Implementation of formative assessment practices in Maldivian primary classrooms

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The assessment landscape in Maldivian schools is currently undergoing change. The new draft Maldivian National Curriculum (Education Development Centre, 2012a) and associated documents, aim to realign assessment, instruction and curriculum in schools to better optimise learning conditions. In terms of assessment a key future focus involves promoting the use of formative assessment in classroom practice. For Maldivian teachers who have traditionally placed emphasis on summative assessment, the transition towards developing a more balanced assessment approach is expected to be challenging. The issues this paper addresses are twofold. The first is to discover how Maldivian primary teachers are currently interpreting formative assessment and putting it into classroom practice. The second is to determine how these practices might act as indicators for identifying future teacher professional development needs. The intent is to provide insight into the complexity of implementing formative assessment at the primary school level within the education system of a developing nation. This paper compliments another focused on children's experiences of formative assessment in Maldivian classrooms (Mohamed, N., & Fastier, M. (2013).

Key words: Formative assessment, Implementation, Challenges, Teacher practices, Development needs.

Introduction

The Republic of Maldives is a small island nation located southwest of the Indian subcontinent. There are 218 government English-medium schools, some of which are exclusively primary, some with both primary and secondary, and a few with higher secondary education. Formal primary education begins at Key Stage 1 (grades 1 - 3), and continues till the end of Key Stage 2 (grades 4 - 6). These six years (ages of six to thirteen years) of primary education are compulsory for all the Maldivian children. Since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1983, Maldivian schools have experienced a changing assessment landscape. In the early years of implementation the main assessment

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emphasis was summative, with frequent examinations culminating in a final exam called the Promotion Test. The results of this exam determined whether individual students progressed to the next grade level or not. Nationally this has created a high stake assessment system with pressure on teachers to conform to school policies and parental expectations being driven to achieve success rates in the national examinations.

With the introduction of 'continuous assessment' in the 1990's, Maldivian schools started to incorporate more diversity in assessment practice (Department of National Planning, 2008). Ministry of Education initiated policies included new school report cards and the specification of minimum learning competencies for all curriculum subjects. The instigation of the Child Friendly Baraabaru School (CFBS) project (Ministry of Education, 2010) developed quality indicators focussing on addressing the total needs of each child as an individual. In 2012 the Education Development Centre (EDC) produced the National Curriculum Framework (Working Draft) and the accompanying Pedagogy and Assessment Guide (Working Document) providing instructional applications for Maldivian teachers. Each of the above initiatives promotes the use of formative assessment in Maldivian classrooms. For Maldivian teachers who have traditionally utilised summative assessment the new state initiatives are expected to be challenging and take time for them to adjust their current practices regarding assessment, recording and reporting in their classrooms.

Context

This case study, involves three Key Stage 1 (primary) teachers, each teaching in urban schools located in Male' the Maldives capital. The participants Fazla, Asma and Nahula (referred to using pseudonyms) were qualified teachers. Although the focus of the case study is on these three participating teachers, their Leading Teacher (Heena, Rafa and Shahula) also participated voluntarily in one-off interviews, strengthening the findings of the study. They helped make sense of the context the participant teachers worked in and provided an understanding of school assessment procedures from an administrative perspective.

Literature Review

This paper is inspired by the Maldivian Ministry of Education's initiative to reform the National Curriculum for schools with the aim to provide optimum conditions for learning in order to provide maximum student achievement (Education Development Centre, 2012a). In this regards the Education Development Centre (2012b) advocates the need for the class assessment to change to help promote learner success. Emphasis is placed on aligning diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment with instruction. Assessment for learning or formative assessment as it is referred to in the literature is the main focus of this study. Both national and international research acknowledges the importance of developing formative assessment strategies in classrooms to support learning as outlined below.

Various types of assessment help improve the quality of education and assist stakeholders to decide the degree to which students have achieved intended learning outcomes (Nitko & Brookhart, 2011). Traditional tests, as currently used in the Maldives, do not focus on many aspects of cognition that research indicates are important. Similarly many large scale assessments provide only limited information that educational administrators can use to identify why students do not perform well or to modify the

conditions of instruction in ways likely to improve student achievement (National Research Council, 2004). As a result, it is essential to find educational assessment strategies that better suit school and student needs. To build up an assessment process that benefits the whole education system, it is important for both teachers and school leaders to have knowledge and familiarity regarding assessment procedures and their terminology. For example, formative assessment is often linked with the constructivist model, in which the learner is responsible for the learning and the construction of knowledge, through cooperative situations, open ended questioning, discussion and meaningful context (Clarke, 2005b). To make school assessment more beneficial, the schools and teachers can prioritize formative strategies over accountability ones when appropriate, while they can visualize how summative and standardized/externally-referenced assessment can work for learning and not against them (Hill, 2002).

Assessment for learning is universally recognized for progressing achievement in students' learning. Numerous research studies have indicated the benefits and effectiveness of implementing formative assessment. For instance, researchers such as Assessment Reform Group (ARG) conducted studies that have shown significant improvement in students' performance (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004; Black & Wiliam, 1998b). More than a decade ago, education systems in many countries, such as the United Kingdom, the USA, Australia, and New Zealand implemented formative assessment in the national curriculum (Absolum et al., 2009; Bennett, 2009; Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Sadler, 1989). It is acknowledged that when teachers practice formative assessment with the students, it showed positive results in students' performance.

Formative assessment or 'Assessment for Learning', as it has become known, has always existed in the education system at times, carried out routinely and unconsciously by unknowing teachers (Clarke, 2005). This process which is considered a kind of a 'loop' makes students and teachers focus on a learning target, evaluate current student work against the target, acts to move the work closer to the target, and then repeat (Nitko & Brookhart, 2011). Black and Wiliam (1998a) define formative assessment as being incorporated with activities undertaken by teachers, or by the students to provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Another prominent scholar, Sadler(1989), describes formative assessment as being "concerned with how judgements about quality of student responses (performances, pieces, or works) can be used to shape and improve the student's competence by short-circuiting the randomness and inefficiency of trial-and-error learning"(p.120). Crooks' (2002) defines formative assessment as focussing on enhancing student development by involving relatively unstructured interaction between student and student or teacher and student rather than planned formal assessment event. In order to follow formative assessment process effectively, the schools can assist teachers to raise standards through assessment and also construct school assessment policies that do not pressure teachers into gathering summative data at the expense of using formative assessment practices (Hill, 2002).

Similar to many other countries the implementation of assessment for learning is a continuing process in the Maldives (Mohamed, 2013). Mohamed (2013) found that teachers already having existing habitual practices of assessment for learning inculcated in their instructions. However, she noted how some of these formative assessment practices were incidental and on-going in nature, happening in the classrooms particularly of experienced teachers. Mohamed and Fastier (2013) found similar evidence of students encountering informal formative experiences in Maldivian classrooms.

Popham (2010) advises policy makers to avoid making the formative assessment implementation process overly complex for teachers as if a teacher is undecided about using formative assessment, then any perception that it is too complicated will surely dissuade that teacher from hopping aboard the formative assessment bandwagon. For such issues, it is significant to follow guidance from Hill (2012), Brookhart (2008), Clarke (1998, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2008), Davies and Hill (2009), Frey and Fisher (2011), Greenstein (2010), Hamm and Adams (2009), and Wiliam (2011a) whose work is well-recognized in implementing the process of formative assessment. Popham (2010), a firm supporter of formative assessment advocates teachers to employ formative assessment and informs the stakeholders of the challenges teachers may face in the implementation processes. He advises the stake holders to be more cautious and not to make the process too complicated or too time consuming for the teachers as the chances of getting them to adopt formative assessment could evaporate.

An important process such as formative assessment has many benefits. For example, when teachers and schools use formative assessment to identify learners understanding and what comes next in their learning, it activates their learning. As a result, this process makes an effective system of intervention for struggling learners and systematically improves the instructional practice of teachers. At the same time, it further motivates students to track their own progress toward attainment of standards by building self-confidence (Stiggins and DuFour, 2007). According to Wiliam (2006) what makes an assessment formative is not the length of the feedback loop, nor where it takes place, nor who carries it out, not even who responds. The crucial feature is that evidence is evoked, interpreted in terms of learning needs, and used to make adjustments to better meet those learning needs.

With many possible formats and processes of formative assessment teachers need to discover the best and the most appropriate ways to use during instruction to achieve learning objectives. For example, Wiliam (2010) believes when the teachers organise additional instruction for students of varying ability, even if it is just to go over the same material again but more slowly, this represents formative assessment practice. Likewise, Fisher and Frey (2007) give an example whereby a teacher observes some students having difficulty in grasping a concept, and to help them either review the activity to help reinforce the concept or alternatively uses a different instructional strategy to reteach the learners. Clarke (2005b) also emphasizes teachers to have plans or different intelligences and styles of learning. Such as, if a teacher observes that some students having difficulty grasping a concept, the teacher can identify the problem and design a review activity to reinforce the concept or use a different instructional strategy to reteach it. For instance, in a differentiated classroom, content, process, and product are aligned to learners' strengths and needs, allowing each learner to function in an optimal learning environment (Fisher and Frey, 2007). Likewise, Fisher and Frey (2007) note the system of assessment for learning working efficiently when it is nested within an instructional framework that allows for differentiation and when it gives opportunities to respond to student needs. Greenstein (2010) agrees many strategies are available for differentiating both instruction and assessment; however, she believes all of them work best when a teacher uses formative assessment strategies to identify the specific differentiations that best meet a learner's needs.

In a classroom, there are different ways students can demonstrate learning. When teachers use formative assessment, there needs to be evidence of learning. Many researchers have contributed information on how teachers can elicit evidence in formative assessment using varied strategies (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Davies & Hill, 2009;

Greenstein, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2009). Moss and Brookhart (2009) amongst others scholars have explained how to recognise the formative assessment process in a classroom.

> As formative assessment involves a systematic and intentional process of gathering evidence of learning, its effects can be observed in the classroom. These effects include what the teacher does, what the students do, what the products and performances look like, and how teachers talk about their students' learning (p.18).

An example of learning evidence is explained by Wiliam and Black (1996) in their study about a small group of students in a classroom. According to Wiliam and Black, the students in the group could demonstrate high quality speaking and listening skills among themselves. However, the teacher may or may not observe the learning taking place in the group activity although learning is occurring in their conversations. They believe evidence of learning involves a simple process and that teachers can look for evidence from sample activities such as completing a worksheet, answering and asking questions, working on projects, handing in homework assignments and even from students who sit silently looking confused in the class (Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, & Wiliam, 2005). Another approach is having portfolios, which is a systemic collection of one's work, collected as evidence with variety of purposes and providing a clear alternative to more traditional forms of assessment (Popham, 2011).

A key element of formative assessment is feedback. According to Sadler (1989) feedback is useful to two main audiences, the teacher and the student. It is used by the teachers to make programmatic decisions with respect to readiness, diagnosis and remediation of the students. At the same time, the students use feedback to monitor the strengths and weaknesses of their performances in the class. For instance, the student's then find out the knowledge or skills they need to develop, how close they are now to achieve or what else they need to do next (Brookhart, 2008). Thus, those aspects associated with success or high quality can be recognized and reinforced, and unsatisfactory aspects modified or improved (Sadler, 1998).The second key element involves feed forward, informing learners of areas for improvement by indicating the next steps in the students' learning trajectory (Black et al., 2003, Hamm & Adams, 2009). According to Brookhart (2008) "good feedback should be part of a classroom assessment environment in which students see constructive criticism as a good thing and understand that learning cannot occur without practice" (p.2).However, Wiliam (2006) argued to make an assessment formative, the feedback is not the only crucial feature; he believed there has to be evidence evoked and interpreted in terms of learning needs, and used to make adjustments in students' learning to better meet those learning needs. According to Moss & Brookhart (2009) for feedback to truly feed forward it must be tightly tied to the learning targets and only by using feedback to feed forward can the teacher increase learning no matter where the student is in relation to the goal. Although feedback and feed forward are important components of formative assessment, teachers know what is best for their students and what needs to be done regarding students' performances at the time they are given. According to Davies and Hill (2009) there is no one right or best way in giving feedback and believe in selecting a method or combination of methods that work and are helpful for students, teachers, and families in the school community.

In conclusion, formative assessment enhances learning and encourages learners regardless of any student's abilities. It cycles assessment information back into learning process itself making learners accountable for their own learning (Nitko & Brookhart,

2011). As a result, many researchers are supportive of the use of formative assessment as it has resulted in improved student achievement. William (2007) a strong advocate of formative assessment appeals educators to help teachers develop effective formative assessment skills as it is the most cost-effective strategy for raising student achievement known today.

Method and design

A qualitative design methodology was employed, to investigate the Maldivian teachers' practices of formative assessment in the primary school context. The study focused on identifying the patterns of assessment practised by the case study teachers to discover how closely their practices exemplified formative assessment. The research settings were explored utilising semi-structured interviews, focussed lesson observations, and document analysis. To help comprehend the teachers' practices of formative assessment, nine lessons were observed in three different curriculum areas (English, Maths and Environmental Studies) with semi-structured interviews held before and after each lesson observation. The interviews and lessons were audio-recorded, and visual lesson observations noted using focussed lesson observation forms. The recorded interviews and lesson observations were subsequently transcribed and data analysed inductively using coding categories and concept maps. This process was iterative in nature with the data repeatedly re-visited. Full commitment was given to interpret and make sense of the data collected. The literature material reviewed was also utilised to help make sense of the teachers' actions, and connections sought to discover if the assessment practices observed represented the 2012 nationally recommended formative assessment practices.

Study Findings

The emerging patterns of formative assessment as practised by participant teachers are discussed in the findings under the following categories: differentiated learning instructions, evidence of learning and feedback/ forward.

Differentiated learning instructions

The studied classrooms showed similarities and differences in the teaching and learning styles. Each teacher had established their own strategies for handling learners with differing needs. To identify learners' ability levels, it is customary in Maldivian schools to conduct diagnostic tests at the beginning of the first term, the purpose being to find out the level of the students at the time they commence their studies in each new grade. In this way, the low-achievers or illiterates (as the teachers called them) are identified and recognized by class teachers and the school senior management. These students' are given close attention and alternative programmes are planned for them by the teachers. The teachers focussed on individual learners needs after explaining the learning activity to the whole class. While they agreed in most cases the students were not given individualised tasks or assignments, in some circumstances, as referred to below, they used customised materials to suit learners of different abilities.

        When students were occupied doing teacher set tasks, it was observed that the participant teachers normally circulated around the room monitoring each student's progress. All three teachers spent lengthy periods of time sitting with groups of students or with individuals. In the case of Asma, her 'slow-learners' were segregated into same

group. When all the students were occupied completing individual activities, Asma took the opportunity to assess individual student's progress, providing each of them with feedback on how they could improve their learning. Asma sat with segregated group of students and explained the concepts constantly, sometimes changing pedagogies according to their needs and teaching them mostly on a one to one basis. According to Asma, by keeping the 'slow-learners' separately, she could provide more attention and individualised help. Although all the learners covered the same topics with similar activities each day, Asma also had differentiated tasks for her 'slow learners'.

In Fazla's class, there were fewer learners who needed guidance and attention. Like Asma she walked around the class helping and guiding the learners, providing feedback and marking the students' books and work sheets. During the post lesson interview, she said that even if she did not mark the students' work regularly, she had the knowledge of students well enough to recognise who had difficulties. Therefore, in the class she would frequently take time to talk to these learners and explain difficult concepts during the lessons. For example, in the English Language lessons, she helped by providing them with words they could use in their sentence writing. According to Fazla, when she sat with the struggling learners who needed assistance, then they would commence their work with more confidence. In addition Fazla prepared her lesson plans to address different ability levels. An example from her Mathematics lesson plan:

> Level (1) draw and read the clock faces. Level (2) draw and write the time. Levels (3) draw what they (students) see from the clock and write what things they (students) could do at that time. (Lesson notes - Mathematics: Asma)

Nahula, the grade 3 teacher's lessons followed similar routine practices to that of Fazla and Asma. After the students were given instructions for completing the set work, Nahula also walked around helping and assisting individual learners. Fazla and Asma's learners were younger and their classes were more spacious with smaller desk and chairs, while Nahula's class had big desks and chairs for the students. Therefore, it was much easier for her to bring the students to her table, whenever she found them having difficulties. Nahula, believed, when she gave explanations to individual learners in this particular manner teaching and learning became more effective:

> I notice when I explain to the children in need of the most attention, they do understand the lesson well, especially on a one to one individual basis. (Nahula)

Along with individualised teaching and learning, there were well planned one hour long remedial sessions for under-achievers held in all the three schools. The teachers conducted these sessions using a variety of activities all designed to help the students become more competent in their curriculum areas. They particularly focussed on numeracy and literacy for the two languages: English and Dhivehi. Normally, the remedial sessions were held after school hours and the teachers prepared separate learning materials and innovative approaches to re-teach the same concepts previously taught in class. Nahula for example, indicated that she focussed on the use of different learning activities to help make the learners competent, and that whenever there was an upcoming class assessment she would re-teach that particular assessment topic with the remedial class. She believed the remedial hour was valuable and helped the learners involved to make genuine progress in their learning.

From the lesson observations and document analysis of various assessment records, student's work sheets, students' work books, assessment/test papers, it was evident that the teachers in the study recognised that individuals in mixed ability classes could benefit from exposure to differentiated teaching and learning instruction.

Evidence of learning

The three teachers put a lot of effort into collecting and displaying evidence of student learning. All of them provided potential sources of information about what the students learnt and what had happened in the classes. Throughout each term the participant teachers collected several folders of student work that if assembled appropriately, could create a sustainable learning portfolio for each student. Examples of learning evidence could be found in Fazla's grade 1 class. The room was filled with teaching-aids incorporating student work. There were labelled areas for subjects such as 'ES Centre', 'English Centre', 'Maths Centre', 'Creativity and Arts', 'Writing Centre,' 'Dhivehi Centre' and a group work centre. These 'Centres' had spaces allocated for each student, and completed individual and group work sheets were displayed. Asma also kept special corners to display student work. Fazla's classroom looked very much like Asma's even though they both were in two different schools. Nahula's class looked completely different as she and the other teacher who shared the class had not kept the walls updated with students' work. In all the three classes there were many types of folders for filing student reading materials, assessment papers, checking of multiplication/dictation tasks, weekend assignments etcetera. All three teachers regularly marked students' work.

The learning evidence collected by the teachers included numerous records of students' progress, regularly updated as required by the schools rules and regulations. For example in Asma's classroom there was a booklet for all students' called 'Student Record Book Grade 1-7' and another book called 'Students' Particular Book.' In these books Asma recorded information on daily events such as completion of homework, conduct, attendance, and other information such as how well a child worked in the class, weekend assignments, checking spelling/multiplication tables and the like. In Nahula's school they also kept a sheet for noting down the progress of each student, however, at the time of observation she was focussing on recording only the details of low achievers in her class. Fazla continuously checked students reading levels and gave written feedback. In addition, students who completed activities were rewarded with badges and certificates.

Feedback and feed forward

While the three teachers might not have had proper formative assessment training they nonetheless, had their own methods of giving feedback and feed forward. Feedback and feed forward episodes happened continuously throughout the process of teaching and learning. Quite often it was observed in the class discussions and while the teachers conducted questioning. For example, in some situations, they corrected the answer of a student or added extra information and provided suggestions for them to follow. In the process of adding missed points and providing suggestions to the students' responses, the teachers also encouraged the learners to progress their on-going learning. The teachers' continuously moved around observing students work and building learning conversations with them. Sometimes, while the rest of the class worked the teachers sat with a group of students or with an individual giving feedback and providing suggestions. For instance,

Asma in her Mathematics lesson walked around the classroom talking to individual students and spending time helping them while the students were engaged in their work.

Apart from the individualized attention given by the teachers in the classes, all three schools planned weekly remediation in their academic calendars and conducted these classes regularly. The classes were conducted twice or more on a weekly basis for an hour. In these sessions the teachers had an additional opportunity to pay attention to small groups of students who needed their individual strengths and weaknesses in a particular learning area re-assessed. As a result, during these sessions, Fazla, Asma and Nahula usually spent time with the particular students reviewing their standards and frequently re-teaching the lessons. They also tried different techniques with appropriate materials to progress their learning. Their main focus was on developing the same learning targets and learning objectives as set in the lessons initially conducted. To make the students more able in reading, writing and better at numeracy, particularly up to the required grade standard (the curriculum level) was considered to be a most important responsibility by these teachers.

Students' exercise books, files and other documents all indicated teachers kept up to date with the marking of students' tasks and activities. According to the teachers in the study, the school management and the leading teachers regularly emphasized this matter and parental pressure ensured continuity as well. The teachers constantly gave out many kinds of rewards and the students' books, files and displayed work on the walls contained multi-coloured stickers, stars, and words. There was evidence of grades and marks written as feedback for the learners. For example, Asma explained: "When I mark students' books, I write comments such as - please revise - keep on trying – excellent - and so on". For the words and phrases used by Asma to be more effective as feedback, they would need to be more specific and clear as to what she meant so that students would know what to do in order to successfully move their learning forward. Nahula had a better idea for giving feedback: "I give remarks in the children's books and usually talk to them individually as well if they score low marks or they do well."

It was a common practice of all the teachers to include a short remark as feedback with the marks and grades awarded. The teachers believed this was helpful in rewarding and pleasing the students. They also believed it encouraged learners in to take the next step in learning. In addition, there were written comments for the essays with remarks emphasizing the good points, and the points the students could develop more. As such, teachers usually asked their students to re-write essays/compositions and to do the corrections of arithmetic numbers and other exercises in their books. The teachers also asked students to write out corrections of the wrong answers. For example, they wrote "Do corrections," "Complete homework and "Please re-write" as headings so that the parents who regularly checked students work would find them. According to the teachers whenever parents checked their children's books and did find particular headings and remarks they usually helped their children to re-do the activities as homework and hence, the learning continued at home as well. The teachers will need to become aware that descriptors used such as 'keep on trying' and 'excellent' are not appropriate examples of feed forward as they do not directly specify the next steps to take.

Discussion

This study represents how three Maldivian teachers' practiced formative assessment in primary schools. Some of these formative assessment practices were kind of incidental and on-going in nature, occurring naturally from their teaching experiences. Clarke

(2005b) acknowledges how assessment for learning has always existed in teaching and learning and how important it is for the teachers to become action researchers in this field even though the government has implemented the initiative. According to Wiliam (2011) 'teachers have a crucial role to play in designing the situations in which learning takes place, but only learners create learning' (p 158). For example, a formative assessment information for the teacher can come from having a conversation with students, observing them working, or looking at their work itself (Nitko & Brookhart, 2011). Hall and Burke (2004) also agree assessment is something that is done to students in a classroom rather than done with them. Many researchers agree that effective assessment procedures encourage students to continue learning in schools and achieve success (Absolum, Flockton, Hattie, Hipkins, & Reid, 2009; Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Black et al., 2003; Crooks, 1988). In that case, if formative assessment is practised and implemented properly and at the heart of the learning process it can also provide a basis for the teaching and learning process (Absolum et al., 2009; Davies & Hill, 2009).

As noted previously, the teachers were not fully trained in the use of formative assessment practices. However, all three of them employed various strategies and created opportunities to help assist their students in the assessment for learning process. Several of these practices had already existed and were part of teaching and learning culture of the three teachers as noted by Clarke (2005b). This was similar to the study by McNaughton (2011) who found that her case study teacher already had existing formative assessment strategies in practice even before she had received formal training in the use of formative assessment.

One technique that teachers used to help low-achievers to become successful in their learning was the use of differentiated learning activities. Even though the teachers planned their lessons generically for all students, they all had special plans and ideas for the low achievers. They provided them further guidance individually and in groups through employing differentiated learning instructions. It was noted that in handling these circumstances there were similarities and differences. For example, Asma kept her low-achievers segregated in a group in the middle of her class for her convenience, while Fazla and Nahula had done so. Regardless, the teachers' main goal was to assist these low-achievers in raising their standards up to the intended curriculum level, particularly in numeracy and literacy. In the same way, all three teachers conducted remedial sessions for these learners by modifying their teaching and learning processes to suit the students' learning needs. The additional time and individualised learning materials helped the learners to achieve success in their learning. At the same time, it became easier for the teachers to assist the identified learners who struggled with particular concepts or applications. Furthermore, it provided the opportunity to respond to the learners with personalized feedback, assistance, and redirection to get the student learning back on track. As Greenstein (2010) advises teachers:

> If assessment data gathered during instruction indicate that all students understand the material, you might skip a planned explanation or activity and move directly to the next topic; if more are lost or struggling, you can slow down, providing additional practice or skills based drills, perhaps, or allowing more time for questions and clarification (p.90).

Even though the teachers planned activities to assist learners who had difficulties, it was not possible for them to follow Greenstein's suggestions fully as there were many rules, regulations and formalities in the three schools' curriculum implementation

schemes. For example, the teachers had to follow the set schemes of work and continue with the next prescribed topic leaving the students with their struggles and confusions unresolved.

Nevertheless, there were various learning evidence displayed in different corners of the classrooms with rewards and acknowledgement. With all the collected evidence of learning the teachers undisputedly have materials to produce portfolios for students. This would this allow students to have their progress demonstrated in a more authentic and meaningful manner. As Hamm and Adams (2009) note portfolios not only capture an authentic portrait of a student's thinking, but can also provide an excellent conferencing tool for meetings with students, parents, and supervisors. The three schools held student-parent-teacher conferences, at which the teachers presented the collected student work, sometimes revealed the marks/grades achieved in class tests and provided feedback. Black and Wiliam (1998b) recommended feedback during learning be in the form of comments rather grades. Wiliam (2011) in a more recent study discouraged the use of grades stating that 'as soon as students get a grade, the learning stops' (p.123). He also believes that if grading stops learning, students should be given them less frequently.

Maldivian teachers also shared collected information about student's conduct and personality with parents. In addition, schools often conduct activities such as concerts, drama, dances, and celebrate special days to provide additional evidence of students' learning. During the term breaks, teachers send written descriptive documents to parents, which they had produced by analysing the data that they collected from the classroom assessment. Generally, the teachers present narrative feedback twice a year in the school's own format. These documents however need to be more detailed, than a simple phrase, for the parents to be more aware of child's progress. According to Wiliam (2011) for feedback to be effective, the most important thing is to direct attention to what's next, rather than focussing on how well or badly the students have done, and this rarely happens in the typical classrooms. In regards to teachers providing advice Black and Wiliam (1998b) state:

> The positive aspect of students' being the primary users of the information gleaned from formative assessment is that negative outcomes – such as obsessive focus on competition and the attendant fear of failure on the part of low achievers are not inevitable. What is needed is a culture of success, backed by a belief that all pupils can achieve (p 142).

It was noted that most of the evidence of learning collected by the teachers to put on display or filed in student folders was of a summative nature. With the assistance of formative assessment the teachers could have used many of these materials to contribute to a portfolio collection as described by Davies and Hill (2009), Hamm and Adams (2009), Greenstein (2010), Shermis and Di Vesta (2011), Popham (2011) and be utilized in a formative assessment manner. For example, there were collections of essays/poems/compositions, art work, needle work, descriptive writings, individual/group assignments, projects and science experiments.

There occurred many feedback and feed forward processes in all three classes as mentioned previously. One of the process frequently observed was when the teachers' used questioning in their lessons, they made corrections to the students' answers, provided suggestions, added missing points, and encouraged the learners to make on-going progress. Fisher and Frey (2007) noted feedback that includes praise, is something that has to be offered to students. For instance, it may include assertion of a correct

response or elaboration on an incomplete answer. While the learning activities continued, teachers circulated helping the learners and encouraging them to complete their work.

As previously mentioned, learning was monitored with feedback, and feed forward during the revision sessions. There was also evidence of teachers giving various types of rewards, marks, and grades as feedback in the three classes studied. However, Black et al. (2003) argue that feedback given as rewards or grades generally enhances ego of the students rather than task involvement. A negative consequence that might result from this is that it can lead students to compare themselves with others and focus on their image and status rather than encouraging the students to think about the work itself and how they can improve it. Another feedback process involved teachers meeting with the parents on a regular basis to share and discuss their findings of their children. This process was intentional and used by some teachers to make parents aware of the help needed at home to assist student learning. According to Hall and Burke (2004) the potential for both learners themselves and their parents to be more actively involved has not yet been fully explored and exploited. However, they found more optimism in students learning when parents and learners were involved in the assessment process together. At the same time, teachers created a favourable condition for their learners by making the classroom learning friendly and conducive. For example, feedback needs to be given while students are still mindful of the topic, assignment, or performance in question. In this way the students still have some reason to continue to work on the learning target and towards achieving success.

Conclusion

The focus of the paper was to identify formative assessment practices happening intentionally or unintentionally in Maldivian primary classes and to consider future development needs. In each of the three case study participant's classrooms evidence of formative assessment in action was observed, albeit at the initial implementation stages, and the potential benefits of such practices for the learners noted. However, as alluded to in the discussion sections, the need for future teacher professional development training to enhance teacher understanding and proficiency in the use of formative assessment exists. The implementation process could also benefit from a reduction in the numerous formalities and regulations that exist around current assessment practices in primary classrooms, that if are allowed to continue could hinder assessment for learning progress.

Popham (2010) a strong advocate of formative assessment, recommends using a 'formative assessment starter kit' in schools to assist the implementation process. Based on personal experiences he believes such can kits greatly help teachers to develop inherent efficacy in the use of formative assessment strategies in their classrooms. Popham (2010) advises policymakers to avoid making the formative assessment implementation process overly complex for teachers. He writes 'If a teacher is on the fence about using formative assessment, then any perception that it is too complicated will surely dissuade the would-be user from hopping aboard the formative assessment bandwagon' (p.185). He also acknowledges the importance of ensuring teachers' thoughts and attitudes are positively skewed regarding the benefits of formative assessment. The Directions for Assessment in New Zealand (DANZ) project (Absolum et al., 2009) provides a valuable model in this regards to the above for Maldivian policy makers to refer to. To successfully implement the assessment reform policies desired in the Maldives junior primary education system on-going professional development

opportunities providing teacher support and guidance will undoubtedly be required for the current rhetoric to become reality.

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