Reconceptualising Assessment for Learning and its implications for Education Policy

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Abstract

This paper considers what Assessment for Learning means in a variety of contexts, and whether the theoretical framework proposed by it originators is in fact what is being applied in practice The main project is part of a PhD study that aims to examine whether the political agenda of the government and the application of Assessment for Learning through the DfES (as it was) training was based on sound pedagogical understanding. The study will look at the practical application of Assessment for Learning at Key Stage 3, but also how it can be applied to Key Stages 4 and 5 and whether this will have implications for the design of examination syllabi as well as the actual examinations themselves. This in turn will lead to a consideration of whether examination awarding authorities have embraced the theoretical framework of Assessment for Learning in their redesigning of GCSE and A Levels or whether it is merely seen as a means to an end.

The paper aims to use an action research framework in a school situation, the theoretical background to which was based on the work of Wiliam and Black. The research was inspired by the work of Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam in their work “Inside the Black box” and “Beyond the Black Box” and considers the role of Assessment for Learning in levering up standards. The action research methodology builds on the work of McNiff, (1988) and the research is also employing aspects of case studies as “A case study approach is particularly appropriate for an individual researcher, because it gives an opportunity for one aspect of a problem to be studied in depth within a limited timescale” which develops ideas postulated in Nisbet and Watt (1984).

The aim of this research is to examine whether the pedagogical reasoning behind the government’s insistence on school’s implementation of the Assessment for Learning strand of the Key Stage 3 strategy was based on sound educational theory. As it is based on a case study framework the PhD study will examine whether aspects of Assessment for Learning have a significant impact on the attainment and motivation of pupils within a comprehensive school. In the action research aspect it will look at whether the researcher’s work has impacted to a significant extent on the learning of the students and the practice of colleagues. It is also centred on the “improve” rather than the “prove” paradigm of research.
Introduction

The researcher for this PhD project is an educational practitioner who has been working in an 11 to 19 school and was inspired to research the ideas expounded by Black, Wiliam et al (2003), particularly in their book on “Assessment for Learning, Putting it into Practice”, published as a result of the initial training on Assessment for Learning from the Key Stage 3 Strategy.

They maintain that:

“an assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used at feedback by teachers and their students in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes formative assessment when the evidence is used to adapt the teaching work to meet the learning needs” p.14.

This triggered a quick response that led to a small scale piece of action research conducted within the researcher’s own classroom. This in turn led to developing the practice for herself with a variety of groups, then across one faculty, and she was then given the opportunity to attempt to roll this out across the entire school. This had the effect of establishing in the researcher’s own mind the epistemological basis for the research project.

This PhD research project addresses the following action research questions:

1. How can Assessment for Learning improve student’s attainment and motivation?

2. How has the researcher impacted on the implementation of Assessment for Learning on a variety of different scales?

3. How has the implementation of Assessment for Learning impacted on the researcher’s own and on others practice?
4. What has the researcher learned about developing the implementation of Assessment for Learning and how can it be improved in similar school situations?

5. Can this research be applied within a national context based on high stakes summative assessment?

These questions will be addressed in most cases by using impact evidence in order to analyse the findings. The work reflects ideas expressed by Ron Ritchie (1995) using his framework for Constructive Action Research that provides a perspective on the process of learning within situated research.

There are also aspects of this work which build on the framework that learning is socio-constructivist based on the seminal work of Piaget and Van Glaserfeld and reflects what Jones and Tanner (2006) call the learning zone, which they base on Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, an idea which the researcher is keen to examine further.

**Research Methodology**

This research method is embedded in the action research and case study paradigm. The case study methodology can best be explained as “The teaching case study. It is used to illustrate a point, a condition, a category, something important for instruction (Kennedy, 1979)”, a quote from Denzin and Lincoln (1994) which summarises the approach of this particular piece of research at this time. It is also possible to suggest as a consequence of this research methodology that the results will not necessarily result in an outcome which allows the researcher to generalise about their findings, but will hopefully impact upon school improvement.
The preferred research framework relates to the action research model as it is cyclical and allows the researcher to amend their practice on a regular basis. The action research framework allows for various methods of data collection as well allowing the researcher to fulfil the role of “participant observer” as defined by Junker and Gold and quoted in Hammersley and Atkinson (1995).

The researcher’s aim is to examine whether Assessment for Learning in schools is being applied in the way in which it was visualised by its originators. It will also establish whether the use of Assessment for Learning strategies impacts upon the students and the teachers; the methodology used to establish this is as wide ranging as possible. The data presented thus far falls into the qualitative rather than the quantitative category although the outcomes of “high stakes summative assessment (the measure by which schools are judged)” (Jones and Tanner, 2006) can be influenced by Assessment for Learning techniques and can be quantified. The research design has involved a wide range of data capture techniques including: observations, work scrutiny, semi-structured and structured interviews. The data collection techniques have generated further questions within the action research cyclical review model, but an attempt has also been made to triangulate the data wherever possible from diverse sources. The research, however, could be described as being based in the interpretivist tradition as it is studying the qualitative analysis of data and is building on the “grounded theory” approach of Glaser and Strauss ((1967) cited in McNiff (1988)).

The researcher is also using the Action Research critical thinking tools developed by Coombs et al (2003) such as the Spidergram and PSOR scaffolds to help develop the systematic thinking involved in the analysis of the data.
Qualitative analysis and findings

The researcher began with the premise that staff at ‘School A’ were familiar with the principles for Assessment for Learning, as the government’s key messages had been disseminated on a training day and the researcher had presented the ideas to teachers new to the school at this CPD event. This meant it was possible to establish where the school was in relation to government guidelines.

The researcher then worked with Heads of Faculty through looking at their Schemes of Work to establish where they had identified specific pieces for assessment and also where their Assessment for Learning opportunities occur within their curriculum.

As part of her work the researcher felt there was also a need to have an overview of how the pupils are working and what their motivation was like at the start of the new school year. This was done in relation to the ideas encompassed by assessment in general and the Assessment for Learning strategy. An examination of as wide a body of evidence as possible was carried out, which included doing a variety of lesson observations where the researcher and the Assessment for Learning consultant for Wiltshire Local Authority observed part lessons, between 10 and 20 minute slots in the subject areas of: English, Maths, Science, ICT, RE, Geography, PE, D&T, Drama and Art.

The results of these lesson observations were shared with staff as a Power Point presentation, but the key results are summarised below:

- 3/10 (3 out of 10) Appropriate lesson objectives shared in a visual way with student friendly language techniques.
- 4/10 Shared the “big picture” with students.
- 2/6 Students were able to explain tasks with understanding.
- 4/7 Students were engaged and used questions to correct misconceptions.
4/7 Provided ‘wait time’ and helped students progress with questioning.

6/10 Gave oral diagnostic feedback either while students were working, or, via question sessions.

As a consequence of these results the researcher was forced to question as to whether staff were unaware of the principles of Assessment for Learning as expounded in the theories of Wilaim and Black (1998); whether they were not applying what they knew, or whether they questioned the value of the strategy. This was due to the fact that the basic premise of Assessment for Learning can be described as “Feedback by teachers and students in assessing themselves and each other and can be used to modify Teaching and Learning activities to meet learning needs”.

As a result of these observations the researcher amended what the success criteria should be and at this point in the research it was felt that the success criteria should include looking at whether key stage 3 levels were affected in a positive or negative way, whether pupils were more motivated to improve their own learning, becoming more critical in assessing their own performance, and also whether or not Assessment for Learning is embedded across the school. As a result of the early cross faculty review a number of areas for development were identified linked to these success criteria. This process also identified the next steps which began with the training needs required by both new staff and staff that previously were at ‘School A’ and the decision was taken to revise AfL strategies, learning objectives and the development of new milestone tasks on the Teacher training Day in February 2006.

In order to establish what the concept of Assessment for Learning was seen to be, a work sample was collected that was intended to provide comparative data across the school. Although the work sample was collected and provided by a variety of Faculties across the school the outcomes were not as expected as it was
“Not possible to give quantitative data as the sample exposed inconsistencies amongst teachers within and across departments” quote taken from the Assessment for Learning Educational Consultant, Wiltshire County Council.

This again suggested that the researcher’s conceptual view of Assessment for Learning and that of the whole staff was not necessarily aligned and in agreement.

The researcher using the Action Research framework then reviewed her own position and recorded in her reflective journal that “I attempt to ground all my lessons in Assessment for Learning”, and in a lesson observed by the Assessment for Learning Local Authority consultant this was borne out. This lesson was based on Assessment for Learning principles, as it was described as having the following characteristic of clear visual outcomes that were shared with the pupils in an accessible language. The lesson was carefully structured and gradually built up to the task with questioning being used to help the students make sense of the task. The students were self assessing their work and making judgements on their progress, which they also find motivating. The researcher also provided strategic oral feedback, which was judged by an outside observer as allowing the students to make progress. As a result of this feedback the researcher again felt confident to refocus the concept of Assessment for Learning within the wider school context.

The Faculties were then asked to provide a copy of their milestone assessment pieces for Years 7 and 9 for term 4 showing the formative nature of the work. The minimum expectation was that each subject would have a milestone assessment in place, which would comprise of a task set by the staff, but shared with the pupils in written form that could be used in a formative way. There was also a levelled mark scheme that could be shared with the pupils in a variety of ways that could include written or verbal forms, but no stipulations were laid down for this. Faculties were then given a
period of time to produce these milestone pieces and the researcher then collected in
the outcomes. This links to the concept of Assessment for Learning exemplified in
Jones and Tanner (2006) which says that “Children require regular, immediate
feedback while they are striving to understand new ideas and construct new
knowledge systems” p.11.

This survey again proved to be incomplete with different Faculties producing a
variety of results, which will be described below on a Faculty by Faculty basis.

In the arts Faculty music had a task with levels produced in handwritten form and
then only for levels 3, 4 and 5 for Year 7. This was based on the “Crazy Frog” theme
tune, but in Year 9 the task was based on the “structure” of music. This did not have a
specific mark scheme, but the levels were available from a previous piece which had a
task sheet and a mark scheme for levels 3 to 6 and a self-assessment sheet.

Art had a task sheet, which apparently had been shared with pupils based on Levels 3
to 6 for Year 7 (this was to make a “relief” shell). In Year 9 the task was to make a
multicolour Styrofoam print of a winged creature. There was, however, no mark
scheme or task sheet provided.

Drama failed to give any indication of what the milestone task was.

The Modern Foreign Languages Faculty used the end of unit tests as their milestone
assessments, and in Year 7 these were targeted at levels 2 and 3, whereas Year 9 were
targeted at levels 2 to 5 and had a mark scheme for levels 1 to 8 which was shared
with the students on a regular basis.

English failed to hand in a copy of their milestone assessments.

Science stated that they were working on an ‘Obtaining Evidence’ set task, which was
a skills based assessment. The Head of Faculty provided a Science 1 level descriptor
sheet and marking grid, but added the proviso that all the classes had done different
modules. The mark scheme provided covered levels 2 to 7. For Year 9 the assessment was to be based on Analysing/Presenting Evidence and Evaluation from Science 1 tasks. It too had a mark scheme which covered levels 2 to 7.

Maths also used their end of unit tests as their milestone assessments and there was evidence that the Faculty provides students with the learning objectives at the start of the module, rather than as part of the test process.

PE did not hand in specific milestone assessments, but discussions were held with the Head of PE as a lesson observation had demonstrated they were applying AfL principles to a high level in the day to day lessons.

ICT also did not hand in any ideas about their assessments.

The Humanities department comprising of History Geography RE and Citizenship at KS3 only have milestone pieces for History and Geography. For the History milestone piece in Year 7 this was to examine the ‘Causes of The Peasants Revolt’. This piece had a task sheet and a mark scheme, based on the levels at the back of the student’s portfolio, levels which are shared with the pupils regularly. For Year 9, students were given a piece of work on ‘Trench life during World War One’ as their assessed piece. This too had a task sheet, with a help sheet and levels provided to all students.

In Geography, Year 7 were working on microclimates which had a task sheet and a mark scheme shared with pupils. Year 9 were working on ‘Fair Trade’, this piece had a planning sheet with hints and tips on, a task sheet which also had the levels on and a target level for students to set their own target from their last piece of work; a feature of the review sheets in humanities, as well as the levelled mark sheet.

The Design Technology (DT) Faculty has been working on assessment and produced a series of pieces for each of the separate DT subjects. These had clear guidance and
task sheets as well as levelled mark schemes and review sheets. The Head of DT also has been working on developing a more consistent approach across the Faculty.

As Black and Wiliam (1998) see formative assessment as a key part of Assessment for Learning it was disappointing to the researcher that the work was not making a significant impact across the school by this point.

The researcher then worked on the concept exemplified by Clarke (2005) taking a role described by Shirley Clarke in “Formative Assessment in the Secondary Classroom” where she states “Once teachers really get going with formative assessment they can find the impact on student learning is so great they cannot go back to what they were doing before. However it needs a “champion” in a school for the first few years to keep it high profile” p.4. This ‘high profile’ was achieved by producing a guide for Heads of Faculty (see Appendix 1).

The students were interviewed as another source in an attempt to triangulate the data and their comments with the other data fed back to the Heads of Faculty by means of Table 1 below.
### Table 1: Faculty – E

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Work Sample</th>
<th>Schemes of Work</th>
<th>Pupil Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strengths</strong></td>
<td>Top tips for achievement is available and teacher comments reflect this. Markscheme easy to access Teacher comments on what can be improved</td>
<td>Clear overview Good learning objectives Well organised Clear learning objectives</td>
<td>Shows how they are helped to learn Some students understand where learning fits in Do review learning Regularly mark or comment on own work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Areas for Development</strong></td>
<td>To show links to previous and future learning Produce clear learning objectives and outcomes Provide feedback to students on draft work</td>
<td>Develop learning objectives and strategies across all schemes Gaps in Schemes of Work</td>
<td>All task to be linked to learning Year 13 to receive more feedback Students to know what standards to aim for Peer marking needed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusions**

Students feel they are helped to understand what is being learned
Divisions between students views on learning objectives

**Action Points**

Consistency to be achieved between English Language and Literature
Clear learning objectives to be written into schemes of work across the faculty.
All tasks to be linked to learning objectives in order for students to understand learning

**Review Needed and Dates**
Conclusions

The research evidence so far has led the researcher to reconceptualise her role as the Action Researcher as it was not possible to conduct research with all the Faculties within the school at the same point. She had to work at different speeds and at different levels within and across Faculties as time permitted such fieldwork to happen.

It has also not been possible for the researcher to fully establish the pedagogical framework of the Key Stage 3 Strategy as this is not clear within the documentation provided by the then DfES (2003), the only reference made in the implementation guide for managers which could be construed as referring to the research is “Evaluations undertaken by Ofsted and Bath University/ London Institute of Education identify the challenge for the successful implementation of the Foundation Subjects Strand”. This reflection made by the researcher was borne out in the work of Jones and Tanner (2006) “Although many aspects of the Strategies have a sound theoretical basis, this is not explained or developed, and teachers are left with instructions about how to act but without any sense of the underpinning rationale” p.15

The next stage of this research project will be to use the interim research project data collected thus far in a comparative study into the effect of the Assessment for Learning strategy over a number of schools. Clearly, the inconsistent approach towards implementing Assessment for Learning (AfL) by different Faculties across the School suggests the need for a new AfL curriculum design blueprint, or scaffold from which teachers can both rethink as well as redesign their teaching programmes with. The ideal epistemology and pedagogical goals of AfL can then be designed into
this instructional design scaffold. The next stage of the research will be to consider how this can be achieved as a consistent toolkit for implementation and subsequent evaluation. This will be an important step for both application within and across schools that wish to adopt a consistent approach for AfL and how this can then be integrated into teaching and learning methods for the GCSE and A Level examination courses linked to the QCA’s (2008) 10 core principles for AfL implementation.

References


QCA (2008) Qualifications and Curriculum Authority website: