

Assess to Learn professional development: great gains for teachers

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Dr Jenny Poskitt & Kerry Taylor

Introduction

Teachers engage in professional development (PD) in the hope that their learning and practice will be improved, given that teachers and their practices have the most effect on student learning (Lingard, Hayes, Mills & Christie, 2003). PD that is relevant and based in the classroom has the most powerful effect for teachers (Hall & Scott, 2007); one example is the Assess to Learn (AtoL) professional development.

Background to the study

AtoL is delivered across New Zealand by five Colleges of Education and three private providers. The majority of participating schools respond to advertisements or invitations to be involved in the project and typically participate for two years. A range of schools are involved, covering the variables of decile, school size, rural and urban location, state and integrated, contributing and full primary, intermediate and secondary schools, albeit the highest proportion of schools are primary. The focus of AtoL is on teacher PD in assessment literacy in order to improve student learning and achievement and shift teachers' knowledge and assessment practice while developing coherent school assessment systems.

Although the content and context (such as literacy, science) for assessment vary according to specific school needs, the following model is commonly used. Having initially met with the principal (and possibly a school-based PD team), the facilitator and teachers negotiate an aspect of assessment to trial in the classroom, co-plan strategies for implementation, classroom observation and facilitator-led individual or group meetings to discuss feedback from the classroom observation. Normally at AtoL staff meetings teachers engage in professional reading, sharing of practical ideas, trialling of resources and future planning. The model is similar to that of Joyce and Showers (1995) which demonstrated the effectiveness of PD practices that incorporated five elements: presentation of theory, demonstration, practice, feedback and follow-up coaching in classrooms.

Methodology

AtoL has been externally evaluated by the authors since 2003, using an evaluative case study design. Reported here are the results of a national teacher questionnaire and classroom observations. Observational schedules were co-constructed by the research and facilitation teams, along with accompanying matrices on which to

summarise teacher progress in formative assessment practice. The matrices contained descriptors of teacher practice in formative assessment related to each of the categories: beginning, developing, developed and extended. The researchers conducted further analyses on the data (Poskitt & Taylor, 2007).

Influence of AtoL on teacher learning

Although learning for teachers can be difficult to measure, indicators of its effects may be portrayed in various ways. This article reports predominantly on: teacher perceptions, and observations, of teacher knowledge and practice.

Teacher perceptions

There were 99 teacher respondents to the questionnaire (55% response rate), 46 of whom were in their first year of AtoL. Some teachers made more than one comment and therefore the number of comments exceeded the number of respondents. The data are reported in relation to two themes: effects of AtoL delivery and content.

a) Effects of AtoL delivery on teacher learning

Teacher perceptions of the delivery of AtoL were analysed into five categories: programme organisation (59 comments), facilitator (24), interactions with other teachers and colleagues (15), other positive effects (5), and dissatisfaction (3). The majority of responding teachers commented on the “excellent delivery” of AtoL, referring to a varied and well balanced programme (of theory and practical strategies), the content being relevant for classroom practice and designed to meet their school needs. *Facilitators* were appreciated for their enthusiasm, friendliness, and integrity. By integrity, teachers meant that facilitators modelled formative assessment by descriptive and individualised feedback on observed classroom practice, and through one to one mentoring that stimulated teacher reflection and extension of practice. *Interacting with other teachers and colleagues* was valued for the collegial dialogue, sharing of ideas, planning and feedback. *Other positive effects* included renewed enthusiasm for teaching. However, for three respondents, dissatisfaction was expressed in relation to confusion around the purpose of some discussions and activities, and the duration of PD sessions.

b) Effects of AtoL content on teacher learning

Four categories emerged in this theme: integrating assessment, teaching and learning (51), development of knowledge and strategies in formative assessment (26), flexibility of facilitator/AtoL to adjust to school needs (22), and use of national assessment tools (11). In the categories of *integration of assessment, learning and teaching*, and *development of knowledge and strategies in formative assessment* teachers noted their increased knowledge from thought-provoking professional readings and discussions, use of assessment to inform next steps in their planning and teaching as well as reporting to parents. Practical and relevant strategies for the classroom were highly valued and more cohesive learning programmes for students were evident in teacher planning and observations of classroom practice. *Flexibility of*

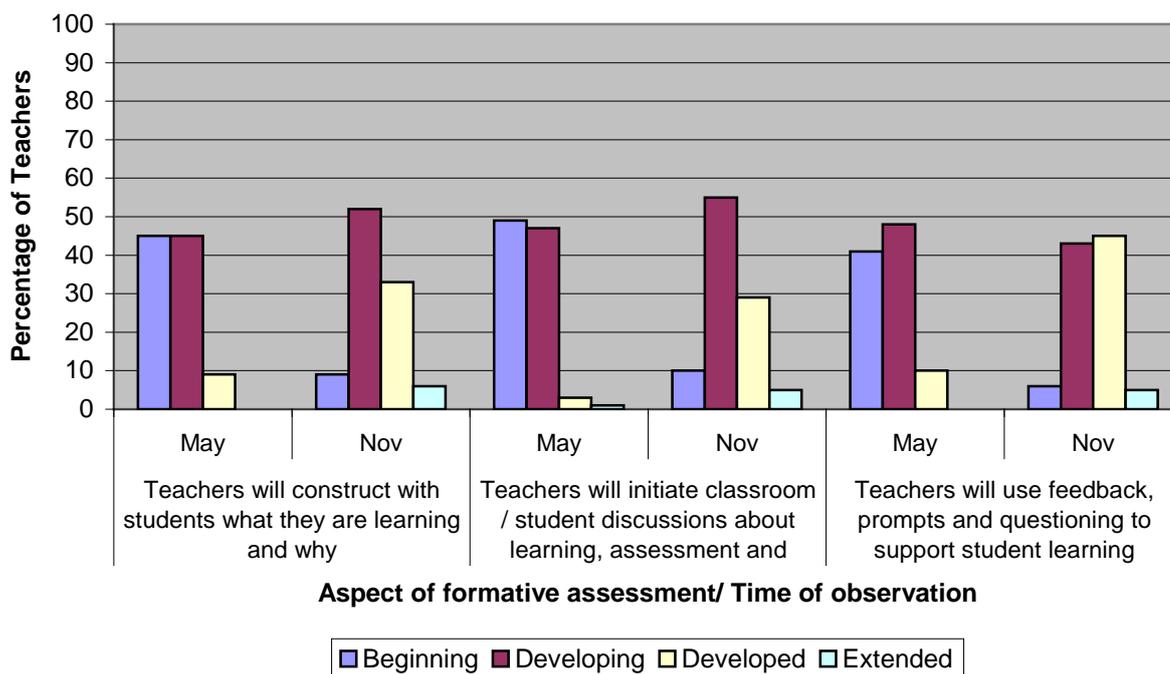
the programme content and facilitator approach in their school was appreciated for adaptation and relevance to teacher needs, provision of pertinent resources and addressing of teacher questions. Finally, *use of national assessment tools* exposed teacher respondents to the range available and techniques required in their use and analysis. It was important to ascertain to what extent learning was reflected in *teacher practice*.

Shifts in teacher practice due to AtoL

Observational data were collected in 40% of the AtoL schools and analysed according to teacher application of formative assessment practice (refer to tables 1 and 2 for three aspects of formative assessment) in the primary classroom. Two sets of interpretation can be made:

- Shifts for participating teachers from May to November (portrayed in tables 1 and 2)
- Comparisons of teacher practice between the first and second years of involvement in AtoL (comparing across tables 1 and 2)

Table 1: Facilitator classroom observations of formative assessment practice by teachers in first year of AToL

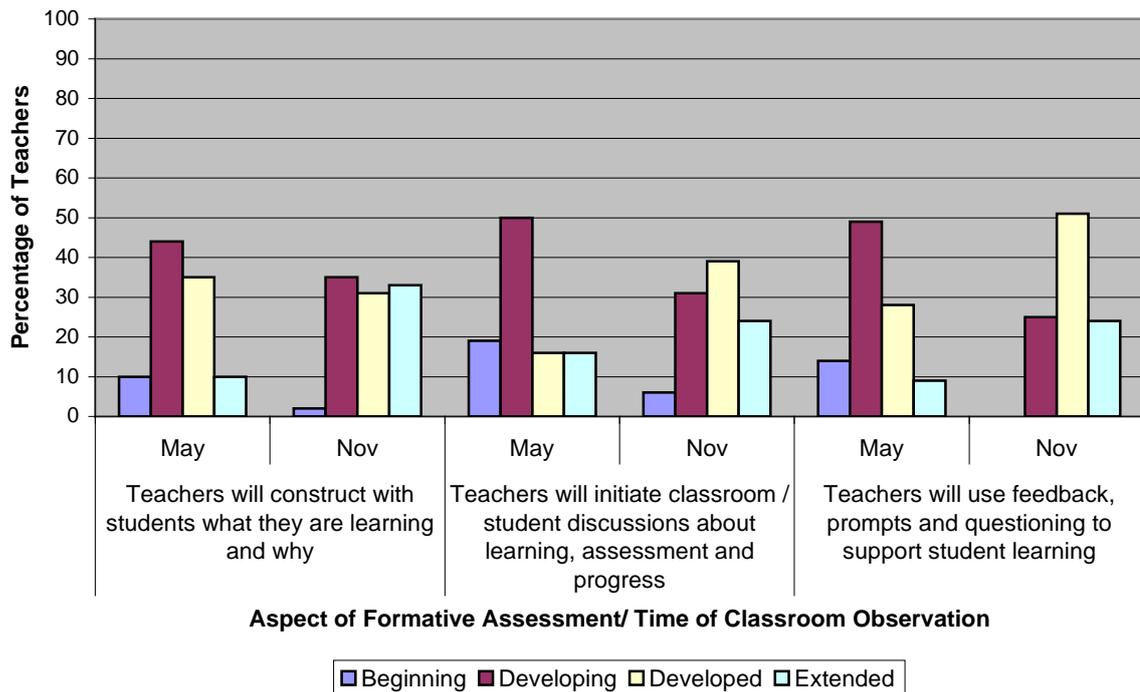


a) Shifts in teacher practice from May to November

Table 1 shows the percentage of first year AtoL primary teachers engaging in *developed or extended* formative assessment practice increased in all aspects from May to November, while table 2 shows data for teachers in their second year of AtoL. Shifts between May and November are more marked in the first than the second year, possibly because embedding shifts is more demanding than initial implementation.

For some schools a different curriculum area formed the context for study in the second year (such as literacy in the first and science in the second year) in areas in which teachers possibly had less depth of pedagogical content knowledge; an aspect worthy of further investigation. The second year programme often changes in focus, particularly in the final half of the year where attention is on sustaining the programme (establishing school wide systems and policies), with less attention to in-class practice.

Table 2: Facilitator classroom observations of AToL second year teacher practice in formative assessment



b) Comparison of November observational data for teachers in first and second years of involvement in AtoL

The November data (in tables 1 and 2) show that observed AToL primary teachers were *constructing with students what they were learning and why* (33% of first year teachers were categorised in the *developed* stages; 31% second year teachers). These teachers demonstrated clear links between planning, learning experiences and the intended learning. Other observed teachers worked at the *extended* stage (6% first year teachers; 33% second year teachers), enabling students to develop and evaluate learning intentions as the learning progressed.

Evident is the degree to which teachers shifted in their engagement of *students in discussions about their learning* as portrayed in the *developed* bar of the May and November graphs. By the end of their first year, 29% of observed AToL primary teachers were regularly reflecting with students about their learning and introducing

reflective strategies into their programmes (39% second year teachers). Five percent of first year teachers demonstrated *extended* practice by routinely reflecting and talking with students about their learning and using effective strategies in their programmes (24% second year teachers).

Displayed also in tables 1 and 2 is the extent to which teachers *use feedback and prompts to support student learning*. Surprisingly 26% of second year teachers were still developing in this aspect of formative assessment. Some teachers believe that students at primary school, particularly at the junior school level, are too young to co-construct feedback; others cite time restrictions as barriers to this process. Further research is needed to investigate why a proportion of teachers are still operating at these levels. It may relate to resistance to change on the part of this group of teachers, aspects of the PD content and process that need attention, dimensions of teacher learning that require further research, or teacher pedagogical content knowledge.

Nevertheless, 45% of first year AToL primary teachers co-construct feedback with students and use prompts that relate to the learning intention and success criteria or question students to think more deeply about their learning (51% second year teachers). Combining the *developed and extended* results indicates that 50% of AtoL year one teachers were observed in November to use feedback, prompts, and questioning to support student learning, while 75% of second year teachers did so.

Conclusion

Like students, teachers are individuals with differing learning needs. Hoban (2002) argues that teacher learning requires attention to four domains: personal, social, classroom contexts and shared professional understandings. AtoL teachers referred to the influence of readings and one to one mentoring that stimulated reflection (personal), the value of interacting with other colleagues for sharing ideas (social), feedback from classroom observations and sharing of practical strategies (classroom context) and collegial dialogue (professional understandings). Although AtoL attended to these four domains, and presented data demonstrates shifts for most teachers in their learning and formative assessment practice in the first and second years of AtoL; further research is needed to inform practice for the remaining teachers.

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