

Implementation of Assessment for Learning in Hong Kong Classrooms

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the 'Assessment for Learning' reform proposal highlighted in a Hong Kong government paper, one of the most important reform proposals that has generated intense debate and a wealth of scholarly work in the Hong Kong education academic community. This paper analyses and compares two articles that also focus on this area to determine how the policy will be implemented in Hong Kong classrooms between 2014 and 2021, and on this basis, it also provides some insights into the future development of the policy.*

Keywords: *Hong Kong classroom, Assessment for Learning, Education Reform*

1. Introduction

1.1. One aspect of the current assessment reforms

Following the 1998 Public Examination System in Hong Kong Report in Hong Kong (ROPES), the Hong Kong government grew increasingly eager to initiate a new round of education reform, including Assessment for Learning (hereafter referred to as AfL). Since the 1990s, the label, AfL has been used in a range of initiatives, including TOC¹, BCA² and SBA³ (Lam, 2016).

The Hong Kong government document makes no distinction between formative assessment and AfL, except that the former is included in the 'aged' TOC reform. The latter is included in the new 'learning to learn' reform agenda (CDC, 2001). Thus, the two terms are interchangeable when referring to similar processes. In Hong Kong, AfL is regarded as one of the most significant programmes in the new millennium's education reform agenda (CDC, 2004).

1.2. Definition and benefits of AfL

AfL is inextricably linked to learning-oriented formative, which Wiliam (2009) describes as any assessment designed to facilitate student learning. Additionally, Laveault and Allal (2016) emphasise its effectiveness that if using assessment data leads to the selection of a more effective teaching strategy than another, it is AfL, regardless of the format or access to the data.

Concerning AfL's benefits. To begin, AfL is supposed to enable a stronger connection between assessment, teaching, and learning. Lee (2009) proposes that assessment, pedagogy, and learning are fundamentally symbiotic. However, Graue (1993) discovered that assessment and teaching were previously seen curiously apart in practice and goal, and therefore the introduction of AfL is seen as reconnecting this connection. Secondly, Black and Wiliam (1998) claim that there is substantial evidence that AfL can help raise achievement standards. The Assessment Reform Group (2002) adds that AfL is the most effective tool for raising standards and empowering lifelong learners.

2. Background

Assessment often has the most resistant features of reform (Morris et al., 2000), especially when introducing AfL (Morris et al., 1999). Despite the educational benefits of AfL, scholars agree that implementing it effectively in the classroom, particularly in Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHCs), is a

¹TOC: It is an abbreviation of Target-Oriented Curriculum, which was introduced into primary education in the early 1990s.

²BCA: It is an abbreviation of the Basic Competency Assessment, which was introduced in 2004.

³SBA: It is an abbreviation for School-based Assessment and was introduced in 2008.

problematic and challenging task (Biggs, 1998; Berry, 2011; Carless, 2011). According to Hamp-Lyons(2007), cultural differences between learning and examination cultures cause such obstacles. When considered in a uniquely Chinese context, the examination system's centrality can be traced back to the Song dynasty's 960-1280 AD screening system (Zeng, 1999; Chen, 2014). This instrumental attribute to learning was also seen as a way to achieve social mobility and class leap. As a result of the examination culture's dominance, scholars have discovered that students frequently play a passive rather than a proactive role in their education. Historically, teachers have been authoritative (Carless, 2011), similar to Western educational philosophy's Essentialism.

Nowadays, this way of thinking is not diminishing but becoming more concrete. The result was an "exam-driven AoL system" (Lee & Coniam, 2013) and an "over-drilling culture" (Tan, 2019). The current teaching methods in Hong Kong schools emphasise teachers' responsibilities and strategies that effectively affect student performance (i.e., trial and test examination skills) (Xie & Cui, 2021). This is a double-edged sword. If AfL is shown to cause positive change, previous stereotypes can be abandoned; AfL's credibility is questioned if no change occurs.

3. Implementation

Berry (2011) contends that Hong Kong is still failing to effectively implement established plans and policies, despite the long-established impact of AfL on student learning development. However, ten years later, has the situation improved? What about future trends?

This and subsequent sections use Mak and Lee's (2014) and Xie and Cui's (2021) case studies to illustrate the above points. To show the actual implementation of AfL in Hong Kong schools in 2014 and 2021 and to predict future implementation in Hong Kong. Keep in mind that Xie and Cui(2021) study formative assessment (hereafter referred to as FA). As stated previously, the policy document does not distinguish between FA and AfL. Also, FA is defined as classroom practice in which teachers, learners, and peers arouse, interpret, and use evidence about student achievement to make decisions about the next steps in teaching that are potentially better or more informed than decisions made without evidence (Black & Wiliam, 2009), which is very similar to AfL's definition of effectiveness (William,2009; Laveault & Allal, 2016). Many authors use the terms 'formative assessment' and 'assessment for learning' interchangeably, according to Chng and Lund (2018). There is also a lack of research on AfL and classroom cases, which will worsen by 2021. As a result, the two pieces were chosen with some inaccuracy and compromise.

The study by Mak and Lee (2014) details the changes, effects, and challenges faced by four teachers in two schools with little AfL practice. For each of the three stages of the English writing teaching process, the four teachers used Hattie and Timperley's (2007) 'feed up, feed back, and feed forward' feedback model. However, the results remained poor, and the four teachers could not continue after only six months.

Xie and Cui's study (2021) examined three preservice teachers who attended the same school and used FA strategies during the pre-, while- and post-writing stages. Compared to 2014, the three preservice teachers in this scenario used five more specific FA principles translation strategies. "Preservice teachers" is a status advantage that also provides them with direct access to university research and mentoring(Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005) in comparison to the preceding scenario. However, the three preservice teachers used FA to varying degrees and only occasionally. Only Cathy's case can be considered close to a success, which Xie and Cui (2014) argue is primarily due to the mentor's openness and support.

4. Problems faced during implementation

Both empirical studies were conducted in three parts of English writing classrooms and implemented AfL or FA. Mak and Lee (2014) took almost a year to perform, whereas Xie and Cui's study (2021) took only 20 weeks. Thus, in the presented study, each of the three preservice teachers was presented separately at the start. However, Mak and Lee (2014) used the four teachers collectively to identify the issue.

4.1. Common problems found in the cases

4.1.1. Power and division of labor

A reciprocal supportive relationship between mentors and mentees produces the most satisfying outcomes, whereas a conservative and controlling approach to mentoring emphasises an unequal power relationship between mentor and mentee (Yuan, 2016; Yuan & Lee, 2014), implying a denial of autonomy. Moreover, Xie and Cui's study(2021) revealed that preservice teachers' success in implementing FA depended on their mentor's openness and how closely their plans matched their mentor's practises and beliefs. Regrettably, two of the three preservice teachers could not successfully launch their FA practice. This was also demonstrated in Mak and Lee (2014), where four teachers were subjected to the same pressure, interpreted as a vertical division of power and status. Only the school leader had the authority to approve the change. Due to the asymmetrical power relations between administrators and teachers, teachers do not have complete autonomy in their attempts at innovation.

4.1.2. Tendency to mark errors comprehensively

None of the teachers in Xie and Cui's (2021) case dared to score selectively. Teachers in Hong Kong are held to a high standard of accountability; Xie and Cui(2019) assert that innovations that allow teachers to do more work are more acceptable (and perceived as more professional). Similarly, comprehensive written feedback is consistent with the visible pedagogy embedded in a performance-driven, exam-oriented school environment (Tan, 2019), whereas scoring selectively would imply not diligence and lax. This was also seen in Mak and Lee's (2014) case. Despite initial intentions to implement focused development, the teachers in the case reverted to their previous practice of comprehensive assessment after six months.

Along with pedagogical reasons, Mak and Lee (2014) discuss differences in teachers' beliefs about feedback. In this case, the teachers believe they would be guilty if they did not mark every mistake. These reasons are enduring and multifaceted. Teachers always pose a dilemma: while they believe in selective feedback, schools typically correct errors comprehensively and thoroughly.

4.1.3. Traditional perceptions are not compatible with AfL

This section returns to the concerns raised in the background, namely the underlying assumptions of high teacher accountability and low student accountability, in contrast to the FA assumptions. According to Leahy et al.(2005), effective teacher feedback involves the giver doing less than the receiver. Similarly, Jackson(2009) asserts that effective teaching requires 'never working harder than your students.' However, students seem to have developed a habit of being passive and dependent on teachers while losing their ability to learn independently. This is exemplified in Mak and Lee's (2014) example of the teacher's reluctance to use selective marking as a backup justification for 4.1.2. However, in the case of Xie and Cui (2021), this tradition was even more pronounced, as the students did not see the preservice teacher's "new approach" as beneficial to their learning. Also, they exhibit behavioural difficulties adapting to new methods that require them to exert additional effort.

4.1.4. Psychological changes of teachers

Although Mak and Lee (2014) argue that administrators and leaders are keen to 'change quickly' problems through innovation, Day (1999) argues that teachers are typically motivated by the ability to see 'change' in their students' lives and vice versa. Thus, similar ideas of wanting to 'change quickly' were lurking in the minds of the teachers. In particular, when teachers struggled to balance the demands of external testing with the additional workload of assessing innovation, Mak and Lee(2014) found their initial enthusiasm faded and was reshaped into frustration. However, the four teachers in the case study rarely questioned AfL's benefits for their students. This psychological shift also occurred in the case of Xie and Cui (2021). More seriously, two preservice teachers negatively viewed FA as impractical. This was one of the reasons these two teachers ceased practising.

5. Discussion

This section looks at the changes and contributions that Xie and Cui (2021)'s research has made to the previous

5.1. Supporting evidence was presented

In Mak and Lee's (2014) case, none of the four teachers was allowed autonomy. In one of the Xie and Cui(2021) examples, Cathy's mentor gave her considerable autonomy, which aided her success. In the same case, Betty and Amber, the other two preservice teachers, were torn between their supervisors' expectations and views and given little authority. This, in reality, forces teachers to choose between adhering to reform practises or meeting the demands of their superiors or leaders; only one may succeed between the 'contextual and developmental dimensions' and the 'relational dimension'. These three visual differences show how healthy working relationships based on mutual trust and respect (Izadinia, 2016; Mena et al., 2017) can lead to successful change and vice versa. Thus, Xie and Cui(2021) use the success story to show the importance of equal relationships and autonomy for reform triumph.

5.2. Improved academic support

In the absence of specific theoretical support, Mak and Lee(2014) suggested 'school cultural adaptation programme' to improve AfL practice. Lam(2016) identified a similar issue and advocated for colleges to provide more tailored AfL programmes and case studies. It is heartening to notice that preservice teachers in Xie and Cui (2021) receive continual professional support from supervisors and university mentors. University mentors provided consistent professional support to all three teachers, ensuring that their understanding of FA principles was appropriately translated into L2 writing instruction. Five FA methods have already been integrated with three teaching strategies in a recent article on the L2 writing cycle (Xie & Lei, 2019). Thus, this advice from Mak and Lee (2014) and Lam (2016) can be seen as being offered in some form today. The current trend indicates that a more relevant and tailored school programme is imminent.

5.3. Improved strategies for resolving teacher frustration

Mak and Lee (2014) and Xie and Cui (2021) also address this issue: the tension between a long time of reform and the pressing need for improved student performance. Although Xie and Cui's (2021) actual example does not improve, the suggestions made therein should be addressed to some extent, namely that innovative pedagogies such as AfL or FA could be adopted in the early stages of school for younger kids. Because FA promotes learner autonomy and peer cooperation, which goes opposite to the current performance-oriented strategy in schools, it would be necessary and indeed helpful to deploy student instructors in lower classes where kids are not immediately under pressure from public exams.

6. Limitation

Although it has been noted that AfL and FA are consistent policies and definitions of effectiveness, there still have distinctions between the two, with William (2011) arguing that much of the variation between the two stems from the operational differences.

Additionally, Farrel (2008) suggests that mentors frequently view preservice teachers as substitute teachers who provide a break for them. As a result, preservice teachers have fewer opportunities to change than full-time teachers, like the four teachers in Mak and Lee (2014). Therefore, issues raised in the past may not be covered in the current study. This does not necessarily mean that they have been resolved successfully, but rather that they may have gone undetected in certain circumstances. For example, Mak and Lee (2014) discuss the issues of 'rule', 'division of labour' and the extra work-loads associated with the reforms and the issue of uniformity of beliefs across the school.

7. Conclusion

Throughout the essay, two literature are analysed. Overall, the current study fills a gap in the previous implementation framework for which little professional support was available, while reiterating the critical need to restructure the relationship between teachers and management, and the critical need to establish an equal footing. The comparison revealed that there are still some unresolved issues despite seven years. Nonetheless, it is pleasing to note that some old headaches have improved, and sound advice has emerged to address some stubborn issues. Thus, future implementation can be viewed with optimism and openness. After all, reform does not occur overnight, and policy

implementation requires more effort and time than might be expected.

Teachers are recognised as the most critical reform component (Day, 1999; Berry, 2011). Rather than simply repeating government documents, create an environment that fosters teachers' enthusiasm for reform and existing knowledge. Meanwhile, it is critical not to lose confidence when difficulties arise. Contradictions and problems are considered a source of innovation (Engeström, 1987) and are essential in development and reform (Cole & Engeström, 1993). Expectantly, we can expect AfL to flourish in Hong Kong classrooms in the not too distant future.

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