

## A Critical Analysis of the Use of Formative Assessment in Schools

MARSH, Colin J.

Curtin University , Perth, Western Australia

**Abstract:** The literature is replete with exhortations about the need for teachers to use formative assessment. Clearly there are many advantages in doing so. Yet, empirical studies reveal that there is very little evidence that formative assessment is used frequently in classrooms. It is necessary to examine reasons why this is the case and to look for possible solutions to the problem.

### Introduction

There are many definitions of formative assessment in the curriculum literature. For example, Marsh (2004) states that " formative assessment provides data about instructional units in progress and students in action. They help to develop or form the final curriculum product and help students adjust to their learning tasks through the feedback they receive" (p.51). Sutton (1992) states that formative assessment is an "ongoing process conducted both formally and informally, by which information and evidence about a child's learning is absorbed and used to plan the next step,or guide a given task"(p.3).

### Major elements of formative assessment

Various writers have linked "assessment for learning" with the term "formative assessment". That is, "formative assessment is part of instruction that informs and guides teachers as they make instructional decisions. Assessment should not merely be done *to* students, rather it also is done *for* students to guide and enhance their learning" own (Swearingen, 2002,p. 3)

Swearingen (2002) also notes that in its purest form, formative tests are not graded and are used as an ongoing tool by the teacher. However, this purest form of formative assessment is seldom used by teachers.

Formative assessment involves providing "useful" feedback on tests and homework. That is, rather than a grade, information is provided about specific errors and suggestions for improvement. As noted by Bangert -Drowns, Kulick, Morgan, 1991, this encourages students to focus their attention thoughtfully on the task rather on simply getting the right answer.

Also some of the feedback gleaned can come about through self-evaluation by the student. Students who have opportunities to reflect on their work show greater improvement than those who do not (Fontana and Fernandes, 1994). Boston (2002) also notes that students with learning disabilities who are taught to use self-monitoring strategies also show performance gains.

Clarke (2001), using findings from Black and Wiliam's study (1998), suggests that the key factors of formative assessment include:

- the provision of effective feedback to pupils
- the active involvement of students in their own learning
- adjusting teaching to take account of the result of assessment
- a recognition of the profound influence that assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of students

- the need for students to be able to assess themselves and to understand how to improve.

### **Benefits of formative assessment**

It can be argued that formative assessment is valuable for both teachers and students. Formative assessment provides information to teachers about how students are progressing and they can use this information to make the necessary instructional adjustments to their teaching. Students can also gain from feedback obtained from formative assessment because it can help them realise where there are gaps in their desired goals and in their current knowledge and skills.

From a pedagogical point of view, it is difficult to disagree with many of the claims made about formative assessment:

- formative assessment helps with planning because it involves giving clear learning intentions to students
- formative assessment ensures that pupils are focused on the purpose of the task and that they can become involved in their learning and can comment on it - that is, there is a sharing of learning intentions
- formative assessment empowers the student to realise his/her own learning needs and to have control over future targets. Students are trained to evaluate their own achievements against the learning intentions in oral or written form.
- formative assessment tracks progress diagnostically and informs a student of his/her successes and weaknesses.
- formative assessment ensures student motivation and involvement in progress - it raises achievement, it keeps teachers informed of individual needs.

Additional reasons for doing formative assessment have been given by educators who contend that summative assessment (especially standardised examinations) can adversely affect students and that more formative assessment should be used in its place (Swearingen, 2002, ; Black and Wiliam, 1998)

### **Reasons why formative assessment is infrequently used**

Despite all the purported benefits of doing formative assessment, it is evident that it is infrequently used in classrooms. Black and Wiliam (1998) refer to "a poverty of practice" (p. 2). Fairtest Examiner (1999) conclude that the state of formative assessment is quite weak. It is therefore necessary to unpack possible reasons for these rather alarming and pessimistic statements.

*Teachers experiences* as learners over the years have almost entirely focused on various forms of summative assessment. As students in primary and secondary years, they quickly learnt their priorities and the major priority for them was to score highly on the high-stakes examinations. These values are difficult to jettison as teachers are constantly bombarded in the media and by parents about the need for high student achievements as measured by summative assessments. Many teachers encourage rote learning because it is a well-known, traditional form of teaching. They are less comfortable with more open-ended, student - centred activities.

*Principals* can also apply considerable pressure to teachers requesting them to concentrate upon obtaining high academic results for their respective classes especially in the core subjects of language, mathematics and science. In some countries such as the USA, legislation such as

the "No Child Left Behind Act (2001) requires principals to ensure that minimum standards are achieved in the core subjects in their respective schools. Defaulters are treated very seriously including the withdrawal of key funds for the school or in some cases even closing it.

*High-stakes examinations* are now extremely prominent in many countries. As noted by Fuhrman and Elmore, 2004, high-stakes assessments now penetrate all aspects of social, corporate and political life in the United States. Harnisch and Mabry, 1993) point out that the dominant means of evaluating public education has been standardised testing; they observed that "each year elementary and secondary school students take 127 million standardised tests mandated by states and districts. About three standardised tests per year per student and 20 million school days are devoted to such testing" (p.179).

Although the intention of such legislation as No child left behind (2001) might seem admirable, the impact on students and teachers is perceived by many educators to be disastrous (Goldberg, 2004, Plitt, 2004).

Another factor of a *cultural* nature, may also be relevant. Many education systems offer awards and honours for students who do well academically. Almost without exception, these awards are based on high proficiency of students in summative examinations. Most cultures praise students who attain a "product" or "level" but they give scant recognition to the processes involved in getting there such as "perseverance", "critical thinking", "problem-based learning", and "self-learning". It is these latter qualities which are so important in formative assessment activities.

A similar claim can also be made about *curriculum planning documents* used by teachers, namely syllabuses, frameworks and teachers' source books. Although some emphasis is given in these documents to processes of learning, the predominant focus is upon knowledge, concepts and skills, as measured by summative examinations.

*Preservice teacher education programs* are typically "packed" with essential knowledge and skills for student teachers to understand and apply. The time constraints on lecturers limits their ability to present sessions where student teachers can reflect upon their assessment practices. If student teachers are to gain confidence in using formative assessment they need to observe and consult with other teachers about effective teaching and learning practices ( Boston, 2002).

### **What are some solutions?**

As noted by Kennedy, Chan Kin Sang, Yu Wai-Ming and Ping Kwan Fok (2005) one possible solution is to give more attention to summative assessment and to consider ways in which might be modified to have a less negative impact on students. For example, they urge the use of internal forms (rather than external) of summative assessment where there might be less negative backwash. School-based assessments, if well moderated, can be used successfully as a summative assessment tool. They also note that system wide monitoring of test results allows schools to be provided with data to help them improve teaching (rather being used to rank schools).

Student self-assessment is another area which could be progressed. The many computer-based programs enable students to work at their own pace and to receive instantaneous feedback on their efforts. "Personalised learning" is being advocated in the United Kingdom as

an initiative to get schools to tailor teaching to suit individual students. By 2007, schools will have nearly 1 billion pounds a year to spend on personalised learning (Times Educational Supplement, 31 March, 2006).

Research studies have demonstrated that certain techniques associated with formative assessment can help students to learn more effectively. These include :

- higher- order questioning techniques
- problem - solving techniques
- peer assessment
- feedback comments rather than grades
- oral feedback from teachers
- sharing assessment criteria
- redrafting of work,
- developing communication skills
- being more inclusive in teaching ( Clarke, 2001, Times Educational Schools Supplement, 30 January 2004)

### Concluding comments

Changing teaching and assessment practices is a critical element if assessment for learning and formative assessment is to be progressed. At the same time, more attention needs to be given to developing forms of summative assessment which are "more inclusive of the basic principles that are informing formative assessment" ( Kennedy, Chan Kin Sang, Yu Wai-Ming, Ping Kwan Fok, 2005, p.10).

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