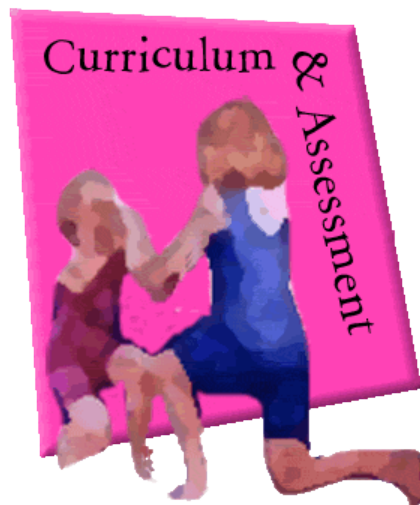


Topic:

As a prospective teacher in primary schools,
how would you go about establishing an “assessment for learning”
culture in your classroom?



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Introduction

Education reform, which was proposed by the government in 2001, marked the importance of preparing students to have an attitude of life-long learning (CDC, 2001). Assessment for learning (AfL) was thus enhanced because the learning processes and products are focused, rather than just focusing on the scores and grades students get in tests and examinations, which happen only once at the end of each term. More attention is paid to the learning activities and feedback students have in class. As the focus is different, teachers nowadays investigate the methods and ways how to implement the concept of AfL in class. The main purpose of writing this paper is to investigate the issues of successful implementation of AfL. In addition to this, literature regarding assessment is critically reflected, which provides suggestions for promoting and principles to implement AfL. The discussion part is divided into two sections. The first one is an attempt to establish an AfL culture in a primary classroom. The second part illustrates some constraints that AfL cannot be widely appreciated by teachers and schools and some suggestions to remedy are put together to provoke more thoughts from readers so that this concept can be more successfully applied.

Critical review of literature

The term “assessment” refers to a step to “gather information from multiple and diverse sources” so that how well an individual understands and the ability to use the knowledge gained from education can be known by others (Hull, 2012, p.51). To understand how much students have learnt, the most apparent way would be by looking at their scores and grades they get in examinations and tests, which are held at the end of a school term. These two assessment formats are examples of “summative assessment” (CDC, 2002), which was valued highly because of its two main purposes. It serves as a tangible resource to parents on students’ achievement, and also it can be used for differentiate primary students into three different bands according to academic achievement. Students with band 1 achievement will be placed in a band 1 school, which has “elite status [on its] reputations for high academic standard” (Carless, 2005, p.41).

However, this phenomenon encourages blind pursue of marks among students. They get lots of pressure from parents and schools so that they can get into the best school. However, they lost the main gist of education: performance is largely related to teaching and learning. Therefore, integrating assessment into teaching and learning, making them as a cycle is suggested (CDC, 2001). This is the concept of AfL, in which the assessment is formative in nature, and aims at reducing the negative outcomes brought by relying too much on summative assessment (Lam, 2011). It serves as a mirror to check the effectiveness of teaching and learning so teachers can

think of the appropriateness of approaches to teaching and their next steps for students because it can evaluate how well the pre-set learning objectives before lessons are achieved (Lam, 2011).

Assessment for Learning is promoted in education reform because researchers (Natriello, 1987; Crooks, 1988) have found that learning gains can be enhanced when teachers use formative assessment during classroom instruction (William, Lee, Harrison & Black, 2004). This stream of assessment also leads to active involvement of students and build up sense of responsibility of their own learning (Lam, 2011) by inviting students themselves to be assessors of their own performances in diversified modes of assessment (Carless, 2005). Giving opinions to others' work can increase their level of self-esteem (Lam, 2011). They are required to develop high-order thinking, understanding of knowledge and creativity and demonstrate them through assessments (Carless, 2005). They also need to apply and analyze the knowledge in real world under formative assessment, which is situated (Lam, 2011). As this type of assessment will not focus on grades, a set of rubric should be adopted to determine the level of proficiency students achieved in several aspects (Lam, 2011) serving as evidence of which stage students have reached.

To achieve the above benefits of AfL, some principles should be followed for carrying out formative assessment. The goal of learning should be shared and no rote memorization is encouraged (CDC, 2001). It should include diversified mode of assessment, not just paper-and-pen assessment as in summative assessment and feedback should be given immediately informing students' merits and demerits of their performances. Apart from teachers' feedback, peer and self-assessments should be adopted in class. Through thinking through students' weaknesses obtained from assessment, teachers can evaluate their effectiveness of teaching and think of scaffolding activities whenever necessary to raise their proficiency (CDC, 2001; Lam, 2011).

Discussion

Part 1 – An example to cultivate AfL in primary classrooms using principles in literature

In this part of discussion, lessons in my primary 4 is recalled which serves as an example of implementation of assessment for learning. I was taught the theme "Places in Hong Kong". My teacher told me at the beginning of the class that we are going to make presentations on one of the places that I like most using the identity of a tour guide. Sharing the goal of learning is one of the principles mentioned in AfL (CDC, 2001).

The class was then guided through many different kinds of exercises before getting to this final goal of learning the unit. Having more than one and diverse type of assessment is a characteristic

of formative assessment. We were taught the name of the places and the action verbs describing what we may do in such places. My teacher assessed us by asking us to repeat the words. This kind of verbal assessment is not the normal paper-and-pen type, but still can let the teacher assessed the effectiveness of teaching by receiving the performance from us, i.e. how we pronounced the words. If we pronounced correctly, my teacher would still teach with her previous method. If we pronounced wrongly, my teacher would try out other methods to help us read them correctly like pronouncing each word syllable by syllable as a scaffolding activity. This alternation or continuation of teaching method has gone through a step of checking the effectiveness of previous teaching (Lam, 2011), which is one of the major goals and advantages of using AfL in classrooms.

I have a very deep impression that the comprehension exercise that followed was very different from the usual one having just one correct answer to each question. Some questions were open-ended and required us to suggest one or more activities that can be done at particular places other than those mentioned in the passage. This encourages high-order thinking, as we needed to first read through the passage, understood the characteristics of that particular place and made possible suggestions based on those special features. For example, the passage mentioned “Repulse Bay has a beach and people can swim there”. If we were asked to provide one more suggestion of what we could do in Repulse Bay, we might suggest “building sandcastles” because there is a beach. This type of exercise is not mechanical drilling or rote memorization, but can test their creativity and also the understanding of knowledge from the passage (Carless, 2005), which are criteria of formative assessment.

After that, we were taught the skills of presentation and the scripts were checked by teachers. They were not marked but were written down some suggestions to further elaborate the points made. Having learnt the vocabulary needed for presentation, we were asked to present in front of the class one by one. Before that, my teacher distributed a sheet of paper reminding us the aspects that she looked for in our presentations like grammar accuracy and body language. There were “good, fair and need improvement” in every aspect and we needed to tick the appropriate one as we listened to our peers’ presentation. I remember that was the first time I did self and peer assessments. We were so attentive, excited and supportive because we were little teachers and needed to write down some comments on each presentation. Whenever the teacher asked what aspects did the present do well or need improvement, we actively answered and the learning environment was enhanced successfully.

My teacher successfully involved students in the learning process by inviting us to join in her assessment job. From the above description, students’ responses are active so the sense of

responsibility of learning is enhanced (Lam, 2011). After each presentation, the process which teacher asked us the aspects that the presenter did well or not demonstrates immediate feedback right after the performance. Presentation also provides opportunities to train generic skills and enhances academic abilities. The aspects listed in that sheet of paper serve as a rubric, which is a set of criteria determining the level of proficiency (Lam, 2011). All these are characteristics of formative assessment.

The above shows an example of how AfL can be integrated into teaching and learning process in a lesson by teachers. However, only by the input and effort of one teacher implementing AfL surely not enough, as students can only enjoy the benefits of AfL in the subjects that the teacher teaches. To successfully implement, it requires the support of schools (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002) and colleagues. Reducing the class size, recognizing and encouraging teachers implementing AfL and discussing the problems encountered during having formative assessment in class among colleagues can boost the environment of carrying out AfL because teachers know they are supported by each other when they try out this new approach. Teachers' belief in using AfL can thus be enhanced so they will not give up easily.

Part 2 – Reasons that undermine the implementation of AfL

The implementation of AfL in classroom physically is not very difficult by following the principles to carry out formative assessments as mentioned above. However, the mindsets of teachers, parents and schools are not easy to change. They stick to summative assessment because it is the easiest and most clear way to show and compare the academic performance among individual students and schools. Competition is tense because university places are limited and schools having better academic performance gain more reputation. Therefore, drilling for examinations is still prevalent that undermines the use of formative assessment (Biggs & Watkins, 2001). Students know that only by getting higher marks in exams, they can have more chances to get to higher education, so they are motivated to do better in this type of assessment. As the results of having summative assessment are satisfactory, the investigation of some innovative methods of assessment is regarded as unnecessary (Adamson & Morris, 1998). In addition, formative assessment is composed of various assessment tasks, together with the factor of finishing the textbook syllabus in a tight schedule of teaching, AfL is not really appreciated until it is suggested in the education reform because of its time-consuming characteristics (Carless, 2005).

Another constrain that leads to difficult implementation of AfL is that when carrying out formative assessment, teachers become roles of facilitators to help students, but not ones who control the

class. Some teachers may worry that they are misinterpreted as not working hard (Carless, 2005). However, in a learner-oriented lesson, students are responsible for their learning, so they should be engaged in the learning process. Assessing their own performances helps them reflecting on how to improve and identifying their strengths and weaknesses. It does not mean that teachers are not in a role of assessing students. Through talking to individual students or to the whole class, teachers can make suggestions and discuss with students how to tackle with weaknesses and make improvements. With the collaboration of students and teachers in this mode of assessment, teaching and learning effectiveness can be enhanced so it is a good suggestion to implement AfL in normal classrooms.

Conclusion

This paper has made insights in possible reasons, benefits and constrains for implementing the concept of AfL in Hong Kong primary classrooms. Methods of cultivating AfL environment has also discussed through the illustration of a lesson recalled. There are many successful examples of using this new concept in classrooms because all the guidelines and principles have been noted in the education reform document. However, to cultivate an environment of AfL is much more than the points made in the document. Responses of students, supports from schools and innovations of teachers to “incorporate” this concept into their own patterns in classrooms (Black & William, 1998) are all important to make the implementation successful. Remedial to constrain is called for so as to help moving a step forward in the aspect of effective assessment.

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