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Research Associate Report

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Does it help to know?

An investigation into the use of assessment for learning practices
in four primary schools

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Introduction

This study focuses on one of the five components of personalised learning as identified by the DfES (2004) – Assessment for Learning (AfL). However, it also has implications for school organisation and school leadership. It is one of eight studies that investigated how personalised learning practices were being implemented in schools, with particular emphasis on:

- how pupils perceived these practices
- how teachers and leaders perceived their effectiveness and impact
- how leaders sought to implement and develop AfL strategies

The school of which I am headteacher has spent two years introducing assessment for learning. I wanted to systematically evaluate its impact in my own school and to investigate what practices other schools had adopted, and what their impact has been.

The assessment for learning practices that the study focused on were identifying and sharing learning objectives, the use of success criteria and self- and peer-evaluation. Other practices were included in the case studies where the schools felt that they were a particularly important part of their work.

The reasons for introducing assessment for learning vary from school to school. I wanted to find out more about the reasons why schools introduced it; whether in response to an external agenda or because of an internal conviction about its effectiveness.

I also wanted to find out how schools went about introducing AfL: who took the lead; what opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD) were provided; what were the timescales; how it was monitored and what had been the constraints.

The direct impact of AfL proved difficult to measure, as it is difficult to separate AfL from other factors. However, the study evaluates the perception of its impact by pupils, teachers and school leaders.

I sought to identify and draw together experiences and perceptions which were common to all or some of the four schools. From this small sample, I drew out possible wider implications for school leaders, strategies and pupils.

Literature review

A great deal has been written about AfL since *Inside the Black Box* (Black and Wiliam, 1998) first demonstrated that when carried out effectively, classroom assessment linked to constructive feedback will increase levels of attainment (Assessment Reform Group, 1999).

A full review of literature about assessment for learning was not possible within the time constraints of this study. I have focused on some key studies and those which were named as influences by the four case study schools.

The Assessment Reform Group (1999) acknowledged the power of assessment in raising standards, but only if used in the right way. That is, that testing does not enhance learning but that successful learning depends on pupils' ownership of their learning. This should include factors such as an understanding of goals to be attained and having the prerequisite skills and being linked to motivation. These principles, they surmised, are also those that are related to successful lifelong learning. This endorses the views of the case study headteachers that learning should not be a passive process to be done to children. Clarke (2001) additionally noted the effect that the use of formative assessment has on pupils' confidence and self-esteem.

In 2002, the Assessment Reform Group defined assessment for learning as "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." It identified 10 principles for assessment for learning Namely, that it:

- is part of effective planning
- focuses on how students learn
- is central to classroom practice
- is a key professional skill
- is sensitive and constructive
- fosters motivation
- promotes an understanding of goals and criteria
- helps learners to know how to improve
- develops the capacity for self-assessment
- recognises all educational achievement

The Primary Strategy, Excellence and Enjoyment: Learning and Teaching in the Primary Years (DfES 2002), embraces the whole ethos of formative assessment and underlines its importance in creating a learning culture. Teachers are encouraged to have an understanding of how learners learn, and to be creative and flexible with regard to the national curriculum.

Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshal and Wiliam (2003) summarised a large number of studies and found that assessment for learning has four common features:

- feedback between teacher and taught, which impacts on teaching methods and so changes classroom practice
- the active involvement of students
- teaching being adjusted in the light of the outcomes of assessment

- increased motivation by students and the benefits of self-assessment

All of these features were found in the case study schools to a greater or lesser extent.

Methods

The research took place at four primary schools in the east and south-east of England:

- a small primary school with enhanced provision for children with special needs
- a very large primary school with nursery
- a medium-sized junior school
- a medium-sized infant school with nursery

The schools were selected to give a balance of size and context and to cover the full primary age range. All the headteachers were regarded by Ofsted or others as highly effective. Two of the headteachers had been in post a relatively short time, while the other two were long-serving. All were actively engaged in making AfL a central part of their efforts to personalise pupils' learning.

As researcher, I began with three or four classroom observations in each school across a range of year groups. In my own school, I explained to the children that, unlike on my usual visits to their classroom, I wanted to look and listen without taking part. The children, even the youngest, responded well to this and one nine-year-old even reminded me when I asked him a question.

I explained to all the teachers that the focus of the observation was the children's engagement in the lesson and the impact that AfL practices had on that. I recorded what was happening at five-minute intervals using a graph based on one in John MacBeath's *The Self-evaluation file* (2004) and how engaged the children seemed to be at those points. I judged engagement by considering:

- where the focus of the children's attention was
- how many put up their hands in response to questions
- whether the children were on task
- whether talk was task-related

It proved more difficult to judge engagement in schools other than my own, as I had no baseline with which to compare what I was seeing.

My perceptions were then checked with a focus group of five children from each class. The class teacher selected the children to represent a mix of gender, ability and motivation. The children were asked how interested they had been at each point in the lesson, ranging from 'not interested at all' to 'really, really interested'. This approach proved to be more successful with older children. Younger children tended to say that they were "really, really interested" all the time – as they may have been – or else to repeat what the first child to have answered said, as they were mostly not able to record their opinion without help. If I were to repeat the study, I would not include this aspect.

The children's focus groups were also asked a range of questions about their learning, such as when they enjoyed it most, what helped them to learn, how they knew what they were supposed to be learning and whether it helped them to know. This provided a much richer seam of information.

Following this, the teachers of the classes observed in each school were interviewed in a group about their experiences of AfL practices and their perceptions of their impact.

At a later date, the headteachers were interviewed about their reasons for adopting AfL, the ways in which they had gone about it, the impact it had had and their plans for future developments.

Case study findings

What follows is a case-by-case exploration of each school's practice. This is followed by a synthesis of the key findings from across the four studies before the implications for leadership emanating from these are drawn.

Case study – school A

Background

School A is a village primary school with enhanced provision for 20 children with specific speech and language disorders, all of whom are statemented. These children are largely taught in two separate classes, integrating into mainstream classes as their difficulties are resolved. The headteacher has been in post since 1985 and has seen the school roll rise from 58 to 116.

The school began work on AfL in September 2003 following an Ofsted inspection. The report identified the need to improve the consistency of marking so that it “is used effectively to inform pupils of their achievements and provide them with a clear view of how they need to improve”.

The deputy headteacher led on the introduction of AfL, and this formed his school improvement project for NPQH. He drew up an action plan, in collaboration with the headteacher, which addressed planning, the sharing of learning intentions and success criteria, self- and peer-evaluation, and the role of support staff, as well as feedback and marking.

The head and deputy felt that the latter was the best person to lead on AfL because he had the opportunity to put it into practice daily and this would give him credibility with other staff. All teachers attended a conference about enriching feedback by Shirley Clarke on an INSET day. This inspired enthusiasm in the whole staff and meant that all teachers heard the message first-hand. It was followed up in a planned programme of staff meetings and teachers were able to support each other and sustain each other's enthusiasm if difficulties were encountered.

Learning objectives

Teachers were used to sharing lesson objectives for literacy and numeracy but not in other subjects. They agreed to adopt a system of sharing ‘learning intentions’ in all lessons, starting with one lesson a week – other than literacy and numeracy – and working towards every lesson. The headteacher monitored this informally whenever she was in a classroom by asking the children what they were learning. Teachers very quickly saw that if there was no learning intention the children would be unable to answer and so the expectation was firmly established.

Teachers vary in how they phrase the idea of a learning intention. Teachers of the youngest children and those exclusively teaching children with special educational needs (SEN) say “today we are going to learn...”, whereas from Year 1, mainstream teachers use the term ‘learning intention’ with the children. All teachers refer explicitly to ‘success criteria’ but will often phrase this as “remember to...”.

One teacher said that basing planning on the learning intention, rather than on the activity the children would do, put the focus on what you want the children to learn and led to more effective teaching. Even teachers who had initially found this approach challenging agreed with this statement.

The children's perceptions varied. Some children found knowing the learning intention very helpful. Asked when they learned best, one child said: "[I] am able to look at the learning intention so that I know what I am doing." However, not all were so positive. One child said: "I'm not really interested in learning intentions." Another child in that class agreed with her. But later in the discussion, the children were asked whether knowing the learning intention helped them and she said: "Sometimes. If it's small." She explained that her teacher "always says chunk your writing down. Make it seem there isn't too much to read. Then she writes big chunks for the learning intention and success criteria." Other children agreed: "But if there's lots of information, you don't want to read it."

The older children in this school now take learning intentions for granted. Asked how they know what they're supposed to be learning, they replied: "By the learning intention," as if this was completely obvious. Asked if they always have a learning intention they said: "Yes. Someone will ask for one if not."

Success criteria

Teachers have also been identifying and sharing success criteria. Asked what AfL practices they have found to be most effective, one teacher with a KS1 class responded that success criteria for maths meant that children knew what to do. The children referred to them while working so they served as a reminder of the process they needed to follow. The children in this class confirmed this: "If you forget what you're doing [the success criteria] might tell you...It tells you which order you have to do things in." Older children described how the success criteria "break the learning intentions up into little bits, like ingredients to bake a cake".

Some teachers felt that the children's ability to read the success criteria had an impact on how useful they were. The teacher of the youngest children felt that her children were not able to use the success criteria yet, but the researcher had observed during classroom observation that many of the children were rereading what they had written, which was one of the success criteria for that lesson. Teachers of the older children felt that it was the combination of the learning intention and success criteria which were particularly effective.

All classes in this school have a teacher's assistant. A by-product of sharing the learning intention and success criteria with the children is that the teacher's assistant also knows what the children are expected to learn and is able to keep them more focused. This has reduced the need for liaison time and has increased the effectiveness of the teacher's assistants' work. Teachers say that the teacher's assistants are consequently less demanding of their time.

When teachers were asked how they knew AfL practices had been effective, one teacher commented that the quality of plenaries had improved. They were no longer

'show and tell' or lacking in focus, but now an opportunity for both the teacher and the children to evaluate whether the success criteria had been met.

Mainstream children also knew that the success criteria could be used to evaluate their work. KS1 children said they know when they'd learned something, "when you've met the success criteria". And that you should "look at the success criteria to check". Older children said: "The success criteria tell you what you need to be able to do at the end... Success criteria mean you have managed to do it." A group of Year 5/6 children said the success criteria help because: "You compare it with your own writing to see if you've done it all... You go back through it and you go back to the success criteria."

Self- and peer-evaluation

The school is working hard to increase opportunities for children to evaluate their own work and that of their peers. The older children described opportunities for self-evaluation as: "What we've done well. What you are proud of."

A system of learning partners has been introduced. Children have a learning partner, chosen at random both from the whole class and from children within their ability group. Learning partners are changed every two weeks to give the children the opportunity to work with a range of others and to ensure that no child always works with, for example, a less able child or a child with behaviour difficulties.

The children were almost all positive about the experience of working with a learning partner. This was partly for social reasons: "You can work with someone you've never worked with before and I think it's fun" (KS1 child). "You get to work with people you don't usually work with. You get to know them." This girl gave an example of working with someone she'd hardly spoken to before because he was a boy, but now they're friends.

In a class where the system has been particularly effective, the children were positive about the effects on quieter members of the class. "You learn politeness. Mrs D says let the quiet one speak first." The group named some quiet children. "They think of more ideas... They share more... They've come out... They show themselves what they've really achieved."

One child was particularly positive about the experience of working with learning partners, saying: "Sometimes, I think we learn more from our learning partners than from our teacher." When asked to explain she said: "You're not afraid to say what you believe. Sometimes, you're scared because you find it hard to read – they won't just laugh. I know the teacher won't laugh 'cos they know how you feel but..." The teacher confirmed that her children had told her they find it easier to receive feedback from other children than from an adult.

Teachers varied in how successful they felt the system was for peer-evaluation, depending on the age of the children. Only teachers of mainstream classes had tried this. In Key Stage 1, a teacher had asked children to identify successes in another child's work by ticking them with a coloured pencil. The children enjoyed this but were not always able to identify successes appropriately. In lower Key Stage 2, the teacher had taught the children to identify successes in each other's work and to suggest an improvement by modelling the process using a child's work as an example. After a

period of teaching the children were able to do this for themselves, but on returning after a few weeks they had lost the skill. The teacher was, however, pleased that the approach had improved the children's ability to justify their opinions. The teacher of the oldest children found this approach most effective and used it frequently. He said that it had reduced the time he spent on marking. The children identified successes and an improvement in each other's work while he supported a group, as did the teacher's assistant. The children were also positive about this, describing how their teacher "used to highlight three successes and an improvement prompt". This was one way in which they know the next step in their learning. Now, "the learning partner does it too."

Impact

The headteacher said that the impact of AfL had been: "The children are much more able to evaluate for themselves their own learning. They say things like 'I've met the success criteria' or 'I've achieved my targets'. They are more reflective about their learning. And more intrinsically motivated. We've done away with external rewards entirely. We have none – no stickers, no certificates."

This came about as a result of attending Shirley Clarke's conferences. The headteacher explained: "Shirley Clarke is very clear about this. External rewards – the children who get them are the very able, the special needs and kids with behaviour problems. Average kids don't get them and it actually demotivates them. Even if a child is getting rewards regularly the number of times they don't outweighs the number of times they do, and when we talked to the children about it this is what they said." Initially, teachers were reluctant to abandon stickers, certificates etc, feeling that the children enjoyed them. The headteacher said: "It's been a wrestle for some of my teachers." However, the children discussed this in class council and confirmed what Shirley Clarke had said. Although they do like having external rewards, they often feel disappointed when they do not get one, especially if they feel they have done something really well. And the occasions on which they do not get a reward far outnumber the occasions that they do.

The headteacher said that the process of embedding AfL had been a long one. "Shirley Clarke told us when we first went to hear her that 'it will take you two years to get it embedded' and we came back saying it'll take us six months. It might take most schools two years but it'll take us six months. Well, actually, it's taken us two years and we're still developing. It's not something you can put in place overnight. For some teachers, particularly older teachers, it's a huge sea change. Not 'this is what you're going to do today' but 'this is what you're going to learn'."

Next steps

The next step for this school is to establish a system so that new staff joining the school can adopt the agreed practices as quickly as possible. A written policy has been agreed and shared with governors. The final step is to share it with parents. However, the school does not regard its work as complete and AfL is still a major focus in the school improvement plan.

Case study – school B

Background

School B is a very large primary school with nursery. It is in a socially advantaged area. The headteacher has been in post since the school opened in 1988.

AfL has been in place in the school for a long time – since the mid-1990s. When he opened the school, the headteacher had the vision that “the school was going to be a school that was not about teaching children but about teaching children how to learn.” He referred to the old adage, “give a man a fish you feed him for a day; teach him how to fish and you feed him for life.” It was not a conscious decision to introduce AfL, but it came about because “without assessment for learning it’s a one-sided process. It’s just about teaching. I’ve got this wodge to get through and I’m going to do it come hell or high water.”

He believes that without AfL: “The process of learning is done to children rather than done with children. You’re externally imposing on children what you think they should learn. You’re presuming what they have learned. And you’re building the learning on ideas on where you think they are, rather where they actually are.” So: “Understanding of prior learning took us to the current learning, and the current learning takes us to the future learning. It’s all integral. You cannot work with children on a learning continuum unless you know what they did, what they’re doing and what they’re going to do.”

The deputy headteacher, who does not have responsibility for a class, is responsible for leading AfL within her overall teaching and learning role. But it also happens at a variety of levels. “Ultimately, the day-to-day responsibility rests with phase leaders.” They ensure that the whole school plan for their phase is implemented through their monitoring of planning and the curriculum, work sampling and classroom observation. There are three: the Foundation Stage and KS1; lower KS2; and upper KS2.

Professional development on AfL has focused on coaching, ensuring that staff have an understanding of what is required, and modelling by peer observation, especially of plenaries. The school has quite a high turnover of staff because of the high cost of housing in the area. In order to ‘transfer the culture’, new teachers, even if experienced, are always teamed up with an existing teacher. The headteacher said: “It’s quite crucial that reasonably regularly the culture is re-established, restated, confirmed and, I guess, that’s my responsibility.” He acknowledged that there has been little professional development focusing on the principles of AfL recently because the school has been heavily involved in other initiatives.

Learning objectives

The practice that the school has focused on most is the sharing of learning objectives. This takes place in all classes except the nursery. In all classes observed, the children were highly engaged during this part of the lesson. They all agreed that knowing the learning objective helps them to learn. As a child in Year 2 said: “You can probably do more work and help other people if they don’t know what they’re supposed to be doing.” The headteacher felt that sharing learning intentions has been the most effective AfL practice. “It’s not a secret game where the teachers hide everything. Ultimately, children

understanding what they have learned and what they need to learn. The children join in the dialogue.”

However, the way the learning objective was phrased varied from class to class. The children used the terms learning intention, learning objective and learning outcome seemingly interchangeably. When asked which they used, they said different classes used different terms. This did not seem to affect their understanding of the process. The headteacher felt: “That’s probably because it’s grown like Topsy rather than being introduced. The government calls it something else. People come from different schools and call it something else.” He planned to address this. “We need a shared vocabulary.”

In the nursery, the children were quite unaware of the learning objectives behind what they were doing, though the teacher was very clear about it. She has a sticker for each learning objective for each child. She writes on it how well each child has done and sticks it into their individual folder under the six areas of learning. The children were confident in their ability to learn without adult input: “I can do it for myself.” All the children asked agreed with this.

Self- and peer-evaluation

The work on plenaries has provided opportunities for reflection and for children to evaluate their own work. One teacher used traffic-lights at the end of a lesson for the children to show how well they think they’ve done. She said the less able always said ‘green’, but other children were quite honest and accurate in their self-assessment. She found this made it easier to write reports. Another agreed: “They are very honest. At the end of the lesson, you can evaluate whether the learning objective has been achieved.”

The headteacher encouraged this. “You have to get the children to articulate their own learning pathway. For children to be able participate in that learning pathway they need to understand where they are and where they’re going.”

The teachers felt that they had not yet used peer-evaluation very much, but there were some examples. One teacher had children looking at each other’s work in order to think about how to improve it. They talked together about how to improve. A recent example was ‘improve your language, checking your punctuation, checking that words are not repeated too often’. She was sensitive to the child’s ownership of the work and tried to make sure that “the person whose work it is writes the changes on.” In order to model this, sometimes the class would evaluate one child’s work together. They had also tried this across age groups. Children in Year 3 and Year 5 read stories to each other and evaluated them against set criteria.

Impact

In terms of impact the headteacher was very clear: “It’s a probably not the thing I’m most proud of but attainment has risen, particularly at Level 5.” He also feels that the curriculum is more personalised. He knows this from regular scrutiny of children’s work. “When I do a work scrutiny, I’m seeing a lot less standardised work; lots of kids doing all the same things. There is a wider range of differentiated work which, I think, is responding to each child’s learning needs. Again, done with rather than done to. So I’m seeing the children having a broader range of experiences, which reflect their learning needs. I’m seeing that in planning. I’m seeing that wider range.”

Next steps

As for next steps, the headteacher feels that the time has come to revisit AfL “to see that our shared understandings are similar”. He said: “There is some good practice but there’s some lack of understanding about terminology.” He wanted to look again at success criteria. “It’s implicit and we need to make it a little more explicit.” He commented on the fact that he has been in post for eighteen years. “When you have long periods as a head, you do need to go back again. Just because you’ve done it before doesn’t mean you don’t need to do it again.” He reflected: “Sometimes, you have to remember that some people get caught in your slipstream and are just holding on either to your jacket or your skirt and are just been dragged along by you... Not everyone comes with you all the way and all the time.”

Case study – school C

Background

School C is a medium-sized junior school set in a large village. There are about 300 children on roll. The headteacher has been in post since April 2002. It is her second headship. In the time between her appointment and taking up the post the school was inspected and found to have serious weaknesses.

The headteacher introduced AfL because: “We needed to raise standards and it seemed obvious that if you are going to raise standards one of the most important things you have to do is improve marking.” She believes passionately, “as a parent and an educator”, that children’s work should be responded to so that they are active participants in their learning. However, once they had begun work on marking she found that: “Assessment for learning is much wider, I think, than I ever thought it was. It is much wider than just marking.” As a result, she took on the role of school assessment leader herself and gave assessment a higher profile in the school improvement plan.

An adviser from the LEA provided input, working alongside teachers identified as weaker through monitoring and provided INSET for all staff. “[He] supported us in revisiting our school marking policy”. They also used materials from the DfES Primary National Strategy, Excellence and Enjoyment: Learning and Teaching in the Primary Years. The senior management team (headteacher, deputy headteacher, science and maths co-ordinators) are responsible for the policy, with the headteacher and deputy headteacher taking the major role.

Learning objectives

Teachers felt that one of the most effective practices was sharing learning objectives, something they had not done previously. This “focuses their whole 40 to 45 minutes”. The children agreed. When asked how they knew what they were supposed to be learning, children said “the learning objective”, as if this was completely obvious. However, the usefulness depended on the clarity of the learning objective. Asked whether it helped them to know the learning objective they said: “Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn’t... When it does, it’s like got things in what tells you what you are supposed to be doing.” The researcher shared the fact that children in another school

said they found long learning objectives unhelpful – but these children disagreed. “When he makes it longer it explains it more.”

Success criteria

As in school A, these Key Stage 2 teachers felt it was the combination of the learning objective and the success criteria which was effective. “Something... I have found extremely effective was to actually share a learning objective with the children... With a success criteria.” So the learning objective gives an overview and the success criteria provide more detail. “They’ve got the main learning objective and the specific focus of the success criteria. That keeps them on target, I’ve found.” However, the children in one lesson observed said that they were least interested when the learning objective and success criteria were being shared.

Children were aware of the value of success criteria in helping them to know whether they had achieved the learning objective. Asked how they knew, they said: “The success criteria: she writes it on the flip chart, what she expects us to be able to do by the end of the lesson... So we know what we are supposed to be doing in more detail.”

Self- and peer-evaluation

The school has undertaken some work on self-assessment. One group described how they had improved their reading aloud. “We taped ourselves reading, we heard ourselves reading and heard how we sounded.” As a result: “Expression has risen, expectations are getting higher. It is a good sort of discipline,” said one pupil.

In every class, an agreed set of self-evaluation questions was on display. Initially, these were used to prompt teachers in the plenary and to ensure that plenaries took place. Now the children use them for themselves. “At the bottom of the whiteboard you saw, there’s those like laminated things. It’s like the steps you go through to see if you’ve achieved the success criteria – reading to yourself – what have I learned, did I understand it, and like you get it all in your head and you think ‘yeah, I really understood that’, and it helps.”

They have also begun to use the questions for peer-evaluation. A teacher said: “I think it’s in the plenary as well, when you ask them what they could do to improve. Not only their work, but other people’s.” And another added: “Getting them to share each other’s work, assessing their own capabilities and following their learning objective and targets. And perhaps talking to their partner about how they see their work improving, which they seem to quite like.” This led to them “coming up with something slightly better”. The children agreed: “Sometimes we do it in partners.” However, the headteacher was conscious that this needed to be introduced carefully. “I do want to move into peer-to-peer assessment but I think everyone appreciates that you can’t just give children each other’s books and expect them to do a good job.” She plans to trial identifying successes and a prompt for improvement in Years 5 and 6 before disseminating the practice throughout the school.

Other features

The two AfL practices which the school has focused on most were improving marking and target-setting. “Our main thrust in assessment for learning was improving marking.

So we reviewed the policy and developed a system of marking codes and also a more consistent approach to marking which meant that all teachers marked the same pieces of work in the same way, although there was a variety in quality of marking and target-setting." A baseline for acceptable practice was established, as a result, and is monitored systematically.

In the past, marking "focused on procedural things like underlining, handwriting, and it wasn't very much to do with what the children were learning". As they began to work on making marking more focused on learning, "an investigation of teaching also uncovered the fact that the teachers were not very clear what the children were supposed to be learning anyway, in certain areas".

The work on target-setting addressed this. Teachers began by levelling children's work to a third of a level and moderating their judgements. They set next-step targets using materials provided by the LEA's literacy team. "The target-setting had a twofold impetus. [It] has given teachers a greater awareness of what is needed to move children on from where they are to the next level and it has given them a focus for planning and a focus for marking. And it also provided the children with a focus for improvement."

The school has introduced a system of highlighting three successes and an improvement in literacy. They called the improvement 'feed-forward marking'. The children were very positive about this and understood that it pointed to what they needed to do to improve. The headteacher confirmed: "All my teachers' monitoring, core and foundation, points to the fact the children really want their work marked, they really want to see the results and that's the first thing they look for."

The headteacher acknowledged the workload that marking so thoroughly involved: "In practical terms, this is not quite so easy, which is how we then came around to the understanding that certain pieces of work would be marked in certain ways. So as teachers plan each week, the two phase leaders identify on planning which pieces of work will be marked in detail and which pieces of work will just be responded to with a double tick, having met the learning objective." Marking was and continues to be a major focus of monitoring by senior management, using sampling of children's work. "It has been sustained because we have never stopped monitoring it and I want people to think it is important to do. Therefore, they should be doing it automatically but we do still monitor regularly." However, she now hopes that teachers continue marking in line with the marking policy because they understand the value of it: "They talk to children about marking and children talk to them about how important it is. They can see that I am not just banging on about some sort of crusade and that it really matters." Teachers confirm this: "When we mark, we try to get the children to engage in some kind of marking dialogue – to respond back again."

Impact

The headteacher feels that AfL has had a huge impact in her school. "I would say that the overall impact has definitely been a huge improvement in the standard of teaching and in a general improvement in children making progress in a lesson."

AfL practices have had a particular impact on high attainers. "Our output data would lead you to believe that we have had a very big impact on Level 5. It has gone from 9 per cent to 48 per cent." The headteacher said: "You would expect the children of greater

ability to take a greater role in their learning. I think it has made an impact on them, definitely, and the children who achieve and who have good standards of literacy and numeracy really do respond to formative marking.” Teachers also felt that more able children particularly enjoy being set targets: “Brighter children, I’ve found, really got into it because they are competitive.”

Another major impact of AfL in this school is that: “The children are much less passive than they used to be. The children are still not active learners but they are much more active participants in their education than before because they respond to the marking, they respond to the target – they enjoy the targets. If you don’t tell them the learning objective before the lesson, they want to know what it is. They understand there is more of a process in what they do in order to achieve results.”

Next steps

In order to increase children’s motivation, the senior management team decided to introduce a range of rewards such as stickers and certificates and a ‘student of the week’ award. The children in every class talked about these very positively. The headteacher felt: “We needed the children to be more motivated and, in order to motivate them, we had to provide something. They were very passive. The motivation is in the reward because we are still not at the point where we are looking at learning for learning’s sake. That is our next step.” She wants the school to take on the Learning to Learn agenda. “The logical next step is to involve the children more and make them understand what it means to make them a good learner.” But she is clear that it is important to focus the school’s energies. “If I’ve learned anything from the last three years – and I have learned a lot – it’s that there’s no point in throwing a lot of time and effort and energy at too many things if you want the important things to embed. It *is* important that children understand how they learn and it *is* important that children know how to move forward. I would rather get those things right and do less of it.”

This school has made enormous progress. The most recent Ofsted, in January 2004, confirmed this: “...is a very effective school which had made significant improvement since the last inspection. Standards are well above average in science and above average in the key subjects of English and mathematics. Pupils of all abilities achieve well.”

The deputy headteacher summed up the journey the school had undertaken: “We have used assessment for learning in the last two years. It was not always perfect. We’ve had to change quite a few times. If you can get it right it’s the key to improving child attainment.”

Case study – school D

Background

School D is an infant school and nursery in an urban area. There are around 300 children on roll. The catchment area is mixed, with about one in four children being from a minority ethnic background.

The headteacher took up post in January 2004. She implemented AfL because she had been involved in the Learning how to Learn project¹ as deputy headteacher in her previous school. She valued the children's engagement and enthusiasm for learning and how learning became more of a dialogue with the children. When she took up a headship she knew even before she started that AfL was something she was going to focus on because the benefits in her previous school were "just astounding".

In this school, the headteacher has taken the lead on training staff in implementing AfL practices: "I suppose I've held it all together because of my interest." She hopes that her own enthusiasm for it "spilled over to the staff". She had considered asking her deputy to lead some aspects, but acknowledged that her deputy already has a major task with ICT.

She has used the workshops from the Learning how to Learn project to train staff. They have focused on sharing the criteria, self- and peer-assessment, feedback and marking and, more recently, questioning. She said: "My first plan was to get people talking about learning rather than work. To actually establish we are all learners here."

Learning objectives

Teachers felt that the most effective AfL practices were the WALT (We Are Learning Today) and WILF (What I'm Looking For). One said: "It's the children knowing – mine have a real need to know at the beginning of the day what's going to happen now... If I don't do it they're most upset and, particularly, the boys. They really know where they're going."

Another teacher said: "We are reinforcing the learning objective throughout the whole lesson now, not just at the beginning and during the plenary. And what I'm expecting to see; the success criteria." She felt that the impact was: "That word, learning, is one that's come into the school's vocabulary." Another said: "They are beginning to question their learning more." The headteacher said: "They are talking more about their learning and beginning to question whether they are learning, and what they are learning and how."

The children largely agreed that it helped them to know the learning objective. One wrote: "I learn best when we know what we are going to do." Most children agreed with this but one had reservations: "If she did not put it up on the board it would be much more exciting for us." At this point, the others in her class agreed.

The headteacher had some sympathy with this point of view, saying that as adults, "we don't always know what we are going to learn". She wondered: "Do we kill some of it by saying this is what we're going to learn?"

Success criteria

The headteacher has a clear idea of how success criteria help children to participate in their learning. "You'll be able to explain to somebody or you'll be able to show somebody." She encourages her staff to give examples of the learning objective: "This is what it looks like. This is what a sentence looks like." She would like this approach to go beyond basic skills but acknowledges: "That's all right when things are very basic. It's not as easy with abstract thought and creativity. But again, what I'd like to get staff to be

thinking about is not just the content but the imaginative side – today we are going to imagine. This is what a thought is. This is what someone imagines.”

Self- and peer-evaluation

This school has also introduced peer- and self-assessment. One teacher said: “Peer- and self-assessment has been a huge thing. We’re now getting the children to talk to each other about their learning and learn from each other... Two brains are better than one.” This was introduced through a Learning how to Learn workshop. In Year 2, children are looking at each other’s writing and suggesting ways to improve it. In Year 1, they use examples of each other’s writing and are asked to listen out for particular features, for example, exciting words.

The impact of this has been: “They are much better at looking for their errors. It is closing the gap for them. The teacher demonstrates a model as an example. The children are able to self-match. Teachers say ‘does it look like that one there? Does it have a full stop?’ The children are able to match their work to an example for themselves.”

The children have used traffic-lights in their books to show their understanding. Teachers have talked about ‘how sometimes we need a little bit of help’. This provides a record of how children perceive their understanding. “We’ve instilled in them that it’s OK not to know. At the end of the day, that’s why we’re here. We all learn in different ways. We’ve actually been saying that to children – these are the different ways we can learn.”

The children have also used thumbs up, thumbs wavering and thumbs down to show their level of understanding. A teacher said: “We’ve instilled that it’s OK to do this [thumbs down] and it’s OK to do this [thumbs wavering]. It is OK to actually find things hard.”

The youngest children used smiley faces to evaluate their own work. However, their teacher acknowledged that this was not without difficulties. “I always make sure they know what that smiley face means. For example, they know that a sad face means ‘I can’t do it very well’. A flat [face] means ‘I’m not sure’. But a smile means ‘I’m happy’.”

In terms of peer-evaluation, one teacher had used partners to “see if you have got your numbers round the right way”. Another had tried “just getting them to talk to each other. Read your work to your friend. Can your friend see anything to make your work better?... Tell your friend what you’ve done.”

Teachers felt that peer-evaluation was building up the children’s trust in each other – their faith in their peers.

Other features

This school is also working on giving children oral feedback, since most children are not able to read teachers’ written comments. “Writing doesn’t mean an awful lot to them.” All feedback is constructive and specific, relating to the learning objective.

The headteacher is developing ‘learning steps’, ‘learning bags’ and ‘learning lists’. Learning steps break down each third of a national curriculum level into tiny steps so

that teachers and children can plan the next stage. “We’ve started to break the learning down and each part will contribute towards a learning step which children and teachers can acknowledge as successful progression.” However, she acknowledged caution in this approach: “If we’re always plotting that next step it felt to me like children never had a chance to revel in being successful.” She talked about “people having time to realise that ‘yeah, that’s a success. Great’. Just have that moment for a minute – that elation – then they can take on the next step. If we always destroy that elation by giving them the next step too early, I think the motivation may disappear.”

Learning bags provide teachers and children with information about what the children need to be able to do to access a particular problem. For example, in order to access the target ‘I can write a simple sentence’, the children need to know that a sentence needs to make sense; that words need to be in the right order; how to write graphemes, upper and lower case; where a word begins and ends; how to blend and segment sounds. Learning lists are for the children to check their learning. Teachers say: “This is your learning list. Have you got all of these things there?” This approach has been used particularly in writing, but it will also be applied to reading and mathematics.

Impact

Teachers feel that as a result of AfL, “our culture in our school is changing”. The children are becoming more independent and more able to talk about their learning. “It has made the children think... They’re far more aware of why they’re here – the importance of being here... It encourages them to ask what they’re going to be learning.”

A teacher reported that parents too had noticed a difference. She said parents say they’re actually coming home and telling me what they’re learning. Not just what they’re doing, but what they’re learning.

The headteacher acknowledges the progress that has been made. However: “We are nowhere near where I want to be still. This year, we have introduced some ideas. It’s helped me to clarify my thinking and I now have a model of learning in my mind. I want to make that absolutely clear in terms of curriculum, in terms of teaching and learning and in terms of assessment. We haven’t got every step embedded yet and some of those ideas are still developing.”

The headteacher uses classroom observation to monitor AfL practices and to provide feedback to staff about the next step. “I’ve only got where I am in my thinking because of how people have worked together to develop ideas.”

She does not feel that AfL has yet had an impact on teachers’ planning. She would like to see children involved in the planning: “Some of these sparks can take off.” She plans to use posters to pose the question: “Who plans your learning? Is it the teacher, is it you or is it a joint effort?”

The teachers agree with her that more needs to be done. “We haven’t done everything.”

Next steps

As for next steps, this school is still developing its practice: “We are still doing it – still moving forward.” The headteacher says: “For me it will be sustained by revisiting it. I

want the ownership to be the teachers'. At the moment, I feel I've got the ownership. I will feel that we've got to where I want to be when everything we've been working on has become second nature to all of the staff." She is involved with a project on summative assessment, *Assessment systems for the future*,² with Professor Wynne Harlen, Paul Black, Mary James and others. She is trying to join summative and formative assessment together in a meaningful way.

She also recognises that the induction of new staff will be an issue. She is in the process of writing an assessment for learning booklet and a teaching and learning booklet. This will set out: "At... this is what we do".

References

¹ *Learning how to Learn*. This project is part of ESRC Teaching And Learning Research Programme. Available at <http://www.learntolearn.ac.uk>

² *Assessment systems for the future: the place of assessment by teachers*. A project by the Assessment Reform Group. For more information, go to <http://k1.ioe.ac.uk/tlrp/arg/ASF.html>

Key findings

For school leaders

- All the headteachers had introduced AfL into their school because of a conviction that learning is not a passive process to be done to children. They wanted children to be involved in their learning – to take part in the learning journey/dialogue. As one of them put it: “Assessment for learning is a part of equipping children with the skills to understand how to learn and the process of learning.” Although two of them had done so in response to an Ofsted inspection, none of them had felt under any external pressure to do so.
- All of the headteachers wanted their staff to share ownership of AfL, so that they used AfL practices out of conviction and not just because it was school policy. “They can see that I am not just banging on about some sort of crusade and that it really matters... I will feel that we’ve got to where I want to be when everything we’ve been working on has become second nature to all of the staff.”
- All of the headteachers had put in place systems for monitoring AfL practices as part of their routine monitoring arrangements. These were conducted by the headteachers themselves, with other staff who held responsibility for AfL. They included formal monitoring of teaching, discussions with pupils – both structured and informal – scrutiny of planning and sampling of pupils’ work.
- Responsibility for AfL lay with different roles, depending on the size and staffing structure of the school. However, all the headteachers were involved personally, both in planning and monitoring.
- Three of the schools had introduced AfL within the last three years. They had given AfL a high priority for continuing professional development, using a mix of external providers and in-house training.
- These headteachers were conscious of the fundamental changes they were expecting from their staff: “Our culture in our school is changing.” They planned the introduction of AfL gradually so that staff did not feel overwhelmed by the demands made of them. They knew it was not possible to achieve everything at once: “We haven’t got every step embedded yet and some of those ideas are still developing.”
- They had a vision of what they wanted to achieve but took the long view: “We are nowhere near where I want to be still. This year, we have introduced some ideas. It’s helped me to clarify my thinking and I now have a model of learning in my mind.”

For strategies

- All of the schools had established identifying and sharing learning objectives as a routine part of their work. The use of success criteria was less consistent, though in schools where this was an important feature teachers felt it was the

combination of learning objectives and success criteria that was particularly effective.

- All of the schools had done some work on self- and peer-assessment. However, it is important to train the children in this. As one headteacher said: “I think everyone appreciates that you can’t just give children each other’s books and expect them to do a good job.” Another school had found that after a period of teaching, lower junior children were able to identify successes and suggest an improvement in other children’s work but on returning after a few weeks they had lost the skill.
- In two of the schools, a focus had been on improving the quality and usefulness to children of marking. In these schools, teachers highlighted successes – as identified by success criteria – and made a suggestion for improvement. Teachers considered that children valued this feedback: “They really want to see the results and that’s the first thing they look for”.
- In one school, AfL had been in place since the mid-1990s. There had been no recent continuing professional development and, in this school, practice had diverged. The headteacher acknowledged the need to revisit principles and practice “to see that our shared understandings are similar”.

For pupils

- In all of the schools, children were taking a more active part in their learning as a result of the introduction of AfL. “They are beginning to question their learning more... The children are much less passive than they used to be.”
- Most children feel that knowing what they need to learn and how they will know they have learned it helps their learning – but only if the language is clear. One said her teacher “always says chunk your writing down. Make it seem there isn’t too much to read. Then she writes big chunks for the learning intention and success criteria.”
- Children welcome opportunities to evaluate their own and each other’s learning. They particularly value the social aspects of peer-assessment and find it very motivating. One said: “Sometimes I think we learn more from our learning partners than from our teacher.”

Implications

From this small-scale study, the following implications emerge:

- To introduce AfL, headteachers need a personal conviction of its importance based on prior experience or an understanding of its perceived benefits. Headteachers need to invest in the process directly, for example, by leading aspects, or indirectly by enabling staff to develop expertise and work with colleagues to develop theirs.

- AfL is not a quick fix. For AfL to be implemented effectively, consistent practice needs to be developed through practice, dialogue and reflection. If it is to have a major impact, introducing it is a gradual process, taking at least two years to become embedded.
- Implementing AfL is a process and, as such, needs to be informed by self-evaluation: monitoring and evaluation and discussion with those who use it inform the journey.
- Developing AfL practices requires teachers to be receptive to and value the pupils' perspective
- Continuing professional development can be a catalyst for innovation and a means of promoting shared learning. However, there need to be systems in place for the induction of new staff and a planned revisiting for existing staff to ensure that practice does not reduce in effectiveness once the focus for school improvement has moved on to other issues.
- Some simple steps can form a good starting-point for development: "My first plan was to get people talking about 'learning' rather than 'work'. To actually establish that we are all learners here."

Conclusion: so does it help to know?

All of the schools identified what they wanted the children to learn – rather than do. The way they expressed this varied depending on the age of the children and the decisions made locally, but all of them shared this information with the children. Most children understood that this was how they knew what they were supposed to be learning and most agreed that it does help to know. They made the proviso that it was important that the information was clear. A small number of younger children thought it would be more exciting to find out afterwards.

The teachers and headteachers all felt it was important for children to know what they were learning because it involved them in their own learning and made them part of the process. However, perhaps the main reason why it helps to know is that if teachers are clear about what they want children to learn then their teaching is more focused and more effective and it is easier to assess whether children have learned it.

AfL represents a fundamental challenge to 'delivery-based' models of teaching and learning; it requires teachers to be receptive to and value the pupils' perspective and actively seek to engage this to inform how their next learning steps can be met. All of the schools studied recognise that such pupil-centredness reaps dividends in terms of learner engagement. It invites them to be a partner in their own and other's learning, and is one of the keys to developing a more personal educational experience.

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