

The Relationship Between Formative Assessment and Special Education

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With the last reauthorization of IDEA, a new world of acronyms emerged: RTI, MTSS and UDL, to name a few. Instruction became a focus and how exciting. One of the authors, a veteran director of special education, focused for many years on overseeing special education programs and staff through the very narrow lens of monitoring and compliance, due process requirements, and problem-solving challenging student and staff issues. Sadly, little emphasis was put on instruction. IDEA however, has challenged us as leaders in both Special Education and Curriculum and Instruction to collaborate on efforts to build a system in which all students can be successful. One of the issues we have tackled is the relationship between formative assessment and special education.

The use of formative assessment in special education holds great promise for student achievement (Hattie, 2008). Formative assessment is typically described as assessment for learning and includes the myriad of methods teachers use to check for understanding as they teach. Formative assessment should *inform* instruction by providing feedback teachers can use to make meaningful adjustments in teaching. This distinguishes it from summative assessment, or assessment of learning, which happens at the end of a period of instruction. Referring to the results of their 1986 seminal meta-analysis, Black and Williams (2010) assert: "innovations that strengthen the practice of formative assessment produce significant and often substantial learning gains" (p.7). Bailey and Heritage (2008) conclude: "effective formative assessment could yield improvements in student achievement by 0.4-0.7 standard deviations with the largest gains being realized by low achievers" (p.43).

Formative assessment is most effective when combined with clear learning goals or outcomes and used to provide feedback to students. The power of students understanding the intended goal of instruction and their own progress toward that goal cannot be underestimated (Hattie, 2009). For special education students, these goals may be standards-based classroom goals or the IEP goals that are developed for each student's particular needs. Hattie (2009) states that even setting difficult goals can be effective because they "lead to a clearer notion of success and direct the student's attention to relevant behaviors or outcomes, whereas 'doing your best' can fit with a very wide range of goals" (p.164).

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This combination of setting goals and using formative assessment to provide feedback to students brings the teacher and student into partnership; it allows teachers to be facilitators of learning and engages students as partners in the learning process. However, it is also important to note that teachers need to be intentional in preparing students to respond in the new learning environment. (Duckor, 2014) explains: "unfortunately, the literature on formative assessments provides few accounts of the culture shock many students experience when they're expected to learn in the new and perhaps puzzling manner" (p.29).

To build capacity for our staff, Instructional Leadership is a standing agenda item on our bi-weekly Special Education Coordinators meetings with the Director. Ideas for practical application of instructional strategies such as formative assessments are, in turn, shared with special education staff at the coordinators monthly building meetings with teachers. Working with staff to use at least one formative assessment technique daily enables them to assess the quality of learning for each student. Effective formative assessments should be short and easy to administer frequently. Consider, for instance, the use of exit slips, graphic organizers, teacher observation, effective questioning, or response logs to obtain daily or weekly information. In Becker Public Schools, teachers also use exciting new technology tools such as Kahoots, Socrative, Quizizz, and Edmodo to gather timely data.

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Clearly there are many innovative administrators implementing all kinds of strategies to recruit and retain special educators across the state. These are just three areas for us to focus on as we continue to put out our staffing-shortage fires. Hopefully as more and more strategies are found to be successful, they will be shared and scaled up so that all of Minnesota can weather this drought! ●

Formative Assessment, from page 13.

These efforts to build the capacity of special education teachers, who work with our highest needs students, should be supported and integrated into the continuous improvement activities of the district. When referring to the challenges of implementing new teaching practices, Black and Williams (2010) conclude that the process of changing teaching strategies is "a relatively slow one and takes place through sustained programs of professional development and support" (p.17). It is therefore incumbent on district leadership to focus efforts on research-proven strategies. Instructional leadership is the job of all leaders, and collaborative efforts are more likely to be successful. Our special education students deserve nothing less. ●

REFERENCES

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MASE Leadership Issues, Sauk Rapids Gov't. Center
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Thursday or Friday, October 5 or 6 (TBD)

Annual School Law Seminar, Minneapolis

Monday - Tuesday, October 15-16

Education MN Conference, St. Paul

Wednesday - Friday, October 21-23

MASE Fall Leadership Conference, Cragun's

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CASE Annual Conference, Atlanta, GA

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Thursday - Friday, December 24-25

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