

Teacher Reflections on Mindset Shifts in Formative Assessment

“I’m a completely different learner in formative assessment right now compared to a year ago. I can’t imagine how different I’m going to be in another year.”

-Jennifer Lowther, Tulsa Public Schools teacher

One of the most critical moments for teachers learning formative assessment is when they shifted their mindset about the potential for the student role in learning. This mindshift occurs when a teacher realizes students have the capacity to gauge where they are in their own learning, to set their own goals for next steps, and to help their peers tackle learning challenges. We interviewed two teachers to learn more about their journey and explore their reflections about these changes to the teacher and student roles. Below, we share what they view as primary outcomes, challenges, and strategies for encouraging this shift.

What Does the Change in Student Role Look Like?

Both teachers we interviewed described shifts in their mindsets as they gained experience in formative assessment. Jennifer Lowther, a teacher from Will Rogers Junior High School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, put it like this:

We talk a lot about our mindset shift. I call it a philosophy, like a classroom philosophy. You really have to change it and shift it, and that kind of collectively happened for us in December. So I feel like we’ve really been diving in for the last four months.

Esmeralda Hernandez, who teaches 3rd/4th grade bilingual math and science at Ben Milam Elementary School in Dallas, shared how a change in the student role has helped students experience their own mindset shifts, enabling them to take ownership of their own learning:

I noticed that the students are more positive and they want to learn. Math has become an area of strength for all of them. It’s just been very powerful to see that they own their learning, and that they can all achieve. Because that is the shift in the mindset that they can all achieve, because maybe before they would think, “Oh, I’m not good at this.”

These teachers also shared that this mindset shift does not necessarily happen all at once but can come slowly. For example, they may see first that students are more competent than they expected at using Success Criteria to evaluate their learning status. Then, later on, they may glean that students can also participate in co-creating the Learning Goals and Success Criteria, as well as participate in decisions about how to move learning forward. As Esmeralda mentioned, students may also begin to develop positive learner identities as a result of these shifts. However, making this transition is not without its roadblocks.

Making the Transition

Sometimes, even with an evolving understanding, teachers may struggle with applying a more student-centered model in their own classrooms. Teachers sometimes fear that their classrooms could become too chaotic, that they could lose control and never get it back. Yet as these two teachers gained more experience, they also said that they could begin to see a path forward. While it could get messy, and many wrong turns could be taken, the benefit of shifting the roles in the classroom so that students have more say, more agency, and more buy-in, are invaluable. Jennifer explained that, "I feel like my expectations of them are changing, so how I define the student role is changing." This perspective also leaves open the possibility for future change as her expectations of students continue to evolve.

It is usually a long journey to realize the vision of students as equal stakeholders, even after deciding it's necessary. Teachers rarely have models to show them the way forward. Many teachers who see the benefit of sharing responsibility of learning with students don't always believe it is possible with their students or their grade level.

Using Transparency as a Strategy for Moving Forward

However challenging, these teachers talked about wanting to continue making this shift in the student role. Once Jennifer understood the mindset change needed, she decided to engage her students by becoming completely transparent with them about her own learning, as well as theirs. Here's what she said about starting with a new group of students in the middle of the school year:

A lot of what was different at that point was what I was telling students. I was very transparent about my goals for myself for the next three or four months and what I wanted to get out of my time with them. And then we started talking about what I hoped they got out of that time. I promised, you can learn from me, but I'm working on all of these things.

I was also really honest about what I wanted them to hold me accountable for. I said, "One of my goals is that we have a Learning Goal and Success Criteria every day that you understand and that you can use." And there have been days where I've been sick the day before, and I show up, and I don't really know what's going on, and they wanna know where their Learning Goal is. So that was a huge difference for them. And

I think I can tell it was different for them to hear their teacher talking to them about what they were wanting to learn. What I was wanting to learn. So that immediately affected our dynamics.

With this approach, Jennifer positioned herself as a learner and the students as important supporters of her learning. She also modeled that it's okay for them to share where they are in their own learning and to identify as beginners. This sets up a powerful model and helps establish a trusting and more equitable classroom culture.

Esmeralda also shared how she works to increase the capacity of students to drive their own learning. She said, "My students have learned to identify their needs and create a path to get to their goals." When asked about what scaffolds and supports she provides students as they use formative assessment, she stated, "A lot of modeling and sitting with them and going over the work." Just like Jennifer, Esmeralda also relies on transparency as an important strategy in her formative assessment practice. For her, transparency comes in the form of think alouds while she is modeling:

It's a lot of me thinking out loud for them at the beginning. I have to say, "Okay so this is what I'm thinking." "Oh, I struggle with these things, too." So giving them examples of how I struggle myself and how they can correct me shows them how everybody makes mistakes, and that it's okay because this is how we learn.

Closing Thoughts

Both teachers highlight important issues as well as solutions for implementing formative assessment. Jennifer hit on a final important strategy when she said:

Something that I underestimated in formative assessment is how much I really need to know about each of my students. Because you're asking them to do things that are harder...or [work in] a situation that is uncomfortable for them, even if the tasks aren't any harder. Because you're really putting that responsibility of learning on them.

When they know their students well, these teachers have found that they are better equipped to accurately interpret evidence of learning. They also hint at a two-way transparency that develops in formative assessment, where there is a new "honesty" about what each person in the classroom knows, including the teacher and the students. This supports the development of a supportive classroom culture where individuals aren't afraid to show what they know and ask for help. It also creates more and better evidence of student learning.

As these teachers have shared with us, it is their daily practices that establish an openness about learning. Their intention to really get to know students through listening, observing, and asking questions enables them and their students to make the mindset shift towards greater shared responsibility for learning. Creating space and structure for ongoing dialogue and interactions between teachers and students become key points of entry for noticing and sensemaking around student learning. When they've made the shift, the payoff is not only that students learn more, but they learn how to learn, gaining skills that don't fade over time, but instead strengthen as they continue to create their own learning pathways.