‘Secondary assessment – formative assessment’ transcript

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PAUL BLACK: Formative assessment is not just a set of tricks for running things a bit better in classrooms. It’s actually revolutionary in opening up, making problematic the way teachers relate to their pupils and the way pupils feel and see themselves as learners.

CHRISTINE HARRISON: I’m passionate about trying to promote the sort of classrooms where children get learning experiences that really take them forward and help them not just with their learn that’s taking place now, but with the future ways that they learn.

NARRATOR: Schools across the country are facing the challenge of finding effective ways to assess the progress of their students. In this programme, two of the country’s leading authorities on formative assessment, Paul Black and Chris Harrison, authors of the influential pamphlet Working Inside the Black Box, outline the principles that underpin their approach to assessment in secondary education.

PAUL BLACK: The key feature is that the teacher finds ways of helping the student to be active in the classroom, and helping the student to speak out and express their ideas. Until that happens, the teacher doesn’t know what’s needed. He might just go on teaching and telling people things, but he may miss completely the fact that they misunderstand, that they’re thinking about something else, and so on.

CHRISTINE HARRISON: In formative assessment, there’s many different areas that teachers and learners need to work on. It all comes down to feedback, really. Feedback is absolutely vital, and feedback will occur if learning environments are set up where children discuss and talk about their ideas, and clearly that needs good teacher questioning to come through, where activities are challenging and teachers comment on those products from those challenges.

Again, that’s a very direct feedback to individuals, but also where children are actively encouraged to self and peer assess, because then they start to gauge what quality means in a piece of work and what needs to be done to improve. And so all of these together help children learn better. They help children think better.

NARRATOR: At Lord Williams’s School in Oxfordshire, Karen Vear and Jon Ryder help Paul and Chris with their initial research.

JON RYDER: I think, for me, it’s about getting the kids to think more in lessons and to try and help them close the gap between where they are in terms of their thinking and where they need to be or where they should be moving to next.

KAREN VEAR: For me, I think it’s about them trying to get the children to be more independent learners, so trying to get them to actually realise what they need to do next to improve their knowledge.

NARRATOR: So what are the main features of formative assessment?

CHRISTINE HARRISON: When you go into a formative assessment classroom, what you actually usually see are teachers who are asking questions that have been well thought out questions. They’re either questions that they know from the research literature or from their own experience, or ones that children may step up on or may have problems with, or they’re ones that they’re developed to be very open questions so that the child can actually take the answer in various ways.

PAUL BLACK: So it’s the quality of the question to evoke interesting and important ideas related to what the learning has to achieve if people are to move on in the subject that matters.

NARRATOR: Science teacher Jon Ryder uses open questioning to stimulate discussion amongst peoples in his year 11 class.

JON RYDER: What we’re looking at today is another one of those really big questions. Are we alone in the universe? In groups of two or three, I’d like you to think about those three questions, discuss them, and also one person in your group, just jot down some thoughts in the back of your book.

PAUL BLACK: You have to encourage them to talk, and that means not responding to the first thing that’s said by saying it’s right or wrong, but really taking it quite neutrally and asking others if they agree with one of those things that one or two people have said.

JON RYDER: I think if I just do quick question, question, answer, they don’t have the time to think and they don’t process information. They also have to take a risk in terms of peer pressure in answering a question, putting their hand up and answering a question. And if they know that, in their group, they’ve shared the ideas and they’ve got something to say, then they’re much more confident to do that.

STUDENT: Do you reckon you should just bundle them all in one country, or try and mingle with them.

STUDENT: Mingle.

STUDENT: Put them in America.

STUDENT: We should breed them.

JON RYDER: America. There’s a lot of space in the middle America.

I used to have discussions where I thought that everyone was involved, and it seemed that lots of people weren’t. And I think here, every kid is actually engaged with the task, and they talk to each other about it, and I hope they know the structure of the discussion that’s coming, and so they know they’re going to have to listen to each other in the discussion that follows.

CHRISTINE HARRISON: Clearly, children get feedback from classroom discussion, but they also get particular, specific feedback when their books are marked, or when products they produce in projects are actually marked. In the past, what teachers have tended to do is to put some sort of grade or level on it. For example, in Key Stage 3, they’ll put a National Curriculum level on a piece of work.

This really isn’t that useful, always, for children. It does actually show them where they’re at, but not necessarily how to improve. And so what a teacher will do is to write some sort of comment on that will maybe reflect the quality of the piece of work, but also will tell them what’s needed next, or at least we would hope that would be the case.

PAUL BLACK: The way you give advice, feedback to children actually affects how they feel about what’s being said. It affects their self esteem. It affects their self of themselves as learners. If what you feed back to them is something about a mark, something by which they can compare themselves with other people, something by which they can see whether they’re a winner or a loser in some competition, then that will not help their self esteem. It’s OK for the real top guys, although it doesn’t challenge them enough. It’s certainly depressing for many of the rest.

NARRATOR: Karen Vear has been developing a comment-only approach to marking mathematics. Why does she think this is important?

KAREN VEAR: I think the benefits for me of comment marking is the interaction with the child, actually getting the child to reply to my comment, let me know that they’ve understood it by doing the thing that I’ve asked them to do, and then having a look when I next mark the book at what they put in to my last comment.

It’s really rewarding to think that actually that child has read it, they did understand it, and now they’ve sorted that little problem that they might have had with a particular question. It’s much more rewarding than just thinking, oh, they got 73 out of 86. I mean, that’s very – you know, it doesn’t mean much to us. Whereas knowing that they can now, you know, subtract a negative number and understand what happens is much more rewarding.

NARRATOR: John Ryder gives time for his pupils to respond to his comments.

JON RYDER: So giving them time in class to start the process of responding to those comments, to start moving from where their work has shown me that they are to where I hope my questioning in their books and my comments in their books will lead them, I think we need to help them do that in class.

At the start of the lesson, we’re going to have some response time. So you’ve got some time to look through and respond to your comments.

STUDENTS: After he’s marked our books, we get them back and then we just do things that we need to improve on and answer his questions that he’s written.

JON RYDER: It takes a long time to write good comments in kids’ books, and to mark a class set of books really well probably takes me about three hours to put good comments in every kid’s book. So I clearly can’t do that with every class every week, so I tend to aim to do that probably once every four weeks or so and check their work through peer and self-assessment, and by checking work in class to make sure they get some – that I’m checking that they’re actually getting their work done.

PAUL BLACK: It’s important in learning that you get wise about how to steer yourself. That is, you will not always have a teacher. The good learner is one who learns to be independent, or learns to learn with colleagues.

CHRISTINE HARRISON: It’s interesting when we actually started looking at the role of self-assessment in formative assessment, that we had difficulty in helping teachers to help the children develop those self-assessment skills. It was only when we tweaked that peer assessment was a way of getting into this that things started to improve in those classrooms, because it’s through peer assessment that you start to become much more aware of your own qualities in your work.

PAUL BLACK: So if you want to assess yourself and see how good you are doing – and you have to do this if you’re going to improve and not depend on other people telling you what to do – then you need to see your work objectively. One important way to do this is to get other people who are like you, not marvellous people up there who can do great things, but people like you, and see what they have done on the same task and get them to talk about what you’ve done on your task.

STUDENT: We liked your balances.

STUDENT: Yeah. You felt confident, or if looked like you felt confident doing them.

STUDENT: You got good links in between them. But I think –

STUDENT: Just Effie, one thing. Work on your body tension, because you’re sort of like –

JON RYDER: When I started with trying to do some peer assessment, I thought it would be great because it just meant I didn’t have to do the marking. And, OK. Swap books. Mark each other’s work. There we go. And it doesn’t work at all. It’s much more complex than that to prepare, because you really need to have thought out exactly how the kids are going to make those judgments on each other’s work.

KAREN VEAR: I give them the answers to go through. They’ve got a model set of answers, and they have to decide what the person whose work they’re marking is good at, what they’re not so good at, what they need extra help with. And they do a comment to each other on those tasks, and then they have to decide whether their partner deserves a merit. And they are incredibly fair. They will say to each other, well, you obviously haven’t spent very long on that. Look at the state of it.

They don’t say, oh, you have a merit because I gave you – you know, I’ll give you a merit if you give me one. They just don’t do that. They are very, very honest, and quite frank with each other in a way that, I think, teachers can’t always be quite so blunt.

JON RYDER: If they’re using peer assessment well, then they start to see themselves as someone who can make judgments about the quality of work, who can give advice on how to improve work. And if they see themselves as someone who can do that, then they start to be able to do that more successfully on their own work as well.

PAUL BLACK: Teachers have to do summative assessments as well as formative assessments, and there’s nothing in the ideas about formative which are necessarily in conflict with summative assessments, although reconciling different practises between the two might be important. All I think about that is that, often, summative assessments are done too frequently, whereas one has to ask what they are for.

Now, if they’re for making a decision about a pupil’s future, then that matters. Otherwise, what value can they have for learning? Well, they can have some value for learning if you use them in a formative way.

CHRISTINE HARRISON: When we started our formative assessment project, we hadn’t thought of this side of it, but the teachers that we worked with made us aware of it very soon. And what they came to do was to actually develop formative practises to make the summative assessment more useful.

PAUL BLACK: A summative assessment can be seen as a review of learning. Preparing for that review can involve pupils in thinking through what they’ve achieved in the learning, which can powerfully involve all methods of self and peer assessment. And then, when they have taken a test and have written answers, it can be used as homework can be used. That is, they can sit in peer groups, and mark their answers, and learn from that what was strong and what was weak about what they did.

KAREN VEAR: OK. I photocopied some questions from the SATs Papers, and I’m going to ask them now to answer the questions discussing with their partner, and then they’re going to be shown the real mark schemes so that they can actually mark their work related to a proper SATs mark scheme.

Well, it helps them to see that they can pick up method marks for just writing a certain amount down. They don’t have to do the whole question and get the whole question right. They can actually get quite a considerable amount of marks even if they got the wrong answer just by showing the method. And I think it’s quite relieving to children to see, oh, I’d have got a mark if I’d just put that down. And using the real mark schemes helps them to make progress on the problem with SATs papers.

JON RYDER: We have to take part in summative assessment, whether that’s external exams or whether that’s some kind of teacher summative assessment, but we have to do that. We have to do the measuring at some stage. But it’s important to use formative practise to make sure that the kids become more successful learners, more independent learners, and as a result of those exercises, are more successful in terms of the summative assessment, which is the high stakes testing for them.

NARRATOR: Since the publication of Working Inside the Black Box, formative assessment’s being adopted in many schools, and Paul and Chris are confident about its continuing value for pupils and teachers.

CHRISTINE HARRISON: Formative assessment is not new, but what is important is, the way that King’s team have taken forward formative assessment, is to take note of the research that has gone on before, and then to do further research to show not just that this is a good idea, but it actually does work in classrooms.

PAUL BLACK: It opens up a large number of much deeper issues than one might imagine, but those issues are right at the heart of respecting pupils and helping them to grow into adults who are confident about learning and about collaborating with one another, which is what we all need.

[MUSIC PLAYING]