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Getting Started With Formative Assessment

When we first read about formative assessment, the compelling research sparked our immediate interest. In a nutshell, formative assessment involves collecting and using ongoing assessment data regularly *to inform teaching and learning*, rather than merely to assign grades. Research shows that formative assessment can double student learning, and it can result in even greater gains for students who struggle (Black & Wiliam, 1998). The more formative assessment is used, the greater the gains. Students given one formative assessment per 15-week period scored 13% higher on final achievement measures. Students receiving 20 assessments scored 26% higher, and those who received 30 assessments scored almost 30% higher (Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, Kulik, & Morgan, 1991).

After using formative assessment regularly, we found this research even more compelling. We witnessed this accelerated growth as our students in special education were mainstreamed back into regular education at rates we had never seen before. Even more gratifying, we watched students beam with pride at what they could now accomplish. Our most disengaged students came alive as they systematically took charge of their own learning and saw their efforts pay off. Moreover, our students unanimously told us how much they liked formative assessments. While the research piqued our interest, our experience secured our buy-in.

In this first chapter you will find:

- An introduction to the formative assessment framework
- An overview of the purpose of formative assessment

2 ● Using Formative Assessment to Differentiate Middle School Literacy Instruction

- Three ways to begin using formative assessment, with vignettes that illustrate the three paths teachers typically follow
- A self-assessment tool to help you determine how much formative assessment you already use in your own classroom
- Steps to establishing a classroom culture that supports formative assessment practices

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

Formative assessment provides a framework of practices in which both you and your students use assessment data to shift the mindset away from gauging “What has been taught?” toward “What has been learned?” You and your students then use the information gained to guide what you teach and what they focus on learning.

So what exactly is a “formative assessment framework,” and where did this framework originate? Formative assessment is a framework of related practices originally proposed by Sadler (1989) and perpetuated by other researchers and practitioners. This framework includes not only the collection of assessment data to inform instruction and learning, but also several related practices that guide which data to collect and how to use these data. Wiliam (2010) formally defined the formative assessment framework as how teachers or students use assessment data to make decisions about next steps—decisions that are better founded with these data than those made without these data.

The research of Black and Wiliam (1998) references and builds on Sadler’s (1989) framework. In their view, for assessment to qualify as formative assessment, it must:

- Be based on and directly convey criteria or standards
- Be followed by detailed, clear, and specific feedback
- Involve students in self-assessment, using feedback and goal-directed behavior
- Use the data gathered to inform next steps and adjust teaching practices
- Recognize the enormous impact of assessment on students’ confidence and motivation

Therefore, the process of formative assessment involves (1) specifying and conveying standards, (2) collecting assessment data on where students are in relation to these standards, and (3) sharing the data with

students via detailed feedback. It is essential to ensure that students are actively involved; their participation is a critical piece of the formative assessment framework. Students will often score their own formative assessments and determine how they can use the results to inform what they focus on learning.

It is also critical for you to use the assessment data “to inform next steps and adjust teaching practices,” or to differentiate instruction. Tomlinson (1999) defines differentiating instruction as an organized, flexible, proactive approach to adjusting instruction so that it best meets the needs of all learners and promotes maximum growth for all.

As discussed in the Preface, we developed our own formative assessment framework based on research and classroom experiences (see Figure 1.1). Our framework presents seven practices, or steps, for practitioners; each practice is followed by research that validates its effectiveness.

We suggest that you approach the list of practices as you would a buffet. Do not expect to engage in all of these practices at once or within a short time frame. Teachers we have worked with have repeatedly recommended that we emphasize this. Fortunately, choosing and using only a few practices will still increase student achievement. For the most part, the teachers we worked with tested the practices by selecting only a few of the strategies; in some cases, they used even the ones they chose only partially. Yet they quickly discovered that student achievement rose in notable and exciting ways. This finding is confirmed by larger-scale research (Ruiz-Primo & Furtak, 2006).

Figure 1.1 Seven formative assessment practices.

1. Establish supportive and self-directive class climate norms (Andrade, 2010).
2. Specify measurable standards to be mastered and convey them to students (Black & William, 2005).
3. List extensions and interventions before collecting data (Wylie & William, 2006).
4. Preassess before each unit and continuously assess throughout the unit (Black & William, 2005; Reeves, 2003).
5. Involve students in using assessment data and teacher feedback to inform next steps they will take in their learning (Black & William, 1998).
6. Use assessment data to support and challenge students with tiered activities and scaffolded extensions (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, & Chinn, 2007).
7. Differentiate homework and graded assessments to meet instructional levels (Bryan & Burstein, 2004).

4 ● Using Formative Assessment to Differentiate Middle School Literacy Instruction

The first column of Figure 1.2 shows classroom characteristics and practices that exemplify these formative assessment practices; the second column shows those that do not.

Figure 1.2 Comparison of formative assessment-based and performance-based classrooms.

Formative Assessment-Based Classroom	Performance-Based Classroom
<i>Practice 1:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The teacher proactively sets and manages classroom climate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A competitive climate flourishes
<i>Practice 2:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unit targets are specified and conveyed up front 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targets are not conveyed, or are conveyed only just before tests
<i>Practice 3:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning outcomes and interventions are preestablished 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning outcomes may be unclear until assessments are crafted at the end of the unit • Interventions are considered after problems surface
<i>Practice 4:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preassessment precedes each unit, and frequent check-ins take place during units 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only summative tests are used
<i>Practice 5:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers and students review assessment data to design individualized supports and challenges • Both teachers and students use data to set next steps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The same work is given to all • Students follow the teacher's lead
<i>Practice 6:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lessons break off into tiers • The teacher makes use of frequent and flexible student groupings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The whole class is usually instructed together • The curriculum or text drives what is taught
<i>Practice 7:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework, tests, and grading systems are differentiated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The same homework and unit tests are given to all

These practices can seem daunting. As one teacher joked, “Being expected to do all seven of these practices now there’s an argument for merit pay!” But again, you can pursue these individually. First, use the self-assessment at the end of this chapter to note which ones you already do. Then consider each carefully, weighing which benefits would help the most in your current situation. We suggest you prioritize and select two or three to focus on each year.

THE PURPOSE OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

As we have noted, the ultimate role of formative assessment in the classroom is twofold:

1. You will use the results of the assessments to alter your teaching practices.
2. Your students will use the results to set goals and focus their learning efforts.

The fundamental purpose must be to increase student learning, not to collect data. Let us take a brief look at that purpose in more detail here.

A colleague recently asked, “What is formative assessment, and what is the purpose?” Almost any assessment can be used summatively or formatively. Traditionally, schools have focused on summative assessments, which summarize learning and are used to compare students’ achievements to one another for the purpose of assigning grades or ranking students. In contrast, formative assessments actually inform next steps taken by students and teachers in ways that enhance achievement. Essentially, formative assessment looks forward to how the information we gain from looking at student work can inform future instructional decisions, much like how information gained from a physical exam might inform future health choices we make.

Moreover, formative assessment is often conceptualized as “assessment *for* learning” rather than “assessment *of* learning.” Summative assessment takes time away from learning for assessment *of* learning. But with formative assessment, you can use assessment purposefully *for* learning, as an integral contribution to learning. You can integrate assessment with learning so that it becomes a powerfully effective learning activity itself. Formative assessment is not about giving assessments; it is about using the results to teach differently (Reeves, 2005).