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# Formative Assessment in the Christian Classroom

## Abstract

When student learning is defined solely by the results of a summative test, the nature of the student is devalued and the process of learning is minimized. Currently, the educational quality of schools is often judged by performance on standardized tests. This has put strain on teachers to measure up to government-set standards and has left students struggling to perform on high-pressure tests. An alternative to such testing exists in formative assessment. When one looks closely at formative assessment and its use within a Christian classroom, one begins to see the value this method of assessment has: individualized attention is given to the needs of diverse learners, learning is valued as a process not a product, and a collaborative learning partnership is forged between teacher and student. This research describes key types of formative assessment which better meet the learning needs of today's students in Christian schools.

## Document Type

Thesis

## Degree Name

Master of Education (MEd)

## Department

Graduate Education

## Keywords

Master of Education, thesis, Christian education, formative assessment, standardized tests

## Subject Categories

Curriculum and Instruction | Education

## Comments

Action Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

Formative Assessment in the Christian Classroom

by

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B.A. Dordt College, 2001

Master's Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education

Dordt College

Sioux Center, Iowa

March, 2012

Formative Assessment in the Christian Classroom

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## **Abstract**

When student learning is defined solely by the results of a summative test, the nature of the student is devalued and the process of learning is minimized. Currently, the educational quality of schools is often judged by performance on standardized tests. This has put strain on teachers to measure up to government-set standards and has left students struggling to perform on high-pressure tests. An alternative to such testing exists in formative assessment. When one looks closely at formative assessment and its use within a Christian classroom, one begins to see the value this method of assessment has: individualized attention is given to the needs of diverse learners, learning is valued as a process not a product, and a collaborative learning partnership is forged between teacher and student. This research describes key types of formative assessment which better meet the learning needs of today's students in Christian schools.

At the heart of effective teaching lies a fundamental desire to see transformation and growth among students. Each day the teacher provides learning opportunities designed to intentionally develop, shape, and grow students' diverse abilities. All teaching strategies and learning opportunities should be structured in ways which promote student learning. Therefore, one of the essential tasks of teachers is to constantly assess student learning and gauge whether the teaching strategies and learning opportunities are effective in promoting transformation and growth.

The way in which a teacher assesses student learning shows students what the teacher values as important and worthwhile. Assessment is a reflection of the teacher's perception of the nature of the student, the purpose of education, and the value of assessment (Van Brummelen, 2009). Historically, most assessment within the classroom has been designed to highlight the differences between students and rank them according to their achievement on tests and exams. This method of assessment primarily occurs after the instruction has taken place. When assessment is limited solely to ranking students and assigning grades after the instructional strategies have taken place, learning as a dynamic process is lost and the diverse nature of the student is devalued.

Many assessment practices which currently take place within schools focus on the assessment *of* learning, rather than assessment *for* learning. A shift in understanding of the purpose of assessment must occur. An effective teacher's approach to assessment should be that of assessing throughout instruction, rather than only utilizing assessment as a way to determine a final grade. Assessment must promote learning rather than solely measuring it.

It is important that Christian school teachers carefully examine the role of assessment within their own classrooms. Assessment is a tool which both teachers and students use.

Assessment in the Christian classroom should encourage growth and maturity in students' knowledge and understanding of God's world and their role within His world. This should be administered by the Christian teacher with love, patience, and grace. Formative assessment should thrive within the Christian classroom because attention is given to the diverse learner, learning is emphasized as a process, and a collaborative learning partnership is forged between teacher and student.

Unfortunately no specific studies are available which document the benefit that formative assessment has within Christian schools. A lack of understanding of formative assessment and an unwillingness to stray from historical or traditional methods of assessment may be factors inhibiting its inclusion within more classrooms today (Popham, 2008). Christian schools need to critically examine formative assessment and explore the benefits to its implementation in their classrooms.

### **Problem Statement**

Knowles and Brown (2000) defined assessment as "a set of strategies for discovering what students know or can do as a result of engaging in learning experiences" (p. 127). These strategies can be classified as either summative or formative in nature. Summative assessment is designed to evaluate student learning after instruction has taken place. Formative assessment is a process designed to give feedback to both the teacher and student while instruction is taking place. These formative assessments are then used to modify, change, or enhance the instructional strategies the teacher has chosen to use as a way to maximize student learning and develop a productive learning environment.



Summative assessment in and of itself will not meet the diverse needs of the Christian school student. However, within a Christian school classroom, formative assessment helps the student better understand the process of learning and helps the student become a more discerning disciple of Jesus Christ. This research project will seek to address the following two questions:

1. With an increased emphasis in today's schools on summative assessment, how does formative assessment support the purpose of assessment within the Christian school?
2. What are successful ways Christian school teachers can integrate formative assessment into their classrooms?

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms have been adapted from a variety of sources. The original source can be found after the definition.

Assessment- A comprehensive set of strategies and activities used for gauging what students know and can do as a result of the learning opportunities to which they have been exposed (Knowles & Brown, 2000).

Evaluation- A value or judgment assigned to a student's performance using external sources such as tests or grades (Knowles & Brown, 2000).

## Literature Review

Historically, the primary purpose of assessment has been to identify differences in achievement and compare test-takers based on performance. Popham (2008) wrote that shortly after World War I standardized tests were introduced as a way to compare test-takers to one another. The results of these assessments were norm-referenced with the results of a previous group of tests takers, and a percentile rank was assigned. A test taker was given a rank based on how many test takers from the norm referenced group scored above or below on the same standardized test. Today's standardized tests can be traced back to the Army Alpha test which was used to compare potential army officer candidates. National standardized tests made their appearance in schools a few years later (Popham, 2008).

Today, the same types of tests are used to gauge instructional effectiveness despite the fact that they were created to be comparative in nature, not as means to judge instructional effectiveness (Popham, 2008). In 2001, *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* was created with the belief that improvements could be made to the quality of education within public schools if high standards were established. The quality of education was to be judged on students' performances on standardized tests. Unfortunately, this legislation has often led teachers to engage in instructional strategies which are not effective in promoting productive, nurturing learning environments. In an effort to prepare students for success on such tests, many teachers unintentionally devalue the process of learning by simply teaching and then testing. Little thought is given to adjustments during the course of instruction because the end goal of such assessments is to produce the highest possible test score, not to provide helpful feedback to teachers and students (Popham, 2008).

Many classify the use of testing as the primary means in judging instructional quality as assessment *of* learning-- simply gathering evidence of student and class achievement at a particular point in time (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002). This model of assessment means unsuccessful students are forced to keep pace with the rest of the class, regardless of whether or not the material has been grasped. According to Chappuis and Stiggins (2002), this traditional model of assessment is founded on two outdated beliefs: first, if learning is to increase, we need to increase students' anxiety; and second, lower-achieving students will be motivated to do better when they compare themselves with higher achieving students. This method of assessment is not viewed as a blessing, but more as a threat hanging over students' heads or something "teachers do to them" (Brouwer, 2007).

In their meta-analysis of over 250 journal articles and studies, Black and Wiliam (1998) concluded that the assessments in classrooms today are filled with problems. Some of the problems these researchers uncovered included the over-use of tests which encouraged superficial learning and memorizing, poor questioning tactics being utilized by teachers, and the overemphasis of assigning grades while underemphasizing constructive feedback and advice from teachers. The lack of understanding of assessment by teachers and the incorrect implementation of assessment strategies fueled Black and Wiliam in their search to find more effective ways assessment can be utilized by teachers within the classroom.

The terms "assessment" and "evaluation" are often used interchangeably but they are quite different. Assessment refers to strategies employed by a teacher that allow students to demonstrate what they have learned as a result of the learning processes they have undergone (Knowles & Brown, 2000). Assessment provides feedback to the students and serves as a tool to diagnose students' progress towards learning goals (Butler & McMunn, 2006). Evaluation

involves judging the quality of students' work. This goes beyond collecting information; it involves making judgments and assigning "value" to students' work. Assessment, on the other hand, is a collaborative process which leads students to improved learning (Butler & McMunn, 2006). When used correctly assessment considers student learning goals, the learning process, and goal revision leading to student improvement (Knowles & Brown, 2000).

According to Van Brummelen (2009), assessment has many different aims. Some of these aims include assessing the extent to which students have met intended learning outcomes, diagnosing learning difficulties, communicating progress of student learning to parents, providing feedback to students, and reporting learning achievement to school boards and governments. Butler and McMunn (2006) argued against the use of labeling one type of assessment as bad while the other as good. Different types of assessment each serve different purposes. Problems arise when one type of assessment becomes the primary means for determining educational effectiveness (Popham, 2008).

### **Summative and Formative Assessment**

There are two types of assessment which fall under the broader assessment umbrella: summative and formative. Popham (2008) described formative assessment as "a way to improve the caliber of still-underway instructional activities" and summative assessment as "a way to determine the effectiveness of already-completed instructional activities" (p. 4). It has only been during the past twenty years that educators have begun discussing the distinctions which exist between summative and formative types of assessment.

Assessment which provides information after the instructional strategies have been completed is considered summative. Summative assessments are used to determine if intended

learning actually took place. These assessments are often used to make statements at a particular point in time to those outside the classroom (Stiggins, Arter & Chappuis, 2007). These statements are used to document individual or class achievement towards standards which have been set by policy makers, program planners, supervisors, or school administrators. The results can be used to certify student competency, to sort students according to achievement, or to determine graduation or promotion eligibility. Teachers use summative assessments when they give final exams, unit projects, and other cumulative tests as a way to determine a report card grade. The main goal of summative assessment is to judge student competency after the instructional phase has been completed (Fisher & Frey, 2007).

Formative assessment occurs when the learning is still taking place. Assessment becomes formative when evidence gathered by the teacher is used to modify teaching processes or strategies to better meet the needs of the learner (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003). These assessments are conducted as learning is taking place and are used to diagnose student needs, to plan the next steps of instruction, and to provide students with feedback they need to improve upon the quality of their work (Stiggins et al., 2007). Formative assessment is a tool which educators can use to gauge student comprehension, direct teaching strategies, and develop relationships with students (Kaftan, Buck, & Haack, 2006). Assessment is formative when the evidence gathered is used to adapt teaching practices to better meet the needs of the diverse student.

In 2006, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) formed an advisory group composed of many of the nation's top education and measurement researchers dedicated to creating a clear definition of formative assessment and discussing how such assessments can be used by teachers (McManus, 2008). In 2008, the same researchers provided a collection of

classroom examples which discussed effective ways formative assessment can be utilized within the classroom. They felt such examples were necessary due to the fact that many teachers and administrators do not have a clear understanding of what formative assessment looks like within a classroom.

One example Wylie (2008) provided included a biology teacher who used formative assessment as a way to quickly gauge student understanding. The teacher would simply read aloud a question and ask students to hold up a “thumbs-up” for true and “thumbs-down” for false. Depending on how students responded, the teacher may have the students present arguments to support their positions, have the students pair together to discuss the issue, or he may decide to present the material using a different instructional approach.

Another example of formative assessment Wylie (2008) discussed involved a middle school math teacher who established a routine to begin class in which students who might have had difficulty with a problem from the assignment could write the problem in question on the board. A student who may be able to successfully complete the problem was able to show the steps they used to correctly solve the problem and would then provide a solution on the board beside the problem. If there were alternate ways to solve the problem, those could be included on the board by other students and the class would discuss which method was correct in solving the problem. This is a concrete use of formative assessment as it promotes collaboration among peers and a component of peer assessment (Wylie, 2008).

### **A Christian View of the Student, Purpose of Education, and Assessment**

In order to determine how formative assessment fits with the purpose of assessment within the Christian school classroom, a Christian teacher’s view of the student, purpose of education, and view of assessment must be addressed.

**The student.** Each student within the Christian classroom has unique gifts and abilities given to them by God. It is this diversity which makes the unique fabric of the Christian classroom. Yet despite the diversity which exists in personalities, giftedness, and abilities, there are several key components which all students share.

Each student in the Christian classroom is an image bearer of God. Reformed educational philosopher Beversluis (1971) believed that student's image bearing qualities are of great importance when it comes to education. Image bearers, according to Beversluis, are undivided physical-spiritual persons who have been given unique endowments for thinking, choosing, and creating. It is with these endowments that we have been called to live in social relationships with others, offering them to God out of obedience and worship.

Students have been created by God, for God. Being an image bearer means that students reflect the image of their Creator. While students do bear the image of their Creator, the Bible also states that each person (and thus each student) is unique (Van Brummelen, 2009). I Corinthians 12:12 states, "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ."

Another important characteristic of students is their desire to learn about the world around them and understand how they can find their own unique place within the world. All students have the ability to contribute to the life of the classroom in a positive way, each using his or her own abilities to serve God and others (Van Brummelen, 2009). Teachers must work to establish a culture among their students which teaches them to fulfill God's calling in their lives by developing their abilities and using them to serve God and other in His world. Students have unlimited potential, and their greatest need is to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior (Knight, 1998). It is from this central idea that the purpose of Christian education flows.

**Purpose of education.** The uniqueness of each child and an understanding of the role he or she plays within the classroom and the world at large, ultimately shapes the purpose of Christian education. The purpose of Christian education accepts the wholeness of students and chooses strategies that will bring them to maturity as whole persons (Beverluis, 1971). Such strategies include challenging students' assumptions about the world, increasing students' awareness of the role they play within the world, and developing knowledge and understanding of God and His world.

According to Wolterstorff (1969), one aim of Christian education must be to prepare students to live the Christian life within a contemporary society. Christian education is designed to equip students to take up their own place in God's narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation (Brouwer, 2007). Accordingly, the purpose of Christian education is not to isolate or indoctrinate students but rather to equip them for service in God's world. Christian education challenges students to develop a critical awareness of the world around them and an understanding of what it means to be a disciple of God who hears and does the will of the Lord. Wolterstorff (1969) also pointed out that the purpose of education focuses on the nature of the student, the student's life of faith, and the role he or she plays within a larger community. Wolterstorff (1969) summed up the purpose of Christian education as preparation for the Christian life. Teachers play a vital role in preparing students for the Christian life.

**Assessment.** Often it is assumed that assessment is simply reporting a student's progress to parents and administration. However, if all classroom activities and interactions are seen as valuable and important in developing the whole student, assessment must then serve as a valuing activity as well. Within a Christian classroom assessment is directly tied to the nature of the student and the purpose of education.



One of the primary purposes of assessment within the Christian classroom is to provide feedback to both the teacher and the student in terms of progression towards established learning goals. Assessment in the Christian classroom is used by parents, students, and teachers as a way to establish a collaborative relationship and ensure all parties are working together. This collaboration also serves as a way to align student and teacher expectations. Honest, clear feedback provides the student with reinforcement of what they are currently doing well and also areas where they can seek improvement.

Another purpose assessment serves within the Christian classroom is that it provides an opportunity for the teacher to enable students to understand their strengths and develop their own unique giftedness (Van Brummelen, 2009). Because each student is a unique learner, assessment should provide ways to celebrate each student's individual talents and abilities. Assessment gives teachers the opportunity to partner with students in developing God-given abilities, unique giftedness, and God-honoring potential.

Van Brummelen (2009) asserted that despite the challenges which exist within assessment, joy can be found when students understand learning as a process in which God unfolds His redeeming plan for their lives. When teachers lovingly walk alongside students, assessment is seen by the student as a valuable, constructive process towards maturity in Christ. In celebrating student successes and providing support for areas which need improvement, assessment aims to help students become knowledgeable, competent disciples of Jesus Christ (Van Brummelen, 2009). Problems may arise when assessment does not have the diverse nature of the student in mind.

All teachers must utilize summative assessment within their classrooms. Teachers must report progress to parents at the end of the year and provide administrators, boards, and other

policy makers with evidence of progress towards established goals. A test can be an effective way for a student to demonstrate what has been learned. However, answering a question correctly on a test does not mean the student knows the subject as well as the teacher might think. Grades alone are poor indicators for assessing students' progress in education (*This We Believe*, 2003). While summative assessment does play a role in the process of learning, it is not the final indicator that learning has actually taken place. Much research shows that summative assessments utilized in classrooms are filled with problems and shortcomings (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

One problem which occurs when summative assessments are incorrectly used is that test scores become the measuring stick by which teachers and schools are judged. Black and Wiliam (1998) concluded that short, superficial tests dominate teachers' work and encourage drilling to produce only correct answers, not learning. This use of assessment does little to encourage students to strive for learning. Consequently, the pressure which is placed upon teachers and schools to "measure up" leads teachers to act against their better judgment about the ways to develop learning among their students. A recent article in the *USA Today* reported that over one hundred Atlanta public school teachers and administrators were accused of manipulating student answers on state standardized tests (Toppo, 2011). The probe found that dozens of educators secretly gave kids correct answers on standardized tests or changed wrong answers once kids handed in score sheets. Teachers faced the pressure to have their students excel on these tests. The test results became the focus, not student learning. When test results are used as the primary way to evaluate quality of teaching and schooling, the ways in which students are taught will be dictated by what is on the test.

Another aspect of summative assessment which may lead to problems is the belief that competition and comparison are essential in promoting high achieving students and schools. Most of today's teachers are anxious about preparing their students for standardized tests (Vars, 2001). Politicians, school boards, parents, and the public demand higher test scores and accountability. These standardized tests are designed to produce a spread in scores among students, schools, and districts despite the fact that they remain instructionally insensitive (Popham, 2008). Nonetheless, schools view these assessments as a way to demonstrate the quality of the education they provide as compared to other schools; thus students identify assessment as competitive in nature (Vars, 2001). While such testing is expected to increase achievement and confidence among students, the opposite is the case. Research studies have shown that "high stakes testing" has a negative impact on low-achieving students who believe they lack ability due to low test scores (Black et al., 2003). Other areas of concern that Black and Wiliam (1998) observed include increased anxiety in students, a widening of the gap between high achieving and low achieving students, and low-achieving students deliberate underperformance on tests because they were already failing.

Others argue that summative tests often encourage rote memorization, and thus superficial learning. When a classroom focuses on rewards, grades, or ranking, students will look for ways to earn the highest possible "grade" rather than try to improve their learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). The motivation for all classroom activities becomes focused on test results, rather than learning. Teachers then teach towards the test with the overarching goal of high test scores. Students spend time and energy looking for "the right answer" and even are reluctant to ask questions for fear of being labeled as someone who lacks ability (Black & Wiliam, 1998). While summative tests do serve in helping students review material, they must also help students

to understand that material in a broader context (Van Brummelen, 2009). When a school solely uses a test to direct instructional strategies, learning as a dynamic process is lost.

If used correctly, summative assessment serves a valuable purpose within the Christian classroom. However, the overuse of such assessments in schools has led to many problems. Many researchers agree that this issue has no easy solution and will require a dramatic shift in thinking about assessment.

### **Successful Formative Assessment in the Christian School Classroom**

For the Christian school teacher, the nature of the student, the purpose of education, and the view of assessment are closely related. One cannot view assessment without taking into account the image-bearing qualities of the student and the preparatory goal of Christian education. How then does formative assessment support the purpose of education within a Christian school? Three major themes have emerged from the research.

One area in which formative assessment supports the purpose of education is in the fact that this type of assessment recognizes and respects the individuality, uniqueness, and worth of each student. Romans 4:4-5 says, “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” Because one of the primary purposes of Christian education is to equip students to take up their role within God’s redemptive narrative, students must understand what their role is and that their role has value. Each student contributes to the fabric of the classroom and is special in God’s eyes. Van Brummelen (2009) stated that because each student is unique and distinct, the teacher must use diverse teaching and learning approaches to meet their needs.

Formative assessment refers to ongoing assessments, observations, and revisions designed to improve instructional strategies during instruction by offering feedback to both the teacher and the student (Popham, 2008). As the teacher identifies strengths and weaknesses in each student through periodic observations and assessments, revisions to instructional strategies are made which enhance each student's ability to learn and comprehend the material. Formative assessment is more diagnostic in nature as compared to summative assessment because it provides the needed feedback which encourages individual improvement (Butler & McMunn, 2006). When assessment is formative in nature, the personal worth of each student as an image bearer of God is celebrated.

Another aspect in which formative assessment supports the purpose of education within the Christian school is that formative assessment values learning as a process and not simply a product. Knowles and Brown (2003) claimed that meaningful assessment values learning as a process rather than a product of one's performance on a standardized test. They argued that traditional tests, due to their emphasis on recall, fail to encourage students to develop their abilities. Knowles and Brown (2003) also stated that assessment must focus on meaningful learning experiences and not the simple recall of facts. "Learning occurs as much in the unfolding of the process as it does in the completion of the final project or culminating performance" (p.131).

Formative assessment not only judges what students know, but also highlights the subtleties of their cognitive growth and development over time (Butler & McMunn, 2006). If ongoing conversations, assessments, and observations indicate that students have not yet mastered the material, the teacher is able to make adjustments to instructional strategies which aid in the process of getting the students to the established learning outcomes set up by the

teacher and student. This process involves careful steps which are planned by the teacher. If done well, noted Van Brummelen (2009), formative assessment “creates confidence in students about their ability to learn and challenges them to continue and improve upon their learning” (p. 142). In other words, formative assessment teaches students to value the process of learning.

Formative assessment also supports the purpose of education within the Christian school by encouraging collaboration between teachers and students. According to Popham (2008) assessment is to be used as a way to open the lines of communication between the teacher and students and allow that information to shape instructional strategies and improve student learning. McManus (2008) suggested that teachers promote a collaborative classroom through the sharing of learning goals, supporting students as they take responsibility in their work, providing feedback, and involving students regarding the direction of instruction. This only occurs if students truly feel they are partners in learning. A classroom culture which encourages respect, transparency, and an appreciation of diversity fosters a productive learning environment. In this type of classroom culture students will understand they play a key role in collaborating with teachers and peers (McManus, 2008). In this context, assessment becomes a blessing.

Students, however, have a difficult time seeing assessment as a blessing. Brouwer (2007) wrote that most students view assessment as a reward for doing well on a test or as a threat for poor achievement. Brouwer(2007) stated that if assessment is understood by teachers, it can be a blessing. Van Brummelen (2009) also stated that assessment must support rather than test student learning. He noted, “Students will sense that teachers use assessment to work with them to develop and apply concepts, abilities, and creative gifts that enable them to contribute positively to God’s kingdom and society” (p. 144).

Formative assessment works best when a teacher and student work together. Whether it is collaborating in establishing student goals, adjusting instructional strategies, evaluating student progress, or providing constructive feedback, a teacher and student must partner together in formative assessment (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002). Students must be equipped to think for themselves by teachers who are committed to the development of each student (Knight, 1998). Formative assessment provides natural collaboration in which teachers can guide and equip students for ownership in their learning and maturity in Christ.

In a Christian school assessment should always give students an opportunity to show the journey they are on as they learn about God's sovereignty, the authority of the Bible, and the effects of sin in the world (Vander Ark, 2000). Summative assessment alone does not give students an opportunity to show their teacher the gains which have taken place. Formative assessment, when skillfully and loving integrated within the Christian school classroom affirms the purpose of assessment within Christian schools.

### **Discussion**

An overdependence on summative assessment has led to confusion regarding the purpose of assessment in school. Formative assessment, however, complements the purpose of education within the Christian classroom. When assessments become formative in nature, the benefits within a Christian classroom become clear: individualized attention is given to diverse learners; learning is valued as a process not a product; and, ultimately a collaborative partnership is forged between teacher and student.

## Implications

Popham (2008) noted that most of today's teachers have a rough idea of what formative assessment is. However, a "rough idea" of what formative assessment is does not mean teachers will fully possess the knowledge of how to implement formative assessment within their respective classrooms. Black and Wiliam's (1998) research showed that formative assessment improves student learning. With increased pressure to "perform" on accountability tests, teachers recognize the problems associated an over-reliance on such tests but they are unsure of where to turn.

Considering that so many educators are now figuratively drowning in an ocean of accountability, it's not surprising to see formative assessment cast in the role of life preserver. If it is true that drowning people will grasp at straws in an effort to stay afloat, it is surely true that they will grasp even more eagerly at "research-proven" straws.

(Popham, 2008, p. 2)

Then, what formative assessment strategies are teachers able to implement which support the purpose of assessment with the Christian school? Four key formative strategies emerged from the research: questioning, self and peer assessment, written and verbal feedback from teachers, and formative use of summative tests.

**Questioning.** Studies have shown that teachers do not adequately plan for dialogue and questioning that will effectively help students comprehend (Black, et al., 2004). Fisher and Frey (2007) made the argument that teachers primarily use questioning as a means to check factual comprehension. One study found that the average wait time between a teacher asking a question and waiting for a response was 0.9 seconds (Black et al., 2003). This short amount of time does



not give the students adequate time to comprehend what has been asked or give the students time to formulate a response. Questioning is an important component of assessment, but often this formative tool is wrongly utilized by many teachers.

Van Dyk (2000) suggested that teachers should use divergent questions, that is, questions which have the potential to open other doors to discussion. When teachers carefully listen to their students, responses can provide meaningful ways to assess student knowledge (Butler & McMunn, 2006). Teachers must demonstrate willingness to provide adequate time for students to answer posed questions. Increasing wait time can help more students become participants in class discussions (Black, et al., 2004).

Teachers must possess the ability to listen to the student responses and, if possible, continue the use of questioning to further understand the students' perspective or comprehension of the issue being discussed. According to Van Dyk (2000), questioning techniques may indeed bear the stamp of the Christian classroom, especially if the teacher is clearly focused on the student response. Questioning provides teachers with an opportunity to hear a student's unique perspective on a subject and then adjust instruction to better meet the needs of the diverse student.

Questioning is an important formative strategy because it allows the teacher to receive immediate feedback which may be then used to adjust instruction. One specific questioning strategy a teacher can use in the classroom is the "thumbs-up" and "thumbs-down" approach. This strategy involves a teacher either making a statement which the students can evaluate as "true" or "false. The teacher may also elicit a "thumbs-up" or "thumbs-down" after a new concept has been introduced to the students to check student comprehension. Another questioning strategy involves a "KWL" chart (Know, Want to Know, and Learned). This

questioning strategy involves teachers asking the class what they already know about a particular topic and what they would like to learn about the topic. The information gathered on this chart can then be used to modify instructional strategies. After this lesson or unit is over, the teacher can ask the class what they have learned. Another questioning strategy known as “think-pair-share,” encourages students to reflect upon the teacher’s question, pair with a partner, and share their response. This technique builds a collaborative classroom.

**Self-assessment and peer-assessment.** According to Van Brummelen (2009), “assessment is not always done by the teacher. [In formative assessment], students learn to assess and evaluate their own work, and also learn to contribute to the learning of others through peer assessment” (p.171). Because students need to understand the various goals of their learning, it is important that students learn the skill of self-assessment (Black et al., 2003). Throughout the formative assessment process, students are encouraged to monitor their own efforts, often reporting to the teacher or peers regarding their progress (Graham, 2003). Students’ own reflections regarding the quality of their own work inform teachers about adjustments which need to be made. Self-assessment can only occur when the teacher has partnered with the students in establishing goals or targets for the students to work towards.

Peer assessment and self-assessment complement each other (Black, et al., 2004). Graham (2003) also contended that because a Christian classroom is a place of love and acceptance, a natural way to incorporate peer assessment exists. Van Dyk (2000) suggested giving students the opportunity to question and respond to one another as a way to promote learning. He also commented that a classroom which is collaborative in nature actually exemplifies God’s design for image bearers who are engaged in service to others.

Formative assessment is a process in which a teacher and student can collaborate together to monitor and evaluate the student's progress towards established learning goals. The teacher must encourage students to be reflective regarding their own work and also the work of others. Popham (2008) warned that teachers play a critical role in ensuring that students are trained in ways to give accurate, thoughtful, and constructive feedback to their peers. It is ultimately the teacher's responsibility to closely monitor these informal peer assessments. In self-assessment, Black and Wiliam (1998) argue that before a student can begin the process of assessing their own work, there must be a clear understanding of what the goal is for the student, where the student is currently at, and what steps can be taken to narrow the gap between the two. However, prior to this occurring the teacher must set clear boundaries, expectations, and parameters in which the student is able to assess their work based on standards the teacher has previously set.

One way in which peer assessment can easily be integrated into the classroom is through the use of rubrics. Students can review each other's work and provide written comments regarding areas where their peers can improve. McManus (2008) suggested when students provide feedback to their peers they use a strategy called "two stars and a wish." The two "stars" refer to areas of a student's work which were particularly strong and the "wish" identifies one area the peer may improve upon. Students are challenged to reflect upon the feedback they receive and are then given time to make adjustments or improvements to their own work.

**Descriptive feedback from teacher.** If students are struggling, the most logical way for a teacher to intervene is to dialogue with the student (Butler & McMunn, 2006). Feedback from the teacher is a formative tool within the Christian classroom in that it provides opportunities for communication, dialogue, and collaboration between teacher and student. Because a teacher is

also an image bearer of God, open dialogue between the teacher and students leads to a truer sense of community within the classroom (Graham, 2003).

One way in which a teacher can provide clear feedback to a respective student is by placing specific comments or marks on written work. One study found that students who received personal comments and suggestions from their teacher showed greater learning gains than those who were simply assigned a letter grade (Black et al., 2003). The same study noted that student learning was improved when each student was given specific guidance on strengths and areas which could be improved upon. Under the watchful eye of the teacher, this sort of collaborative classroom promotes relationships in which students take responsibility for one another's learning, especially when the teacher models clear expectations to students (Van Dyk, 2000).

Descriptive feedback gives the student a clear idea of what they can do but also provides clear suggestions of what they can do in order to meet the goals the teacher and student have established. One strategy a teacher can use which provides descriptive feedback is setting up brief meetings with each student following a summative test or a major project. The teacher can provide the student feedback regarding areas which the student did well in but also the teacher can provide an oral explanation of areas the student can work to improve upon. When the student understands what improvements need to be made in the future and the teacher is there to encourage them in meeting these goals, the student will be more inclined to rise to the challenge. Descriptive feedback focuses on specific areas the student can improve upon.

**Formative use of summative assessment.** If a teacher does not clearly communicate the purpose and limitations of testing, students will be unable to grasp the necessary role testing plays within a classroom. "While we cannot single-handedly change the testing climate

overnight, we can create classrooms where testing is understood and appreciated by teachers and students for what it can accomplish” (Fisher & Frey, 2007, p. 99). One way in which a teacher can use summative assessment in a formative way is to allow students to create and then answer their own questions (Black, et al., 2003).

Another way to use summative assessment effectively is to allow opportunities for self and peer-assessment of test answers (Black, et al., 2003). This allows students to rework answers in class as a way to better promote learning. A test not only gives students an opportunity to show what they have learned but also provides teachers with a teaching tool (Vander Ark, 2000). Summative assessments can measure what students have learned but they are also a learning opportunity themselves. As long as questions are open ended and give students an opportunity to use their minds according to their development, summative assessment can be used in a formative manner (Graham, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

Christian school teachers must be encouraged to examine the use of formative assessment within their respective classroom. Summative assessment, in and of itself, does not recognize the diverse nature of the Christian school student. When Christian teachers carefully integrate formative assessments, these assessments become a transformational agent in the hands of the teacher. Students are given freedom in developing their own giftedness as image bearers of God, they come to understand learning is a process and not something which can always be measured at a particular point in time, and they come to realize that the teacher uses assessment not as a threat, but as a tool which encourages collaboration and shared partnership within the Christian school classroom.

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