

Formative assessment in practice: Children's experiences in Maldivian classrooms

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Assessment practice in Maldivian schools is currently undergoing change. The new draft Maldivian National Curriculum (Education Development Centre, 2012a) and associated documents aim to align assessment, instruction, and curriculum in an effort to optimize learning conditions for students. The support document entitled 'Pedagogy and Assessment Guide a Working Document' highlights the importance of ensuring a balance between assessment 'for' learning (formative assessment) and assessment 'of' learning (summative assessment). Maldivian teachers, who have traditionally placed emphasis on summative assessment practice, will now be required to enhance their use of formative assessment strategies to help diagnose individual student's strengths and weaknesses and to support future learning. The focus of this article is to identify formative assessment practices Maldivian students may already be experiencing in the lower primary school grades 1 to 3.

Keywords: Maldivian Education; Ministry of Education initiatives; assessment change; formative assessment strategies in action; lower primary school grades 1-3.

Introduction

The Maldives: Geography and education

The Republic of Maldives is a small island nation located southwest of the Indian Subcontinent in the Indian Ocean, which makes the closest neighbours India and Sri Lanka. The archipelago of 1192 small coral islands forms 26 natural atolls and administratively 20 atolls. The capital of the Maldives is Male' and almost one-third of the population live there. The population of the Maldives is 300,000. The national language is Dhivehi and the religion is Islam. There are 218 government English-medium schools, some of which are exclusively primary; others include both primary and secondary, and a few offer higher secondary education. There are four main phases of schooling recommended by the National Curriculum: foundation, primary, lower secondary and higher secondary. Each phase targets a specific age group consisting of primary, lower secondary and higher secondary grades. The primary phase (formal primary education) begins at key stage 1 (grades 1 – 3), and continues till the end of key stage 2 (grades 4 – 6). These first six years (ages six to 13) of primary education is compulsory for all the Maldivian children.

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Changing assessment landscape

Since the introduction of the National curriculum in 1983, schools have experienced ongoing assessment change. In the initial years of implementation emphasis was on summative assessment, with frequent testing culminating in a final examination called the Promotion Test. The results of this exam determined if students progressed to the next grade or were retained at the same one. With the introduction of continuous assessment in the 1990s, Maldivian schools started to incorporate a wider range of assessment strategies (Department of National Planning, 2008). The MOE initiated policies included updated assessment practices such as the introduction of new report cards in schools, specifying minimum learning competencies for all curriculum subjects, and instigating the CFBS Project which placed importance on the need for a balance between the use of formative and summative assessment. In 2012, the EDC produced the National Curriculum Framework - Working Draft and other support documents such as the Pedagogy and Assessment Guide - a Working Document, to provide teacher guidance including instructional applications of assessment practices for Maldivian teachers, with an emphasis on formative assessment. The term formative assessment as used in this paper refers to assessment conducted during learning; it may be formal or informal, is used to diagnose student strengths and weaknesses and aims to support future learning. Informal assessment happens as part of the normal class learning routine such as observing students as they work individually or in groups, asking questions and discussing individual progress.

Investigating assessment formative practice

The study employed a qualitative design methodology. Three urban schools in Male' were selected for interim data collection, with the focus on lower primary grades 1, 2 and 3. The data gathered in this study was predominantly obtained from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews and documents collected from the three schools. The three voluntary participant teachers, representing each of the three schools, were referred to using pseudonyms: Fazla (grade 1), Asma (grade 2), and Nahula (grade 3). While the research was primarily a case study of these three teachers, their Leading Teachers (supervisors) responsible for administering the particular grades, also participated voluntarily in order to make the study findings more reliable and trustworthy. Their pseudonyms were Heena, Shazla, and Rafa.

Each case study teacher was interviewed before and after each lesson observation. The three Leading Teachers were interviewed once following the completion of their subordinates' observed teaching sessions. Three sixty minute lessons were observed per case study teacher, each involving a different curriculum area. In addition data was gathered from documents such as the teachers' lesson plans, samples of student work including their various files/folders and exercise books,, and most importantly the schemes of work (guidelines for teachers including weekly and day-to-day plans for each curriculum area allied to the National curriculum).

Data analysis

The research settings were explored with a focussed lens. The lens set out to capture the sights and images associated with practices of formative assessment happening in the classroom settings. The data was analysed using coding categories along with concept maps. A literature review helped to make sense of the teachers and children's actions, and

connections were made to find out if the practices observed represented acceptable and nationally recommended formative assessment practices.

Overview

The focus of this article is to identify examples of formative assessment practices Maldivian students are currently experiencing in their classrooms. Black and Wiliam (1998a) conducted similar research regarding assessment 'for' learning in UK schools. While this article purposefully covers Maldivian students' classroom experiences of formative assessment similar to the Black and Wiliam study, specific attention is given to the use of class discussions, questioning strategies used by the teachers, the sharing of learning intentions, target setting and use of self/peer/group-learning activities.

Class discussions

In this study, nine lessons of sixty minutes duration were observed in total. In these lessons the teachers' conducted numerous discussions, in which the students participated and interacted. Analysis of the lesson transcripts revealed incidences of formative assessment occurring. These incidences happened in the form of conversations, with many dialogues of learning being exchanged between the teachers and students. In the process of data collection, the study was strongly focussed on studying the dialogues between teachers and students, as in assessment for learning, a key notion is that student progress occurs on a day-to-day, even moment-to-moment basis in the classrooms (Shermis & Di Vesta, 2011). Black and Wiliam (1998b) state 'dialogue with the teacher provides the opportunity for the teacher to respond to and reorient a pupil's thinking' (p.143). The lesson transcripts of the participant teachers displayed considerable skill, with various teaching and learning strategies being employed to involve the learners in class discussions.

The studied lesson transcripts illustrated balanced and imbalanced proportions of students and teacher dialogues occurring. Nonetheless, evidence of key elements of formative assessment could be observed within the lessons. Davies and Hill (2009) note the importance of actively involving learners in their own learning in order to define learning and what it looks like, so that they can then shift students from being passive to active learners. In the classes studied, there were many different types of learners, e.g. self-assured, withdrawn, quiet, and loud. Some of them whispered, but there were also many learners who vocally expressed their ideas and thoughts whenever they had the opportunity to do so. In some instances the teachers' utterances dominated and they spoke more in the lessons than the students did. Even though the teachers did dominate interactions at times, there was also evidence of teacher guidance, identifying students' errors, highlighting unclear messages and inaccuracies, and making requests for repetition or reformulation. In a study by Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, and Wiliam (2003) a science teacher defined effective assessment for learning as a two-way dialogue between both student and teacher, stressing the importance of not only listening to what each other is saying, but using what is said to inform the learning process. According to Joyce (2007) when teachers talk with their students about their ideas, they can find a lot of information about what the students know and what they can do, which could in fact, be part of assessment for learning.

In order to understand students' experiences of formative assessment in a class discussion, Fazla's English language lesson is examined as a case sample. She taught grade 1, comprising of six-year-old second language learners. The lesson plan topic was 'Ely's fun day at the beach' involving reading a story from a 'big book', to teach beach toys and to arrange the sentences in the book in order of the story. (A big book is a storybook of size A3

size or larger, with enlarged pictures and one or two sentences to illustrate what each image shows). This particular story was about a girl who goes to the beach with her toys. The objectives included students listening to the story and identifying and naming the beach toys mentioned in the storybook. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher had a bag of plastic toys used at the beach. She took them out, one by one, questioned, talked, and discussed each toy, while the students sat and listened.

Sometimes during the discussion she focussed on individual students, although frequently many students responded at once. As she continued, she displayed the qualities of an experienced teacher by assisting and prompting the students in order to further activate their learning. For instance, Fazla used teaching strategies such as making the letter sound to introduce the toys from the bag. When she did that, many students guessed the correct word that she wanted. For example, when she showed a 'shovel' from the bag, she said it started with 'shhh'; and the students named the implement. She also made the students pronounce the words accurately whenever they mispronounced them. To make them retain the knowledge and information that she shared, she made them repeat the words verbatim as outlined in her lesson plan. Another observation was that she allowed no deviation from the lesson plan, even though some of the words could have multiple meanings, interpretations, and uses. For instance, a student replied 'spade' as a farming tool, 'bucket' as a bathroom utensil, both reasonable and acceptable answers according to the schemata of the students. However, these replies were not the answers that she wanted, and therefore these answers were rejected, ignored, and sometimes laughed at by both Fazla and the students. She only accepted the answers that were related to those used by the girl in the storybook. Additionally, she did not seem prepared to explain any more than what she had planned and written in the objectives of her lesson plan.

Similar types of incidents as those outlined above in Fazla's lesson were evident in other observed case study lessons. According to Black and Wiliam (1998b) when the dialogues are manipulated as mentioned above, the teachers' seal off any unusual, often thoughtful but unorthodox attempts by students to work out their own answers. Clarke (2008) also advises teachers to be careful in how they respond to students answers, as it critical in determining the level of confidence students in terms of what they feel they are able to say e.g. a right answer, a wrong answer, a different opinion, a wondering question. Teachers' subtleties of body language, tone of voice and words need to be thought about carefully, so that 'put downs' do not occur in any form, which could stifle the 'student voice'(Clarke, 2008). There is a possibility of causing irreparable damage to the student's sense of self if they take it in a humiliating way (Wiliam, 2008). Black, et al. (2003) point out the importance of responding to each student's voice and attempting to meet their learning needs so that the students see their learning as valuable and something worth spending time on. Evidence observed in the lessons of the case study teachers observed such as Fazla's, demonstrated examples of appropriate use of formative assessment occurring during class discussions as well as aspects of their practice as highlighted in the research literature that could be improved upon

Questioning by the teachers

Questioning strategies used by the case study teachers provides another example of formative assessment. It is argued by Torrence and Pryor (1998) that formative assessment should be essentially focused on the students' experience despite the fact that teachers' control most of the processes of formative assessment in the classrooms. This study involved learners at the key stage 1of primary education in Maldivian schools and some of these learners were just beginning school. As a result, it was easy for the teachers to dominate the

teaching and learning process. Consequently, the case study teachers' questioning dominated, and controlled most of the processes involved during class discussions. According to Black and Wiliam (2009) classroom questioning is an important way to implement and engineer effective class discussions involving eliciting evidence of student understanding. Hall and Burke (2004) in their study emphasise the use of different types questioning to promote classroom dialogue is particularly important. Clarke (2008) stresses the importance of asking 'worthwhile questions' i.e. the kinds of questions that teachers can determine how far the discussions will go towards deepening and furthering students' learning and understanding.

In the lessons observed, the teachers' question/answer dialogues were the most common form of pedagogy used by the teachers, often in a ritual like manner, to generate whole class discussions. As the teachers conducted questioning it was noticed that their questions were not always directed at particular individuals, resulting in many students shouting back replies in unison. The teachers as a result were often not able to make out who answered the questions correctly or incorrectly. In addition the teachers often answered the questions they asked themselves, as a final confirmation of the correct answer. When the teachers did self answer the questions, they also made the learners repeat back the answers after them.

In some instances, the teachers were in such a hurry they answered the questions themselves without waiting for student responses, and then they continued the discussion with another question. This was particularly so in curriculum areas such as Environmental Studies (ES), where the students had to recall much factual information. This involved a 'whole class questioning strategy'. When the teachers' employed this strategy, there were some students who always listened, some who never tried to answer and another group of students who always responded. The teachers did not always persist in practicing this form of questioning strategy, changing their questioning style whenever the students became noisy or restless.

Another questioning strategy observed involved the teachers focussing their questions on certain individuals with the intention of finding learners who could answer their questions correctly. In doing this they deliberately made use of 'wait time'. 'Wait time' refers to the time provided after posing a question and taking up a response and provides many benefits according to the research (Black, et al., 2003; Crooks, 1988). In this study, the teachers did not always affirm the answers immediately and often stood still with a firm face or eyed the students for some time. When asked about the purpose of this strategy, the teachers responded that they were trying to find out the students' level of understanding by strategically using 'wait time', as a means to get the learners to think before they gave an answer. In the case of Asma, the 'wait time' lessened the number of students with 'blank faces' and increased the number of confident students who were willing to answer the question posed (Asma had many students who put up their hands-up whenever they heard a question). Fazla in her class noticed that when she waited for a while without affirming answers, the students' eagerness arose, and they tried to think, and willingly started providing responses.

The other teaching strategy observed by the teachers' in relation to questioning was providing guidance and feedback. In some lessons where students responded to questions incorrectly the teachers readily prompted them. Whenever the prompts failed to resolve these issues, the teachers provided additional cues to help the students. These collaborative situations often produced the best answers. Nahula, the least experienced of the three teachers, had some issues in managing questioning strategies as part of the teaching process compared with Fazla and Asma who exhibited greater confidence. The evidence observed

regarding the use questioning for formative assessment purposes demonstrated both effective practices as well as others in need of improvement.

Sharing of learning intentions/goals

The importance of involving learners in the sharing of learning intentions/goals is highlighted in a study by Torrance and Pryor (1998). They suggest that formative assessment ‘...must inevitably involve pupils reflecting on what they have achieved and how they have achieved it’ (p.16). To make it easier for the students to be involved in the learning Rayment (2006) points out the importance of explaining to the students the learning objectives and expected lesson outcomes. When a teacher starts to share this information, students’ doubts about the lessons are minimized as they become clear about what they are to learn and expected to achieve. The Assessment Reform Group of England proposed sharing of learning goals as one of the seven precepts that summarized the characteristics of assessment that promotes learning (Wiliam, 2011).

The transcripts (interviews and lesson observations) provided evidence that the three-participant teachers already had existing expertise and knowledge about the sharing of learning intentions/goals. In the case of Asma, she knew the importance of this process and usually explained the learning intentions/goals along with assessment information. This included sharing with her learners what they were supposed to do, how they were to do the learning tasks and what she would be looking for in the lessons. Doing this she found the students became more interested in learning and gave full commitment to their work. She also stressed how difficult she thought it would be for the students to work if they had no idea about their learning intention/goals. Nahula also supported sharing the lesson learning objectives with her classes and discovered that the students worked very hard to achieve them, when this information was shared. In Nahula’s school, there existed a regulation for the lesson outcomes to be written on the black board for all the students to see. Likewise, Fazla held the same belief regarding sharing learning intentions/goals with her students. Unlike the other two teachers, she also shared the learning intentions with parents as well as the students. She would meet with both the parents and students together on the last day of the week. She would inform the parents what the students done during the week, share the upcoming weekly events, and most importantly explain how the students were to be assessed. The three Lead Teachers were aware of the importance of sharing learning intentions/goals as well, and the frequently shared their knowledge in this area with the participant teachers through professional development sessions.

Setting targets and criteria

Setting targets and criteria is customary in some Maldivian schools while in other schools, teachers and leading teachers make their own decisions. In the three case study teacher’s schools, there were some requirements already set by the school management regarding setting targets and sharing learning criteria. These regulations and formalities meant it was a necessity for each teacher to involve both the students and the parents in the process. Beyond the school regulations the case study teachers could pursue additional initiatives themselves. The teachers found by involving their students in setting learning criteria, and regularly sharing assessment information with their students they were better positioned to comprehend their learners’ needs.

Setting targets and learning criteria is considered one of the most important strategies of assessment for learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Davies & Hill, 2009). In a study by Wiliam, Lee, Harrison and Black (2004), it was found that teachers emphasising

formative assessment as an integral part of learning, helped the students understand the marking criteria for investigative or exploratory work and this in turn improved their learners success rates. In another study, Wiliam (2011) in regards to formative assessment indicates ‘any attempt at the regulation of learning processes requires at least some idea of a goal, whether this is conceptualized as a single learning destination, or a broad “horizon” of learning goals any of which are equally acceptable’(p.12). In a study by Wintle and Harrison (1999) teachers found when they talked about setting targets with the learners it opened up their minds and helped to identify the next steps and way forward in learning. They also recommend once a target has been attained (or the teacher felt a change was needed), the teacher should proceed to add another target. For instance an effective method could be to sit down with a child to go through their work and find out the targets attained and to set new criteria.

In Asma’s school, the school management annually organized sharing of targets and many other issues of learning with power-point presentations and the Leading Teacher, in this case Shazla, informed the parents of the whole grade. In the same school, the targets were well organized and set for all the students with rubrics for each developmental area of both mathematics and the two languages – English and Dhivehi. Asma always showed these rubrics with the set targets during the student-parent-teacher conferences and talked to the parents and students using them. Here is a descriptive account of the procedure shared by the participant teacher Asma.

I also set targets and inform the parents how much the child has to attain to get to a certain level of achievement. Normally, it is referred to the numeracy and literacy sheet. If a child does not perform a listed criterion, I write a dot, and then for the next student-parent-teacher meeting, if the child could meet a certain criteria I write a tick near the dot. Therefore, there will be a dot and a tick in the same column with dates written for each dot and tick, so that parents will find out when and what the child has tried achieving [Interview, Asma]. Shazla, who administered grades 1 and 2, indicated that whenever there were un-achieved targets, teachers usually kept on informing the parents. In fact, she frequently ensured that the teachers continued the practice with internal supervision.

In the case of Nahula and Rafa, they met their slow-learners’ or under-achievers’ parents, whenever there was a need for the students to achieve certain targets and/or learning criteria. In their school, it was a common practice to give diagnostic tests at the beginning of the term. Rafa, the Leading Teacher, explained the purpose of conducting diagnostic tests as finding students who were unable to read and write. They normally find one or two students from each class that they called ‘illiterates’, and the teachers prepare individual targets for them. Usually, these individual cases were filed with essential information, which the Leading Teachers monitored closely, and if there was a need, the parents of these learners were met on a regular basis. According to Rafa and Nahula an example of a set target could be to make these under-achievers read and write simple phrases and sentences and there would be different targets for each student.

As discussed previously, Fazla met with the parents and students together in weekly meetings to inform and share upcoming events, including information on targets and criteria for assessment. Fazla’s Leading Teacher, Heena, believed in teachers recording and noting down information on learners’ and she stated that this could benefit the students in many ways including the setting of targets for the individual learners. Recording information about the students means that the teachers will have better understanding and knowledge about their students and I believe that is a very good thing. Then, if the teacher has a better understanding, it is also important is to share the information with the parents to bring out better results from the students [Interview, Heena].

Heena also believed targets had to be set for individual student's own self-improvement, as students had different ability levels. She thought students should not be compared to each other, as each student had to be guided to go on a plan according to his or her own potential ability level. Unlike Heena, Rafa believed in teachers knowing learners well and she thought it was not necessary for them to record every step of learning. She mentioned that primary teachers spent a lot of time teaching their students five curriculum subjects (English, Maths, ES, Practical Art and Physical Education) and they should know their learners well enough to set individual targets and work towards achieving them. It was evident from the observations of the lessons in the three classrooms, the interviews with the teachers and Leading Teachers, and the review of the documents that the practice of setting targets and learning criteria was happening in all three case study schools with minor degrees of variation.

Self / peer/ group learning activities

Research carried out by Black, Wiliam, Clarke, Torrance and Pryor, among others, (Black, et al., 2003; Black & Wiliam, 1998b, 2009; Clarke, 2008; Torrance & Pryor, 1998; Torrence & Pryor, 1998) highlight the many benefits of using self and peer assessment in teaching and learning. Self and peer assessment provide effective strategies to help learners become responsible for their own learning. When teachers provide opportunities with peer/group learning activities, students develop cooperative skills, and learn to care for and support each other in improving their learning. To implement self and peer assessment Clarke (2005) points out the importance of sharing the success/learning criteria with the students. Teachers have to be open about the criteria, and encourage the students by modelling how to assess and discuss related issues in the class. By doing this, the students learn to mark constructively against the learning success/criteria of the task with their peers. Students marking their own work, or the work of their peers is considered part of self-peer assessment and teachers should encourage such practices by providing opportunities for the learners (Clarke, 2005).

There were many opportunities of self/peer/group learning carried out in the daily teaching and learning practices of the three teachers, and evidence from documentation showed that these practices have existed in their teaching, learning, assessment, and curriculum (schemes of work) for some time. It was observed that the students were expected to work with their peers or in groups, either in well organized ways such as in Asma and Fazla's class or in informally structured ways, such as in Nahla's class. The lessons observed regularly involved one or two of self/peer/group learning, and the students showed enthusiasm towards actively participating collaboratively with other students. During these sessions, the teachers assigned tasks to foster positive student inter-relationships and to build learner confidence in leading activities assigned. There were instances of teachers making students exchange and mark each other's work. For example, Fazla made her students exchange their work in English Language lessons and directed them to put a tick if the sentence was correct and leave the given bracket blank if it was incorrect. Interviews demonstrated Nahula and Fazla frequently made their students exchange and mark each other's work (books and work sheets). Nahula also used to make her students self-assess work; however, she discontinued the practice after noticing that many students erased and corrected the work by themselves when she later checked the work. She was also not in favour of group work and realised it was not effective unless it was well organised, as some students seemed to become controlling and dominated the whole group, not letting other group members participate or contribute.

In order to further investigate this type of formative assessment, many other documents were explored such as the teachers' lesson plans, the scheme of works and students work. These revealed the powerful influence of self/peer/group learning. For teachers' convenience there were explanations of how they could practice and conduct these activities in their lessons. For instance, in the schemes of work in Asma's and Fazla's schools, there were many suggestions regarding how teachers should implement learning activities in their lessons. These included examples such as how students could develop concept maps by themselves or with their peers' on different topics of ES, special math learning games and special English group language activities. Additionally, both Asma and Fazla's classroom walls were pasted with posters and other tasks that the students had completed over the semester. In all the three classes, the students' books and files/folders provided additional evidence of the students' involvement in peer and group learning processes.

Discussion and implications

The focus of on the research was to find out the current extent of formative assessment practice that students in Maldivian primary schools encounter. Data was collected carefully and precisely and the research settings were explored and analysed using a formative assessment lens approach. This perspective enabled the sights and images associated with practices of formative assessment to become more visible and identifiable regarding the perception of learning behaviours and learning incidents of the students. Findings that contributed to understanding formative assessment practices were supported with reference to sources of literature, which helped to guide the overall focus of the study.

Engaging students in class discussions with learning dialogues showed the learners experiencing assessment for learning. Wiliam (2006) makes it clear that an assessment of a student is formative if it shapes the student's learning by evoking and interpreting their learning needs, and consequently, learning evidence is used to make adjustments to better meet those learning needs. Fazla's illustrated English Language lesson, exemplified a typical Maldivian classroom discussion, and the dialogues that were exchanged between the teacher and the students provided opportunities for her to respond to and reorient students thinking (Black & Wiliam, 1998b). Along with the classroom discussions, the teachers continued questioning the students in their lessons. This process had become habitual or the norm for them. In many parts of the lessons, they focussed on questioning individual learners, deliberately using 'wait time' and making students think carefully before they answered the target questions. In a similar circumstance, Black et al. (2003), while investigating the effect of increased 'wait time' found that wait time made more students become involved in question-and-answer discussions and as a result, the length and quality of their responses improved.

The case study teachers were experienced in providing direct feedback and feed forward in the discussions of the lessons. The observations of the instant oral feedback and feed forward showed the teachers guiding the students and informing them about the nature of their errors and providing chances to correct them. According to Black, et al (2003) feedback can only serve learning if it involves both the evoking of evidence and a response to that evidence with some ways to improve the learning. When teachers provide feedback in a class discussion, Black and Wiliam (2009) note that the feedback has to relate to the needs of the subject taught as a whole, and that it has to be an immediate intervention in the flow of classroom discussion. For example, it was observed that the teachers in the study corrected pronunciations, reformulated the students' answers, and prompted and gave cues to assist learners to remember the answers. Feed-forward usually begins as soon as mistakes,

errors and misconceptions are identified. In a recent study, Frey and Fisher (2011) discuss innovative approaches for feedback and feed-forward instructions that would provide the best practices of formative assessment such as guided instruction, prompts (heuristic and reflective), error analysis, error coding, looking back-looking forward, cues to shift attention and direct explanation and modelling to clear up confusions (see pp. 91-118).

While the participant teachers took action and adjusted students' learning, it would have benefitted the learners more if the teachers had been more open minded about the learners' responses. For instance, there were learners who shared information beyond their ability levels; however, the teachers were not looking for advanced knowledge and the answers were rejected, ignored and turned them down without acknowledging or appreciating them. This particular behaviour of teachers reflects an assertion from Torrence and Pryor's (1998) study, in which they point out 'a situation where pupils are only guessing at what the teacher wants to hear is unhelpful' (p. 107). The negative impact of this might be that during the process of learning, the students might think they are not allowed to give a range of possible answers because the purpose of the teacher's exercise is to work out - or guess - what answer he/she expects to see or hear (Black & Wiliam, 1998b). If such behaviours from teachers continued and they concentrated on getting the rightful book answers, the students could feel constrained in participating in lessons and this would likely affect their future contributions in lessons. Clarke (2008) points out that in order to create a positive learning environment students should feel safe to speak out and they should be treated with respect in classroom. Furthermore, Clarke advises teachers should not leave students with misconceptions and to deal with students in a 'grown-up' way', as if running a staff meeting. She suggests following strategies for teachers:

Opening it up: Include the words 'do you think' in any question (e.g. How do you think an aeroplane stays up in the sky?) so that a response becomes an opinion rather than a wrong answer.

Transfer: Say 'That was the answer to another question I was going to ask!'

Gathering: Does anyone agree? Disagree? Have a different opinion?

Stalling: I think you might want to come back to that idea a little later....

Returning to the same pupil: Do you want to say something different now? I think I know where you were coming from before. You were put off/misled by the...

(Clarke, 2008, p. 63)

Although the case study teachers did stimulate and challenge the learning experiences of the students by adapting different formative assessment practices more encouragement to help make the students more comfortable with debating and defending their viewpoints would be beneficial. McMillan (2010) for example suggests incorporating the feedback of others and sharing ideas openly with one another to be a valuable high-level formative assessment practice. Joyce (2007) also advises teachers to keep an open mind about the learners' responses and to remember that talking to students always provides additional evidence in finding the next step to help them learn. Black & Wiliam (1998b) also note the importance of class discussions in which pupils are led to talk about their understanding in their own ways.

Of the three teachers, Fazla and Asma were very experienced and were incorporating formative assessment procedures not only in their lessons but also had policies regarding these practices in their school based documents. Nahula, reported that she had received guidance in formative assessment practices through professional development workshops conducted in her school. In Asma's school, to help students and parents recognise teachers' expectations and the prospect of learning the intended curriculum, the

school had well-planned targets (school-wide documents) that included rubrics set up for their students. These systematically arranged rubrics, used to identify each student's achievement level particularly for example in numeracy and literacy, were simple and straightforward. In Fazla's case, regular weekly meetings kept her parents happy and satisfied with important information incorporating learning intentions/goals, targets and assessment criteria for upcoming weeks. The importance of sharing of learning intentions/goals and setting learning criteria has been emphasised by Clarke (2001) and highlighted by Black and Wiliam (2009). Harris (2007) has also explored the advantages of students setting their own targets and how this was effective for them in taking more responsibility for their own learning.

Literature shows that when learners are involved in learning experiences such as self/peer/group activities, they are being provided with assessment for learning opportunities. For example Clarke (2008) states that when students are involved in peer assessment, it provides them with valuable opportunities to give feedback to each other. In a recent study Laud (2011) suggests some valuable practices of self and peer assessment for mathematics students. She recommended making maths learners self assess the accuracy of their work with answer keys, to make them re-solve the problems, so that they get the same answer the second time, to let them do the inverse of operations and to work out the solutions back into problems. This study evidently showed the learners were encouraged to participate in such learning activities set by their teachers, and furthermore the schools established and incorporated such learning experiences in their schemes of work as well.

Conclusion

The following findings drawn across the case study teachers, illustrate evidence of different types of formative assessment in action in the Maldivian classrooms studied. There was evidence that the case study teachers were encouraging the learners to move their learning forward through the use of assessment for learning practices in the lessons taught. These findings represented normal day-to-day happenings in the three classrooms studied for the project. Although variations between the three case study teachers existed, the study demonstrated formative assessment in action as being at the initial stages of dissemination/implementation in each of the three Maldivian schools. The children's assessment experiences relating to formative assessment in the study were represented with literature to support them. The assessment for learning practices lead the learners to encounter positive learning experiences that helped assist and contribute to their on-going learning processes. The students were guided with feedback and feed-forward throughout the formative assessment learning processes. Impediments to the implementation of formative assessment as indicated are still evident for example some teachers controlling the conversations. While this happened it was observed that learners benefitted more when they had the freedom to share information, discuss what they were learning, and the chance to participate in such activities without any obstructions and hesitations from the teachers.

The data indicates the case study schools were endeavouring to implement formative assessment and this is benefiting learning experiences for Maldivian students. Given more time, ongoing professional development and support the enhancement of formative assessment practice by Maldivian teachers in the lower primary school grades 1, 2 and 3 should be achievable. The professional development could incorporate engaging teachers from different schools in discussion, networking and collaboratively sharing resources and ideas. Facilitation of this could be achieved through pre-service and in-service developmental programmes including greater emphasis in MOE policy directions to further promote the inclusion of formative assessment in the lower primary school grades.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Abdullah Mohd Nawi, who is affiliated to University of Canterbury and University Teknologi Malaysia, for his contribution in initial editing of this article.

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