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System Leaders Using Assessment *for Learning* as Both the Change and the Change Process

A Research Summary

By Anne Davies and Sandra Herbst

Many schools and school systems have been deliberately working towards full implementation of *Assessment for Learning* for more than a decade, yet success has seemed elusive for many. Too often, leaders, with the best of intentions, tell others what they should do. At times, we, ourselves, have struggled with this stance. Yet, we realize that telling another what to do and how to do it is just not enough.

In our work with positional leaders and leadership teams over the past 15 years, we have deliberately gathered research evidence regarding the effectiveness of using *Assessment for Learning* as *both* the change and the change process. This longitudinal qualitative research study (Davies et al., 2014) drew on the experiences of eight positional leaders as they implemented both the 'spirit and the letter' of *Assessment for Learning* at all levels. These leaders came from systems in Alberta, British Columbia, Germany, Georgia, Hawai'i, Manitoba, New Zealand and Ontario. The timeline of implementation varied from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, with the shortest implementation at the time of the interviews taking place over three years and the longest over 10 years. The systems ranged in size from 350 to more than 180,000 students.

A study such as this is grounded in professional practice and aims to describe key features of that practice. It is different from studies that seek to prove or disprove a particular theory, in that this study sought to support the conversation of researchers and practitioners concerning the ongoing sustainable implementation of *Assessment for Learning*.

Collecting evidence across time and combining survey data and interview data, along with examining supporting documents, resulted in data that were triangulated, thus enhancing the validity of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1984). This collection and analysis of data are aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1984) notion of trustworthiness – evidence collected over time from multiple sources that can be used to inform others engaged in similar work. We chose to use

a qualitative approach because it is more amenable to exploratory inquiry and, therefore, more appropriate to early stages of innovation and related knowledge acquisition.

Research regarding the effectiveness of using Assessment for Learning as *both* the change and the change process makes sense, since classroom assessment has become a recognized field – separate from measurement and evaluation – over the past 30 years.

In our work in the area of assessment since the late 1980s, we have come to define informed classroom assessment as

- a set of principles and procedures grounded in research methods
- the requirement that teachers come to know and understand the relevant standards/outcomes and agreed-upon statements of quality
- the collection of evidence of learning from multiple sources over time in relation to standards that is potentially as diverse as the students, teachers and the various disciplines
- a learning process that engages students through assessment – examining samples, co-constructing criteria, self-assessing, collecting evidence of their learning and communicating it to others and
- dependent upon teachers' informed professional judgment, which, when collected from multiple sources over time, can be more reliable and valid than external test results.

(Davies, A., Herbst, S. & Sherman, A., in press)

After analyzing the findings of this study, it was clear that there were three actions that the successful leaders employed:

1. Leaders take action and move beyond words to deeds.
2. Leaders evaluate what they value and move beyond numbers to include triangulated evidence of learning.
3. Leaders find ways to collect ongoing information and use frequent feedback loops.

TAKING ACTION – BEYOND WORDS TO DEEDS

The leaders in this study used Assessment for Learning as a leadership tool deliberately, for example, as they showed samples, co-constructed criteria and worked to arrive at agreement around quality. They used Assessment for Learning principles, structures and strategies in their leadership work and in support of adult learning. They did not simply 'tell' others what to do. As the leaders sought to embed Assessment for

Learning in classroom practice, they expected themselves and other leaders to use these same principles, structures and strategies with their faculty members and others.

This modelling and coaching seems to have set the expectation that Assessment for Learning would be used to attain better results related to student achievement. These

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leadership actions helped to bring alignment throughout the system, and leaders indicated that the more they used Assessment for Learning themselves, the more they saw it being used by others. The data has shown that this deliberate process of aligning word to deed seemed to further embed Assessment for Learning into the culture of the system.

The following excerpts from the transcripts are illustrative in nature and point to leaders who are not just telling others what to do, but are using quality assessment practices in their leadership stance and action:

"At staff meetings, the administrators modelled, 'Okay, here are our learning intentions for today's meeting!... This year when we walk in classrooms, we hope that the learning intentions are really clear. We're going to be asking the kids, 'What are the learning intentions?'

"As a leader, you have to be seen learning with and alongside your staff ... and, as a leader, you have to also think about how are you going to align this to your own practice because I think the implementation dip happens when people don't see that alignment and they see that only part of the organization cares and is working, while the rest are just continuing to do what they do. You need to think carefully about how this is going to impact on your leadership – that means your time, where you are, that means how you're visible and how

Additionally, these leaders deliberately modelled alignment, demonstrating that teachers were not the only ones being expected to value qualitative data and triangulate evidence of learning over time.

you deliberately and consciously say out loud, 'I'm doing this because it's like what you do in the classroom, I'm showing you this because I think you are showing examples in classrooms, so here's my sample. We're going to co-construct criteria about what it means for this team to be effective, just like we're doing this in the classroom with students every day across our schools. If we step away from that we're missing opportunities from a leadership perspective and we're allowing holes to develop in what otherwise might seem a very tight and well thought of plan.'

BEYOND NUMBERS TO TRIANGULATED EVIDENCE OF LEARNING

It is often said that we evaluate that which we value. Without exception, the positional leaders in this study work in an environment where educational systems are “judged” by external data. Yet, the shift to using more Assessment for Learning in classrooms is often accompanied by valuing learners' voices and ways of knowing. These leaders, as evidenced in the data, balanced external, lagging data about student achievement with classroom-based evidence gathered through triangulation – products students created, observations of students engaged in process, conversations with students about their understandings – and the meaning of the evidence being generated.

Additionally, these leaders deliberately modelled alignment, demonstrating that teachers were not the only ones being expected to value qualitative data and triangulate evidence

of learning over time. The leaders interviewed explained that as alignment in terms of triangulation increased, the need to rely solely or heavily on external data diminished; data were being collected and valued from multiple sources and from all layers and parts of the system.

The following excerpts from the transcripts highlight leaders who are in fact scaling the notion of triangulation from the classroom to the school and system level:

“If we're asking teachers to collect triangulated evidence we needed to model that ourselves. And so, along with the traditional school plan year-end report, administrators began to send us video clips of kids and teachers in action, lesson plans that illustrated the use of Assessment for Learning, images, and other student, teacher and leader artifacts in order to let us know that they were meeting their school plan outcome.”

“Initially when those 600 teams of leaders and teachers were working, we had them culminate that work in the form of a portfolio where they proved they had gone back and implemented what was to be done ... to use portfolios ... a team of administrators and coaches go through with a rubric and actually look at those and provide participant feedback, then they go back to the teams.”

LEARNING FROM FREQUENT FEEDBACK LOOPS

Leadership literature has long promoted feedback loops as being incredibly important to system change and learning (Senge, 1990). Yet, in education, the search for effective feedback loops has resulted in more external testing in many

jurisdictions. In this study, positional leaders described how they were able to gather frequent feedback from multiple perspectives and at different levels – students, teachers, parents, schools, systems, trustees and community partners. They explained how they used the data to make adjustments based on the analysis of the evidence of learning – ongoing assessment information – in relation to the school or system-learning initiative. They revisited policy, rules, regulations and procedures in order to expand the evidence of student, adult learner, school and system learning. This data served to inform ongoing “just-in-time” decision-making and was available as a result of frequent feedback loops.

These excerpts from the transcripts demonstrate how these leaders focus on leading evidence, rather than lagging evidence:

“I think we’ve come a long way. The Japanese have a word for this – they call it ‘kaizen.’ Kaizen means always spiraling forward. So not reinventing the wheel, but building, and I think over the past few years we’ve been practicing kaizen here ... we’ve taken what we’ve learned and we’re always building upon it ... you have to do everything in your power to also walk the talk and do away with all the obstacles that are serving as barriers.”

“The policy development became an education in and of itself because it involved multiple feedback groups from each of our 42 schools. We talked to trustees.... We were working with the teachers’ association and getting feedback from them. We also included some parent voices. There was always facilitation by someone on the steering committee ... [it] wasn’t just the superintendents leading it. It was teachers and administrators from every level. They were identified and selected by their members.”

This study, like others, demonstrates that leaders, when they assert their leadership, can make a powerful contribution to

system and student learning and achievement. But these leaders found Assessment for Learning – its principles, structures and strategies – to be a powerful change process in and of itself that helped both large and small systems to learn and succeed, regardless of their jurisdictional context. Leaders who were interviewed demonstrated that using assessment – for adult learning, school learning and system learning – is a powerful leadership tool. This finding moves beyond leaders simply knowing what classroom innovations should look like and supporting adult learning to make that happen – an interpretation by some of distributed leadership. When leaders stop there, they may abdicate the essence of their leadership. These findings suggest that when leaders employ the tenets of Assessment for Learning as their leadership stance and action, they exert their leadership in incredibly impactful ways. In other words, Assessment for Learning is not only the change, it is also the process for change and for enacting leadership.

For access to the full research report, along with complete references, please go to: <http://connect2learningmembers.com/pdf/READ/DaviesEtAl-Leaders-2014-1.pdf> ▲

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