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Assessment-as-learning in classrooms: the challenges and professional development

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify teachers' perceived challenges in implementing assessment-as-learning (AaL) in classrooms, and evaluate the impact of a one-year professional development programme (PDP) designed for 47 teachers in a Hong Kong primary school to promote AaL implementation. Findings showed that the PDP increased the frequency and appropriateness of AaL implementation when on-site support was also provided, otherwise changes were not substantial. It suggests that systematic supporting measures should be provided together with PDPs to address the challenges teachers encountered in implementing AaL.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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KEYWORDS

Assessment-as-learning;
professional development;
in-service teacher;
assessment reform

Introduction

Assessment reform in Hong Kong aims to build productive connections between assessment and learning by explicitly emphasising formative assessment, i.e. assessment-for-learning (AfL) and assessment-as-learning (AaL) (Curriculum Development Council 2017). However, its implementation in classrooms is unsatisfactory (Yan and Cheng 2015). One major reason for the failure is the exclusive reliance on teacher-directed AfL without making use of AaL because 1) it overburdens teachers, especially in big classes; and 2) without AaL, students lose invaluable opportunities to develop self-regulation competence. Successful assessment reform requires synergies between AfL and AaL. Unfortunately, AaL is underused in classrooms. Lam (2019) found that Hong Kong teachers' understanding and implementation of AaL were superficial.

Hence, this study aimed to (1) identify teachers' perceived challenges in implementing AaL; and (2) evaluate the impact of a one-year PDP designed for 47 teachers in a local primary school to promote AaL implementation.

The study

The one-year PDP involved a need analysis meeting, three 2-hour whole school workshops, and on-site school support. The need analysis meeting with the principal and coordinating teacher identified the focus of the PDP. Accordingly, three workshops were designed, guided by Yan and Boud's (in press) conceptualisation of AaL and Black and

William's (2009) formative assessment framework. Self- and peer-assessment were used as the major AaL examples.

Workshop 1: clarify important concepts, such as assessment literacy, AfL and AaL.

Workshop 2: introduce strategies for integrating AaL in questioning and feedback.

Workshop 3: demonstrate how to use AaL to promote students' self-regulation.

For each workshop, participants completed a pre- and post-worksheet containing open-ended questions. Pre-worksheets gauged teachers' perceived challenge in implementing AaL and what they expected to learn, while post-worksheets recorded what teachers actually learned. The on-site support for selected (by the school) teachers ($N = 6$) included class observations followed by consultation meetings. All meetings were audio-recorded (with teachers' consent) and transcribed. The transcribed data and teachers' responses to the open-ended questions were subject to content analysis. In addition, all teachers completed a pre- and post-programme survey about their frequencies of AaL activities in the past year.

Results and discussion

Teachers' responses to the open-ended questions and meetings demonstrated that the challenges included (1) the curriculum requirements are heavy so that teachers do not have much time and flexibility for AaL activities; (2) student diversity in ability makes AaL difficult; (3) students lack initiatives to engage in AaL activities; and (4) teachers lack sufficient skills and concrete examples for AaL. The workshops did help teachers in terms of (1) having a deeper understanding of the relevant concepts and (2) acquiring concrete, ready-for-use strategies and examples of AaL. The class observations showed that the selected teachers designed and applied AaL more frequently and appropriately.

Wilcoxon-Signed rank tests (Table 1) indicated that teachers' use of peer- and self-assessment (statements #1 to #4) had no significant differences before and after the programme. But the increase on using assessment data for monitoring (statement #5) were significant ($p < .05$).

An explanation for the results, as verified in the consultation meetings, is that professional development did enhance teachers' skills in AaL which resulted in more AaL implementation to some extent, especially for those receiving on-site support. However, some challenges (e.g. curriculum requirements, student diversity) are difficult to be addressed by professional development alone. Thus, the frequency increases in the use of peer- and self-assessment are not significant.

Table 1. Comparisons between pre- and post-survey results ($N = 40$).

Statements	Pre-survey		Post-survey		<i>p</i>
	M	SD	M	SD	
1. I ask students to evaluate peers' work.	3.63	0.90	3.83	0.81	.213
2. I ask students to provide feedback to help peers improve.	3.63	0.93	3.88	0.91	.223
3. I ask students to identify strengths and weaknesses in their own work.	3.73	0.75	3.70	0.88	.832
4. I ask students to identify strategies which will improve their own work.	3.93	0.83	3.88	0.94	.725
5. I ask students to use assessment data to monitor their learning progress and set learning plans.	3.58	0.93	3.98	0.80	.028*

Note. The rating scale is a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to very frequently (6).

Conclusion

This study identified teachers' perceived challenges in conducting AaL and evaluated the impact of a PDP in promoting AaL implementation. Findings showed that the workshops were useful for professional development. However, it is challenging to increase teachers' AaL implementation without on-site support. As AaL is a substantial change from traditional assessment approaches, systematic supporting measures, including curriculum redesign and individual student support, might be necessary, in addition to PDPs, to make AaL possible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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