

Discuss the importance and effectiveness of developing Assessment for Learning throughout the primary school, including critical analysis of personal implementation of one AfL strategy from Professional Teaching Experience.

The aim of this essay will be to discuss the importance and effectiveness of developing Assessment for Learning (AfL) throughout the primary school, including a critical analysis of a personal implementation of one AfL strategy. When discussing AfL one of the biggest misconceptions is that it is the same as Assessment of Learning which has been described as an “assessment for validation and accreditation” (Taras, 2008, p.172). A definition of AfL, however, describes it 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 them there” (Gadsby, 2012, p.2).

If you're assessing in order to help you teach better, that's assessment for learning, and if you're assessing in order to grade students, to rank them or to give them a score on a test, then that's assessment of learning.

(William, 2009, p.9)

Specifically AfL combines the approaches and techniques within formative assessment. The term formative assessment was coined by Michael Scriven in 1967, from there many people have made an input to its development, in particular a review by Black and William (Stiggins, 2005).

There are four main aspects to AfL, these include sharing criteria with learners, questioning, quality feedback and peer/self assessment (Black et al. 2003). Each of these should be implemented within teaching and learning in order to make judgements on where a learner is, where they need to be and how to move them forward within their education (Gadsby, 2012). One thing formative assessment is designed to do is give pupils feedback; quality feedback can help learners develop their work to a better standard, it is especially useful for lower attainers as it allows them to understand what they need to improve on, and how to get their desired results (Black and William, 1998). Although this is the case, most intellectual and social skills can't be developed if you are simply told about them, they also need practice in a supportive environment, therefore a teacher who is able to give good targets, offer support and describe how to be successful is essential (Sadler, 1989).

Having defined what is meant by AfL, I will now move on to discuss my personal implementation of a strategy within Key Stage 2 (KS2) during my Professional Teaching

Experience (PTE). Although I used many strategies within my PTE, the one I will discuss within this essay is the use of lollipop sticks within a classroom while questioning children. This was used by writing the name of each child, within the classroom, on a lollipop stick and placing these facedown within a jar. It was then explained to the class that these sticks would be used to select names of pupils at random throughout the lesson when there was a question to be answered. The reason I chose to implement this strategy was due to certain consistencies I observed when children were being asked to raise their hands if they had an answer or suggestion. It was clear to see that only certain children were volunteering themselves to answer and engaging with the thinking tasks on a regular basis. Because of this it was difficult to gauge everyone's understanding on the topics being taught; many of the children would simply hide behind those who were more confident in their answers or tune out as they felt comfortable they were not going to be asked for an answer. According to Black and William (1998) this is often the case as some children feel they will not be able to respond fast enough or are afraid of making any mistakes so allow the more confident, higher attaining pupils to respond for them. By implementing the lollipop stick strategy, I wanted to give each child the opportunity to participate and contribute to the discussions taking place. William (2011) suggests that in order to make learning engaging for each child, participation must be compulsory, not a choice. As well as this, it seemed a useful tool to continuously evaluate the students learning and understanding. Therefore giving me the ability to decipher where each child was in their learning, where they needed to go and consider how to help get them there.

While using this strategy, I came across many benefits, however there were also clear limitations. I was able to use the lollipop sticks in order to recap on prior knowledge and question the pupils. This was very beneficial as it gave me the opportunity to identify any gaps in the pupils understanding and adjust my planning in order to cover any aspects that needed revisiting. Although this is the case, the strategy is one that could be considered controversial. Humanist psychologists such as Holt have suggested that using approaches such as lollipop sticks can make children feel uncomfortable and result in withdrawal and a lack of self confidence or disruptive behaviour. This is due to the fear of humiliation and rejection (Holt, 1983). An alternate opinion would be that of William (2009) who suggests that without participation from each child there is a lack of engagement as well as knowledge gained.

According to William (2011) answering questions on a topic increases a child's knowledge. This particular AfL strategy is beneficial as it gives each child the opportunity to increase their knowledge and understanding on a topic, instead of only one small group, therefore decreasing attainment gaps within the classroom. Although

this is the case, not every child was able to answer or engage with the questions given to them. In these situations I would repeat or rephrase the question and give the child thinking time, if they were still unable to answer they would then be given the option to phone a friend or I would bounce the question on to another pupil myself. According to Black et al. (2003) studies have shown that increasing wait time for a child to answer a question results in more confident, longer answers as well as a decrease of students unable to respond. I often asked follow up questions relating to a pupils response e.g. choosing a lollipop stick and asking that child if they could give evidence for, elaborate on or even disagree with the previous students statement. This was useful as each child knew they could be chosen at any point, this therefore encouraged them to pay attention to and engage with their peers statements as well as the teachers.

While many strategies can be difficult to implement within a classroom due to things such as financial implications, this strategy is one that is fairly practical and simple to use. Although this is the case, if the strategy is not implemented across the whole school it may take a while for the children to get used to it. The higher attaining children, in particular, seemed to struggle with this strategy when i used it as they were desperate to answer the questions themselves. There were a few pupils who weren't satisfied that some people's names were getting called out twice while others were yet to contribute to class discussions. In the future to ensure everyone gets an opportunity to answer it would be useful to pull out the lollipop stick of children who have been called on once or twice, without them knowing, and placing it back in after the majority or all of the class have had the opportunity to contribute. Another option would be to allow the children to choose the lollipop sticks themselves, ensuring they are aware that the process is random. If implemented throughout a school however, these difficulties could be avoided as the children would be used to this method of discussion, rather than only certain pupils answering everything. Due to its nature, the lollipop stick strategy is one that could be used continuously within a school from Foundation Phase (FP) to KS2. It is a strategy mostly used for questioning which is an AfL technique used in both FP and KS2, therefore the strategy itself remains beneficial in keeping children engaged and ensuring participation. There are, however, things that may be useful to change, for example in FP it may be more engaging to have a picture of each child attached to a lollipop stick rather than just a name to make it more visual for the pupils.

Reference List

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