Assessment and Learning Partnerships

Short Course for School Leaders

Introduction

The purpose of this short course is to help school leaders understand the Assessment and Learning Partnership (ALP) professional online development program, the associated research project, and the nature of the benefits to students, teachers and school leadership that can flow from its effective implementation.

Specifically, the aim is to encourage school leaders to introduce appropriately *supported* and *targeted* differentiated assessment and teaching. It simultaneously aims to understand precisely where, how and why the ALP approach is successful in improving student basic skills assessment outcomes.

Anticipated benefits accruing to teachers and schools using the ALP model to target and differentiate assessment and teaching are:

- improved student learning outcomes
- improved monitoring, analysis and use of assessment data
- greater understanding of student learning needs based on the adoption of a developmental model of learning that focuses on what students 'can do' as a starting point for identifying teaching interventions
- growth in teacher subject, pedagogical and metacognitive knowledge based on increased teacher professional collaboration
- increased evaluation by teachers themselves of their own teaching effectiveness in relation to student achievement over time.
- increased levels of teacher trust and empowerment as agents of change
- increased drawing on the research base and external expertise to provide new perspectives and/or new knowledge

These can be achieved if the procedures outlined in the ALP professional development modules are implemented. For this to happen, school leaders have a critical role to play. School leaders need to understand what is expected of their teachers in the course and to help them monitor and support associated changes in teaching practices. Unless change in teaching practices takes place there can be no expectation of improved performances of the order that we are experiencing with many schools where the procedures are followed precisely.

It is important – essential – therefore, that school leaders:

- understand the program that teachers are engaged in
- understand the nature and purpose of the research
- provide the necessary support to teachers
- understand and interpret the results to help formulate supportive policy within the school to help teachers improve student learning in reading mathematics and problem-solving

Without the support and engagement of school leaders we already know that the program fails to improve student learning as much as it does in schools where school leadership is fully informed and engaged in the process. Anecdotally, we are able to link lower levels of engagement and support by and from school leaders to lower performing cohorts of students. Similarly, we are also able to link higher performing and higher gain schools to high levels of implementation and procedures supported by enthusiastic and engaged school leaders. We know that where school leaders enrol teachers and students in the program without consulting them first has the effect that the school does not perform as well as other schools where teachers volunteered to join the program. Schools where teachers are told to participate do not necessarily follow the instructions of the program. This leads to lower levels of performance.

When considering whether or not to join the ALP professional development program and research project, we encourage school leaders to work with teachers to determine whether or not they should be engaged in the program. While we argue that students have a point of readiness to learn it is also clear that schools and teachers have a point of readiness to participate.

Background for ALP professional development and the ALP research study to improve student educational outcomes

With the completion and reporting of NAPLAN testing in 2011, it became possible to look at trends in student achievement for two cohorts of students 2008-2010, and 2009-2011 in Reading and Numeracy from Year 3 to Year 5 and from Year 7 to Year 9. The NAPLAN National Report 2011 made the following observation: "Nationally there are no differences between the 2009 to 2011 and 2008 to 2010 cohorts in gains in Reading and Numeracy from Year 3 to Year 5 or from Year 7 to Year 9" (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011, p.342).

At the same time, recent results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) show the level of student achievement in Australia has started to fall behind that of some other nations.

These results highlight a number of important questions:

1. Should there be an expectation of ongoing improvement in student achievement from cohort to cohort over time?
2. Does the NAPLAN, PISA, TIMMS and PIRLS data suggest that prevailing approaches to teaching and the organization of teaching has reached the limit of its effectiveness?

The results of the Literacy Assessment Project (LAP), a pilot study commencing in 2006 conducted in conjunction with the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM) on reading comprehension in 19 Catholic primary schools in Melbourne, suggest that significant improvements in student achievement *can be made*. In this pilot study, PLTs collaboratively questioned evidence of student learning and the links between explicit teaching interventions and improvements in student educational outcomes. The results from LAP were compelling (Care & Griffin, 2009).

The analysis of the student outcomes in reading comprehension for those first 19 LAP partnership schools over the first three years of their involvement is shown in Table 1. The project was implemented across Grades 3 & 4 in the first two years and then expanded to include Grades 5 & 6 in the third year.

Table 1: Average student growth (in logits and by cohort indicated by shading).

	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
2006	0.68	0.51		
2007	0.84	0.83		
2008	1.01	1.04	1.1	1.06

The average growth in student outcomes between March and October in each of those first three years was calculated across the 19 schools for each grade. The unit used to measure the change in student ability is called a logit (in the same way that the metre is the unit used to measure distance). Average student growth in reading comprehension in *non-LAP* programs, is 0.5 logits per year. The analysis shows that the growth in student outcomes increased markedly over the first three years of the schools' involvement in the project. In the third year of involvement, the average growth was approximately double that of the first year. The results and the feedback on this initial LAP partnership prompted the Assessment Research Centre, supported by the Australian Research Council, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), Victoria, and CEOM, to establish ALP in 2010.

ALP is a comprehensive online teacher professional development program and research study designed to replicate the features and to identify the factors behind improvements in student achievement characterised by the LAP approach, and to see whether the procedures used could be generalised and scaled up across systems, year levels and subjects (Care & Griffin, 2009). It seeks to examine the role of collaborative teaching teams (PLTs) in the use of data to enhance decision-making regarding teaching and learning strategies (Care & Griffin, 2009). Underlying this are key research questions about teacher behaviour, knowledge and values, and their relationship with student learning.

We are now beginning to see in the ALP project that many schools are beginning to improve not only their test results using the Assessment Research Online Testing System (ARCOTS) but also showing a persistent improvement in external measures such as NAPLAN. Testimonials from regional network leaders, school principals and teachers are building an anecdotal evidence base for the effectiveness of the differentiated assessment and teaching approach endorsed by the project. Empirical data is currently being gathered through the linked research project to support this approach.

Professional development program outline

In the full ALP professional online development program, teachers, organized into Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) of between 4-6 teachers in the school with responsibility for a specific cohort of students, complete 10 modules directly linked to their day-to-day practice. These modules are designed to help teachers use a developmental model of learning to collaboratively and critically analyse student performance data, to plan, implement and evaluate teaching interventions, and progressively build increasingly sophisticated understandings of learning and teaching. The modules, and associated testing of reading comprehension, numeracy and problem solving, are normally taken one per month. They currently include:

- Introduction to ALP
- Using a developmental model of learning
- Establishing an assessment baseline
- Effective PLTs and analysis of student learning data
- PLT culture and teacher learning
- Validity and reliability
- Interpreting data to produce developmental progressions
- Analysing ARCOTS data to look at student growth and test administration
- Using data to review classroom practices
- Sustaining and celebrating PLTs

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How does the ALP professional development program support student teacher, school and system learning?

Care and Griffin, (2009), *Assessment is for Teaching,* outline the essential nature of the program. They identify the key elements that have been built into the program and how these elements support learning.

1. Teaching is guided by what students have learned and what they are ready to learn. In other words, rather than students being 'at, on, above or below expectations' at a particular age, a characteristic of a deficit model, they are described as being at a level of development defined by what learning is appropriate for them at that point in time. This focuses teaching at the point of need rather than at what is expected due to grade level, age, language or socio-economic background.

2. Teachers need to have a common, shared and/or articulated understanding of the hierarchical nature of learning in their teaching areas. This focuses teachers on the developmental progression or steps that students typically take in learning new skills. It emphasizes the need to have shared understanding about targeted teaching interventions for each step. This is why we emphasize that assessment is primarily for teaching.

3. **Assessment is for teaching.** Teachers need to develop an understanding of how assessment is systematically used to identify a student's zone of proximal development (ZPD), the point at which the student is most ready to learn, and where intervention will have the greatest impact (Vygotsky, 1986). The existing rhetoric of assessment for learning allows an exemption to the teacher if the students do not learn – it is the student's fault. If assessment is regarded as being good teaching there is no exemption.

4. Teachers work collaboratively in PLTs, not alone. Teachers observe and encourage each other and mutually develop solutions and strategies. Teachers are accountable to each other to ensure that strategies used are evaluated in terms of student outcomes. The collaborative teamwork involves some tension. We encourage teachers to challenge each other in terms of the changes that they would observe in student outcomes if "good ideas" were implemented.

5. The search for evidence - what students do, say, make and write - is the focus of the work of the PLT. Evidence about what students can do defines where teaching needs to be directed. Because of this, 'evidence' is examined carefully. This requires

from teachers a willingness to engage in professional challenge that also serves to clarify and refine teacher thinking.

6. 'Every student has a zone of proximal development, and every student can and will learn if teachers can scaffold at and around that zone' (Care & 2009, p58). Evidence is interpreted within a developmental continuum that allows for the identification of a student's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). An example of this is cumulative steps of increasing complexity in reading comprehension. Using specifically constructed tests that reflect these cumulative steps of increasing complexity in the selected skill, the teacher identifies the point where student understanding becomes inconsistent. This is the student's ZPD, where teaching is to be targeted and learning scaffolded.

7. Teachers - and schools - develop a systematic method of collecting data, a way of interpreting it, and systematically making best use of it. This is facilitated by professional development. This project helps teachers understand how to design and collect valid data; ways of recording and interpreting reports; and ways of linking this to direct targeted and explicit intervention focused on a level on a developmental progression.

8. A paradigm shift in the teaching culture from deficit to developmental in which it is believed all students can and will learn if their ZPD can be identified (Griffin & Care, 2009, p58). This requires a change in teacher language to take place. These changes are perhaps best expressed in the following ALP 'mantras' which are unpacked in the online course in terms of both their particular meaning and rationale for use:

- Challenge, collaborate and check
- Evidence versus inference
- 'Our' students not 'mine'
- Do, say, make and write
- Talk about students, not teachers
- Focus on development, not deficit
- Teach to the construct, not the test
- Assessment is for teaching
- Skills, not scores
- Challenge, not share
- Use more than tests

The creation of PLTs in which teachers collaboratively examine evidence from their own students and their own practice support this change. The use of external expertise to support teacher and PLT professional inquiry and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills also supports this.

9. The Principal and school leaders play a critical role in the ALP program. They understand the goals, purpose and language of the program and articulate this clearly. They organize the school to ensure that necessary infrastructure and resource support is provided, including dedicated time and location for PLT meetings on a regular basis. They also link financial resource allocation to what evidence of need demonstrates and strategies that can be linked to improved student educational outcomes.

Essential Reading:
Griffin. P., & Care. E., (2009) *Assessment is for Teaching* Independence Vol. 34 No. 2, 56-59.
Available here *(pg 9 to 12 of this PDF document)*

References

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2011)*, NAPLAN Achievement in Reading, Persuasive Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy: National Report for 2011*, ACARA, Sydney. Downloaded from: http://www.nap.edu.au/verve/_resources/NAPLAN_2011_National_Report.pdf

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Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language*. MIT press.