

A True PLC Focuses on Formative Assessment Data

Dr. Rich Lambert



As a part of our newsletter series on the formative assessment process (FAP), I want to review some of the basic concepts of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). You might ask, why PLCs? How are they related to assessment practices? Let us take a few minutes to explore some of the important connections between assessment practices and fully functioning PLCs. For a more complete treatment of the topic, we will be introducing our training modules on PLCs later this year.

At its core, a PLC is an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively to achieve better learning opportunities for the children they teach. So how does this work? To start with, high quality formative assessment evidence is one of the main ingredients that makes a PLC a true PLC. In a true PLC, the teachers are lifelong learners, and they are continuously striving to serve children better. They do so by using assessment data together to learn more about what the children need and to plan strategies for meeting those needs.

A true PLC is not a just a support group for teachers. A true PLC is not a Community of Practice or a collective study group. Furthermore, a true PLC is not just a time for teachers to get together and share ideas. All of these things are important and helpful. However, a true PLC focuses on child assessment data. A true PLC focuses on using data to understand how children are functioning currently so teachers can work together to help the children learn, grow, and develop. In a true PLC, assessment data drives all the discussion.

Richard and Rebecca DuFour, the originators of the PLC model, put forth what they call the three big ideas: A Focus on Learning, A Culture of Collaboration, and A Focus on Results. These ideas are the foundation of a true PLC.

In a true PLC, the focus on learning, collaboration,

and results means all members must monitor each child's learning and development on a regular basis. Furthermore, they must recognize that authentic formative assessments are the best tools for monitoring child development. Within the PLC model, teachers use high quality formative assessment measures as a powerful and useful structure to the process of ongoing monitoring.

Therefore, in a true PLC, teacher use formative assessment data to know when children have met expectations. They work together to extend and enrich learning opportunities when children have already met expectations. They also use high quality formative assessment measures to understand where children need to go next. They use the data to point to individualized instructional strategies to support the learning and development of all children. Within the PLC structure, teachers support each other to use formative assessment data for instructional planning. They realize there is no better source for understanding the unique needs of each child. They understand data is essential if teachers are going to differentiate and individualize instruction. In a true, fully functioning PLC, all members work together to clarify instructional goals, build a collaborative culture, and assume collective responsibility for the growth, development, and learning of all children.

The idea of collective responsibility means that all team members work together to use data to design intentional instructional strategies that ensure all children receive support for learning according to their individual developmental needs. All team members collect high quality formative assessment data to monitor the effectiveness of instructional strategies. Across the school year, they monitor the success of differentiated and individualized instruction continuously through formative assessment data.

The DuFours also created what they call the Four Critical Questions. I have rewritten them slightly here to apply to our work.

THE FOUR CRITICAL QUESTIONS

1. What is it we want all children to learn, and how do we foster individual development?
2. How do we know if the children are developing as expected and have learned essential skills and dispositions we have deemed most essential?
3. How will we respond when some of the children do not learn and develop as we expected?
4. How will we enrich and extend the learning and development for children who are already mastering developmental objectives?

WHAT IS IT WE WANT ALL CHILDREN TO LEARN, AND HOW DO WE FOSTER INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT?

The first question focuses on instructional objectives, in short, where we want the children to grow and develop. Our instructional objectives are outlined in Foundations, the learning standards document for young children in North Carolina. High quality formative assessment measures make the learning standards come to life by outlining a developmental pathway for each instructional objective. Each developmental pathway shows teachers and children where they are going on their journey of learning, growth, and discovery.

HOW DO WE KNOW IF THE CHILDREN ARE DEVELOPING AS EXPECTED AND HAVE LEARNED ESSENTIAL SKILLS AND DISPOSITIONS WE HAVE DEEMED MOST ESSENTIAL?

The second question focuses on how we know when children have reached the milestones of greatest interest. The developmental progressions contained within most high quality formative assessment measures outline the pathway to reach age-specific expectations. High quality formative assessment measures align with the standards and therefore illustrate widely held expectations for child development at each age or grade level.

HOW WILL WE RESPOND WHEN SOME OF THE CHILDREN DO NOT LEARN AND DEVELOP AS WE EXPECTED?

The third question prompts teachers to think about how they will respond when some of the children do not learn and develop as expected. I thought it would be useful to review Foundations, Guiding Principle 3, to start thinking about this question.

“...Development occurs in predictable patterns, but individual children’s developmental progress is often uneven across different stages and across developmental domains...”

So we want to remind teachers it is OK if all children are not developing at the same rate, in the same way, and at the same time. In fact, that is what we should be expecting. The more important issue, as stated in question four, concerns how we as teachers respond with intentional strategies and support when some of the children do not learn and develop as expected. We can refer the teachers we support back to the guiding principles in Foundations. We can help them remember that each child is unique and will develop at their own rate. A range of developmental levels is a natural part of the pre-K classroom. Furthermore, high quality formative assessment systems, such as Teaching Strategies GOLD, link teachers to instructional strategies that are designed to support children at each stage of development.

HOW WILL WE ENRICH AND EXTEND THE LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR CHILDREN WHO ARE ALREADY MASTERING DEVELOPMENTAL OBJECTIVES?

The fourth question focuses on the strategies teachers will use when some children exceed widely held expectations for their age level. The developmental pathways specified by high quality formative assessment measures indicate where all children need to go next. They include rich behavioral anchors and descriptors for the stages beyond the typically expected developmental levels. Therefore, teachers can go beyond age-specific expectations to support all children as needed.



“...mentors and evaluators who address the formative assessment process within their work have richer and more impactful interactions with teachers.”

So how can we as mentors and evaluators encourage the PLCs we work with to move toward a focus on data and learning? First, we have to help them realize the work of formative assessment is the work of instruction and learning. Therefore, the collaborative culture of a fully functioning PLC makes the work of teaching, learning, and assessing much more effective and rewarding. Addressing the FAP with teachers is not easy or simple.

Becoming a fully functioning PLC is a process. However, mentors and evaluators who address the FAP within their work have richer and more impactful interactions with teachers. Let us be encouraged. By including the FAP within our work, we enhance the professional growth of the teachers we serve. By helping teachers grow professionally, we in turn positively impact outcomes for children and families.

The Four Critical Questions come down to these simple ideas:

What do we want the children to know and do at the end of the year?

How do we monitor their progress?

How do we help children who need special support?

Our job is to help teachers realize that PLCs can help teachers understand instructional objectives more completely, monitor child progress, and give individual support to specific children. A fully functioning PLC is simply a structured time for teachers to collaborate on the work of formative assessment, and use the information it provides to serve the children and families better. Sharing makes this challenging work easier.



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