

PARENTS AND CHILDREN'S FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: TIPS FOR PARENTS

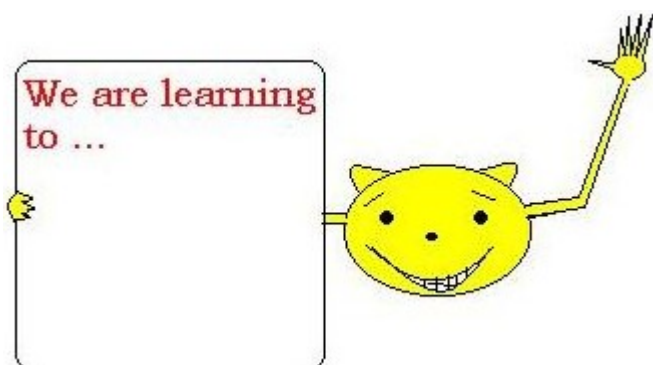
by Leonard Grech - EO Test Construction
Educational Assessment Unit

[Article published in the Sunday Times of Malta on 29th February 2004]

My main objective in this article is to make parents aware of some of the aspects of formative assessment, and how these promote the learning process and result in the raising of standards.

Clarissa arrived home from school. She was elated because the teacher had praised her work. Clarissa's assignment had been to write a letter asking for information. The teacher had not mentioned to whom the letter should be sent, nor did he make any reference to the actual subject matter. He only emphasised the fact that whoever sends the letter should ask for information. So Clarissa started thinking about the sort of information she might need to acquire. Since her family had just moved house, and she was therefore a stranger in her adopted town, Clarissa decided to write a letter to the secretary of the local council asking for information regarding children's organisations in her locality. She asked for contact persons, types of organisations and their activities, addresses and how to go about it, if she wanted to become a member of one organisation or another.

Clarissa is a very lucky person, because her teacher always introduces innovative methods of teaching. Since the beginning of the year he started making them conscious of the learning objective of particular lessons. This motivated the students a great deal because now they know what they are supposed to learn. In other words they know where they are heading.



Mr Camilleri is in fact implementing 'active' elements of what is termed 'formative assessment'. **The first step is to have clear and attainable learning intentions and to share them with the students.** Clarissa and her classmates became very enthusiastic knowing exactly what they are supposed to be learning. On their copybooks they started writing in

colour: "We are learning to...." On one occasion it's "We are learning to produce provocative statements", on another occasion it's "We are learning to make up an adventurous story". Sometimes the learning objective or intention is very specific, for

example, “We are learning six adjectives which describe our school”, or “We are learning the negative form of Maltese verbs ending in ‘a’ and others ending in ‘i’”.

Clarissa became so enthusiastic about this new method that everyday she wants to tell her parents what she has learnt at school. Her parents too are feeling better about the situation because now they know in a very practical way what their daughter is learning. Now they feel more confident to reinforce their daughter’s learning, especially because they were encouraged to do so by Mr Camilleri himself during a meeting called by the head of school. During that meeting two further important issues were tackled. The first involved the word ‘We’ in the phrase/sentence ‘We are learning to....’ “Why not ‘I’”, remarked one parent, “so that the student would feel more personally involved?” It was at this point that the head of school started explaining about the school becoming a learning community involving students, teachers and parents among others. The head explained how the students have to help each other in the learning process. Clarissa and the other students know about this. They experience working in groups every day. Clarissa is rather weak in Maltese, so many of her classmates help her when she gets mixed up on where to place the ‘gh’ or the ‘h’. On the other hand she is extremely fluent in English not only because she reads a lot but also because her grandma is English and speaks to her in English. Therefore Clarissa is very willing to help others with their reading, with sentence construction, with the use of new expressions and the like. In this way the children are learning together and from one another. ‘Sharing’, ‘assisting’ and ‘supporting’ have become household words. This method of teaching is leaving very positive effect on the new atmosphere developing in the classroom. The children are coming closer together like members of the same family. On his part Mr Camilleri never compares the attainment of different children. The head of school too emphasised this point. She told parents that **each child is an individual with his or her own strengths and weaknesses**. “You will not be helping your child with words like: ‘Look at Clayton, he studies so much. He gets 80s, and you never score more than 60’”.

“Such comparisons”, explained the head, “make children jealous of each other, and in certain cases may lead to acts of bullying.” The above is **one** of the reasons why Mr Camilleri is avoiding giving marks, a practice which needed to be explained in detail to the parents.

“If you don’t give marks to my son, how would I know where he stands?” Many parents were thinking on the same lines. The head of school and Mr Camilleri started sharing their ideas with the parents.

“When marks are given, these tend to put a halt to the learning process. Children and parents look at the mark and ignore the remarks and comments made by the teacher. Children compare marks, and these do not lead to any improvement in learning. On the contrary, in the case of low achievers, it drives home their failure, which damages their self-esteem. What’s more important and effective than marks, are practical tips on how to improve. Isn’t that what we want for our children, that is, help to move forward? So forget the marks and concentrate on the suggestions made by the teacher”.

It was not easy to persuade everyone. By the end of the evening, however, those present persuaded themselves that children need not be reminded with every piece of work how much they would have scored if it had been an examination.

“Concentrate on the feedback in the form of comments”, emphasised the head of school. At this point one parent observed that her daughter gets really discouraged and demoralised by the unlimited underlining in red and the comments made by the teacher on the side of the page and at the end of every piece of work. The head of school was really waiting for someone to make such an observation. It gave her the chance to explain a very basic teaching strategy. She made an analogy and began by asking the following question: “What do you do when you start teaching football, billiards, knitting, or cooking to your son or daughter? Do you teach them everything at once, or do you take it in very small steps, practising each step as you go along? And suppose your learning intention is to teach your daughter how to hold the knitting needles, do you comment if the first stitch turns out rather clumsy? Again, if your learning intention is to teach your son or daughter how to hold the billiard cue, do you comment on the fact that the child is not succeeding in driving the ball into the pocket? We teach and assess one step at a time, until the time comes when the child starts proper knitting or playing an actual billiard game. It is at this point that we assess all the steps at the same time.”

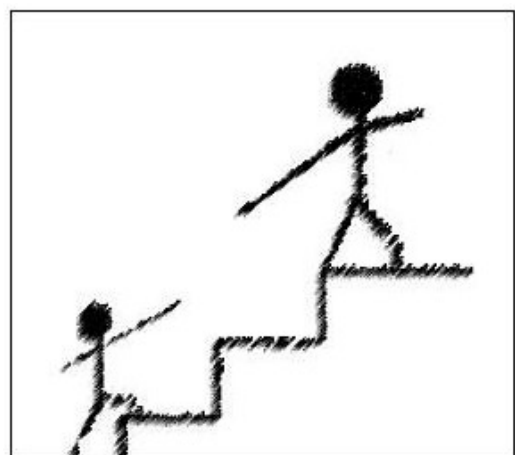
Mr Camilleri then pointed out that the same thing happens in school. As an example he dealt with the English composition.

“If the learning intention is the writing of a good introduction, then we should focus on that when we make our comments. The same procedure should be adopted if our learning intention is spelling, the development of ideas, the format of a composition, the use of prepositions or connectives or the inclusion of an effective conclusion. If the teacher comments on all these aspects for each and every piece of work, the children will get disheartened and will not be able to handle all the comments made all at once.”

“Do you mean to say that there will be times when the teacher will not comment on spelling mistakes, for example?” remarked Mrs Borg.

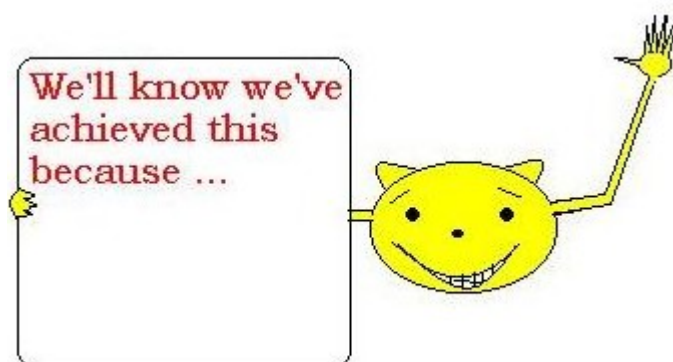
“That’s exactly what we mean, unless spelling is the learning intention for that particular lesson”, pointed out the head of school to the amazement of some of the parents. “However,” continued the head, “there will be times, for example once every six weeks, when the children will be assessed on the English composition as one whole piece of work.”

Parents seemed to have understood and realised that this method of teaching enhances the learning process. They convinced themselves about this particularly because the head of school pointed out over and over again that the comments made by the teacher would have to be practical tips intended to help the student make progress, however small.



Comments made by the teacher should be practical tips intended to help the student make progress, however small.

As explained by the head, the method described above gives children the chance to focus on a particular aspect and make sure that they know what they are doing. But how would the teacher and / or the parents know that the child has succeeded in learning what had been stated in the learning intention? Indeed, how would the students themselves know whether they have succeeded or whether they missed the whole point? It was at this stage that the head and Mr Camilleri started talking about the ‘success criteria’. Let’s take the example mentioned at the beginning of this article. Clarissa was asked to write a letter asking for information. The success criteria could be “asking for five pieces of information”. Or, perhaps the learning intention was to say and recognise the numbers from 1 to 10. The success criteria could be “to say the numbers and to name them one by one”. Indeed, the children will become highly motivated particularly because they will write down the success criteria on their own copybook. Clarissa and her peers are now used to writing on their copybook: “We’ll know we’ve achieved this [that is, the learning intention] because....”



Parents have to understand that the procedure explained here is not a waste of time. On the contrary it is crucial in the teaching and learning process. Research has proved that having learning intentions and success criteria (which are fundamental to formative assessment) facilitates learning and results in the raising of standards. Isn't this what we're all after?