

Formative Assessment Practices Series:

We Too Can Be

by Dr. Rich Lambert



I love to watch the Discovery Channel TV show called Myth Busters. They always seem to identify some crazy thing that happened in a movie, and then test whether it really could have happened the way it was portrayed on the screen. For example, they tested whether you could really blow up a safe and leave the cash inside intact. Sometimes, they take a common belief many people have and put it to the test. For example, they once tested whether dogs really do look like their owners. As we continue our series of articles on the assessment, I want to talk a little about the myths many teachers carry around about the formative assessment process, and how we too can be Myth Busters.

Try to imagine how you can be a Myth Buster, and specifically what you would say to a teacher who shared some of these example beliefs with you. As teachers spend more and more time using measures like Teaching Strategies GOLD, part of our job is to help them understand how authentic formative assessment measures like GOLD can be resources that help with the instructional process. If we don't find ways to combat some of these myths, formative assessment will continue to seem like just another demand piled on top of an already busy and challenging work load.

Teachers bring quite a wide range of perspectives to this topic. Some teachers do not understand assessment, do not know the purpose of formative assessment, and see the whole thing as nothing but another stressor. Other teachers have a long history of fully integrating assessment practices into their work. Of course, many teachers fall somewhere in between.

Let us start with one of the most common myths. Have you ever heard a teacher say this?

“I know my kids. I don't need to document everything to know my kids.”

It is certainly true that most teachers really do know the children in their classrooms. In many cases, they may know them better than anyone else does. However, it is a long way from knowing the children, to honestly keeping up with the developmental progress that every single child is making across dozens of instructional goals. We can help teachers see measures like GOLD as valuable resources that help them keep organized and on top of the progress each child is making. **No teacher can realistically keep track of all that information without some systematic way of organizing it.** Furthermore, teachers who know their children well do not always know exactly what to expect the child to do next. They may have a general sense of the overall developmental trajectory, but formative assessment measures help them know how each child is developing and where their developmental journey is going next.

Teachers will often say things like this:

“This has no immediate relevance to what I do as a teacher.”

“The purpose is to get this done and entered into the system.”

“I just need to line the kids up and make them all do the same thing.”

When faced with these myths, our job, as mentors is to help teachers understand just how instructionally relevant assessment data can be. We also may need to help them understand how

to collect evidences of developmental progress that are emerging during the course of regular classroom activities. Children are constantly showing us all they know and can do. Teaching can be much more rewarding for teachers when they learn to watch for the signs of the progress that is happening all around them.

Maybe you have heard teachers say things like this:

“All types of assessments are the same.”

“We already test kids enough.

Why do we have to do another test?”

“The tests are not connected to the standards.

We have enough to deal with.”

When we hear these types of myths, our job is to help teachers understand the differences between the various classes of assessments used in the early childhood classroom, such as screeners, formative assessments, summative assessments, and diagnostic measures. We can help them understand that “tests” in the conventional sense are rarely used with young children and are generally not developmentally appropriate. We can also help them understand how high quality authentic formative assessments are closely linked to standards such as Foundations and really do focus on the instructional goals we all share.

Perhaps these myths have come up in your work as a mentor:

“I don’t need to know what I can do with the data. The data is not for me.”

“All assessment scores are for evaluating how we are doing our jobs.”

“Someone else uses this data to judge me or my program.”

If these myths were true, all teachers would have a perfect right to be frustrated and discouraged. **However, we can help them become positively motivated to put time and energy into the assessment process by helping them understand that the data is for them.**

The most common myth I have encountered over many years of doing research on formative

assessment in North Carolina is the belief that someone in Raleigh is looking over the data, and even worse, can’t wait to use the data to blame teachers for all society’s problems.

Of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

However, teachers are often **not** told that the data is for them, and the children, and families they serve.

They are rarely told that the electronic platforms that accompany measures like GOLD are simply offered as a tool to **help make their jobs easier.**

We as professionals who support teachers are not above some myths of our own. Have you ever told yourself something like this?

“If I talk about assessment with this teacher I will add unnecessary stress to her life.”

The fact is, teaching is a stressful and underappreciated profession that has only become more challenging during the current pandemic. However, if we leave common teacher myths unchallenged, that is actually creating more stress for teachers. If we are successful at helping teachers understand the true purposes and instructional value of good assessment practices, we are reducing the burdens on teachers, not increasing them. Remember, the weight of the myths they are carrying around is part of what is weighing them down.

So What Should We Look For?

Many teachers go through phases as they become comfortable with the formative assessment process. We have to recognize that it is a challenging part of their job, and that it takes time to master. We also have to remind ourselves that we can support them through the process and they will become better teachers because of our support. Here is a simple model that may help you think about this process.

Phase I: Misunderstanding.

“More tests, really? I guess it’s just what we have to do.”

Remember that many teachers think of the formative assessment process as just another unfunded mandate.

It is something they have to do, but they do not understand why they have to do it, and all they know is they do not have the time to do it well. They often do not even understand why they are required to collect formative assessment data and how it differs from summative assessment. They find it difficult to know how to use the data to help them become better teachers. We can reassure them that these are perfectly normal feelings, while we gently bust the myths behind these reactions.

Phase II: Exploration.

“I am trying to collect lots of evidences, but how do I do it?”

Many teachers do not know what evidences to collect or what makes a good piece of evidence. Many teachers do not know how to analyze evidences. Furthermore, many teachers do not know how to incorporate formative assessment practices as part of the everyday process of teaching. We can be models and sources of support in helping them grow in these areas.

Phase III: Learning the Progressions.

“What am I supposed to be looking for again? I am trying to understand what comes next for each child.”

The developmental progressions from high quality formative assessments can be very instructive for some teachers. **We can help teachers understand how to use the progressions as a tool for understanding where child development is likely to go next.** This can be one of the most fascinating aspects of teachers. It really is fun to watch human development unfold right in front of us.



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Phase IV: Differentiating and Individualizing Instruction.

“I have made placements on the progressions, now what? It is so hard to know how to support each child in the best way. But I want to learn how to support each children individually.”

This phase is at the heart of high quality teaching practices. Most teachers want to help each child reach their full potential or they simply would not stay in the profession. Master teachers know each child as an individual, their unique qualities, strengths, needs, and areas for further support. Furthermore, master teachers know how to shape the entire classroom experience to fit the unique needs of each child. With our support, many of the teachers we serve can gain the confidence they need to become master teachers.

Phase V: Full Integration.

“It is so much fun to watch the children grow and develop. I see so much more now that I know what to look for. I can see all the little steps they take.”

When it all comes together, assessment and instruction work together seamlessly. Our job as mentors is to use observational data and classroom artifacts to understand where each teacher is in their understanding of the formative assessment process. In this way, we can individualize our support for each teacher, and base that support on data. This process can be such a valuable object lesson for teachers as they learn to provide data-driven support, individualized support for children. Individualized and differentiated instruction is always better when it is rooted in assessment data. Furthermore, teaching is not complete until assessment is a fully integrated component of the teaching process. As we help teachers build strong formative assessment skills, we are supporting every aspect of the instructional process.



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