Teachers May Need to Deepen Assessment Practices for Common Core

By Liana Heitin

For Olivia Lozano and Gabriela Cardenas, team teachers at the UCLA Lab School in Los Angeles, understanding what each of their students know and can do at any point in time is so integral to their practice that they call themselves "teacher researchers."

Over the 10 years they've worked together, the two have put formative assessment at the center of their instructional routines. Each day during workshop time, they pull students aside one-on-one or in small groups to ask open-ended questions about the lesson at hand and to gain insight into each 1st and 2nd graders' thinking.

"I have a conferencing binder where I'm taking copious notes on each individual student. I analyze their work and see where they're at," said Lozano. "I really feel it's grounded me and how I make decisions about what my next pedagogical move will be."

More than just a buzzword among savvy educators, formative assessment is the ongoing process of collecting data on what students know or don't know, and changing instruction accordingly. The idea is that with a clear vision of the progress each student is making, teachers can adjust their lesson plans and provide necessary interventions to improve individual achievement. As Nancy Gerzon, a researcher at the San Francisco-based WestEd who specializes in formative assessment, explained, "It's differentiation with more evidence as to why you're differentiating."

For many teachers, formative assessment has traditionally consisted of quick checks for understanding, Friday quizzes, or exit slips as students head out the door. But as the majority of teachers around the country transition to the Common Core State Standards—which are designed to emphasize complexity, critical thinking, and skills like collaboration and reasoning—some experts say more teachers need to deepen their assessment practices. In other words, they need to begin seeing themselves, like Lozano and Cardenas, as teacher researchers.
A Full Picture

"If you're asking students to think critically, you have to have formative-assessment practices that tap into that critical thinking," explained Nancy Frey, an education professor at San Diego State University and co-author of a book on formative assessment.

The common standards are asking students to do that and more. They are aimed at "building childrens' capacity to think, and analyze, and communicate, and reason," said Margaret Heritage, the assistant director for professional development at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing at UCLA. "We need to know if [students are] grappling with complex ideas," said Heritage, who mentored Lozano and Cadenas. "Where are they? Is the idea beginning to consolidate? What do I need to do to go deeper and really help them get this?"

All of that may be tough to measure with quick-answer questions or exit slips. Instead, to get a full picture of student understanding, teachers need to ask open-ended questions and push students to explore ideas aloud, the UCLA educators say. "When [students are] solving problems mathematically, they say, 'I did it in my head,'" said Cardenas. "And you ask, 'Can you let me in to what's going on? Into your thinking?"

With the common standards, "classrooms will look different," said Heritage. "We'll need a lot more talking, more focus, more discourse, more depth."

Cardenas and Lozano spend conference time asking guiding questions and posing strategies to help lead students toward an answer—and to get them talking about their thinking. "You're developing their metacognition skills, helping them think about 'What kind of a learner am I? What's going to help me learn better?,'" Lozano explained. "It helps to give them a voice."

Consortia Comparison

The national consortia charged with creating common-core-aligned tests are taking different approaches to formative-assessment items.

Listening Skills

Perhaps the most central aspect of being an effective teacher researcher, the team teachers say, is listening. In addition to paying attention to what students express during one-on-one sessions, teachers should be listening to what students say throughout class. "When children are working together, we can also listen in," said Lozano. "And when they're having a difficult time explaining [what we're working on] to each other, we can say, 'OK, this child needs more support.'"

Frey of San Diego State University tells teachers that, when listening closely to students, "The question you have to ask yourself is not whether the answer is correct or incorrect, but rather what is it likely that that student knows and doesn't know in this moment in time that would lead him to that response?"

"It takes a different kind of listening," Frey said, and rather than an innate talent, it is "a habit to be developed."

Another technique for potentially deepening assessment practices—and complying with the new...
standards' focus on collaboration and communication—is to have students assess each other.

Amanda Pecsi, director of curriculum at the Washington, D.C.-based Center City Public Charter Schools, pointed out that one of the mathematical practices required by the common standards is to "construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others." She said this may lead to teachers using more peer review during their lessons. "Ideally we want to be moving into a place where students are doing that heavy lifting and their formative assessment is how they evaluate someone else and how they talk about it."

**Moving Toward Inquiry**

Pecsi noted, however, that getting teachers to that point will be a process.

As of now, most of the K-8 math teachers in Center City school use an "I do, we do, you do" lesson format. After direct instruction, the students and teacher do a problem together, during which the teacher walks around to do a quick check for understanding, Pecsi explained. The lesson ends with a one- or two-question exit ticket, often made up of multiple-choice items pulled from an online assessment bank.

In light of the math common standards' emphasis on performance tasks and constructing arguments, however, Pecsi said teachers will need to begin using more inquiry-based problem-solving. That might entail "20 minutes of students digging deep into one problem and debating," she said. "Ideally that could be an entire lesson eventually. And that would drastically change what our formative assessment looks like."

Rather than asking multiple-choice questions or scanning quickly for right and wrong, teachers will need to be attuned to what students are saying during those discussion and debate sessions. "If you're walking around with a clipboard or notebook as kids are working through application, you're hearing, are they using mathematical thinking? Are they attending to precision? How well are they using the mathematical practices?" said Pecsi.

And while some teachers are already asking these questions, full-scale adoption of new assessment techniques will not happen overnight. "I see this as being a three-year process, even though we only have a year before PARCC [the common core-aligned assessment to be used in Washington] starts," Pecsi said. "It will take time to evolve to the point where we change to meet where the common core asks us to. In our urban environment, it's particularly difficult."

**Assessment Tools**

Meanwhile, the two main common-core assessment groups—the aforementioned Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium—are planning to support teachers with formative assessment.

Smarter Balanced is putting out a "digital library," which Chrys Mursky, the group's director of professional learning, emphasized is "not a test bank of items" but a group of digital resources aimed at helping teachers build their own formative assessments. The library will be available by the time the Smarter Balanced assessments are ready to use, but only for teachers in states that purchase the full suite of tests.

http://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2014/03/05/ndia_formativeassessment.html?nl=PWPVDvZ5fadD8inQdQWtbV%2BRtDDrdGHRr17t9&print=1
PARCC plans to have adaptive, **online "non-summative" tests** for students available to all teachers in PARCC states. However, Bob Bickerton, co-chair of the PARCC non-summative working group, said the consortium is still currently looking for a vendor for some of the formative tools, so those will not be available until the 2015-16 school year.

But it remains to be seen whether these formative-assessment tools can really offer the deep dive into student understanding that teachers are likely to be aiming for. And according to Frey, teachers are "shifting from understanding formative assessments as a noun—as a bunch of tools—to really thinking more closely about formative assessment as a practice," and seeing more opportunities for ongoing data collection.

The data teachers are looking for, Frey said, is "all around you. It's whether you choose to pay attention to it and act upon it. That's where the struggle is."

*Coverage of policy efforts to improve the teaching profession is supported by a grant from the Joyce Foundation, at [www.joycefdn.org/Programs/Education](http://www.joycefdn.org/Programs/Education). Education Week Teacher retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.*

WEB ONLY