Enhancing assessment leadership of school heads

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Abstract

The role of school heads in any educational reform is undoubtedly one of the biggest factors that helps teachers achieve the intended outcomes (Stiggins & Duke, 2008). In the current assessment reform in Brunei's education sector, whilst most teachers have received significant training on the principles of sound assessment practices they struggle to find support from their school heads to further advance their competencies. This paper reports on one strategy used that aligned the understanding of school heads to the current assessment reform through participation in the development of teacher's Assessment for Learning (AfL) competency assessment tool. This tool is to be used both for teachers' performance evaluation and for professional learning. Analysis of interview data shows that participation of school heads in the project has deepened their understanding of AfL principles, which consequently enhanced their confidence in providing professional and system-wide support in program implementation. School heads have gained significant insights about their roles both in creating a school environment where students' learning is the focus of monitoring and in providing assessment leadership support to teachers. Similarly, the school heads have understood the demand to improve their assessment capabilities to provide support specific to the needs of the teachers. This paper concludes by outlining the school heads' assessment leadership competencies as identified by the participants.

Keywords: assessment leadership, school heads, assessment for learning

Background of the Study

The involvement of stakeholders in all aspects of educational program implementation is a crucial factor for its success (Henry, Dickey, & Areson, 1991). Particularly, the ability of the school heads to provide enabling mechanisms and support to teachers increases the likely success of the program. However, most educational reforms are done through teachers' training to effect the changes as envisioned by program implementers. This approach has been criticized because of the high tendency to create inconsistencies between teachers and practices of the school heads. As proven by research, educational reforms can only be successful if all personnel at all levels develop a high level of understanding of what the program is all about and what it is trying to achieve. Thus, it is necessary to establish coherent understanding and practice between and amongst stakeholders.

In the current educational reform in Brunei where School-Based Assessment for Learning (SBAfL) is being implemented, a very aggressive professional development for teachers has been undertaken. As more and more teachers have participated in the training, the senior officers are expecting consistent monitoring of school heads and deputy school heads on how

teachers are implementing SBAfL. With this pressure at work, the school heads have realised their low level assessment leadership competence. As a result, there is a growing demand for them to enhance their understanding of SBAfL and how they can assist teachers to fully implement the assessment reform.

The School Heads as Instructional Leaders

The role of school heads expands from being a school manager to instructional leader. The former requires them to plan, implement and monitor educational programs to ensure effective learning of students whilst the latter requires them to demonstrate to teachers the teaching competencies above the minimum requirements. In the recent years, research evidence puts instructional leadership as the central role of school heads (Fullan, 2003). School leaders who serve as instructional leaders work together with teachers to improve their quality of teaching aimed at enhancing student learning (Hopkins, 2001). As instructional leaders, the roles of the school heads include setting the vision of the school, developing human resources, involving all stakeholders, using data and engaging in research to address teaching and learning issues (Day et al., 2009) They also model and lead teachers to better understand effective instruction, thus ensuring the output of effective instruction, leading teachers in monitoring students' progress and learning, and working with teachers to use assessment data to enhance student learning (Southworth, 2009). School heads' leadership is affecting student learning in indirect way (Dinham, 2005; Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2005). In the research report of Day et al. (2009), they highlighted findings which are directly linked to the instructional leadership roles of the school heads which have positive effects to student outcomes. These roles include the indirect effect of school leaders in improving teaching and learning through enhancing teachers' motivation and commitment, and improving the school climate. Further, they identified the most influential factors mediating school leaders' influence on student learning to include 'academic emphasis, assessment for learning, collaborative teacher cultures, monitoring pupil and school performance, coherence of teaching programs, and the provision of extra-curricular enrichment activities (p185)". In addition, they have identified that the two way-process of trust between school leaders and teachers greatly enhances teachers' commitment and their willingness to work together. Such findings highlight the significant roles of assessment literacy of school leaders to be greatly influencing the teaching and learning processes. This is consistent with the previous view of Cisek (1995) about the assessment leadership of school heads, which was further emphasised by Noonan and Renihan (2006).

The School Heads as Assessment Leaders

As school heads assume the roles of instructional leaders, they need to have a deeper understanding of sound assessment practices and to develop their skills in ensuring that school assessment practices are of high quality and assessment results are used effectively to inform teaching and learning. According to Dinham (2005), high performing school heads are characterized by their strong focus on students particularly on ensuring their learning rather than on teachers and their teaching. In other words, the emphasis of instructional leadership is

on supervision of learning (Glickman, 2002) which is contrary to the old view of leadership focused on supervision of teaching. It was emphasised by Fullan (2001) that in order to provide a strong support and assistance to teacher teaching and student learning, the school heads need to have a deeper understanding of what constitute an effective practices in curriculum, assessment and instruction. Their functions as instructional leaders involve designing and implementing of the curriculum, instruction and assessment activities at the classroom level (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Reeves (2004) stresses that one characteristic of an effective principal is devotion to hands-on evaluation of student work and high involvement in the social moderation activity to discuss student output.

As put forward by Stiggins and Duke (2008): 'school heads can be pivotal in the improvement of student learning by helping teachers develop and use sound classroom assessments that strengthen instruction and student learning' (p286). The competence of school heads in AfL has various applications in teachers' assessment literacy and in ensuring student learning. The deep knowledge of schools heads of AfL facilitates the development of school assessment systems which account the use of various assessment information to every level of decision to make regarding student learning (Stiggins & Duke, 2008). At the classroom level, school heads can work closely with teachers and students, and even parents, to use assessment to fully engage students in their learning. At the program level, school heads can lead the teachers, staff and other stakeholders to evaluate the effectiveness of the assessment system and to use the results of evaluation to improve teachers' practices. At the institutional level, school heads can work closely with district heads and community leaders using assessment data for accountability and for policy articulation.

But what constitutes assessment leadership? Stiggins and Duke (2008) identified ten (10) leadership competencies in assessment which range from understanding the principles of AfL to creating the necessary school culture which foster the effective use of assessment to improve teaching and enhance student learning. These assessment competencies are consistent with the new claims of Day et al. (2009) , that effective school heads use a wide range of evidence to inform decisions on what strategies should be used to optimize the effectiveness of teaching and learning. According to them, amongst the works of the school heads which enhance student learning include setting high expectations for students learning and teachers' performance, establishing academic support to help teachers improve their teaching and emphasizing the use of assessment for learning. There are some lacking competencies of the school heads in assessment leadership which need to be included. These include their role in mitigating the negative effects of high-stake testing to instruction, curriculum and most importantly to student learning.

However, developing assessment leadership of school heads can be an intimidating initiative and school heads may perceive it negatively as adding more burdens to their leadership roles. But regardless of how daunting this task may be, school heads need to take an active assessment leadership role to work with all stakeholders to effectively address the learning mandate of the school (Noonan & Renihan, 2006). Considering the current reality, the school heads have mostly very low assessment literacy which is the major problem in their execution of assessment leadership. The low level of assessment literacy amongst school heads can be

due to the lack of formal training or whilst they were teaching they had failed to develop their assessment literacy. To enhance the assessment leadership skills of the school heads, Noonan and Renihan (2006) repeated the original recommendation of Stiggins and Duke (2008) and that school heads should enrol in assessment courses to fully understand and start to develop a sound assessment practices.

Purpose of the Study

This paper illustrates a key strategy to enhance the assessment leadership of school heads. We showed how the participation of school heads to the development of School-Based Assessment for Learning Competency Framework led to better their understanding of the principles of AfL and more importantly, enhanced their competence in AfL and drew out their strong commitment to provide assessment support to their respective teachers for better assessment practices.

Methods

38 school heads from various schools in Brunei were recruited in the development of Teachers' School-Based Assessment for Learning Competency Standards (TSBAfLCS). Their involvement in the project include identifying emerging AfL competencies of teachers, establishment of performance standards, validating the standards, analysing the results of pilot tests, and revising the TSBAfLCS based from the results of item analysis. The process took 8 months with monthly meetings.

Focus group interviews were conducted at the end of their engagement. 20 of them participated and were grouped into two focus groups.

Results

Analysis of the data revealed interesting insights.

Reasons for Participation
The school and department heads had mixed feelings on their first day of participation. There were three major motivations that made school and department heads respond positively to the invitation to participate. First, some of them expressed that the invitation affirmed their importance as key figures in the SBAfL implementation but it also developed apprehension because they did not know what to expect and were afraid that they could not contribute well in the workshop considering their limited understanding of SBAfL. This was summarized by one participant saying that he was "honoured (for) being chosen as one of the participants of the workshop (but) anxious as well since (I have) never developed rubrics for teachers' competencies". Others expressed their concern over the additional workload. Second, some school heads responded to the invitation just to fulfil their duties. They considered their participation as akin to attending workshops, which was part of their job. Third, other school

heads had professional reasons to get clearer ideas on what SBAfL was all about, especially those who had not attended any training on SBAfL before.

Prior Understanding of SBAfL

School and department heads had different levels of understanding of SBAfL. There were those who had high confidence about their SBAfL understanding. These were particularly those who had attended PD courses and those who had research interests in assessment. In fact, there were participants who had listed almost completely the various elements of SBAfL. Some even went to the details of classroom teaching and assessment activities that helped students learn better. This was not always true for all as there were those who expressed their limited understanding of SBAfL and even misconceptions. This was obvious with their understanding that SBAfL was only for lower secondary teachers and was only a plain assessment activity. These school heads failed to establish the connection between conducting assessment to using the information gathered to make important decisions to enhance learning and adapt teachers' teaching.

Perceived Effects of Participation to their Understanding of SBAfL

The participation of school heads to the development of T SBAfL CS has increased their understanding in different aspects of SBAfL. First, the process which required school heads to identify assessment practices of teachers which they believe enhance student learning, had clarified their prior understanding of assessment through discussion and literature review. One principal said that 'the discussion of topic (amongst) my colleagues initiated deep thinking about SBAfL'. Also, the exchange of ideas made them identify critical issues in SBAfL implementation. Second, school heads had seen the holistic functions of the teachers. They gained clearer understanding of the specific tasks that teachers need to do every day to help students learn. In other words, they fully understood the scope of teachers' teaching and how teachers can be effective in ensuring student learning. Third, school heads had 'increased their knowledge in assessing teachers (through) designing the SBAfL competency performance instrument and (getting insights) about the performance required for each level of competence'. The list of indicators informed them what to expect from teachers and the descriptions of each performance gave them ideas on what levels of performance needed to be assessed. Fourth, school heads had established the link between teachers' SBAfL implementation and student learning. They had seen the roles of teachers in enhancing student learning. This was expressed by one participant who said that her participation made her 'realise that teacher's competency affects students' performance (so much)'. Another participant elaborated this further and explained that 'the roles of the teacher inside the classroom to effectively implement SBAfL required them to have self-reflective ability to ensure its success'. In a more general sense, school heads became 'more aware of the importance of SBAfL at school'. Their participation highlighted the importance of SBAfL in the current education system. Fifth, the school heads realized that the implementation of SBAfL was a system- wide undertaking emphasising that: 'I realised that SBAfL is not only about students but (more) so on evaluating teachers' competencies and how to (help) these teachers to improve in order to help students to learn… it was good to know that SBAfL can be implemented at the teachers' level but all levels in the Ministry should have the same

focus in providing support to teachers at the grassroots." Sixth, the participation of school heads enhanced their professional expertise. They gained more confidence to train teachers in their respective schools. Also they were more confident to establish dialogues with parents and discuss the SBAfL policy of Ministry of Education.

Effect to their Roles in SBAfL Implementation
When asked about the effect of their participation to their roles in SBAfL implementation, school leaders identified various effects. First, they were able to clarify their responsibilities and roles in implementing SBAfL especially in supporting teachers through creating a school environment where student learning was the focus of monitoring.

> 'It helps a lot (because) I was able to identify more areas that I can help teachers by providing support who at the moment are mainly focused on assessment and finishing the (content) of the syllabus'.

Second, they have developed their monitoring skills in recording teachers' SBAfL progress across time. One participant said: 'I know what (evidence) to look to (validate) teachers' performance'. Third, they have seen what support teachers needed to fully implement SBAfL. They realised that teachers, like students, needed motivation to sustain their interest in SBAfL implementation. Also, they have seen the need for teachers to be empowered strongly to move to higher levels of SBAfL performance. Fourth, their participation had drawn strong commitment from them for better implementation of SBAfL. They had even expressed that their increased understanding made them more enthusiastic to implement SBAfL. The enthusiasm of school heads is a critical factor in leading a school (Blase & Kirby, 2000). The responsibility of the school leaders to inspire teachers is the driving force when implementing a challenging innovation (Marzano et al. 2005) identified specific behaviours and characteristics of school heads   associated with enthusiasm and commitment to advance the implementation of the initiatives.

- Inspiring teachers to accomplish things that might go beyond their grasp
- Being the driving force behind major initiative
- Portraying a positive attitude about the ability of staff to accomplish substantial things (p56).

Fifth, they were more prepared to take on their assessment leadership roles because they were more confident to hold discussions with their teachers and they believed that they could properly address whatever issues related to SBAfL that were raised.

Effects to their Implementation Goals
As outlined by the participants, their involvement in the program had given them important insights on how to implement the SBAfL initiative. First, they could set realistic and focused goals for their schools. Second, they could play their role in teachers' direct assessment to identify the current level of teacher's performance and identify their competency gaps, know the teachers' profile and strengths and also design PD for them. Third, they could design professional development program for their teachers based on the result of the direct

assessment and teachers' self-assessment. Fourth, they became more responsible and keener on the (proper) ways of implementing SBAfL and provided more input and monitoring on SBAfL teachers and lessons. "It pushed me more to achieve our targets at our school. It gives clearer direction to me and how and what to do with implementation.It gives us a lot of thinking in order to achieve the implementation of SBAfL and also it opened up our eyes (as to how) SBAfL can help teachers and then people in our school to improve and make better in delivering knowledge to students'.

Effects to Helping Teachers
The participation of the school heads and department heads has increased their confidence in providing support to teachers because they now have a deeper understanding of SBAfL. They are not intimidated anymore by issues relating to the implementation of SBAfL because they are now more confident to deal with these issues. First, the school heads feel more confident to facilitate teachers' training on assessment in their respective schools. 'The effect to me is massive. I am very confident now to facilitate teachers' training in our school'. Second, not only can they train, they have increased their competence as well to 'develop and propose better training for teachers.' Their involvement made them realise that professional development programs should be needs-based and not generic ones for all. The workshop on establishing the descriptions of the increasing level of performance of each indicator made them see the progression of teachers' capabilities and what sort of specific training was needed to assist individual teachers to advance their SBAfL competence. Third, school heads can establish a school climate that permits the development of trust between them and the teachers. This is an important component for a successful SBAfL implementation as teachers need to see school heads as trustworthy people to conduct direct assessment of their competence. The increased trustworthiness of teachers' SBAfL competency assessment ensures that feedback coming from the school heads are welcomed and will be used by teachers to enhance their performance. Fourth, school heads have strengthened their roles as SBAfL implementer. They became more enthusiastic in working with teachers to assist them in their daily routine.

'We help teachers realize that there are many areas where SBAfL can be implemented effectively and efficiently'.

'Confident now to work with teachers to make them realize their important role in SBAfL implementation. '

Fifth, the school heads have put emphasis on the quality of teachers' performance. One deputy principal summarised this: 'I have come to the realization that implementation of SBAfL must be carried out consistently and with high quality performance'. This performance needs to be supported 'with proof and evidence.' Sixth, some school heads have started to form learning groups in their schools. They have seen the importance of school-based professional development. One principal said: 'I have developed a socialisation group on SBAfL that helps train teachers to learn and practise SBAfL in the classroom.' The formation of teacher learning communities is one of the strategies proposed by (2008) to ensure a school-wide implementation of assessment reform. He cited the work of Thompson

and Wiliam (2007) in using teacher learning communities to promote the implementation of assessment for learning at the school system. Seventh and equally important, school heads have started working for the alignment of the curriculum. Through their engagement in the research, they were 'able to translate the commitment of MoE at the school level.' They became more conscious of their curriculum practice to ensure that they adhere to the thrust of the assessment reform.

Best Thing about their Participation

When school leaders were asked about the best thing about their participation, they cited several key points.

1. *Sense of fulfilment*. They take pride in their contribution in the development of Brunei Teachers SBAfL Competency Standards and SBAfL Competency Performance Assessment Tool. Their apprehensions during the first day of the workshop have turned into excitement as the research progressed in every stage. They can truly say that they have developed the competency standards and they are assured that the standards adhere to their context.
2. *Sense of achievement*. When the school heads learned that Brunei is the first world to develop a detailed SBAfL competency framework, they expressed that this achievement was worth celebrating. The tasks were very challenging and tedious but worthwhile.
3. *Sense of Professional Pride*. As school leaders developed deeper understanding of SBAfL, they feel more professionally prepared to perform their roles. "I am now one step ahead about SBAfL compared to others".
4. *Sense of happiness*. When the school heads saw the report, they were 'overwhelmed with the output of the research.' It was only during this time that they realised how large the scope of the research was. They thought their participation was very enriching.
5. *Sense of responsibility and commitment*. School heads expressed that their engagement in the research drew more commitment from them to ensure that SBAfL was properly implemented. Also, they added that they take more responsibility now than before. Because they were highly involved, 'if any matters arise regarding the tools we know where the mistakes will come from and we could possibly rectify it."
6. *Sense of ownership*. School heads felt a sense of ownership of the SBAfL CS. They ahd been able to come up with the best design which suited local aspirations and philosophy. "We have our SBAfL instrument we can call our own".
7. *Sense of belonging to a learning community*. The direct engagement of the school heads and the participation of thousands of teachers in all stages of the research made them feel that their knowledge and expertise were valued. They enjoyed the exchange of ideas with other administrators and teachers. "My contribution will help other teachers to do self and peer assessments and hopefully will help teachers to become better teachers."

The School Heads as Assessment Leaders

As outlined by school heads, the following is a list of assessment leadership competencies.

Basic competencies of assessment leaders

1. Advance level of AfL performance in the following:
    a. Development and utilisation of assessment task

     b. Communicating assessment results

     c. Ensure trustworthiness of assessment

     d. Adherence to ethical standards

     e. Utilisation of assessment data in lesson planning

     f. Selection of suitable learning experiences

     g. Clarification of learning outcomes and success criteria

     h. Adaptation of teaching processes

     i. Provision of opportunities for students'' involvement in the assessment processes

     j. Development of environment that values individual learner

     k. Directing students towards learning

     l. Utilisation of assessment tool to identify professional training needs

     m. Communication with parents/ guardians

     n. Enhancement of community's trust.

2. AfL mentoring skills

     a. Establish a collegial peer-evaluation of teaching

     b. Identify training needs of teachers based from the results of SBAfTLCS

     c. Communicate to teachers their training needs

     d. Provide professional training/guide/mentoring to teachers

     e. Develop a professional development plan with emphasis to assessment and content-knowledge skills

3. Engage with teachers and students in using assessment

     a. Consider teacher's beliefs and values

     b. Draw strong commitment from teachers

     c. Promote discussion of assessment to teachers, students and other stakeholders

4. Develop an assessment culture that promotes high level of student achievement and learning

     a. Oversee that professional development is made available for teachers

     b. Identify and secure the resources needed

     c. Create a climate where assessment for learning is the focus of monitoring and supervision

Assessment leadership, on the other hand, is concerned with working with teachers to improve their assessment literacy. It involves empowerment, providing the right professional support in diverse areas of assessment, and working closely with teachers in analysing assessment data to improve teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The school heads' involvement in the development of Brunei Teachers SBAfL Competency Profile and Brunei Teachers SBAfL Competency Performance Assessment Tool has played a critical role in both their personal and professional learning. School heads have developed deeper understanding of the SBAfL principles which consequently enhanced their confidence

to take active roles in the program implementation. Also, it made them fully understand the requirement of a system-wide implementation of an assessment reform. Their holistic understanding made them realise their roles both in creating a school environment where students' learning is the focus of monitoring and in providing assessment leadership support to teachers. Similarly, school heads have seen the demand to improve their assessment capabilities to provide specific support to specific needs of the teachers. Overall, the participation of the school heads gave them sense of ownership of and pride with TSBAfLCS.

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