



**Book Review: Clarke, S., Timperley, H., & Hattie J. (2003). *Unlocking formative assessment: Practical strategies for enhancing students' learning in the primary and intermediate classroom* (NZ Ed.). Auckland: Hodder Moa Beckett.**

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Formative assessment has been present in international and New Zealand educational research literature for several decades, although more prominently since the mid-1980s. In 1988, Terry Crooks, a New Zealand researcher, made a substantial contribution to the field of assessment by reviewing significant literature on the impact of classroom assessment practices on student learning. It became an influential paper on New Zealand assessment policy and practice for it underscored the integral role of assessment in teaching and learning and was essentially the 'forerunner' to explicit formative assessment trends in New Zealand. This research shaped government policy, particularly in the 1990s, and assessment research programmes in New Zealand.

In 1994, the Ministry of Education produced a report, *Assessment: Policy to Practice*. This was the first Ministry of Education document to actually use the term formative assessment and to define it, although some of the wording had been used in earlier documents:

*Formative assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. It is used to provide the student with feedback to enhance learning and to help the teacher understand students' learning. It helps build a picture of a student's progress, and informs decisions about the next steps in teaching and learning. It can take a variety of forms, such as comment on a presentation, conferencing or interview, or the analysis of test results.*

(p. 8)

The Green Paper *Assessment for Success in Primary Schools* (Ministry of Education, 1998) highlighted a gap in the availability of achievement information in the primary years and thus proposed the development of a range of assessment tools, amongst which were some standardised tests (later shaped to become asTTle - assessment tools for learning and teaching) and 'exemplars of student work referenced to the achievement objectives for all curriculum statements' (p. 19). At the end of 1999 a change of government saw a move away from proposed national testing to improving the quality of teaching, and learning. Thus formative assessment became an integral component of national assessment strategies, as seen in the content of the Assess to Learn

professional development contracts, and the development of tools such as aTTle and the exemplars.

It is in this national context that the book *Unlocking formative assessment: Practical strategies for enhancing students' learning in the primary and intermediate classroom* is reviewed. Originally published by Shirley Clarke in the United Kingdom, this New Zealand version has been adapted by Clarke, Timperley and Hattie to increase its relevance and accessibility for New Zealand teachers. On the surface, it is a very teacher-friendly book that can be read in one sitting, or picked up and read during spare moments. The layout of the book makes it suitable for individual teachers to read, or for groups of staff to use as a basis for professional development discussions. Photographs, diagrams, summary points, suggested implementation strategies, sample teacher questioning and plentiful ideas make it potentially valuable for any primary or intermediate school.

The book is particularly helpful for teachers *new* to the concept of formative assessment (simply interpreted as using assessment information to inform and alter subsequent learning and teaching in the classroom). A key concept developed in the book is the linkage between planning, teaching, learning and assessment. Chapters are therefore developed along the themes of planning, sharing learning intentions, involving students in self-assessment, provision of feedback and target setting. Strategies are provided for teachers in refining their questioning skills, monitoring of student work and raising student expectations and self-esteem.

Examples are drawn from recently developed assessment tools, particularly aTTle, NEMP (National Educational Monitoring Project), the Numeracy Project, ARBs (Assessment Resource Banks) and pertinent examples from specific schools. It is puzzling that there is little mention of the National Curriculum Exemplars, for their fundamental purpose is to 'assist in formative assessment and teaching (highlight what to look for, collect information about, act on), help teachers, students and parents discuss learning (viewing indicators of important qualities of learning) and provide a basis for teacher judgements on student work' (Ministry of Education, 2002: 2) Available in every school in New Zealand, these exemplars encompass all the essential learning areas and levels one to five of the national curriculum – unlike the other national assessment tools. National curriculum exemplars contain specific information to guide teachers in providing feedback and next step learning for students. Scant regard to this significant formative assessment resource by Clarke, Timperley and Hattie is a serious shortcoming of their book.

Moreover, any teacher already versed in formative assessment will learn little in regards to the theory of formative assessment. Whilst the strategies in the book are useful starting points for teachers new to the concept and practice of formative assessment, greater depth may have been expected. There is an extensive international literature that could have been drawn on. For example, the work of Tunstall and Gipps (1996) provides a range of types of effective feedback, and indeed they conclude that a fine balance between evaluative and descriptive feedback creates the most powerful support for learning. Furthermore, formative assessment needs to be considered in the context of international trends, policy development and educational reform – which can be

done in a publication that combines academic and practitioner-oriented information. An example is the recently published international study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004) *Formative assessment: Improving learning in secondary classrooms*, involving seven participating countries, of which New Zealand is one.

*Unlocking formative assessment* is a useful practical book to have in the teachers' library, especially for beginning teachers. However, it is not the complete guide to formative assessment and teachers wanting to challenge their knowledge and skills in assessment would be advised to supplement it with other publications.

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