
Preface

Over the past two decades, both of us have worked as middle school English teachers and as learning specialists in urban and suburban schools in public and independent school systems. As teachers committed to differentiating middle school literacy instruction, we sought guidance on practical issues and tried to put together a coherent description of what using formative assessment to differentiate literacy instruction looks like. After compiling and developing resources and formulating a framework for how to differentiate literacy instruction, we began presenting at conferences and teaching others. We found an overwhelming demand among literacy teachers to learn more about how they can effectively differentiate literacy instruction in their classrooms.

As we began to use more formative assessment practices regularly, we quickly saw a transformation in students. Struggling, passive students became active, competent learners. Students who excelled but perhaps didn't work as hard as they could were suddenly stretched to achieve beyond what even they thought they could accomplish. Using formative assessment to differentiate literacy instruction provided us and our students with a tool kit for regularly experiencing this kind of eagerness and engagement in learning.

Research shows that instruction is most effective when differentiated so that students are taught at their individual instructional levels (Huebner, 2010). When instruction is either too difficult or too easy, students become frustrated or bored and learning declines. Teachers recognize this intuitively, yet they often find it challenging to differentiate instruction in ways that will challenge each student. Differentiation is facilitated first and foremost when teachers use formative assessments to understand where students are at and then to modify instruction. As a colleague recently put it, "Differentiation and formative assessment are inseparable, like the music of Gladys Knight and the Pips—their music can only result from their combined work together." Formative assessment is effective only when used to differentiate instruction, and differentiating instruction can effectively take place only when following useful, targeted formative assessment.

So what is formative assessment? Formative assessment differs from midunit or end-of-unit (summative) assessments that are used to summarize learning. Formative assessment is collected before and during learning, then used in partnership with students to enable them to know where they stand in mastering unit goals. Teachers use formative assessment data to inform their instruction, and students use it to chart and direct their course of learning. Formative assessment data, when used collaboratively, shift the dynamic to a partnership in which teachers and students work together to ensure students achieve their personal best, whether this involves finally mastering a basic proficiency or further enhancing already advanced skills. In addition, formative assessment is the key objective of the assessment standards of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and an integral part of instruction to help students master the Common Core State Standards.

Although substantial research on the effectiveness of differentiating instruction is growing, few large-scale studies exist. However, Black and William (1998) collected over 250 articles and book chapters showing the effectiveness of formative assessment (and the resulting differentiation) in raising student achievement. This research shows that formative assessment can double student gains, and that it may result in the highest gains for students who struggle. Due to the scarcity of large-scale research and legislation such as No Child Left Behind and Response to Intervention that mandates research-based methods, schools have begun to turn to formative assessment and differentiating instruction methods to improve teaching, particularly given the strength of the research base on formative assessment.

This book specifically shows how using formative assessment to differentiate literacy instruction offers the most promising framework for equipping students to use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes with regard to learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and exchange of information (NCTE, 2009, Standard 12), particularly enjoyment. The assessment practices in this book have been shown in our experience and in research cited throughout this book to raise not only achievement but also student motivation. Raising student motivation is a key focus of Standard 1 in NCTE's *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing*. These standards recognize the teacher as "the most important agent of assessment" (NCTE, 2009, Standard 2), although this book argues that students also play a critical role as agents of assessment.

This book presents this information through a framework of seven practices we have developed based on research and classroom experiences. These practices, which we detail in Chapter 1, provide teachers with a snapshot of what a differentiated class looks like as well as concise directions on how to achieve one. Woven throughout the book are practical suggestions,

real-world examples, reproducible activities, and connections to NCTE standards and Common Core State Standards. We include this information to illustrate how teachers can use assessment to cultivate the kinds of “centers of inquiry” in their classrooms “where students and teachers investigate and improve their own learning and teaching practices, both individually and as learning communities” (NCTE, 2009, Standard 3).

Chapter 1 offers a framework for formative assessment as well as a purpose for using it. It gives an overview of seven practices that will help teachers start using formative assessment to differentiate instruction, and it highlights ways to create a successful classroom climate in which students accept that individuals will often do different work and feel safe acknowledging areas in which they would like to improve.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of how to specify and convey standards. It also begins the discussion of how to design, administer, and score standards-based assessments, which allow teachers to determine what to teach and how to teach it. It then offers instruction in how to measure what is being learned along the way, and these data provide invaluable feedback that recursively informs next steps to be taken.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on differentiated instruction. Chapter 3 defines and describes it, whereas Chapter 4 delves into various ways to differentiate and tier lesson plans and tasks. Chapter 4 also offers practical strategies for running a differentiated classroom, including planning units, overseeing tasks, grouping students, dealing with homework, and grading.

Chapter 5 focuses on time management. Since most teachers may be responsible for up to more than a hundred students by middle school, this chapter suggests the most practical and time-efficient ways to create, adapt, collect, and analyze assessments.

We wrote Chapter 6, which addresses specific strategies to support students who struggle, with Shira M. Cohen-Goldberg. This chapter offers a broad framework for fine-tuning differentiation supports to address foundational and higher-order thinking skills.

Chapter 7 offers techniques to challenge students who show strength in the subject. It provides a brief overview of traits that define students who show giftedness or are high achieving and then offers multiple suggestions for ways to enhance their learning.

This book is a result of the journey that we have taken in our efforts to best serve our students. We consider ourselves fortunate to have discovered the value of formative assessment. In the following chapters we share our learnings, and we invite you to share in the journey and keep in touch with us (Leslie@hillforliteracy.org or Pooja979@gmail.com) so that we all can continue to move forward as we learn from one another and help our students continually grow.