Formative assessment

This brief explains how formative assessment can contribute to improving learning and what recurring challenges affect its implementation. It then provides policy recommendations that may help educators and policy-makers overcome these obstacles.

Formative assessment, often referred to as ‘assessment for learning’, classroom, or continuous assessment, encompasses ‘all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by students which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998: 7–8). Whether formal or informal, they can take various forms such as quizzes and tests, written essays, self/peer assessment, oral questioning, learning logs, and so on. While traditionally opposed to summative assessment or ‘assessment of learning’, which is used to ‘certify or select learners in a given grade or age for further schooling’ (UNESCO, 2019: 16), the distinction has become blurred, with a growing number of hybrid assessments mixing both purposes. Additionally, although generally low-stake, formative assessments can count for students’ final grades. Thus, it is worth noting that classifying an assessment as formative should consider both its characteristics and the use of the information generated (Dunn and Mulvenon, 2009).

During the COVID-19 crisis formative assessments gained more relevance due to uncertainty about whether students were acquiring the necessary skills. With summative and high-stake examinations often being cancelled or postponed, formative assessments may provide better options and solutions in measuring learner progress (Bawane and Sharma, 2020). Although the education sector globally was unprepared for the crisis, some countries managed to find alternative modes of formative assessment through innovative means. For instance, in the United Arab Emirates, a smart measurement policy enabled the assessment of students’ academic performance using artificial intelligence (IIEP-UNESCO, 2020).

What we know

Evidence about the benefits of formative assessments on learning is mixed. A review of the literature in Clarke (2012) suggests that they can yield promising learning gains (especially for low achievers) if frequent and of high quality. Meaningful feedback is central to the efficiency of formative assessments (OECD, 2005a; Muskin, 2017). Hill argues that ‘when used to provide feedback on a daily basis to both teacher and students’, they are ‘one of the most powerful interventions ever recorded in educational research literature’ (Hill, 2013: 65). To be effective, feedback needs to be based on sound data, performed well (Hill, 2013), and followed by appropriate corrective measures (Allal and Mottier Lopez, 2005). However, Browne (2016) makes the nuance that while research clearly points to the inefficient implementation of formative assessments in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the only rigorous experimental study conducted in these regions found no positive effects
on learning even with appropriate implementation. Moreover, some authors raise methodological concerns or concerns related to definitions in the literature supportive of formative assessments (see for example Dunn and Mulvenon, 2009; Bennett, 2011).

Nevertheless, if ‘valid, timely, constructive, and specific to the learning needs of the child’, formative assessments can be particularly helpful in advancing teaching and learning (READ, 2020: 3). By providing feedback to teachers and students, they can help educators to plan instructional activities (Allal and Mottier Lopez, 2005), including differentiated instruction (OECD, 2008), and enable adjustment and remediation targeted to a student or group of students (Muskin, 2017). They may also help identify areas for improvement in teacher professional development, and may be crucial for teachers in motivating and engaging their students (Muskin, 2017).

**Challenges**

Many education systems are moving towards more formative assessments, acknowledging the limitations of high-stake examinations (e.g. the limited range of skills assessed and techniques used). However, their implementation in classrooms remains problematic, especially in developing contexts.

**Teaching conditions**

Poor teaching conditions may affect the effective implementation of formative assessments. Large class sizes may cause teachers difficulties in providing individualized attention to their students (Browne, 2016). Moreover, fears that formative assessments might be time-consuming and resource-intensive, especially alongside extensive curriculum requirements, contribute to their perception as an ‘administrative burden’ for teachers (OECD, 2005b; Browne, 2016). Teachers may conform to policies but do not use assessment results to improve teaching or learning (Browne, 2016).

**School- and system-level support**

Although policy changes initiated a shift towards formative assessments in Africa, minimal institutional support, such as additional teacher training and materials, has been provided to operate this shift (Browne, 2016).

Moreover, school culture may not always be supportive of formative assessments. In many countries, the focus remains on more visible summative assessments conducted for accountability purposes (OECD, 2005a; Browne, 2016). Additionally, school directors, inspectors, or the wider system may not grant teachers enough freedom to make decisions based on assessment results by adjusting their teaching methods and moving away from traditional teaching practices (Muskin, 2017). Teachers’ autonomy is all the more imperative as the current pandemic creates unprecedented situations in which teachers’ ability to adapt and innovate is essential (UNICEF, 2021).

**Lack of trained teachers**

In some countries, many teachers need capacity development in test construction, administration, record-keeping of test marks, and assessment of soft skills (Muskin, 2017). Consequently, teachers may use poorly constructed tests or may copy tests from textbooks (Kellaghan and Greaney, 2004). However, Browne (2016) notes that even when trained and equipped with adequate resources, teachers may return to previous practices if they lack confidence, do not understand the purpose of formative assessments, or are not encouraged by a supportive school culture.
Inclusion and equity

Formative assessments are central to the teaching-learning process. They can help improve student outcomes if part of a fair, valid, and reliable process of gathering, interpreting and using information generated throughout the student learning process (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2020).

Equity preoccupations are at the center of the debate between proponents of formative and summative assessments. Arguments against formative assessments include that they can penalize disadvantaged students, for instance because of patronage risks or potential biases in teacher assessments linked to gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic background (Kellaghan and Greaney, 2004; Bennett, 2011; IIEP-UNESCO, 2020).

However, formative assessments can foster equity and inclusion if they are used through a variety of assessment methods that take into account the diversity of students’ abilities (Muskin, 2017) and if teachers are aware of, and address, any potential preconceptions they might have (OECD, 2005a).

Students with disabilities may require alternative forms of assessment. They are more likely to access the curriculum in inclusive environments when teachers use a universal design approach and are already capable and competent to modify, adapt, or accommodate the needs of students within their assessment plans (Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth, 2006; Wagner, 2011). Accommodations may include extra time to complete assignments, the use of scribes, oral instruction, and so on.

Policy and planning

Linking formative assessments to sector planning

Whereas summative assessments often dominate the political debate on education (OECD, 2008), it is not evident how formative assessments can inform sector planning. An OECD study points to ‘a lack of coherence between assessments and evaluations at the policy, school and classroom levels’ as a major barrier to wider practice (OECD, 2005b: 4). It means that information gathered at regional or national levels is often judged unhelpful in informing classroom practices; vice versa, classroom-based assessments may be perceived as irrelevant for policy-making. This may also come from the fact that, in the absence of standardization within or across schools, formative assessment data cannot be aggregated into system-level information in the way large-scale standardized assessments are (World Bank, 2018).

However, the importance of classroom-level variables in student learning variations still makes it necessary to look ‘inside the black box’ of classroom practice (OECD, 2005a: 88). International organizations such as OECD and UNESCO advocate for a better alignment between, or combination of, formative and summative assessments (OECD, 2005a; Muskin, 2017). For instance, in Uruguay, large-scale national assessment results were used for formative purposes to advance both student learning and in-service teacher training (Ravela, 2005). Additionally, the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), a ‘hybrid assessment’, offers an example of how a large-scale assessment, whose data inform decision-makers, can also help identify the need for early instruction improvement in classrooms (Wagner, 2011; IIEP-UNESCO, 2019).

Investing in teacher training
Investments in initial and in-service training, as well as materials for formative assessments, are essential for teachers’ confidence and the effective implementation of formative assessments (OECD, 2005a; Muskin, 2017), especially in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa where they are relatively new (Browne, 2016). Ensuring teachers understand the purpose of formative assessments is key to fostering their ownership of these pedagogical changes (Browne, 2016). Such efforts, combined with the provision of tools and incentives to use the results of formative assessments, proved effective in Malawi, Liberia and India (World Bank, 2018).

**Strengthening schools and the education system’s support**

Schools play a major role in stimulating and guiding teachers while conducting and using formative assessments. For instance, the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO) implementation guide of the state of Victoria, Australia, encourages schools to obtain school-wide agreement on the use of formative assessments and to establish consistent processes for analyzing the data generated.

Implementing formative assessment requires a system which follows up, monitors the quality of assessment practices, and supports teachers when needed (Browne, 2016; World Bank, 2018). It is also important that teachers are not overwhelmed with assessments while they juggle dense curricula. Some countries, such as Morocco, have dedicated time in the calendar for continuous assessments, while others, such as Tanzania, have simply opted for a dramatic simplification of the curriculum (Muskin, 2017). The COVID-19 crisis has rendered the latter option relevant, as UNICEF recommends prioritizing some curriculum components and identifying those that are currently unachievable (UNICEF, 2021).

**Creating a culture of evaluation**

Instilling a culture of evaluation throughout the system is crucial. It signifies that ‘teachers and school leaders use information on students to generate new knowledge on what works and why, share their knowledge with colleagues, and build their ability to address a greater range of their students’ learning needs’ (OECD, 2005a: 25). Moreover, teachers are more likely to conduct formative assessments if schools and education systems alike encourage them to innovate, for example through peer support or pilot projects which test new assessment methods (OECD, 2005a).

**Plans and policies**


**Tools**
• READ (Russian Education Aid for Development). 2020. 'Formative Assessment and Student Learning: How to Ensure Students Continue to Learn Outside of the Classroom'. Newsletter 13.

References and sources


IIEP-UNESCO. 2019. 'Student learning assessments', IIEP Policy Toolbox.


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