

Formative Assessment: involving pupils in their own learning

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by Leonard Grech

A class in an English primary school was lucky enough to be taught by a teacher who believed in the effectiveness of formative assessment. This class was subsequently taught by another teacher who did not emphasise assessment for learning enough. The pupils could obviously discriminate between the two different approaches, and they surprised the teacher by complaining: ‘Look, we’ve told you we don’t understand this. Why are you going on to the next topic?’ (Paul Black, 2004).

Who would have dared to do such a thing just a few years ago? Probably in Malta, such an attitude on the part of the pupils is considered rude and unacceptable even now-a-days. It could be that deep down in our hearts some of us still think that children should be seen but not heard. Children’s rights seem to be there to be preached about, but not to be put into practice. It could be, unfortunately, that some of us still view children as ‘little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they [are] full to the brim’ (Dickens, *Hard Times*). Then we expect them to dish out word for word what they have learned, or rather what they have memorised.

Such a traditional view of teaching and learning would probably exclude the teaching of skills. Moreover, in such a scenario children would hardly be encouraged to ask questions, to learn from their own mistakes (because no mistakes are allowed in the first place) and to move around so as to talk, discuss and criticise one another. Today,

we believe that educators, including parents, should create opportunities for children to discover the world and to go through experiences that help them develop what are being referred to as 'key competencies'. One such key competence is 'learning to learn' which is prerequisite for life-long education. Children need to be given a voice and to be involved in their own learning. This can be achieved by adopting different teaching/learning strategies.

Frida walked a kilometre with her son Anton so that he would get the feel of how long a kilometre is. Moreover, they timed themselves walking at a slow pace on one occasion and running fast on another. Among other things, Anton became aware of the fact that he did not get tired on the first occasion. On the second occasion, however, he not only got tired and started perspiring, but he also got very thirsty and needed to drink. Back home Anton was more than motivated to find out what was happening. It is not good enough to 'tell' children. They need to discover things for themselves. If parents were to realise how much deep learning would take place as a result of such teaching, they would spend more time outside with their children rather than leave them glued to a desk or in front of the television set. This is also applicable to the classroom situation.

Involving children in their own learning can take place both at school and at home, and formative assessment will help us to achieve this. What's more, formative assessment will contribute not only to a dialogue between the learner and the educator, but also to autonomous and self-directed teaching. It will also lead to a learning to learn situation. Indeed, we should reflect on the maxim that 'learners learn to learn as they learn'.

Perhaps, at this point it is fitting to ask: How are children involved in their own learning through formative assessment?

First of all one should keep in mind that formative assessment and examinations (particularly national examinations) are rather incompatible companions because formative assessment is not an exercise carried out merely to know how much children have learnt. Putting it simply we can say that formative assessment is a way of teaching. But it is not just another method. Research shows that formative assessment guarantees progress and the raising of standards. It benefits all children particularly low achievers (Black and Wiliam, 1998).

Now to tackle the question stated above, that is, how children are involved in their own learning through formative assessment. When formative assessment is adopted as an effective learning strategy, the parent or the teacher as well as the learner are aware of what is to be learnt. The objective could be learning how to dribble a ball or how to put the shot, or how to access the Internet or use the index of a publication. On another occasion it could be learning to distinguish between fact and opinion, learning to discover patterns or learning to find similarities and differences. One immediately realises that the learning objectives could be knowledge or skill-based. Children and parents/teachers would know whether learning has taken place not by resorting to examinations but through other effective methods which, in themselves, continue to boost further learning. Nicholas was with his daughter Nathalie who wanted to learn how to send an e-mail. That was the learning objective shared by father and daughter. “But how am I to know that you have learnt?” asked Nicholas. Nathalie was more

than pleased to come up with a quick reply. “On my own and without your help, I can send you and mum an e-mail which you can read on the laptop.” Thus Nathalie came up with another principle of formative assessment, namely the establishment of the success criteria, which, like the learning objective, has to be known and shared by both the parent and the child. This is what we mean in practice when we say that learners should be involved in their own learning. Through questions and feedback children feel more and more part of the learning process. The interaction between parent/teacher and learners is such that children are not shy if they give ‘wrong’ answers. They know that the environment is presenting a learning experience to one and all. In fact the classroom or the family can become a community of learners where no-one is excluded and everyone is engaged in the process of learning. Furthermore no-one feels embarrassed or shameful when criticised by others.



Implementation of formative assessment: pupils’ involvement in History lessons at Great Coates Primary School in Grimsby, NE Lincolnshire

Peer-assessment is another characteristic of formative assessment. Paula delivered a talk to her classmates about ‘chatting on the internet’. Then her peers felt free to

discuss her performance. She was quite aware of the criteria that was being used, namely (a) the talk had to last between three to four minutes (b) Paula was expected to speak clearly and project her voice (the use of the microphone was prohibited) (c) she had to captivate the interest of the audience (her classmates) and (d) she had to mention at least one advantage and one disadvantage of 'chatting'.

This method of teaching/learning is very effective because it gives children the chance to experience the role of being a teacher and a learner at the same time. Additionally it presents the students with a challenge. Of course we have to distinguish between challenge and stress. A challenge has a positive effect on learning, but stress stops it because it causes a feeling of helplessness and of loss of control.

Assessing others is a great step forward in acquiring the skill of self-assessment. Parents can help in the acquisition of such a skill. They can introduce the children to the idea of the traffic lights, which can be adopted, for example, during revision time. Philip and his mother are very much acquainted with this method. Lisa asked her son to assess himself on his knowledge and understanding of Greek architecture. Philip was quick to raise the green card which meant that he knew the topic and could deal with another aspect of the syllabus. So Lisa and Philip moved on to the building and the significance of the pyramids. Philip put up the red light, meaning, there were areas that demanded explanation. This method can also be applied to a classroom situation where children can explain to each other areas of the syllabus that present difficulties.

When given the chance children prefer these methods because they allow them to be in control of their own learning. Therefore it is up to us to involve the pupils as much

as possible. It is normal practice for Mr Borg to give a passage to his pupils and asks them to propose questions themselves. These questions are then worked out with peers or with parents. When examinations approach, Mr Borg even invites pupils to suggest test questions.

Involving pupils in their own learning both at home and at school increases pupils' self-esteem. Children come to believe in their abilities; they enjoy learning, and hence make a greater effort to improve. The result is a deeper understanding of a topic which means that the learner can now move on to the next topic.

Having education for all is good but not good enough. It is high time that we guarantee **quality** education for all. Formative assessment and therefore the involvement of pupils in their own learning offers such a guarantee and therefore ensures the raising of standards. Hopefully, all educators including parents will, one day, become familiar with what formative assessment is all about and what it really stands for.

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