

*Transformative Assessment* by W. James Popham.  
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Curriculum Development, 2008. 150 pages. \$22.95.

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The benefits of formative assessment are widely recognized by educational researchers as a powerful instructional method that can increase student understanding and engagement. However, formative assessment (also called assessment for learning, or AfL) faces an all-too-common obstacle to educational reform: Classroom implementation is often incomplete or based on misconceptions of what formative assessment actually is.

W. James Popham, an emeritus professor at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, is among the most articulate advocates of formative assessment. His recent book *Transformative Assessment* offers a comprehensive look at the concept, particularly with respect to getting AfL into the classrooms of in-service teachers. *Transformative Assessment* provides a well-developed description of the key elements of AfL, an overview of what it can do (as well as what it can't), and a guide to implementation.

To be clear, this is a book designed with in-service teachers particularly in mind, rather than educational evaluators or researchers. The conversational style and sense of humor on display throughout *Transformative Assessment* helps keep the writing clear and accessible, without diminishing the importance of the topic. Those used to a denser academic style

may find Popham's prose difficult to adjust to, but we encourage those readers to delve deeper into the material, as Popham's suggestions for implementation are considered and comprehensive.

The book is a slim 142 pages, which makes it an easy read over one or two days. This seems to largely agree with the book's purpose, which is to inform and educate without becoming boring or preachy. The fact that Popham actually succeeds at being both brief and thorough speaks both to his skill as a writer and to his long experience as an educator. He begins by defining exactly what is meant by formative assessment, which we excerpt here because it is both succinct and exhaustive:

Formative assessment is a planned process in which assessment-elicited evidence of students' status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning tactics.

The rest of the book flows naturally from this definition. The strongest sections are chapters three through six, which comprise roughly half the book, and address four levels of implementation of formative assessment. The first level is teachers' instructional changes; implementing formative assessment along Popham's lines requires that teachers identify

when and how to assess their students, and then to make concrete changes to instruction based on the assessment results. Popham does an excellent job here making clear that, as laid out in the definition, formative assessment requires both planning and substantive changes to subsequent instruction.

The second level of implementation requires students to make changes to the way they learn. In our experience, this is the aspect of formative assessment most often ignored in the classroom: It is not enough that teachers make changes; students must also change. The fact that Popham addresses this point here is one of the greatest strengths of the book. Teachers who keep their instruction and assessment techniques opaque to their students are using only a fraction of the power of AfL. However, when teachers are careful to explain to their students what the curricular expectations are, how the students will be measured, and how the students can help themselves and each other meet their learning goals, those teachers increase the likelihood that they will see the improvements for which AfL can be responsible.

The third level of implementation involves changing the classroom climate from one of competition among high-achieving students to one of shared responsibility for and engagement in learning on the part of all students. We'll resist the temptation to stand on the soapbox again here, but altering the classroom environment is an important part of AfL that is also often overlooked. Popham's recognition of it here is astute and again, speaks well of the book as a whole.

The fourth and final level of implementation is schoolwide or districtwide. This section suggests ways to get more teachers involved in formative assessment and may be of least importance to in-service teachers, but of greatest importance to evaluators and researchers who are interested in assessment.

The final chapter deserves attention as well, but we are less positive about it. While it's quite

important to discuss the limitations of any proposed reform, Popham's last twenty pages are unfortunately monopolized by his long experience with standardized tests. We agree in general with the author that standardized tests do not measure the things that formative assessment generally improves (student understanding, engagement, and motivation), but that issue might be more properly included in a book about the limitations of standardized testing. Popham has indeed written such books, and they are as informative and engaging as this one, but his discourse on the subject seems somewhat out of place here.

Overall, *Transformative Assessment* is a timely book. It addresses formative assessment at a time when that concept is at risk of becoming a poorly understood buzzword and has the potential to set any reader on the straight path toward better educational practices. It has a place on our shelf as researchers in AfL, and will be an often-reached-for tool any time we interact with existing school systems at any level.