How does assessment for learning support student achievement?

In order to ascertain how assessment for learning is used to support student achievement it is essential to be fundamentally certain of what assessment is and how it can be used for learning. Anthisasou & Lamprianou contend that the main focus of assessment and testing in formal education settings is to make certain student knowledge and skill (2002). The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) define assessment as, “the ongoing process of gathering, analysing and reflecting upon evidence to make informed and consistent judgements to improve future student learning”. Colin Marsh (2010) outlines assessment as a term that is typically used to describe the activities undertaken by a teacher to attain information based on their students’ understanding, skills and personal learning styles. Assessment for learning, otherwise known as formative assessment, allows teachers to track student achievement levels in order to gauge learning, ultimately assisting with cultivating future teaching plans (James, 2008). Formative assessment takes place in the classroom environment, where information is collated during teaching or instruction with the eventual intention to improve learning outcomes for all students (Anthisasou & Lamprianou, 2002). It is through formative assessment that teachers are able to observe their students in action, tracking data that assists to form a final curriculum model that helps students best meet their learning goals (Marsh, 2010).

Strong research evidence by Black and William (1998) proposes that assessment for learning, or formative learning, when implemented appropriately, not only supports student achievement but leads to vast increases in attainment of learning goals. Recent studies by Broadfoot & Black (2004) and Carr & Claxton (2002) further reinforce ideas first contended by Black and William, that by presenting assessment and learning simultaneously, teachers can create a strong platform for all students to achieve success in the classroom (Marsh,

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S00127026
2010). When engaged in assessment for learning, it is essential that teachers maintain a dialogue within the classroom focused around the learning goals, acquiring feedback as they continue through the lesson in relation to these goals (Black & William, 2006). It is through this meaningful, positive and constructive feedback that teachers are able to develop a model of learning within their classroom that ultimately assists them in their planning as well as students in their learning outcomes (Black and William 2006a; Black and William 2006b; Marsh, 2010). Simultaneous learning and assessment ensures that students are focused on the purpose of the task, allowing them to become personally involved in their learning through commenting or sharing learning intentions (Marsh, 2010). Furthermore, students become intrinsically rewarded when realising their personal learning needs and have control over their future learning progress (Marsh, 2010). In allowing each student the same access to the curriculum, differentiating access levels, students become personally accountable for their work. When engaging in formative assessment strategies, teachers ultimately evoke in their students a sense of self-worth and authority, allowing each student to work to their full potential.

Additionally, assessment can be used in the classroom as a means of learning. Clarke (2001) argues that students must be responsible for their own learning, stating that this leads to a great impact on their self-esteem as displayed through observable student behaviour. Moreover, she contends that when students are personally accountable for their own assessment and develop a metacognition, they are able to accurately indicate where they have made mistakes and why through self-evaluation and reflection. Students are able to develop their own learning goals and are able to openly discuss their learning, including mistakes, without any sense of failure (Clarke, 2001). It is also concluded from her studies, that teachers are able to develop a stronger sense of students' learning needs when self-assessment is implemented.
Assessment of learning, otherwise known as summative assessment, is most commonly the assessment that takes place at the end of an instruction period that provides information to people other than the students, usually teachers or faculty heads, about the relevance or success of a unit (Athanasou & Lamprianou, 2002; Marsh, 2010; Swaffield, 2008). It typically displays a level of achievement of the student in the form of their final grade. There is predominately more strengths to a formative model of assessment, when compared with its summative counterpart, however assessment in education institutions often resides in the former as teachers frequently struggle to find the time to develop a formative assessment plan for the classroom (Athanasou & Lamprianou, 2002). Broadfoot and Black (2004) reinforce this argument by stating there is a clear obstacle in mainstream education assessment in that there is a clear priority on summative assessment and standardised testing on a large scale.

Summative assessment can be referenced in two ways; norm-referenced assessments are used to compare students' performances with one another, whereas criterion-referenced assessments are used to compare a student’s results to a set of criteria in relation to a standard (Marsh, 2010). Norm-referenced assessment is useful when learning is age-related (such as NAPLAN) or when it is essential that a students’ performance should be compared to a specific group. Conversely, when the criterion-referenced assessment model is used, there is a much more prevalent emphasis on the individual learning that is taking place and learning is clearing defined and related back to the learning goals (Athanason & Lamprinaou, 2002).

As afore mentioned, the reasons for assessment are for teachers to gain relevant insight into the learning of their students in order for them to make suitable conclusions from said results. Such suitable conclusions, however, would not have any form of legitimacy if the assessment results were deemed unreliable. Swaffield (2008) contends that no measurement is “perfectly reliable” (p. 128), thus there are procedures that need to be placed in order for fairness and equity to prevail.

In conclusion, formative assessment or assessment for learning, ultimately acts as the bridge between assessment and learning. It is the simultaneous act of acquiring knowledge and displaying this understanding through ongoing assessments that student’s
will receive the ultimate learning benefit. Summative assessment, while it is currently in strong demand in most education institutions, exhibitions a weaker demonstration of knowledge and often fails to give a holistic approach. Ultimately, student achievement is greatly supported through assessment for learning. Assessment has the power to create an engaging, safe and intrinsically pleasurable classroom environment for each student. At present, assessment is strongly focused around a summative approach, or assessment of learning (Marsh, 2010). It is the current challenge of teachers to allow their education institutions to make the transition from assessment of learning to assessment for learning, allowing their students to gain additional information about their own thoughts, personal learning experiences and learning goals along the way. It will be the culmination of formative and summative assessment that will guide education in Australia through the 21st century to develop a strong and more equitable society.
Reference List


doi:10.1080/09695940220119148


1,322 words