

What happens when pupils set their own targets in the classroom?

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Rationale

According to the Scottish Government's Assessment is for Learning (AifL, 2005) policy, assessment should be at the forefront of everything educators do to ensure that every child reaches their full potential. Formative assessment can provide learners with the opportunity to look at their progress whilst also giving them an understanding of how they can improve, allowing them to be actively involved in their success. Black and William (1998) and the Assessment Reform Group (1999) highlighted five important factors for learning to be improved through formative assessment; two of which will be focused on within this enquiry. The first of which is pupils being actively involved in their own learning, and the second the importance of pupils being given opportunities to assess their work and find out how to improve. This is in support of the Standards for Full Registration (The General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2012) which highlights the importance of educators developing children's understanding of self-evaluation in order to advance their learning. Additionally, recent research such as that of Wanner and Palmer (2018) have highlighted the importance of learners developing skills in self-assessment in order to help them succeed in Higher Education. This shows the importance of developing skills in assessment to ensure educators are preparing every child for later life experiences and the world of work.

Aims

The focus of this practitioner enquiry was to investigate whether there would be an improvement to the quality of self-assessment when pupils set their own targets. These targets would be in the form of the success criteria within a specific part of the curriculum. The aim of this enquiry was to compare the quality of self-assessment when:

1. The teacher provided the success criteria; therefore the target for a given lesson
2. The children created the success criteria; therefore setting their own targets for a lesson

Methodology

The process of this enquiry was conducted with a primary six class of 31 pupils. The evidence discussed within this enquiry however, focuses on six pupils within the class who will be referred to as pupils A to F in order to protect their identity.

Literacy was identified as the area in most need of improvement to self-assessment and so was selected as the area to focus on in this study. Two pupils were chosen from each Literacy group, six in total, to enable results to show the effect across different stages within one subject area. Each group were working at different levels with some working on the last stages of first level and others at different stages of second level within the Curriculum for Excellence.

Over a four week period evidence was collected in the form of: formative assessment using two stars and a wish within pupil's jotters; informal pupil discussions with the teacher and between pupils themselves; and participant observation. During the first two weeks the teacher provided each Literacy group with their targets for their Literacy lessons. These lessons spanned over comprehension tasks, grammar and taught writing. Targets were given in the form of the success criteria which was discussed prior to starting each lesson and referred to again during the assessment period. Following this, for another period of two weeks, at the beginning of each Literacy lesson pupils created the success criteria for their group themselves and once all were in agreement this was displayed as the target for that specific lesson.

Findings

Displaying targets for each lesson is important to understand what is going to be assessed and therefore making learning purposeful. Within this enquiry, there was found great improvement in the quality of self-assessment when learners created their own group's targets. Not only did learners show more interest in what the aims of each lesson were, they also displayed a greater understanding of how to assess their own work as shown within their Literacy jotters.

Informal Discussions

The results from informal discussions found that all pupils preferred setting their own targets as they were working towards ones they viewed as more important. Additionally, pupils A, C and F highlighted that when teachers provide this information the learners forget what their targets are. It is not until the assessment process begins that they are reminded of the success criteria. From these discussions pupils highlighted the importance of being given the responsibility for their own learning and being given the chance to set then achieve the targets they wanted to. This shows the importance of giving learners opportunities to be independent learners and effective contributors. This is in support of Donohue (2012) who highlighted the importance of ensuring learners are actively involved in the assessment process and not passively observing it. They argued that in doing so learners are more aware of the skills they are developing as they have a clearer understanding of the aims of the lesson. This was made clear throughout this enquiry as by changing how aims were set in the classroom there was also a positive change as learners were more successful in developing new skills.

Participant Observation

Additionally, through participant observation the enquiry found that throughout peer discussions, which occurred when each group worked collectively to set their own targets, there was a lot of critical thinking and evaluating occurring. This showed pupils developing not only their skills in assessment but also their critical thinking skills, further benefiting their learning. Learners could be heard discussing what success would look like and how they could show it as well as making suggestions and evaluating them. This was evident across all groups however teacher input was required throughout to ensure targets set were moving each group forward and challenging all learners. The development of critical thinking skills is very important, as highlighted by Moore and Stanley (2010), as it is linked to achievement across a variety of areas and therefore makes the findings within this enquiry even more important. It could therefore be said that by changing the process of creating the success

criteria, the teacher is allowing the chance for more skills to be developed and not just those specific to the subject area being taught.

Jotter Evidence

Furthermore, when examining the jotters of pupils A, B, D and E it was found that self-assessment had improved drastically, especially with those learners who previously had struggled with assessing their own work. There was also a clear improvement in their next piece of work, showing the positive impact of the changes made to setting the success criteria during these lessons. Previously learners would tend to make comments about handwriting or finishing work quicker when self-assessing, however with the changes made learners now focused their comment when assessing their own work on the success criteria; showing a good understanding of the targets for each lesson.

Finally, once the enquiry had ended pupils were invited to comment on the changes made within Literacy lessons; some of which are noted below:

“It makes more sense for us to make up the success criteria ourselves because we are the ones who are completing the work” – Pupil F

“I liked choosing what my targets were because then I knew what I was supposed to do” – Pupil C

“I liked talking to my friends about what I needed to do to be successful” – Pupil E

These comments showed a change in the way learners perceived assessment, which should have a positive impact on learning as a result. Additionally, those who typically rushed through self-assessing their own work could be seen to be taking more care and consideration with it, showing that they now valued the process more now than before.

Conclusions

As a result of this enquiry it can be proposed that target setting is much more beneficial when learners are involved in the process of establishing them. Assessment is such an important aspect of learning and so learners themselves should be involved in creating what is to be assessed. In doing so learners are equipped with a better understanding of the skills they are developing and so can self-correct their work throughout against the success criteria; reflecting on their work during self-assessment. In order to be successful in their learning, children need to be active participants in all aspects and just as teachers use assessment to plan their next lessons, learners should be able to plan their next moves in their own learning too.

Implications for Future Practice

The evidence from this enquiry will have a significant impact on teaching and learning within my classroom as it was found an improvement in self-assessment when the children created their own targets. All children expressed enjoyment in being given the responsibility to set their own group's targets, allowing them to become leaders in their learning. Learner's confidence and ability to work together also improved as did their ability to effectively set aims for their next piece of work.

Although the evidence shows an improvement in self-assessment it may not show an improvement in learning. This enquiry would need to be conducted over a longer time period and with a larger group of pupils to ensure validity. Further, it may be beneficial due to time constraints for the class to set targets for a block of lessons or for each term which would also give more time for each target to be met by every member of each group where possible. In addition, if this study was to be replicated within a different subject area or under different circumstances then it could be beneficial for target setting across the curriculum and account for different learning styles pupils may have; ensuring that ever pupil is always moving forward in their learning.

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