Assessment for Learning: a reconceptualization

BERA paper: 220 – BERA conference, 4-6 Sep, 2012, University of Manchester

Catherine A McKenna, Assistant Principal Colne Community School and College (Author for Correspondence) cmckenna@colne.esssex.sch.uk

Dr. Steven Coombs, Bath Spa University – s.coombs@bathspa.ac.uk

Introduction

This paper addresses the research conducted on the theme of Assessment for Learning (AfL) inspired by the ideas expounded by Black Wiliam et al, (2003) from the seminal book “Assessment for Learning, Putting it into Practice.”

This interest was triggered by the initial training on Assessment for Learning from the Key Stage 3 Strategy in England’s Secondary Schools, which was then pursued further by examining the strategies in a real world context. The key idea was that “an assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used as feedback… becomes formative assessment when the evidence is used to adapt the teaching work to meet the learning needs” Black and Wiliam (2003). This was particularly significant as it inspired an original doctoral action research project that enabled the principal researcher to ground the work in a theoretical framework.

This paper summarises the findings relating to reconceptualising the ideas contained within the theory expounded by Black and Wiliam (ibid). These will be examined in light of educational and political changes which have taken place over the last few years. The original concept which the principal researcher had for the project was based on the seminal work and the follow-up to the original research article: Inside the Black Box (Black and Wiliam, 1998). This concept has been further defined by the Assessment Reform Group (2002): “Assessment for Learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there”, which was a later articulation of the original concept. The 1998 seminal text, on Assessment for Learning, was not only the inspiration for the principal researcher, but was responsible for generating a whole range of other publications and research: Black (1998), Black and Wiliam (1998, 1998a, 2009) and Black et al (2003, 2004).

Background and origins of Assessment for Learning

It is significant to note here that the research in this article was initiated by the Assessment Group (later renamed the Assessment Reform Group) of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) in 1998 and was funded by a grant from the Nuffield Foundation. The research was taking place at a time when the UK government policy on education was seen as a national priority. Hence, there were obvious political implications for any form of educational research being conducted at this time, with the work of Black and Wiliam being no exception. Essentially, we understand that at that time the British educational system absorbed key research on formative assessment systems (e.g. Sadler, 1989) from the US and applied it to their own system; with the work of Black and Wiliam (1998 & 1998a), examining how standards were being raised within the classroom, which would in time come to contribute to the wider political agenda. The Assessment Reform Group (2002) originally started work as the Policy Task Group on Assessment and was funded by the British
Educational Research Association. Membership of the group was described as changing slightly over the years, but the major focus of the group did not: they worked on policy issues in relation to assessment and initiated a dialogue to influence key policy makers. At the time this research was being conducted in the UK, a strong Labour government came to power in a landslide election victory in 1997 with education policy at the top of its then agenda. This area of research was then considered important to the new educational reforms of the late 1990s and beyond.

The aims and purpose of the original research by Black and Wiliam (ibid) was not, however, to overtly support the then UK government’s policy relating to the National Curriculum at the time with the testing and league tables subsequently allied to it. Instead, it sought to examine “one aspect of teaching – formative assessment ... this feature is at the heart of effective teaching.” This stated purpose in the policy and practice section of the article summarises the results of the research and the new ways it was looking to move teaching and learning forwards. It proposed an in-service teacher development proposition that “this can only happen relatively slowly, and through sustained programmes of professional development and support”. In order to achieve this goal it would require the ideas involved with Assessment for Learning to be disseminated and then adopted into practice across England and Wales. Hence, there were broad ranging implications for the researchers’, the government and teachers’, although it is unclear whether this was the guiding principle of the research. Another relevant suggestion was made in the conclusions of the original article, which identified several key purposes; it recommended that further research should be initiated and that it should be carried out by a variety of different teachers and should take place across a range of schools. Taken to a logical conclusion this concept can be interpreted as a rolling programme of in situ action research projects co-ordinated by the researchers in order to develop the ideas they are postulating, as well as assessing their effectiveness through authentic fieldwork. Again, this approach had implications for both teaching and learning as well as the design and delivery of continuing professional development (CPD).

The then accepted paradigm of CPD can be described as more of a passive one, in that CPD tended to be “done” to teachers, in that they attended in-service courses, usually after work. Whereas the idea of teachers operating as action researchers developing their own curriculum practice in schools is much more dynamic as well as practical. This new approach towards CPD and practice-based curriculum development had a deep underlying significance for the principal researcher leading to a unique doctoral research project that was to contribute towards a reconceptualisation of the framework and assumptions of Assessment for Learning. However, as far as the UK government was concerned this work was to be dovetailed into the National Strategies as a whole that were introduced from 2000, with the research on Assessment for Learning being part of the 2003 cross-curricular approach. The Key Stage 3 (KS3) National Strategy booklet Key messages: Pedagogy and practice (Ref. DfES 1025/2003 – see URL: http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/5005/1/52d26d769e74cdb2e51a6818a3cec590.pdf [accessed: Aug 2012]) provides guidance on the relationship between pedagogic approaches (teaching models), teaching strategies, techniques and methods of creating the conditions for learning in order to inform lesson design.
As a result of the development of the Assessment for Learning Strategy the then definitions were disseminated to all schools via the supplied training materials. This could be said to exemplify the idea of CPD as a passive reproduction of ideas where information and design for change was presented to teachers in schools via a hierarchical top-down delivery model. The principal researcher was involved with the KS3 Strategy originally owing to an expressed interest in assessment. As a consequence the principal researcher became involved in the Local Authority training for the cross-curricular aspect of the KS3 Strategy. She was sent as the school representative on the training programme and from this there was one immediate result which led to a very limited curriculum experiment within the confines of the classroom with a group of Key Stage 4 History students.

Assessment for Learning via Participatory Action Research?

The aim of this very small scale project was for the principal researcher to assess for herself the usefulness of the supplied National Strategy AfL materials. The principal researcher was inspired to attempt this limited experiment by the accessibility of the original research and designed some new approaches mirroring these ideas. The research paradigm of Black and Wiliam is not clear from the literature and does not easily transfer to case study experiments; although the Assessment for Learning approach could be described as fitting somewhere within the action research framework as within the text they (ibid) state that “All such work involves new ways to enhance feedback between those taught and the teacher, ways which require new modes of pedagogy.” This suggests a potential involvement of participatory action research, but there is then no further mention or exemplification regarding how the research could transfer to an “improve” paradigm as argued by Coombs and Smith (2003). It is possible to suggest that this might be left to later publications in the same series. The assumptions and framework of an “improve” paradigm for meaningful CPD is explored by Coombs and Smith (2003). They emphasised the social learning benefits of participatory action research by teachers’ operating within their own classrooms as a new paradigm interpretation and validation of the Hawthorne Effect, that had previously been used as a criticism of a ‘researcher’ operating within their own social domain, i.e. invalidating social data gleaned by practitioner researchers via the assumptions of a classic positivist research paradigm.

The research project examined the pedagogical theories behind the practical implementation of AfL into schools and has critiqued the views of a number of different stakeholder groups which will be further discussed in this section. The clarity of the pedagogical theories the original work was based on was difficult to determine, as this work stated that they only wanted to look at the processes involved with formative assessment linked to three clear research questions. In subsequent articles such as Working Inside the Black box (Black et al, 2004) and Assessment for Learning, Beyond the Black box (Broadfoot et al, 1999) the critical theorists suggest that the Black Box in question is the classroom where these activities take place. The title of the original article itself suggests that they are working within the context of behaviourist psychology within the positivist experimental paradigm, which is clarified in later works where they state the black box they are working in is in fact the classroom, see Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam (2004).

The research was looking specifically at the idea of formative assessment and according to the article the researchers set themselves three key research questions notably First: Is there

What is the pedagogical framework of Assessment for Learning?

These are clearly focused research questions linked to the evidence the researchers themselves present via a literature review that has yielded positive answers to these questions. But despite this initial literature review evidence these questions were still pursued as a research project. According to Black and Wiliam the research began with examining the work of other researchers including Fuchs and Fuchs who were using quantitative evidence of learning gains. However, there is no clear articulation at this point of the pedagogical theories involved and these have been extrapolated as the study went on. The extrapolation of these theories have included the fact that the arguments in favour of assessment for learning imply forms of classroom discourse that are interpretative as well as transmissive (Barnes 1976), exploratory as well as presentational (Barnes 1976, 2008). The distinction between “action knowledge” and “school knowledge” encapsulates the challenge that dialogic pedagogies are designed to meet. Following in Barnes’s footsteps and stimulated by the insights of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), work in the English-speaking world has produced a number of different, though closely related versions of dialogic pedagogy; for example, “the guided construction of knowledge” (Mercer, 1995) and “thinking together” (Mercer, 2000, Mercer & Littleton, 2007), “dialogue of enquiry” (Wells, 1999 & Lindfors, 1999), “dialogic teaching” (Alexander 2001, 2008).

The researchers themselves made the following statement about the nature of pedagogy linked to Assessment for Learning in 2009, which obviously had the benefit of hindsight. The aims of any instruction are usually a combination of aims specific to the subject and aims directed to improving learning skills. For many teachers, the former are explicit and the latter only implicit. The formative practice's, reflect very general principles of learning, notably social constructivism and metacognition (Black and Wiliam, 2009). The background to the pedagogy according to this article is based on both Piaget and Vygotsky. One central aim is to encourage cognitive growth by creating cognitive conflict, following Vygotsky’s dictum from “Mind in Society: learning which is oriented toward developmental levels that have already been reached is ineffective from the viewpoint of a child’s overall development. It does not aim for a new stage of the developmental process, but rather lags behind this process. The only good learning is that which is in advance of development. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 82, cited by Black and Wiliam, 1998) The ideas of behind the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is not, therefore, just a way of describing what a student can do with support, which might be one way of understanding learning; it is a description of the maturing psychological functions rather than those that already exist.. From the Vygotskian model Wiliam and Black have given emphasis to creating cognitive conflict rather than giving straight answers to questions, and linked this to the importance of dialogue that serves the social construction of knowledge, and to metacognition involving learners’ reflection on their own learning. This conceptual understanding makes it clear that such formative assessment practices are an essential pedagogical feature of these programmes (Black and Wiliam, 2009). These links have been clarified in the principal researcher’s own mind when looking at the ideas relating to the ZPD, which means that different interactions are required in the classroom as described by Gardner et al, who state that the overall message seems to be that in order to understand the determination of effective feedback …
we will need theoretical models that will acknowledge the situated nature of learning (Greeno et al., 1998)

**The impact of implementing Assessment for Learning in Schools**

A part of this study has also identified the impact of these theories in the context of implementing Assessment for Learning on high stakes summative assessment as the political landscape associated with ideas linked to league tables changed over the period of the study. The impact of the move from the beginning of the Key Stage 3 Strategy across the following years might not appear to impinge on high stakes summative assessment, which most people associate with Key Stages 4 and 5, notably GCSE and GCE examinations. However, formative assessment can be used across a broad range of situations and indeed the small scale experiment which began the principal researcher’s study was within the context of a Key Stage 4 examination group. The aim of this very small scale project was to assess the usefulness of the materials to which the principal researcher had been given access. This was assisted by the accessibility of the original research materials and led to the design of a limited experiment mirroring these ideas.

The principal researcher was able to alter some of the key research parameters to suit local needs and purposes, i.e. starting with the rationale for the choice of group. This was because the principal researcher wanted to begin with a Year 11 group (who consequently were not involved in the Key Stage 3 Strategy) with the rationale to conduct the experiment for a group of students for whom the principal researcher held a valid set of data on, having good prior knowledge (the principal researcher having taught them as a group for a year, and had also taught two thirds of the group for the previous two years). The principal researcher also believed the group would respond positively to the experiment if they could see the relevance of it for their development, given the social benefit of prior personal knowledge of them. The experiment was fairly simple in design, in that it was based on exam feedback from the end of Year 10 exams and required the criteria for the exam being shared with the students on a comment only basis. This limited experiment and the fact that the results proved to be successful were shared with other staff within the school; this was done through a variety of forums, including Heads of Faculty Meetings. This sharing of the experiment was implemented in order to model the fact that the principles of Assessment for Learning, as disseminated by the Strategy, should be seen as a system which can work in real life circumstances via targeting pupils for whom other methods might not have been as motivating, or as effective.

It was as a result of this small scale local experiment and the apparent successes it generated that inspired the principal researcher to incorporate more of the ideas from the original training materials into classroom practice on a regular basis. Owing to the fact the principal researcher believed in these ideas and also as a result of the trialled success with some of the students in the school the principal researcher became a champion for leading this initiative within the school. Consequently, the transferability of Assessment for Learning pedagogical techniques and strategies was demonstrated both to the principal researcher and to other members of staff within her school.
Misconceptions of ‘assessment’ and ‘testing’

If we consider the understanding of the key ideas relating to Assessment for Learning and how they were transferred for use by the designers of high stakes summative assessment, then there are very different interpretations regarding the understanding of key pedagogical terminology adopted by practitioners and this needs to be taken into account. It is the word ‘Assessment’ which tends to cause the problem of interpretation, as this is a deeply contested term where the default assumption for many educationalists tends to be that of assuming “assessment” means the same thing as “testing”. With the term testing also assumed as only applying to summative assessment situations. This key misconception was evidenced in a variety of situations including a meeting witnessed by the principal researcher called by the Teacher Development Agency to discuss the content of the new Masters in Teaching and Learning launched in 2009 (and discontinued at the end of 2010 by a change in UK government). This misconception is something which has had a significant effect on the development of the Assessment for Learning Strategy.

The development of new specifications for GCSE and GCE were brought in across a four year period, but it would appear that the implementation from the point of view of teachers and senior managers in many schools did not take into account the pedagogical principles embodied by the Assessment for Learning Strategy. The new GCSE specifications included the move from coursework to controlled assessment, a move which could be described as a retrograde step as there is less opportunity for the formative comments developing the understanding of students in controlled assessment than there was in coursework, which had more opportunity for feedback. Although all the examination boards have provided exemplar materials and exemplar mark schemes, these are somewhat limited in their scope. There has also been no explicit or apparent evident use of the educational theories behind the ideas relating to formative assessment and given the original impetus of the National Strategies it is interesting to note that these ideas were not taken into account at this particular point in time.

How the Assessment for Learning project developed over time

The original work suggested a rolling programme of action research projects to develop the ideas the researchers were postulating, as well as assessing their effectiveness. This was highly significant as the principal researcher has taken this and developed it in order to examine a variety of practice. From beginnings as a small scale project set within one classroom it had expanded across a school Faculty. From this point these ideas were then taken and disseminated as policy and practice across a whole school, and then supported by the Local Authority (LA) Assessment for Learning advisor. The scope of the research then broadened out across a number of schools in different LAs, due to the change in role and location of the researcher. This has allowed the theoretical basis to be further examined and the scope of the project to be developed in different directions. In the first school there was a move from an upper school to an 11-19 comprehensive and this led to a significant expansion of new teaching staff as well as the admission of three new Year groups (7, 8 and 9). This change had raised the issue of consistency in assessment practices, as well as in teaching and learning in general; it also led to new opportunities for the researcher to work within and across different subject Faculties.

This meant work was done with a range of staff and practice observed across a range of teaching and learning situations. The senior leadership of the school was very supportive and work was possible with a variety of members of staff ranging from Heads of Faculty and
Departments to Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs). The original research formed part of the training materials for the members of staff in the school, along with the Key Stage 3 Strategy materials and this was delivered on planned Professional Development days, along with more targeted support for different Faculties and support for individual members of staff. The school was also eligible for support from the Local Authority and this enabled work to be done with the Local Authority consultant. This led to wider dissemination on the practice relating to Assessment for Learning developments across the County, which proved to be valuable in comparing and contrasting schools experiences.

The context of the research moved over a period of time with a change of schools, Local Authority area and changed role. This change of role for the principal researcher was as a member of the school leadership team given responsibility for teaching and learning. This allowed use of the work on Assessment for Learning in order to develop the skill sets of the teachers in another whole school setting. What was also useful was to compare the responses between the two different school communities to the training provided. The context of the second school was somewhat different as it was already established as a fully comprehensive secondary school of 1500 pupils, which included a post 16 provision for approximately 200 students. Both schools data showed that there was a variety of responses within and across Faculties and that there was a lack of consistency of implementation. This was despite the fact that according to the National Strategies there was supposed to be a dissemination of the standard methods to be adopted using CPD. The CPD idea is a key one as if this had been properly adopted the original researchers’ felt that it would have made a significant impact on outcomes. However, it is likely that most teachers identify with the comment made by Dylan Wiliam (2011) in his recent book called “Embedded Formative Assessment”, where he explains how teachers feel about such regular new developments “One year it’s language across the curriculum; the next year, it’s differentiated instruction. Because teachers are bombarded with innovations, none of these innovations has time to take root, so nothing really changes. And worse, not only is there little or no real improvement in what happens in classrooms, but teachers get justifiably cynical about the constant barrage of innovations to which they are subjected.” (Wiliam, 2011, p.29)

Key findings and the future: Assessment for professional learning?

The key findings of this study relate to stakeholder views and the political implications of these. It also links to the adoption of a practitioner action research model that allowed the principal researcher to reflect upon and amend practice on a regular basis. There are also findings relating to the “improve” paradigm of research (Coombs & Smith, 2003 & Gardner & Coombs, 2009) and this approach best fits on-the-job curriculum development through teachers operating as participant and practitioner action researchers in real world learning situations as authentic, and indeed, living CPD building upon the work of Brown, Collins, & Duguid, P. (1989) and Whitehead (1989). One of the key views espoused by the original researchers (i.e. Dylan Wiliam) described the difficulty of changing teaching practice as like turning around a supertanker. This is because if we look at the idea of questioning, most teachers will have used thousands of questions over their career, so to change pedagogical
practice requires a great deal of conscious effort linked to a powerful argument that questions contemporary practice. These ideas were articulated by Dylan Wiliam at a training session held at the Cornelius Vermuyden School in January 2010. There have been movements forward in the practice of teachers on an individual basis as they see the improvement in their pupils; and this has been recorded by the principal researcher whilst working across these various schools. This approach clearly links to the improve paradigm of work, but it is significant that these various assessment for learning developments were not applied consistently elsewhere leading to patchy implementation.

It is also interesting to note that the original researchers into Assessment for Learning had their own views on the subject of the implications of the National Strategies. As has already been noted earlier in this paper, Dylan Wiliam was not involved in the development of the training materials for the Assessment for Learning strand of the National Strategy. He also expressed the view that formative assessment was not embedded in schools and that policy makers did not properly understand the deep pedagogical concept of Assessment for Learning. If we are to further reconceptualise Assessment for Learning and apply the useful principles of formative assessment to enable high quality learning in schools then challenging the pedagogical assumptions of key terminology is possibly the first issue to be addressed. This includes the terminology and meaning behind the word “assessment” which is still a major sticking point even when using the term “formative assessment”. Finally, assessment for learning is an important pedagogical approach that can be benfited by all learners. The authors of this paper strongly recommend that assessment for learning be fully integrated elsewhere across the education system, including teacher education and especially CPD. Thus, we would propose a new CPD framework that is underpinned by assessment for professional learning (AfPL) that seeks to discover new ways for measuring and ‘assessing’ constructivist tasks and acts associated with authentic work such as practitioner action research and similar living/doing tasks. We would then meaningfully ask questions such as: What is a constructivist assessment system and form of authentic testing?
References


