

Embedding formative assessment: one school's experience

Peter Richardson, deputy headteacher, Walton-Le-Dale Primary School, explains how they applied Dylan Wiliam's approaches and the Embedding Formative Assessment toolkit

The catalyst for our adoption of formative assessment was a target set out in our school development plan following our last Ofsted inspection: raising the quantity of outstanding teaching through a fundamental change of approach to formative assessment. As part of this process, it became clear while reading several of Dylan Wiliam's books that formative assessment was a critical, research-proven way of achieving this. I found *Embedding Formative Assessment* my go-to text (one I still refer to) alongside his latest book *Leadership for Teacher Learning: creating a culture where all teachers improve so that all students succeed* (2016).

While reading, I was scouring the internet for snippets of Dylan lecturing to put something together for our staff, when I became aware of the SSAT programme, Embedding Formative Assessment. In short, it appeared to offer a cost-effective solution to the challenge I was facing. It enabled creation of not just an Inset or a couple of staff meetings, but a comprehensive programme that would ensure our staff embedded techniques which, used correctly, would lead to higher quality teaching and learning. In preparing to launch the programme in the September I watched the videos provided in the pack and referred back to Dylan's embedding formative assessment book. Since launching the pack we have closely followed the guidance.

Teacher learning communities (TLCs) have met every month. We are a two form entry school with 450 children aged 3-11, so have one TLC group consisting of 14 staff in key stages 1 and 2. It is a commitment we are finding to be the backbone of the programme and it definitely enables momentum to continue in teachers trying out and embedding techniques that work for them into their teaching.

Appraisal target

To support the programme we have tied it in as our primary appraisal target for the year, highlighting to our staff the importance we give to their professional development and formative assessment.

In addition, our second target relates to developing a growth mindset, something that ties in extremely well with getting children to take ownership of their own learning – one of the five strategies outlined in the programme. Alongside this, completely rewriting our assessment policy so that it contains feedback (of which marking is just one technique), formative and summative assessment has completed the picture. Sharing Dylan's research and giving teachers flexibility within the policy is proving important to the success of our approach thus far.

Elaborating on this, undoubtedly one key success of the programme, like our policy, is that although it is highly structured, staff can choose what to work on following each session. This has really led to a 'bottom up' approach where staff are more and more taking responsibility for their own development, feeling secure in the knowledge that their teaching is not being continually judged. Instead, we are all working together to help each other raise the quality of our formative assessment and therefore quality of teaching.

As an integral part of the programme, committing to monthly peer observations has been extremely valuable. Once used to the process, our staff have really engaged in this aspect. They recognise and value gaining feedback purely on the formative assessment techniques tried out. They also value watching other teachers, building trust, professional respect and understanding, and picking up good practice from within.

There are now more passionate conversations about teaching and learning. Teachers are more prepared to 'drop the reins' of a lesson plan within a lesson and become more responsive to the needs of learners as they occur. As we progress through the programme, teachers are also making more informed decisions, as the quality of feedback they are getting from their class is more accurately linked to what all the children have actually learnt, rather than what two or three who have been asked have learnt.

Following the first few meetings there has been a strong focus on developing a no-hands up classroom climate, with exit tickets and ABCD cards to gain responses from all the children at any one time.

When changing our assessment policy, we felt it essential to base it on Dylan Wiliam's model. It now contains the five key strategies of formative assessment:

1. Clarifying, sharing and understanding learning outcomes and success criteria.
2. Engineering effective classroom discussions, questions and tasks that elicit evidence of learning.
3. Providing feedback that moves learners forward.
4. Activating students as instructional resources for each other.
5. Activating students as owners of their own learning.

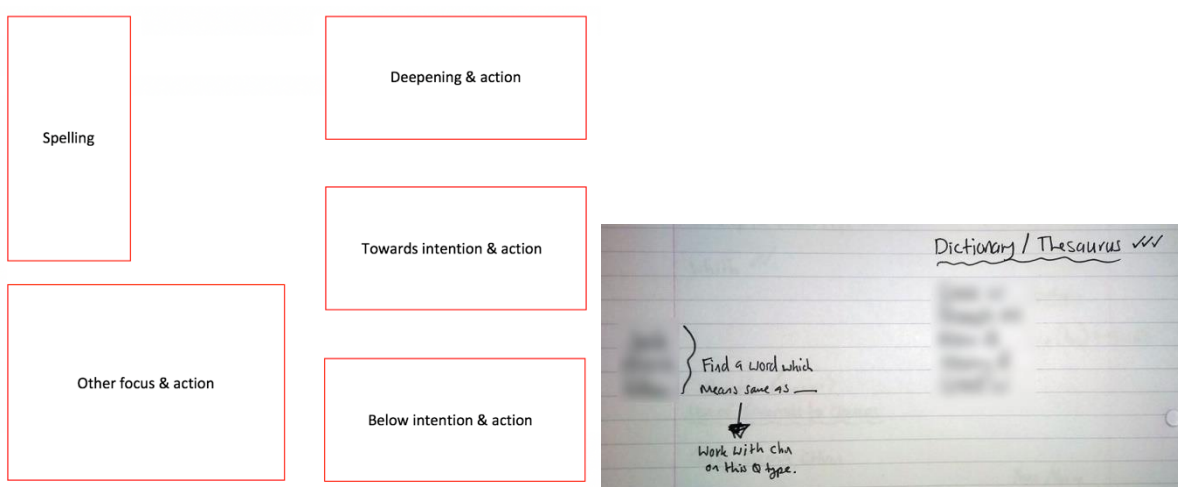
Responsive teaching has become a focus in what would be the 'marking' element of the policy. Teachers are given flexibility to use their professional judgement to match a chosen feedback technique (of which written comments is just one) to make the maximum impact on the children's future learning. Our teachers are growing in confidence in responding to whole-class feedback and adapting to needs on a moment by moment basis.

Teachers' journals

A key part of the policy is the development of our teachers' journals, in which teachers record their formative assessment thoughts in note form. We originally started with a proforma, purely so we could get our staff to organise their thoughts clearly. However, when the system was up and running the proforma simply became a guide, and teachers wrote notes straight into an A4 notebook. We ask our staff to fill these in for English and maths,

for each lesson that contains any feedback to them that they can in turn use formatively to alter the next lessons.

Not all elements are needed or appropriate to fill in each time. Sometimes none is recorded, as assessments and adjustments have been made within a lesson or the learning can't be neatly fitted into a single session, requiring two or more sessions. Therefore, the journals do not become a burden or a 'marking replacement' but act simply as a way of recording a teacher's ongoing formative assessments. Several teachers have reported how useful this is. Rather than having to thumb through 30 books to find spellings or particular issues, an overall class-based model can be used, if wished, to focus on a key element that may apply to all or most of the children.



We trust our teachers to go through the same process for other subjects, without the need to formally record in a journal. This has reduced our comment-based marking to almost zero, hugely reducing the burdensome task on teachers. And, so far, we have not seen any negative effect on learning. Teachers still look at all books, guide learning (which we can see through their teacher journal entries) and give feedback. It just isn't so much through individual, written comments.

In terms of impact, we have seen significantly higher levels of enthusiasm in our staff and that our children are developing a love of learning.

One of the things I am really looking forward to developing is 'activating students as owners of their own learning'. To me, this is the holy grail for teachers. If children are engaged in their learning, want to improve themselves without fear of failure and peer pressure, and accept feedback from teachers and their peers, you have self-perpetuating, highly skilled learners.

In maths particularly, we have already seen a significant increase in attainment. We have adopted a mastery approach to the teaching of maths and our approach to formative assessment fits perfectly with this. Our children are better able to make connections between mathematical concepts, hence answering seemingly disconnected questions in test papers correctly, because of the deep and meaningful discussions and activities they

have been engaged in. All of which has been directed by the teacher, with formative assessment playing a vital role in each lesson's direction of travel.

Widening the range of techniques

Our next steps are to widen the techniques our staff are using. We have embedded some and are working on others but really want our staff to now begin to target exactly which of the five strategies they want to focus on, therefore picking techniques to help improve that area. We simply want to extend the good work of our staff, through this excellent programme, in order to have further impact on our children's learning. Personally, I think and expect that as the programme continues, many staff having been successful with maths will want to focus techniques on writing, and everything we have adopted and are embedding sets us up for this to work.

Without question, I would recommend the programme. It is money extremely well spent. You do need to follow it almost word for word so that the messages are not diluted and the high focus is maintained. The structure is also extremely important to keep to. Monthly meetings and peer observations really allow the techniques to be embedded and therefore truly maintain an impact on learning over a sustained period of time.

If you are prepared to put those things in place (and why wouldn't you be when all the research says if you do, formative assessment has the potential to impact on learning more than anything else?), you can't go wrong. I would go as far as to say that we will be skilled enough after the programme ends to further it ourselves, adapting to changes in staff or continuing to discuss and refine our professional practice.