

Embedding Formative Assessment Project – End of Year 1 Report

Building a culture of learning through formative assessment: what we know so far

Welcome to the Embedding Formative Assessment (EFA) project end of year one report. This report is written by Corinne Settle, SSAT Educational Lead, to collate the evidence from schools participating in the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) funded project in EFA, identifying common issues, solutions and successes to enable informed decisions about next steps in the process. Although we fully expect every school to apply the lessons from the project in their own context, there are broader lessons to be learned from the first year of the project, which we share here.

We would like to thank the 66 schools that have committed to this project in the last year. Each school has completed an end of year report; collectively, they have provided a rich pool of information. We would have liked to include something from every school but for the sake of brevity, we have limited this to a selection of quotes, which highlight particular features common to many schools.

Executive summary

This report provides a summary of the reports written by schools after one year of the EEF Embedding Formative Assessment project. Schools have reported on the outcomes of the project to date including the impact on teachers, students and the wider school culture and ethos.

The report shows a correlation between the leading indicators for success that Dylan Wiliam identified in his development of the programme and the reports from schools.



Schools have commonly reported the following features:

- » Teachers have regular meetings to reflect on, develop and share their practice.
- » There is more consistent and effective use of formative assessment techniques.
- » This has led to increased confidence for teachers to try new techniques and adapt them, responding more effectively to learner feedback.
- » There is genuine shared collaboration and commitment.
- » Learners are more engaged and are taking ownership of their learning.
- » Culture and ethos change in adopting formative assessment practice and teacher learning.

These leading indicators should therefore lead to improved student achievement over time.

This report also identifies the challenges, solutions and recommendations for schools that wish to develop formative assessment using teacher learning communities.

Formative assessment has formed a strong component of a larger proportion of lesson observations as part of teacher appraisal and in department reviews (learning walks, student voice, staff voice and marking and assessment activities). As a school we have revised our marking and assessment policy to involve greater reflection and demonstration of response to feedback. It is even renamed, as our feedback policy. There has been a strong correlation between greater progress and students in subjects where formative assessment is being used more effectively to engage students in their own learning and progress.

Andy James, Assistant Headteacher
Ecclesfield School

The Project

Formative assessment involves teachers using evidence of students' understanding to make decisions about the next steps in teaching. Students are empowered to be owners of their own learning and support each other to progress. Formative assessment is known to be effective; the difficulty lies in supporting teachers to adopt the practice successfully.

The project is a trial of a whole-school professional development programme based on formative assessment written by Dylan Wiliam and Siobhan Leahy. The project was launched at an event by Dylan Wiliam in September 2015. A resource pack was developed containing all the materials needed for a professional development session together with a complete set of materials for running 18-monthly follow-up teacher learning communities (TLCs). Over two years the TLCs meet approximately monthly, using the agendas and resources provided. For this project, all teaching staff become members of a TLC. These 75-minute TLC meetings involve teachers feeding back on their use of techniques, new formative assessment ideas to try and personal action planning for the coming month. Most importantly, these professional learning conversations are followed up by action and support in the classroom through peer observation and discussion. The purpose of the EFA pack is to support teachers in 'acting their way into a new way of thinking, rather than thinking their way into a new way of acting'. Changing teacher practice is complex; the training materials are designed to help schools address and support this challenge.

Each school has an assigned SSAT Lead Practitioner (LP) to support with the effective implementation of the EFA pack. The SSAT LP met with the school lead at the start of their project and continues to maintain regular contact through telephone and email conversations as well as a further face-to-face meeting at the end of year 1. Additionally schools have an online forum as a further means of sharing resources and ideas.

After one year, we expected to see a whole-school approach to formative assessment becoming **consistent** and **visible** in every classroom.



Additionally, that regular professional learning would be taking place across each school, with structured opportunities to enable this to be embedded in everyday practice.

Dylan Wiliam

Every teacher needs to improve, not because they are not good enough but because they can be even better

Consistency: There is an expectation that schools will see a shift in culture and ethos, such that every teacher is developing their practice through genuine professional dialogue.

Visibility: There should be an observable shift of teachers' practice to include more formative assessment practices, moment by moment, lesson by lesson.

Both factors have positive impacts on students through increased engagement and ownership of their learning, leading to deeper learning.

Holy Family Catholic School

Adele Klitou, Vice Principal

Since launching the project there has been a far wider focus on what matters – what goes on in the classroom.

In practice

A summary of common findings from schools at the end of year one.

Effective, reflective practitioners

One of the key pieces of evidence of success for this project is the engagement of staff in the project. Teachers value being given time to reflect on, discuss and share their own practice, which in turn develops their own thinking and supports the development of others. Schools have reported a change in ethos or culture where teachers are talking more honestly about the challenges they face, but also becoming more comfortable with celebrating and sharing successes. At each TLC, teachers choose the techniques they wish to work on or continue to work on.

Trinity High School

Fiona Horton, Assistant Headteacher

The immediate impact witnessed was that teachers were discussing strategies and the impact of them with each other more frequently, in the staff room, on break duty and even during parents' evenings. Not just the successful strategies but also ones that did not work with certain groups of students and what they had done to try and overcome it. The key change has been that staff are much more reflective on their teaching practice, that they have other colleagues from different subject areas to discuss improvements.

Skipton Girls School

Teacher

The workshops got me excited about AfL again. Each meet-up encouraged me to set myself a challenge; to come up with an innovative AfL strategy, to trial it out, and to assess its effectiveness. It was fun to try new approaches, and it was interesting to evaluate their success and then tweak them for re-evaluation. It was motivating to add new strategies to my belt, and also to see just how effective a particular strategy could become if tweaked enough.

This reflection has led to a distinct increase in the range and quality of formative assessment techniques being used by teachers. These have been visible to both students, teachers and school leadership. Schools are reporting evidence from lesson observations, learning walks, book scrutinies, student and staff voice.

Middlewich High School

Michael Taylor, Teacher

There has been a large impact across the school which has been evidenced in learning walks and lesson observations. In particular teachers have been adapting their lessons and, there has been a great deal of constructive classroom dialogue witnessed. Teachers in our school are now listening attentively to what children are saying and adapting their teaching accordingly.

Increasing staff confidence

The TLC meetings provide valuable time for professional conversations, which affirm current practice but also inspire teachers to take risks and try something new – this has been a common thread in the feedback from schools. All conversations, whether in meetings or on corridors, can give teachers confidence to know that they are moving in the right direction and doing their best for the students they teach.

Groby Community College

Mandy Bearne, Assistant Headteacher

I found it a very valuable experience. Each member of our TLC group felt confident in sharing their classroom practices and even felt happy about sharing pedagogy that they find more difficult or challenging. It is a brave thing to do, as many colleagues may find discussing weaknesses quite difficult, especially among colleagues they have very little to do with... Being given time to discuss classroom practice and pedagogy was very refreshing and that also gave us the opportunity to support each other.

Carleton Community High School

Ginty Varley, Director of Student Progress

Staff are more confident to change direction and leave the lesson plan if they receive feedback from students that it would be beneficial.

Bay House School

Moira Duffy, Assistant Headteacher

The TLC sessions have enabled us to develop our practice fearlessly. Our greatest success has been in establishing a forum to share ideas without risk of judgment.

Commitment and collaboration

Schools that have committed two years of their teachers' time to this project in the knowledge that high quality formative assessment in every classroom will have a positive impact on student outcomes over time. This commitment to raising student outcomes has led to the growth of critical friends within the staff who crucially are given time to meet, challenge each other's thinking and collaborate effectively.

Schools have found many different approaches to supporting the sharing of good practice and resources beyond the TLC meetings, for example; weekly briefings, newsletters, teachmeets, twitter, shared area on intranet, displays and celebration events. Abbott Beyne School share resources and reflections through their blog. <https://abbotbeynelearning.com/>

Everest Community Academy

*Samantha Toohey,
Assistant Vice Principal*

Teachers have taken more ownership in developing teaching and learning techniques. The largest change is the ethos and mindset of the teaching staff. They are working collaboratively, peer observing and developing practice.

The Sutton Academy

Lianne Seddon, Assistant Principal

Instead of working in departmental isolation, staff have embraced the opportunity to discuss, share ideas and implement new resources. There is a renewed vigour and buzz in classrooms, with staff willing to try new activities and adapt resources to suit their students' needs. Staff feel more empowered to celebrate the fantastic learning taking place through an 'open door' approach.

The learner's perspective

Initially teachers' practice develops as they individually try out techniques, but as effective practice is developed and shared within TLCs, in departments and across the school formative assessment becomes more prevalent and visible for students. Their engagement increases through teachers selecting students and then giving them thinking time to respond to carefully crafted questions.

Holy Family Catholic School

Adele Klitou, Vice Principal

Through lesson observation it is evident that in most classes students are immersed in their learning and are becoming far more self-reflective and able to identify their own areas for development. In addition we are finding that they are being challenged to think more deeply about their learning.

Students are being taught how to effectively assess their own work and that of other students, giving feedback that enables them to move forward.

Longfield Academy of Sport

Stuart Rawle, Assistant Headteacher

One example of pupils being able to take responsibility for their own learning is through peer feedback. The pupils have progressed in providing a more objective stance of their peers' work and are now able to identify more easily the areas of learning and to determine the next steps which need to be taken for that individual pupil.

A wide variety of different marking techniques have been trialled in schools, with a focus on ensuring that feedback moves the learners forward and can be acted on.

Sir William Borlase's Grammar School

Jenny Hopper, Associate Assistant Headteacher

The biggest impact has been seen on self and peer assessment and pupils' response to marking and their feedback. A survey before the EFA project showed that pupils did not rate peer assessment and many teachers were reluctant to use it as they felt pupils didn't take it seriously. This attitude has been transformed over the first year, and changes we've seen this year will be embedded next year, with marking and feedback as a whole-school priority.

Invicta Grammar School

Marelle Giles, Deputy Headteacher

The biggest impact of the project on our learners has been that they are now much more responsive to acting on the feedback given. They no longer look at a grade/mark and accept it as set; they use the comments, advice (written and verbal) and paired/group opportunities to improve, correct and amend their work.

Middlewich High School

Michael Taylor, Teacher

Where students are showing hints of not understanding or misunderstanding, teachers probe deeper with questioning rather than glossing over the misunderstandings.

Challenges, solutions and recommendations

There is a reality that of course one size does not fit all. In implementing the project protocols, as developed in schools over the last 15 years, all schools have found their own unique paths along the journey.

But there are some consistent elements: below is a summary of approaches and actions that have been found to be most effective in developing teacher learning communities in schools at the end of year one.

Leadership of the project

The challenge is to ensure that staff have the time and resources to allow effective professional dialogue.

- » Understand that you aren't going to get instant results – it takes time to get teachers to change their classroom habits.
- » Plan your calendar carefully over the year. Get the time spacing (generally about every 4 weeks) between the sessions right, so that staff have time to try ideas out effectively.
- » Give careful consideration to who your TLC leaders should be and provide the necessary resources, maintain regular communication and if possible meet before each workshop.
- » Involve all the TLC leaders in not only the delivery of the project, but its planning
- » Get the groupings right. The dynamics of each TLC is really important.
- » Find something that teachers can do less of, to allow them the space and time to do something even better.
- » Enable all staff to complete peer observations, where appropriate, committing to cover where needed.
- » Ensure that resources are available for staff online and easily accessible, so that they can access them at any time.

Launching the project in school

The challenge is get all staff 'buy in' so it is not just another initiative.

- » Get all staff buy in with a whole school launch.
- » Be clear about your vision and the expected impact on student outcomes.
- » Articulate to staff that it is not a new initiative – much of what is presented they will be familiar with – it is about revisiting, choosing and embedding effective practice.
- » View the EFA material and TLCs as a core component of your staff CPD programme and ensure that staff understand this.
- » Find a way to embed it in systems that are already in place in the culture of the school.
- » Make it explicit that teachers have freedom to choose and to focus on a techniques until it has become embedded.

Lincoln Christ's Hospital School gave guidelines for when TLC meetings should be completed, but the groups decided the timings of their meetings to best suit them.

Lincoln Christ's Hospital School

Greg Gilbey, Director of Learning

In a school that has been 'initiative-heavy' over the past two years, the willingness of staff to experiment with the techniques has been inspiring. We have grappled with hinge questions, questioning techniques, exit cards, marking forward to encourage student response, and, in short, it has been a privilege to lead on it.

Leading the teacher learning communities

The challenge is to make meetings productive with clear outcomes. The TLC lead should:

- » Stick to the agenda and timings; allow sufficient time for academic dialogue, sharing of ideas and discussion; vary the starter activities to suit your community e.g. some schools love the 30 seconds 'to get things off your chest' whereas others feel it can be a negative start
- » Expect something from and for everyone from every session
- » Be organised with the materials
- » Be creative and adapt ideas and how you share them with the community
- » Provide refreshments
- » Thank staff and establish ways to share good practice
- » Ensure their role of the 'challenger' is carried out effectively to ensure all ideas/discussions are about formative assessment
- » Ensure specific targets are set at the end of each meeting through personal action plans.

Keeping EFA 'front and centre'

Many schools have reported that the biggest challenge to the project is keeping it at the forefront of teachers' minds, to ensure that plans discussed in the meeting are put into action. Teachers 'plates' are often already overflowing so it is important that schools support them in prioritising the development of their practice. Even immediately after an inspiring meeting or discussion, ideas can be forgotten on their journey back to the classroom. Schools that have been most successful in this project are those that have continuously worked to keep formative assessment 'front and centre' through regular communications, encouraging dialogue at every opportunity such as staff briefings, departmental meetings, sharing good practice activities and staffroom displays.

Clayton Hall Academy and Newcastle Academy

Amanda J. McHugh, Director of Learning

It is influencing the way in which staff are beginning to work; staff like the opportunities it presents for them to discuss and share ideas – particularly in today's world of education, where the very essence of why we are all in the job in the first place tends to be shoved to the bottom of the pile due to more and more administrative and data assessment jobs.

Providing time for peer observations

The other major challenge has been providing time for peer observations to take place. Where needed, schools have provided cover for these observations. The use of recording equipment is being trialled in some schools, so that the lesson can be discussed at a later time. Where getting cover has been difficult for teachers to observe colleagues within their TLC groups, schools have widened the net and looked at timetables across the school to match colleagues working on the same strategy. Alternatively, when teachers' focus is on marking it can be really beneficial for them to meet to review marking and resources outside of lessons. All of this of course supports the challenge of keeping formative assessment on teacher's plates.

To find out more about the Embedding Formative Assessment Programme visit ssatuk.co.uk/efaproject or email efa@ssatuk.co.uk to find out how we can support your school.