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Assessment for Learning: a model for the development of a child's self competence in the early years of education

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In recent years policy documents, curricula and other educational initiatives have promoted a pedagogy founded on the concept of independent learning. This is broadly defined as 'having the belief in yourself to think through learning activities, problems or challenges, make decisions about your learning and act upon those decisions (Blandford and Knowles, 2009:336). The central role of Assessment for Learning (AfL) in this process is often overlooked in practice. By considering the findings from a small scale research study this article addresses the central role of the teacher /practitioner in developing effective AfL in the early years classroom (3-5 years).

Introduction: defining AfL for early years practice

Assessment for Learning (AfL) underpins policy, curricula and other initiatives promoting a more personalised approach to learning and a move towards teaching for independent learning. The recognition of AfL as a valuable means of raising achievement is largely due to the significant work of Black and Wiliam (1998). The growing body of research within the field generally attributed to or connected with the Assessment Reform Group (ARG), further attests to its benefits as an educational strategy for improving outcomes (James and Gipps, 1998; Assessment Reform Group, 1999 and Harlen, 2009). Evidence based research exploring aspects of AfL highlights the effectiveness of its various constituent parts as tools for improving children's attainment (Gipps et al., 2000; Sebba and Deakin Crick, 2005). Despite the growing body of research since the publication of *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through classroom assessment* (Black and Wiliam, 1998), research literature directly addressing assessment for learning in early education is more scant. That said however, its association with independent learning in the early years of education is documented (Featherstone and Bailey, 2001, 2006; Whitebread et al., 2005 and Williams, 2003).

In practice, AfL means children and practitioners working together to decide *where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there* (ARG, 2002). Founded on the idea of collaborative working and active learning, AfL is guided by the following 10 key principles: 'helps learners know how to improve, engages children in self assessment, is central to effective planning, addresses how children learn, is crucial to classroom practice, is a professional skill, is sensitive and constructive, fosters motivation, promotes understanding of objectives, and recognises educational achievement' (Adapted from ARG, 2002). These principles delineate AfL and when implemented by teachers and practitioners have a significant impact on improving children's outcomes and promoting independent learning. Gardner et al., (2008: 9) however, emphasise the need for 'professional learning' programmes focussing on 'teacher understanding' rather than teaching technique for its effective implementation.

Although there is little evidence based research exploring the impact of AfL on early years provision, *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education* (EPPE) study (Sylva et al., 2004) highlighted the benefits of constructive feedback in the assessment process. In addition, Hutchin (2000, 2003), Regional Adviser for the Foundation Stage (curriculum for 3-5 year olds) in the DCSF National Strategies, has underlined the need for observational assessment to closely inform planning in meeting individual learning needs.

In interpreting AfL for early years practice (3-5 years), the nature of teaching and learning, with its focus on play and open ended tasks, necessitates the adaptation of certain aspects of the process. For example, it is not always possible or relevant to make children aware of learning objectives prior to an activity. However, acknowledging the importance of providing children with a focus to learning, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA, 2005: 6) clearly states that:

Practitioners should discuss their learning with the children, giving feedback when appropriate without interrupting their play and identifying next steps with them.

Context

The introduction of the Foundation Stage Profile (QCA, 2003) at the end of the Foundation Stage has brought greater focus to assessment in the early years. That said, the moderation process has highlighted some deficiencies in its use as a tool for objective assessment (QCA, 2005). A positive initiative however has been how the Profile, has necessitated closer working between primary schools and educational providers for the under five's. Based on a number of formative assessments, in the six key areas of Learning and Development (personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development and creative development) throughout the Early Years Foundation Stage, a record of children's achievements can be made available to the primary schools.

Implicit in the effective implementation of AfL is the development of children's metacognitive processes, whereby learners are made aware of how they are learning. The Assessment Reform Group (2002) reaffirms the need for the understanding of learning to

be a two-way process. Overall and Sangster (2006:66) refer to the centrality of the *internal dialogue*- which they define as '*talking within the head*'- in the learning process. They propose *pair or small group work* as a natural means of enabling children to become aware of the 'how' of learning. They further suggest that the interaction of the practitioner with the young learner in explaining how to carry out a particular task or getting them to talk *about what they know* or how they know if they have completed a task *well or badly* provide a natural means of enabling the child to become aware of the learning process. The High/Scope curriculum, with its plan-do –review approach to learning lends itself naturally to the development of this and other aspect of AfL. Its particular focus on 'active learning' through plan-do –review activities (child-initiated), small group time and large group time (Holt, 2010) provide opportunity for children to discuss their learning with adults. Underpinned by a philosophy of 'shared control' (child and adult) and the idea of 'encouraging' rather than 'praising' children (Holt, 2007), the High/Scope curriculum acknowledges the impact of assessment on children's motivation and self-esteem.

Black and Wiliam (1998:11) highlighted the benefits for children, in terms of *improved knowledge and understanding*, when they have the opportunity to discuss their work with practitioners. This is supported by findings from the *EPPE* study (Sylva et al., 2004), which suggested that discussion is most effective when it involves some aspect of sustained shared thinking. Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) define sustained shared thinking as "an episode in which two or more individuals "work together" in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend". In recent years this type of adult child interaction developed in practice through sustained shared thinking, has been endorsed by the government (DCSF, 2008) as a means of effectively engaging and supporting children in their learning and development. It is perhaps best understood within the following framework:

- "Adults are aware of the child's interests and understandings, and the adult and child work together to develop an idea or skill.

- In the most effective settings, practitioners support and challenge children's thinking by getting involved in the thinking process with them.
- There are positive, trusting relationships between adults and children.
- The adults show genuine interest, offer encouragement, clarify ideas, and ask open questions, supporting and extending children's thinking and helping them to make connections in learning''.

(Source: DCSF, 2008:53)

By providing opportunity for sustained shared thinking, children learn to work through quite complex problems, employing a number of valuable skills in the process. The important factor for the educator is the type of questions which are sensitively asked to help children develop a feeling of being in control or being the 'director' of their learning. These might include: that's good, how does it work..., that's interesting, why did you..., you're good at thinking, can you think of another way of doing that.... It is important to ask the question with interest and enthusiasm about the child's work. Practitioners need to show that the child is the 'expert' and they would like to know about it too. In addition, time is given to the child to think through their response. Black and Wiliam (1998:11) in their study of assessment highlighted the following:*there are clearly- recorded examples of such discussions (teacher-child) where teachers have, quite unconsciously, responded in ways that would inhibit the future learning of a pupil. What the examples have in common is that the teacher is looking for a particular response and lacks the flexibility or the confidence to deal with the unexpected.* The implications for practice are quite clear. Practitioners need to reflect upon possible ways of both asking and answering children's questions, which can be integrated into day-to-day practice.

Methodology

In order to explore the concept of AfL within the context of independent learning a two phased approach was adopted. The methodology outlined here was developed for a larger study focussing on the professional development of teachers, practitioners and other educators involved in the early years of education (0-7 years). Phase one involved an

exploratory semi-structured interview with senior leaders or managers in three early years' settings in England. Aware of the valuable insight into education offered by the increasing body of international research studies in early years practice, an exploratory semi-structured interview was carried out with an initial teacher trainer (early education) in an HEI in France. In order to develop a strong theoretical base for the second phase of the research, interviews, which lasted between 60-90 minutes, focussed on key aspects of early years education. Aspects included independent learning, AfL, planning, teaching and learning, children's behaviour and partnership working. Interview data was tracked and categorised and used to inform the development of interview and observation schedules for a secondary case study phase in three early years settings in England.

The case study approach enabled more in-depth research to be carried out in the key areas. Semi-structured interview schedules (for senior leaders and managers) and observation schedules (for children) were developed to focus on the key aspects in more depth. Interviews and observations were arranged at the convenience of the senior leaders and managers within the settings. Interviews were carried out face to face or by telephone. The second phase of the research did not aim to compare practice but to highlight examples of good practice in the key areas. At the outset settings had been identified from across the various types of early years providers. Selected for their good practice (as highlighted by The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills-Ofsted), senior managers and leaders within the settings were contacted and invited to participate in the research. These included a Sure Start Children's Centre (provides integrated health, social and early education services), a private nursery, an independent school and two local authority nurseries.

Findings

Assessing young children in the classroom or early years setting

Assessment for learning is based on the continual process of *seeking and interpreting evidence* (ARG, 2002) about children's learning and development. Such assessment, informs planning (formative assessment) *when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet the needs* (Black and Wiliam, 1998:2). The importance placed on

AfL was evident in the research findings, highlighted by the following comment made by one senior leader:

(Assessment for learning is) absolutely fundamental (to planning). It is fundamental that you respond to children's learning needs. They will be diverse. The important thing is staff that know the children well and carefully plan for those needs. I let staff do their own planning; they are very capable. We have weekly and end of term meetings (related to planning). Staff also meet in between to do planning. There is an overview and then they plan individually.

Each child is unique and the ongoing process of collecting evidence of learning, both formally and informally can be a challenging task for the practitioner. Hutchin (2003) , highlights the following as ways that practitioners will gather evidence of children's learning during the foundation stage: observations, conversations with children, information from parents, samples e.g. drawings, from others involved with the child, e.g. bilingual assistants and collected from other settings that the child has attended (QCA ,2005:15). Many educators initiate planning by following the approach suggested by Fisher (2002a) and assess what children already know when they arrive in the setting. This demands a certain level of flexibility and the opportunity for children to carry out a number of *open ended* tasks (Fisher, 2002). These, can be initiated by the practitioner, but are open by outcome to allow the children to think through problems. Evidence from the research shows how this is done in practice:

When you are initiating a new area of activity it will be more adult directed. Adults will be saying such things as could we try this or that? or could we use that there? So the adults will be engaging with the children at the start (of the activity) to give it a focus and to get the children on board. (In essence) to let them know that we need to engage in this activity because it is worthwhile. You must communicate learning goals so that they can get something out of it. I don't propose sitting and reading the learning objectives aloud, but it (the activity) needs to be carefully planned and structured so that they (the children) get something out of it. Children might be more directed in the use of for example

specific equipment. Children could use equipment incorrectly and then that would detract in some way from the activity (from the learning value of the activity).

Overall and Sangster (2006: 75), take this a step further and suggest that *for formative assessment to be successful it is about creating a classroom in which children become engaged in learning which is meaningful to them and you and they have strategies to respond to their learning needs.* This was evident in the research findings, as highlighted by the following comments made by leaders in a number of participating settings:

(The learning environment should be) well planned, well structured and safe and secure in both senses of the word. By creating a safe and secure environment, I don't just mean in the traditional sense, although in that way as well. We talk a lot here about "personal zones". We mean that if children are walking down the corridor, for example, they can get to where they need to be going without anyone interfering with that. They feel safe. We also talk about "depth of engagement". So children should feel safe and secure in the sense that they can engage in what they are doing. So for example, no one is going to take their resources. That's facilitated by the adults there. It could be an adult-led activity or a child initiated activity, but they need meaningful interaction with the adults to make the activity meaningful. So staff need to plan themselves into that activity. In addition our particular setting allows for a lot of play to take place outside- the aesthetic element is important.

And:

We encourage them and promote independent activities. We always have a construction area with sand and water. The children can go and play there when they want to. Children develop the right dispositions for learning by being with adults who are enthusiastic and praise the children.

And:

We try to give children responsibility throughout the school. This is tied up with motivation-if children are taking responsibility then they are more likely to be motivated (self). Here, the ethos of "community and shared responsibility" is fostered throughout the school. And we also involve parents. Children love talking about what they are doing

or have been doing. So we have meetings with parents and children talking about what they've been doing.

When practitioners know how young children learn and develop, it enables them to *recognise significant moments in learning* (Smidt, 2005:43). The following, taken from an interview with an initial teacher educator at an HEI in France highlights the particular approach adopted in the country:

The teacher has to know what makes fun or pleasure for that age. I always tell my students to observe and listen to the children on the play ground during breaks. You have to know their needs.

Teachers have to try to remember themselves as children-what did they like? What made them proud? What made them laugh?

When I had (taught) this age group I always planned a surprise in the lesson, without telling them. They had quickly understood that there would be something strange, funny (or) good during the course (of the lesson) but they did not know when to expect it. So they concentrated to be sure not to miss the fun.

During my planning I always thought carefully about something that would make the whole lesson fun- nice. Something I always tell my trainees, don't ever do an activity that bores you.

The teacher has to carefully choose the activities- too difficult, too easy, too long (will not be enjoyable for the children). This means that for a lesson of 45 minutes I planned at least five or six different activities. Each new learning (exercise) was presented in a different way or as a different activity (in order to) feed different learning styles, visual, listening, handling, moving.

In practice, assessment is a cyclical process, which informs long, medium and short term planning. It involves gathering evidence of children's learning, analysing and evaluating the evidence and allowing time to reflect on how to *develop learning priorities or targets for the children across the breadth of the curriculum* as appropriate (QCA, 2005:16). Practitioners acknowledge that observing children first hand informs teaching and provides opportunity to develop their learning. Developing a framework for common

practice can marginalise the element of subjectivity in all observation and may take the format of a set of questions as in the following example:

1. What aspect of learning do I want to assess?
2. What is the best way of collecting this data (what type of observation-participant, incidental or planned, focussed?)
3. What am I looking for? (consider the assessment scales).
4. What does it tell me about the child?
5. What aspects do I need to consider to help this child develop/progress more autonomously? (be flexible-later in the day, another dimension of the child may be observed which will alter the plan)
6. How much time do I need to give this child to develop this skill/progress in this area?

Involving children in self-assessment and discussion of their learning.

Developing positive dispositions to learning is closely related to a child's level of confidence, which in turn can impact on motivation. Psychologists suggest this is related to children's own theories about learning which produce certain recognised patterns of behaviour in approaching new learning challenges (Brooker and Broadbent, 2003:51). The following comment from a senior leader who participated in the research highlights the central role of the teacher in this process:

The things we value here are helping children to have self-confidence and develop their own feeling of self competence. Helping children to develop their own feeling of competence is more important than confidence.

We want children to be aware of the needs of other children. Children should respect each other's personal space and personal zones. We help them to develop the ability to focus on something and to see it through rather than flit from one thing to another. So it's an ability to be determined and focussed. We are facilitating learning through the way we structure their personal learning zones.

(personal learning zones refers to the child's 'space'-no child will take a resource from another child if they are using it)

Dweck (2000) refers to these patterns of behaviour as “mastery-oriented” and “helpless – oriented” behaviour. Children who display a *mastery* orientation towards a difficult task remain confident in attitude and approach, whereas those who display a helpless-orientation lose focus and concentration and adopt an attitude of failure. Effective Formative Assessment needs to be constructive. It should motivate children, moving them towards self-mastery. The following comment made by one manager who participated in the research shows how this can be done:

We try to help young children develop the following independent learning skills-self-esteem, individual enjoyment of learning alone and as part of a group, involvement in decision making, giving children choices and empowering them to make choices.

In practice we do this by involving the children in decision making. For example what snack they have and how much to have. We have baskets of toys in the room and the children are free to choose which toys to play with and when. We encourage free-play with an adult around. As we have a ratio of 9 children to 4 adults where standard practice is 3:1, we can give more time to individual children. For example there is always an adult to encourage them and develop their thinking by asking them relevant questions

Brooker and Broadbent (2003:54), citing Carr(2001) suggest that children can develop *mastery* by being “ready, willing and able to learn”. Carr (2001: 23), who considered assessment in early years learning through stories, delineates these dispositions within the following context: *being ready is about seeing the self as a participating learner, being willing is recognising that this place is (or is not) a place for learning, and being able is having the abilities and funds of knowledge that will contribute to being ready and being willing.*

Whitebread (2003:8-9) highlights the centrality of adults in enabling young children to feel empowered. Children who feel in control of a task, he further suggests, *respond positively to failure, and try harder the next time, believing all the time in their own ability to be successful in the task...* He cites, democratic parenting styles as a good

example of how adults enable children to develop mastery behaviour. In such a style *there are rules to which a child is expected to conform, they are applied consistently and they are discussed and negotiated with the child.* The centrality of relationships to a child's development is self-evident. The following taken from an interview with an initial teacher educator in France shows the importance of both the type of relationship with the teacher and with other children in helping children to feel empowered and in control of their learning- (The approach discussed relates to teaching young children a foreign language. However, the suggestions are generic and can be applied across a number of different activities):

The atmosphere in the setting has to be relaxed and concentrated. Mocking or laughing at someone has to be clearly and strongly forbidden and every effort (a child makes) has to be encouraged. Praise is very important. Before a child dares to speak, he/she needs to be confident in his/her ability to produce the right sound, word, sentence.... One useful means is to encourage repetition collectively and often. If the practitioner hears a good "production" (sound, word or sentence), he/she can ask a particular child, with praise, to say it to the others; but he/she should not ask a child to repeat, individually, something new if he/she does not volunteer to do it.

On the same principle, listening tasks or others are given to teams of children and the tasks have to be feasible for the team. It's not important that each child succeeds but that the team succeeds. So in the group, children are more confident to try. Nobody is forced to do or say something in front of the entire group if he/she does not feel ready. Stress lowers the chances of success.

Also, the "status" of error is important. Errors are part of the learning (and children should be made aware of that). Practitioners can't expect children to produce/reproduce without error the first time. Some children are quicker than others. That is natural. Some can do it the first time; others have to listen more often before they can reproduce it. Practitioners have to respect the quiet ones. Of course they have to stimulate and invite them too; but some children have to listen a long time before they can produce a sound. This is the same in the mother tongue.

Again singing is very useful, it's impossible to put the tonic accent in the wrong place in a song, so singing together is a very interesting means of training pronunciation. Another means of training speech is to give tasks where speech is needed in pair work. Here

children can train without fear of exposing the “imperfections” in their production to the whole group.

One necessity is also to give speaking tasks that make sense for the child. A question should always be a real question, i.e., if you ask, it means that you don’t know the answer. Can it be fun to ask an old pal “what’s your name?” so the teacher has to give new secret names for example if they want to train this question. The question must be real. It could easily be done in a guessing game where the object is really hidden.

Broadhead (2004:123) connects learning dispositions with emotional intelligence, which she defines as our ability to “actively manage our interactions with others”. Goleman (1999) however, offers a more comprehensive definition within the following context:

“the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships”.

Broadhead (2004:123) suggests that when children are able to operate within the “Cooperative domain”, for example, “when they play with others who manage this domain effectively”, even though the individual may not be able to do this, she suggests, that they are acting within a phase or stage of coping with their interaction with others. She cites play as an excellent means of supporting and promoting emotional intelligence. She suggests that when play is collaborative, by fixing upon and engaging with the knowledge of other children, those with a less developed emotional intelligence can engage more meaningfully with “the world around them”.

In practice, Brooker and Broadbent (2003:30) suggest that personal, social and emotional development are addressed both spontaneously and in planned activity, where the “role of the skilled practitioner is to be alert to the multiple meanings of children’s every day experiences in and out of the classroom”. That is, is the child’s interpretation the same as the educator’s or what the educator would expect? Does the educator need to clarify the point through carefully thought out and appropriate questioning? Should the educator use this point as a means of further developing the child’s learning? This demands a focused approach on the part of the early years educator.

Children's confidence develops step by step and is fuelled by their successes- recall the adage *success breeds success*. This is best achieved by focussing on the individual; their achievements and their continuing progress. By focussing on the child during discussion time, practitioners also provide opportunity for child self-assessment. In essence, motivational feedback focuses on progress and success and is central to effective Formative Assessment. The ARG (2002) proposes AfL approaches which *protect the learner's autonomy, provide some choice and constructive feedback, and create opportunities for self-direction* as a means of preserving and enhancing motivation.

Involving children in planning their next steps

The last few years have witnessed a shift in classroom practice, particularly in the way children have become involved in their own learning. There is the expectation that practitioners, by making children fully aware of the learning objectives and outcomes of a particular activity/lesson and involving them in planning their next steps will enhance their learning. This was evident from the research findings as described by one senior leader:

A lot (of feedback) is immediate. This age group needs immediate feedback- so for example we might say such things as- is that what you expected? Or could that have been done differently? etc. Feed back needs to happen there and then.
So it's making use of opportunities as they arise. It's facilitating children to make choices and give reasons why. Staff planning is responding to children's needs as they see them.

In practice, Clarke (2002) suggests *balancing the curriculum* to cover both the teaching of skills, concepts and knowledge and their application, *sharing unit coverage throughout lessons* and *separating learning objectives from the context of learning* will help children to be more aware of the goals on which they need to focus.

Involving children in planning their learning helps them to take ownership of the work. For educators, this means guiding the children in their decision making. It is a time for guided choice, not free choice. Child- initiated activities, provided through the plan-do-review approach of the High/Scope curriculum, will lend themselves more easily to

this type of child involvement than adult –led activities. That said, there are always opportunities to involve children in “what next?”. The responsibility is with the practitioner to consider how this can be effectively implemented (e.g. constructive questioning). For child –initiated activities, allowing time for the children to plan and discuss their activity in advance, will bring greater clarity to their thought process and will provide further opportunity for stimulating ideas.

Outcomes

Reflective practice

The *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE)* study (Sylva et al., 2004) and *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY)* study (Sylva et al., 2007:58) highlighted the benefits for children when practitioners adopted a *thoughtful, structured approach to everyday activities*. The study further suggested that this led to better *cognitive and linguistic outcomes for children*. Pedagogical practice of this type calls for practitioners who are able to select, analyse and assimilate relevant material to enhance their knowledge of children, their professional practice and their future development. The effective integration of AfL into teaching and learning, to improve children’s achievement and support them in their development as independent learners, affirms the need for teacher reflection, both individually and as a group, both of which encourage critical thought. Good pedagogical practice promotes children’s learning and creativity. For this to be effective, teachers need to be aware of how their, ideas, attitudes, values and beliefs influence what happens in practice. Consider the following diagram:

INSERT FIGURE 1

Figure1: Improving pedagogical practice

Practitioners consider where their values, beliefs, attitudes and ideas come from, how they inform their reason and judgement and how this influences the way they relate to the children, parents and colleagues within the setting. Articulating their own views helps them to build on their strengths and correct weaknesses. This particular approach closely

resembles the widely adopted reflective dialogue model and can be taken further to explore AfL in practice, as indicated by the diagram below:

INSERT FIGURE 2

Figure 2: Enhancing practice

Figure 2 shows how practitioners, in groups, consider AfL in practice, examining the underlying principles, theories and philosophies. They discuss what they know and understand about AfL, what particular skills they have in this area and consider any gaps in these areas.

Conclusion

Enabling children to have confidence in their competencies

Assessment for learning should be central to day-to-day practice. The routine, daily interaction of the early years practitioner with the child provides many opportunities for embedding formative assessment in class room practice. The introduction of the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage: Setting the Standards for Learning Development and Care for children from birth to five* (EYFS) (DfES, 2007) has put a greater emphasis on outcomes and accountability in educational improvement. Although this is highly positive in many respects, it can be a cause for divided priorities amongst early years practitioners. Many may feel that with a strong focus on the development of the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding to meet educational targets, children's achievement, in what are often referred to as the 'soft skills' (DfES, 2006:10)- self confidence, self-esteem and other social and emotional skills is not fully acknowledged. Although recent government educational policy is underpinned by the themes of personalised learning and teaching for independent learning, on the surface it might seem that there is a gap between policy and practice. Bertram and Pascal (2002:88) suggest that *what is easily measurable cannot reflect the immense complexity of early learning*. However, the breadth of the learning goals and educational programmes in the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* provide, with effective planning for

assessment for learning, the flexibility to address and acknowledge the holistic development of the child.

Notes on contributors

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