

Focus on FAME

What are the optimal conditions for implementing formative assessment (and the FAME program) in the classroom?

Several conditions are necessary for successful implementation of formative assessment practices. Margaret Heritage, Nancy Gerzon, and Marie Mancuso highlight the context for teacher professional learning and the transformation of classroom practice in “Necessary Conditions for Successful Implementation of Formative Assessment,” prepared for the Dell Foundation Formative Assessment Project.

The authors outline the following three necessary conditions for the successful implementation of formative assessment:

1. Understanding formative assessment as a set of practices, grounded in disciplinary learning, rather than as a test event
2. Sustaining a long-term commitment to lead formative assessment implementation
3. Establishing a culture, structures, and supports for ongoing professional learning for teachers, principals, and district leaders



The implementation of formative assessment involves a change in teachers’ instructional practice, in the role of the student, and in leadership expectations and support. Making these changes can

be challenging, and it is essential that all participants receive support through a change process. The school culture must support risk-taking so that teachers and students can experiment with new practices



It is fair to say that without the commitment and active engagement of leaders, formative assessment implementation has little to no hope of getting off the ground in any meaningful and sustainable way.

– (Heritage, Gerzon, & Mancuso, p. 2)



as they implement the formative assessment process. Leaders can model collaborative relationships and promote “mistakes” as sources of new learning to cultivate a culture of professional learning characterized by respect and trust.

The authors also highlight a number of readiness factors for the district, school, school leadership, and teacher that provide guidance to district and school leaders during the planning for formative assessment implementation. The readiness factors can support districts and schools as they prepare to implement formative assessment.

What are the readiness factors for the teacher?

Teachers and students are at the center of change in the classroom. Teachers need to be willing to change how they think about teaching and the role of their students as learners to implement formative assessment in deep and lasting ways.

To garner the power of formative assessment for learning, teachers need to understand that it is more than a collection of superficial strategies; it is an intentional process that involves a shift in a belief system for effective practice. Teachers must be open to rethink core ideas about instructional practice and classroom culture to change the ways students engage with their learning. Teachers will also need to reflect on their beliefs, their instruction, and ways to deepen disciplinary knowledge as they implement the formative assessment process over time.

What are the optimal conditions for formative assessment in a classroom?

Classroom culture is a key factor in formative assessment. As teachers place students at the center of the learning process, they will need to make changes in the classroom, communicate their expectations, and scaffold structures of support. Sustaining changes in practice over time is critical to create a supportive classroom culture.

The effective implementation of formative assessment in the classroom often means a change in the ways in which teachers instruct, how they relate to their students, and what students are expected to do for themselves and their peers. In many instances, this is an entirely new approach to learning so it must include a change in the classroom culture.

Teachers play a key role in developing a supportive classroom

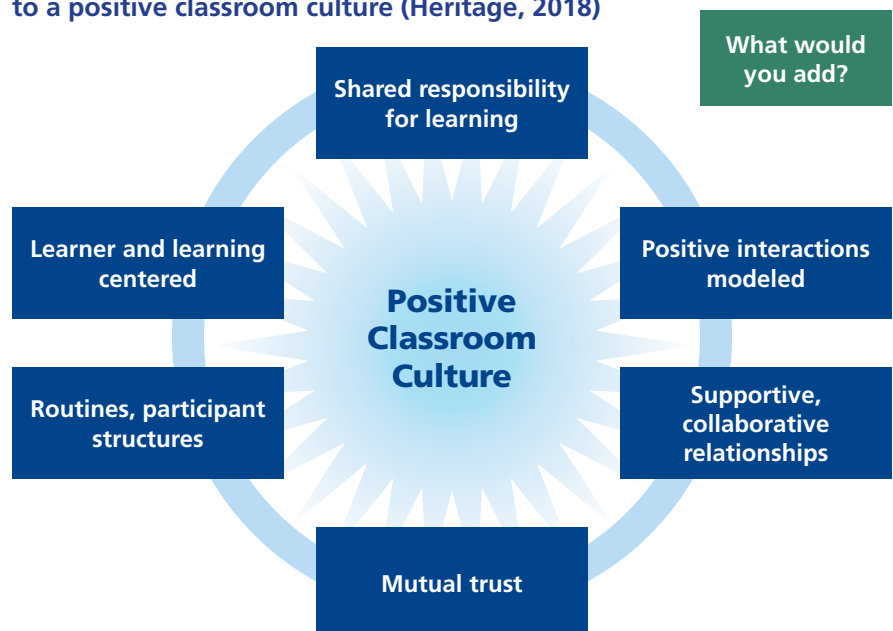
culture and the formative assessment process. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning and to support their peers. The teacher must move students toward a supportive classroom culture through experiences, expectations, and reflections that promote trust and cooperation.

The diagram in Figure 1 outlines classroom culture characteristics that contribute to a positive classroom culture (Heritage, 2018, personal communication). The chart includes:

- Shared responsibility for learning
- Positive interactions modeled
- Supportive, collaborative relationships
- Mutual trust
- Routines, participant structures
- Learner and learning centered

As you review the diagram, consider what other characteristics might you add? How do you or would you create a classroom culture in which each characteristic is present?

Figure 1: Classroom culture characteristics that contribute to a positive classroom culture (Heritage, 2018)



How do I promote a supportive classroom culture?

Teachers can engage in intentional practices to create a classroom in which every student has the right to express his or her thinking, to be respected as a learner, and to be supported by the teacher and peers to take the next steps in learning. Teachers can engage in the following instructional practices:

- establish clear norms, routines, and structures for student sharing and interactions;
- communicate clear learning goals and engage students in goal setting;
- demonstrate care and respect to create positive relationships;
- model specific behaviors;
- provide ample opportunities for practice;
- encourage risk-taking and promote learning from mistakes;
- give students actionable feedback on their progress toward meeting expectations;
- ensure opportunities for collaboration and cooperation through structured group work;
- value and respect all students, ideas, and diversity in the classroom; and
- encourage students to share responsibility for their learning with the teacher and their peers, to express their ideas, and to engage in collaboration with peers.

These practices can help to build a foundation in the classroom; however, the culture does not have to be completely established before engaging in formative assessment. Over time, the culture can support the implementation of the formative assessment process as teachers gather information about student understanding, respond to students' ideas, and support students as they engage in self- and peer assessment. In turn, as teachers and students engage in the formative assessment process, the classroom culture will be further strengthened. The changes will help build new

routines for how teachers and students engage with the content and with one another.

Through interactions in the classroom, the teacher models how to listen and respond to students. As teachers demonstrate care and respect for students and for their ideas, this positive regard shapes how students view themselves, other students, and their identities as learners. The description in Figure 2 provides an example of some practices the teacher can use to promote a supportive classroom culture.

Figure 2: Creating the Desired Classroom Environment

Use the following practices as they appear, or adapt them to your own teaching style and the age and social-skill levels of your students.

- 1: Greet your students at the door every day as they enter your classroom.
- 2: Explain your expectations for classroom behavior.
- 3: Stage an icebreaker to make students more comfortable with their new classmates.
- 4: Convince students that learning how to work effectively with others will benefit them throughout their lives.
- 5: Teach students how to move efficiently and properly into groups of various sizes.
- 6: Use role-playing activities to teach your students cooperative skills.
- 7: Form mixed-ability groups.
- 8: Allow newly formed groups to engage in team-building activities to build group cohesion.
- 9: Allow students to engage in groupwork activities without unnecessary interventions by you.

Resource: Teachers' Curriculum Institute "Bring Learning Alive!"

Findings of the MAC FAME Research and Development Team

Data collected from teachers by the Michigan Assessment Consortium (MAC) FAME Research & Development (R&D) team have long supported the importance of developing a supportive classroom culture that includes trust and a partnership between teachers and students. Two FAME Coaches had this to say:

“When you fully embrace the formative assessment process, it becomes a part of everything you do in the classroom. Every decision you make as an educator is designed to help you know where your students are and how to move them forward. It all starts with classroom culture. A teacher that fully understands formative assessment as a process has to make sure students feel safe to contribute in a classroom community, are willing to take risks and learn from mistakes, and know how to reflect on their own skills and learning. This happens on day one by building a strong classroom culture.”

– Ingrid Dettman, Corunna Public Schools, Corunna, MI (2019)



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“It is imperative to build a foundation of respect, trust, and responsibility within the classroom starting day one. This “we are in this together” mentality slowly builds and permeates the class environment, especially as students realize that it is okay to learn together and help each other. Each person has a responsibility for one’s personal education and for the greater community’s success. Everyone matters. Everyone is part of the TEAM (Together Everyone Achieves More).”

– Mary Helen Diegel, Livonia Public School (2019)

In a classroom observation visit in early 2019, members of the MAC FAME R&D team had the opportunity to talk to and visit with teachers engaged in formative assessment practice in their classroom. **Every** teacher stressed the need to create a supportive culture and positive relationships between teacher and student as well as among students. Formative assessment cannot be effective if this is not established.

Summary

A number of conditions are necessary for successful implementation of the formative assessment process. A supportive classroom can be intentionally cultivated over time. Teachers and students can work together to promote classroom culture characteristics that include:

- shared responsibility for learning;
- positive interactions;
- supportive, collaborative relationships;
- mutual trust;
- routines and participant structures; and
- learner and learning centered environments.

The teacher can model how to listen and respond to students through interactions in the classroom. In turn, relationships based on respect and positive regard can influence students’ identity as learners. Research from the FAME program has further supported the importance of developing a supportive classroom culture that fosters student agency, respect, and mutual trust among the teacher and students.

Learn more

Please visit the FAME website at **FAMEMichigan.org** to view case studies and videos for more information on classroom culture and conditions to support formative assessment. The website includes resources, videos, and vignettes to support effective practice. Teachers may use these resources to engage in discussion and to analyze what contributes to a supportive classroom culture for formative assessment.

REFERENCES

Heritage, M., Gerzon, N. and Mancuso, M. (2017). *Necessary Conditions for Successful Implementation of Formative Assessment*. WestEd.

Bring Learning Alive! Methods to Transform Middle and High School Social Studies Instruction (2010). TCI (Teachers' Curriculum Institute).

What is Formative Assessment?

Formative assessment is a process that occurs during teaching and learning to improve student outcomes. The following definition of formative assessment from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is used by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) in the Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) professional learning program.

“Formative assessment is a planned, ongoing process used by all students and teachers during learning and teaching to elicit and use evidence of student learning to improve student understanding of intended disciplinary learning outcomes and support students to become more self-directed learners.”

(CCSSO SCASS FAST, 2017)

What is FAME?

Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) is a professional learning program in which teams of educators work on learning teams supported by coaches working collaboratively to learn about, implement, and reflect on the formative assessment process. The program involves educators in a multi-year commitment to promote significant change in professional practice, supported by internal and external resources. Since 2006, thousands of educators have participated in the FAME program to guide student learning and teachers' instructional practices across the state.



Resources to Learn More About Formative Assessment and FAME

- Heritage, M. (2007). Formative Assessment: What Do Teachers Need to Know and Do? Kappan, <http://tinyurl.com/Heritage-Kappan>
- Michigan Assessment Consortium. (2016). Learning Point: What constitutes a high-quality, comprehensive, balanced assessment system? Mason, MI: Author.
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- Swaffield, S. (2016). Multilevel Leadership for Assessment for Learning, and the Potential of Critical Friendship. *Leadership in Diverse Learning Contexts*.