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Assessment for Learning

“Sadler (1989) identified that, in order for improvement to take place, the child must first know the purpose of the task, then how far this was achieved, and finally be given help in knowing how to move closer towards the desired goal or ‘in closing the gap’. It is perhaps the last aspect that we have not always helped children to maximize their achievement.” Clarke, 1998

They learn... therefore I teach!

Dear Colleagues,

Experience has shown that even though we go in class with detailed schemes of work, files with notes, power point presentations that take a lot of time to be prepared, it may not result in learning... at least not for all the students present in our class. What is their problem?

Let’s look at it from another point of view. Who am I thinking of while preparing the lesson? Do I think about how much my lesson will be engaging for the students I have in my class this year? For how many minutes will each student in my class be truly engaged and involved in the lesson? This should not include the time I would like my students to take heed of what their peers are answering. Engagement is the key to learning. And it is the teacher who has the ability to prepare engaging tasks that keep each and every student doing the learning. With engaging tasks I mean activities where the explanation becomes part of the activity and during which students are working in groups, asking questions, writing, doing hands-on tasks, discussing, moving around, writing on white boards, using the computers.... but never waiting. Such lessons are never boring and students feel they are part of the learning process. Learning happens in such environments as the teaching is compatible with the students’ way of learning. It is not the syllabus that dictates how we should teach! It is the student that shows us how s/he learns, consequently we teach accordingly. That’s why they learn... and only then we can say ‘I have taught.’

Joanne
GOOD AND EFFECTIVE QUESTIONING
Cheryl Curmi - Head of Department, Primary (Assessment)

Questioning is a key aspect of the teaching and learning process. Asking questions is one of the most often used teaching techniques. Teachers use questioning for various reasons. Questioning can be used as a diagnostic tool to allow the teacher to glimpse into the minds of learners to find out not only what they know or don’t know but also what misconceptions learners might have about a particular topic. Questions are asked to engage and challenge learners; to promote reasoning, problem solving, evaluation and the formation of hypotheses; to assess what has been learned and to test learners’ memory and comprehension.

ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS!

Ask fewer questions: Many of the questions teachers ask are not meant to be answered; they are really instructions (Is everyone sitting down?), rhetorical questions (Do you think I didn’t see that?), or are answered by the teacher. So the first step in asking more effective questions is to ask only the questions that learners are required to answer.

Ask more open-ended questions: Teachers ask mostly questions that are closed. These types of questions do not allow higher order thinking since learners just have to recall facts and very often the teacher already has a predetermined correct response in mind. Teachers should use more open-ended questions which allow a range of correct responses. Open-ended questions require appropriate thinking time of around 10 seconds since learners need time to think before answering.

Prepare challenging questions beforehand: Asking questions that are open-ended, is not natural and intuitive. These types of questions require planning prior to the lesson. Teachers also need to plan how each question will increase in challenge according to Bloom’s Taxonomy.

Examples:

• Instead of asking ‘Is 7 a prime number?’, the question can be changed to ‘Why is 7 a prime number?’ or ‘Why is 7 a prime number and 14 not?’ or ‘Prime numbers are always odd. Do you agree? Why?

• Instead of asking ‘X’inhu x-xogħol ta’ pustier?’ learners can be asked ‘Taħseb li x-xogħol ta’ pustier hu eħfef fis-sajf milli fix-xitwa? Għaliex?

• Instead of asking ‘Which food is healthy?’, learners can be asked: Are these food items good for you - chocolate, fruit, milk, fat, sugar, salt, water, motor oil, rice? Why?

• The question ‘X’gara fl-Assedju l-Kbir?’ is a closed one since it only focuses on the knowledge of the content. Changing such question to ‘Kieku int kont Dragut, x’kont tagħmel differenti biex tirbaħ l-Assedju l-Kbir tal-1565?’ provides opportunities for higher order thinking.
QUESTIONING TECHNIQUES

No hands up technique:
When using this technique, learners do not put up their hands when a question is posed. The teacher then selects the learner/s to answer. The benefit of this technique as opposed to the ‘volunteer’ method, is that all learners have to think because they do not know when they are going to be asked to answer. When using the no hands up technique, thinking is not a choice; everyone has to think.

Think, Pair, Share:
The teacher poses the questions to the whole class. Learners think about the answer individually. Then learners pair up and combine their best answers. Learners share their new improved answer with the class.

Pose, Pause, Pounce, Bounce:
The teacher insists on no-hands up before the question is delivered. The question is posed to the whole class. The teacher pauses to give learners time to think. Then a learner is chosen to answer. Without commenting on the given answer, the teacher ‘bounces’ the answers from learner to learner developing the ideas or encouraging learners to add their views or extend answers.

The use of mini-whiteboards:
A great way of keeping all learners actively involved in a lesson, is the use of mini-whiteboards. The teacher asks a question and instructs learners to write their answers on the mini-whiteboard. After giving the required wait time, learners hold up their answers. The teacher can see at a glance the different answers given by learners and know where learners stand in their learning.

Random picker name:
The teacher chooses a learner by picking a name randomly. The advantage of this strategy is that all learners have to think since they do not know when they are going to be selected to answer. Teachers may use the following links for random name pickers:
http://www.classtools.net/education-games-php/fruit_machine
http://www.classtools.net/random-name-picker/

A questioning friendly classroom
Establishing the right climate and the teacher’s response are crucial factors in effective questioning. Learners need to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and asking questions and they will be more inclined to ask questions if there is a supportive atmosphere in the classroom.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SESSIONS AND UPSKILLING
Heads of Department for Assessment are collaborating with the Heads of Department for Literacy, Literacy teachers and complementary teachers from the Literacy Agency. Meetings are being held regularly and this collaboration is proving to be beneficial for the schools since interventions are focused.

St Thomas More College offered the opportunity to the HODs for Assessment, who provide support to schools in this college, to explain the services offered by the team during a council of heads held earlier this year. Members of the AfL team attended meetings with San Gorg Preca College and St Clare Half-Yearly Examinations Committees to review the papers prepared by the colleges.

An overview of AfL was given to the complementary teachers of St Thomas More College, St Clare College and St Nicholas College. Teachers explored AfL strategies and techniques that could be used in the classroom. A meeting was held with the LST from St Clare College where literacy lessons were reviewed so that they incorporate AfL strategies.

A session on Questioning was held for complementary teachers of St Thomas More College and St Ignatius College. Teachers used Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives to frame questions that could be posed during shared reading and guided reading.

Furthermore, a session on portfolios was held for Kindergarten Assistants at Maria Regina College, Mellieha Primary who were exposed to this very valid assessment tool which can have a significant impact on student learning.

KGAs from Maria Regina College, Gharqar Primary were introduced to Learning Stories which are stories that document children’s learning and help them to see themselves as powerful learners.

PD sessions on AfL were held at St Benedict College, Gudja Primary; Maria Regina College, Mosta Primary B; and at St. Nicholas College, Mgarr Primary. Moreover, in collaboration with the Literacy team a meeting for parents about effective questioning and literacy was held at St Benedict College, Qrendi Primary. In November 2014, a four day INSET course on assessment was held with Assistant Heads from the primary sector.

‘Good teaching is more a giving of right questions than a giving of right answers’. (J. Albers)
The importance of leadership in securing sustainable school reform has been demonstrated in research and practice (Noonan et al., 2006). It is becoming ever more apparent that the focus on student learning is a central element of the college/school leadership mandate (Harris, 2002).

This research study, carried out in one of the local colleges, illustrates the impact of the school leadership on the implementation of assessment for learning. It also provides unique insights into Maltese Primary School leaders’ views and experiences related to assessment for learning. Recommendations for the development of formative assessment practices that enhance the child’s learning experience and progress will be discussed in the next edition of the Afl Newsletter.

The latest focus on the concept of assessment literacy has underlined the significance of college/school-level leadership in incorporating the formative and summative orientations to assessment as a principal’s responsibility (Stiggins, 2002). Cizek asserted that as leaders of education systems, administrators cannot neglect the role of assessment. ‘The only critical question remaining is how administrators will be involved’ (Cizek, 1995:248). In his conceptualization of contemporary leadership for learning, Glickman (2002) placed assessment content and methods firmly at the centre of factors that influence student learning. He suggested that educational leaders require the tools to improve classroom instruction, including a focus on what to attend to in improving teaching, observing classrooms, using achievement data, and evaluating samples of student work.

Brandon and Quarin-Wright (2012) present, within the context of the 2009 Alberta Student Assessment Study, different leadership dimensions which are essential to secure the successful development and implementation of assessment across the curriculum. In one of the assessment standards in their research the school leader is seen as ‘an accomplished teacher who provides quality leadership in the provision of optimum learning for all students in the school’ (Brandon and Quarin-Wright, 2012:67). School leaders are guided by leadership dimensions such as instructional leadership, visionary leadership, leaders of a learning community, effective relationships, and external influences on teaching and learning (Brandon and Quarin-Wright, 2012). On the other hand, the ‘Afl 8 schools project’ (DFES, 2007), provided evidence of the impact of Afl on standards, depending on the depth of understanding of Afl by school leaders (Stiggins, 2010). School leaders need to be able to make connections between good practice and impact on pupil achievement, have systems in place to track progress and assist teachers to record the impact on students in different subject and lessons (DFES, 2007). At college level, the foundation and the frame work must be put in place for institutional support of assessment for learning while at school level, the head of school’s role is to provide direct classroom support to teachers. How far school leaders can focus on their curricular role in schools in Malta and Gozo, burdened as they are by administrative and bureaucratic duties is a moot point and ideal material for further research.
THE CASE STUDY

School Leaders’ views and experiences related to AfL

The school leaders taking part in this research identified a number of key views about assessment and learning. They all attributed their main views to their own teaching experience, their role as assistant Heads of school and professional development sessions related to assessment and learning they participated in. The College Principal’s and the Heads of Schools’ comments revealed that they perceived a strong, interdependent relationship between classroom assessment and learning. Head E summed up this relationship as being, ‘[t]he process of learning being quantified … learning is a process we go through and assessment is a periodic monitoring on to what extent you are learning.’ The College Principal thinks that, ‘[t]he teacher cannot teach without the idea of assessing. There is an absolute relationship between assessment and learning. Teaching and learning cannot take place without assessment.’ Head B described the relationship as, ‘fundamental in the teaching and learning process as it indicates if learning is being done. There isn’t a good learning process without assessment.’

Two Heads specified where assessment impacted the learning process. They also indicated what needs to be done for this to occur.

Assessment is part and parcel of the learning process. It is an important ingredient to promote teaching and learning. AfL tells you where you are, where you want to go and the means to get there. The class teacher has to be equipped with a varied repertoire of assessment strategies so that AfL is successfully implemented. (Head D)

One Head of School made direct reference to the mixed ability classes as one of the most challenging aspects of assessment and learning. She argued that teachers were finding it very difficult to cater for all these abilities and were very sceptical of mixed ability classes. She proposed deploying a teacher assistant in the classroom to help the teacher practise differentiation.

I think one of the most complex challenging aspects of AfL is mixed ability classes. There are too many children with different abilities in the classroom. I think that to improve the teaching and learning process the teacher needs an assistant and the AfL strategies can be easily implemented. (Head B)

Head D believed that assessment for learning could be successfully implemented if the Heads of School were convinced of its significant benefits. This was also noted in the Alberta Student Assessment Study (Webber, 2009) in which the views and experiences of the school principals about AfL were seen as crucial in the implementation process. Additionally, Head D indicated that assessment should also be implemented outside the classroom. According to this Head, an important aspect in the assessment process is self-reflection.

I think that the complex part of assessment is self-reflection so that you improve your own practice. As a Head of school it is essential to do self-evaluation. You have to stop and reflect by backing out of the crowd and understand how the crowd is reacting.
Head A used a colourful image to describe AfL strategies. He compared the assessment for learning strategies to a compass which is necessary for the captain to guide the ship.

AfL is like a compass. A captain needs a compass to guide his ship. The teacher needs the AfL strategies in his/her lessons in order to be creative and so as to have a good idea of where students are in their learning.

Head E noted that although he believed in the importance to learning of AfL, he could note with regret that AfL strategies are rarely and randomly used during the lessons. She also noted that there should be a structure in place for these AfL strategies to be effective. Here one can note that the school had started collaborating with the AfL Unit in the scholastic year 2012-2013.

AfL strategies should definitely be used in class in order to assess the pupils but to assess yourself as a teacher so that you know whether you’re being effective. The strategies are still used haphazardly during lessons. For these practices to be successful there should be a structure or framework. (Head E)

Several Heads were full of praise for the Head of Department, Primary (Assessment) for the sterling work that is being given to teachers about AfL strategies in the curriculum sessions and demonstration lessons. Indeed, Head B and Head C commented that they could see a marked difference between those classes that were benefiting from AfL support and those classes where this support was not forthcoming. These Heads of School, through the formal and informal class visits, are seeing a difference between the Year 4 classes who are receiving AfL support and the rest of the school.

Many teachers in our school use some AfL strategies. However, Year 4 teachers who are at the moment benefiting from the AfL support are more conscious about the strategies that they are implementing in their classrooms. (Head B)

The AfL strategies are used mainly by Year 4 teachers since up till now the HOD (Assessment) has only given support to that year group. (Head C)

End of Part 1. Please look out for the 6th edition of the AfL Newsletter for the second part of this article.

References:

‘AfL is like a compass. A captain needs a compass to guide his ship. The teacher needs the AfL strategies in his/her lessons in order to be creative and so as to have a good idea of where students are in their learning.’ (Head A)
One can be sure that a student is learning only if evidence is collected. Collecting evidence happens throughout the process of learning and therefore every time a teacher uses a task, activity, project, question, its purpose needs to be known by the teacher and also by the student. The student can own the learning if s/he is given the tools and the skills to do so.

Anyone who would like to share experiences or has any feedback to give us with regards to this newsletter kindly contact Ms. Joanne Grima, Assistant Director on; joanne-rita.grima@ilearn.edu.mt.