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## What's In A Name? Selected Secondary English Teachers' Experiences Of Engaging In Formative Assessment

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WHAT'S IN A NAME? SELECTED SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHERS'  
EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGING IN FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

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A Dissertation

Presented to the

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Sarah P. Hylton

WHAT'S IN A NAME? SELECTED SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHERS'  
EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGING IN FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

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## **Dedication**

For my family, who teach me daily what a wonderful life it is.

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## **Abstract**

Formative assessment's evolution over the last 50 plus years has led to the ubiquitous use of the term and ostensibly its practice, yet very little research has specifically addressed teachers' experiences of formative assessment, particularly in the realm of secondary English. This study's goal, therefore, was to gain insight into how teachers experience engaging in formative assessment. By exploring their experiences, this descriptive phenomenological study sought to discover what meaning selected teachers ascribe to formative assessment and to thereby elevate teachers' voices in the formative assessment conversation. This research question guided the study: What are secondary English teachers' lived experiences of engaging in formative assessment? To answer this question, I generated data from 12 secondary English teachers by conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews and collecting lived experience descriptions. Collectively, their experiences revealed that they practice formative assessment as a multi-step process, undertaken to determine where students are in their learning and to inform their instruction. They experience formative assessment as integral to their instruction and value informal formative interactions and conversations that are embedded in daily instruction. They consider positive class culture essential for undertaking formative assessment and have concerns that grading, district-mandated formative assessments, and the term itself may be impediments to effectively undertaking formative assessment. Ultimately, these findings offer strong support for the study's conceptual framework; fill a gap in the formative assessment research; and offer policy makers, instructional leaders, and educational researchers insight into how these teachers understand and practice formative assessment.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? SELECTED SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHERS'  
EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGING IN FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Assessment is a pervasive aspect of contemporary K-12 education. Countless hours of classroom instruction are devoted to assessment, and myriad educational stakeholders from policy makers to parents have vested interests in assessment practices and results, albeit each with different lenses, concerns, and degrees of assessment literacy (Burke, 2010; Chappuis et al., 2017). In the current political climate, assessment has focused on the accountability of students, teachers, and schools, prompting widespread conversation and coverage of this particular aspect of public education (Klein, 2018; Popham, 2008). This national focus on assessment for accountability has “set into motion an ever-increasing emphasis on high stakes summative evaluations” (Burke, 2010, p. 1), leading Stiggins (2007) to assert that “there is almost complete neglect of assessment where it exerts the greatest influence on pupil’s academic lives: day-to-day in the classroom, where it can be used to help them learn more” (p. 10).

As a result, scholars have resoundingly called for more balanced systems of assessment (Brookhart, 2007; Burke, 2010; Chappuis et al., 2017; Heritage, 2010) in which both formative and summative assessment coexist as meaningful “parts of a coordinated system of assessment that provides teachers with data to inform the different decisions they need to make to support student learning” (Heritage, 2010, pp. 35–36). This view is in keeping with Scriven’s (1967) original perspective that both formative and summative evaluation should be utilized and valued for what they offer.

Such calls are grounded in the view that formative assessment has positive effects on student learning, a view supported by several large studies over the last several decades. In a



1986 meta-analysis, Fuchs and Fuchs investigated the impact of ongoing formative assessment on the learning and progress of students with mild learning disabilities and concluded that the systematic use of formative assessment had an average weighted effect size of .70 and thus “reliably increases academic achievement” (p. 206). Similarly, Black and Wiliam’s (1998a) seminal review of classroom assessment studies found strong support for formative assessment practices as a means of advancing student learning, noting that the effect sizes of these studies ranged from .40 to .70. Others have challenged the claims regarding the degree of the effect of formative assessment, finding smaller effect sizes that are dependent upon grade level, content area, and the particular formative assessment practice being implemented (Kingston & Nash, 2011). However, McMillan et al.’s (2013) review of this study contests those findings, citing concerns about the study’s methodology. More recently, efforts to quantify the effectiveness of formative assessment have supported the view that the practices associated with formative assessment do effectively advance student learning (Graham et al., 2015; Klute et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2020).

Formative assessment as a concept has developed over the last half a century, evolving from its initial understanding as a practice in curriculum development to today’s widespread call for its use in K-12 classrooms (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Chappuis et al., 2017; Stiggins, 2007; Wiliam, 2011). Rooted in the field of course development and evaluation, formative assessment in the field of education traces its origins to the work of Cronbach (1963). Cronbach argued that fully developing a course and then evaluating its effectiveness is limiting as it delays any form of meaningful feedback that might support the ongoing development and revision of the curriculum. To offset this delay, Cronbach emphasized the necessity of evaluation *during* curriculum development, observing that “evaluation, used to improve the course while it is still

fluid, contributes more to improvement of education than evaluation used to appraise a product already placed on the market” (p. 675). To accomplish this goal, Cronbach advocated collecting data that includes, but also extends beyond, student test results, noting that there are other means of determining the nature and degree of student learning.

Scriven (1967), too, emphasized the importance of establishing a methodology for ensuring that course evaluation provides timely and useful information to course developers. However, unlike Cronbach (1963), who asserted that ongoing evaluation during curriculum development is of more importance than evaluation of the finished product, Scriven argued for a balanced system of evaluation which appreciates and capitalizes on what both types of evaluation offer. To avoid confusion, Scriven stated that “novel terms are worthwhile” (p. 43) and proposed the terms formative and summative to differentiate between the use of data to guide the work and the use of data to legitimize the work. Scriven defined formative evaluation as evaluation that occurs as a course is developed, the objective of which is to “discover deficiencies and successes in the intermediate versions of a new curriculum” (p. 51). Thus, Scriven emphasized, as Cronbach had before him, the importance of collecting information during the process in order to generate feedback. Scriven urged that this should occur sooner rather than later, noting that doing so can correct for tangents and misconceptions as well as provide fodder for new ideas.

In 1971, Bloom appropriated Scriven’s (1967) terms *formative* and *summative* and applied them for the first time to classroom instruction and student learning. Bloom set formative evaluation within the context of mastery learning, noting that given the expectation that all students master standards, students and their teachers require two types of information: evidence about whether they have attained mastery (summative evaluation) and feedback regarding their

progress toward that mastery (formative evaluation). Like Scriven, Bloom acknowledged the need for a balanced assessment system, recognizing that both formative and summative evaluation serve distinct, yet equally important purposes.

Although Bloom's (1971) discussion of formative evaluation focused on the use of diagnostic progress tests, he acknowledged that there is a place in formative evaluation for other methods of generating information, just as Scriven (1967) had not confined formative evaluation to testing procedures. Despite his focus on unit tests, Bloom nonetheless developed the idea of formative evaluation as a process rather than an event, highlighting that such tests should lead to effective feedback for both students and teachers. For students, this feedback should suggest additional resources needed for improvement, and for teachers, this feedback can be used to adapt instruction as needed. Bloom also contended that students as well as teachers must have clarity about learning goals and success criteria so that students can function as consumers of the feedback they receive and as advocates for their own learning.

Given that students' involvement in formative assessment was central to Bloom's (1971) conception of it, it is not surprising that he also attended to the affective consequences of assessment and evaluation. He paid particular attention to student motivation and self-concept as they relate to the development of students as life-long learners and was clear that formative evaluation increases students' sense of self and empowers them as regulators of their own learning.

Building on Bloom's (1971) ideas, Sadler (1989) proposed a view of formative assessment that emphasizes the role of students as assessors of their own learning. Sadler contended that formative assessment is "concerned with how judgments about the quality of student responses (performances, pieces, or works) can be used to shape and improve the

student's competence" (p. 120). Rather than offering a broad theory, Sadler's focus was on students learning (a) to properly evaluate their own products and (b) to use that evaluative self-feedback to make productive decisions about how to refine their work for improvement.

Sadler (1989), then, concentrated on students' ability to make complex qualitative judgments about their own efforts so that they develop agency as active participants in their own learning. The ultimate goal is for students to be able "to exercise executive control over their own productive activities and eventually to become independent and fully self-monitoring" (Sadler, 1989, p. 120). Becoming adept at making such qualitative judgments requires feedback, which Sadler noted is an essential characteristic of formative assessment. He argued that feedback provides information for two audiences: teachers and students. To help distinguish between these, Sadler used the term "feedback" to refer to the information teachers give students and the term "self-monitoring" to refer to the information students generate themselves. To effectively accomplish self-monitoring, students must understand the goal, be able to compare their performance with the criteria for that goal, and take actions that lead to closing the gap between the goal and their performance. Like Bloom (1971), Sadler cautioned that negative affective consequences may arise if increases in expectations of students outpace increases in student improvement, warning that this may lead to students developing a sense of futility about their own learning.

Following the work of Sadler (1989), Black and Wiliam (1998a; 1998b) presented their findings from an extensive survey of formative assessment literature. Their review concluded that formative assessment practices produce effect sizes from .40 to .70, though they cautioned that their study is not a meta-analysis, nor is formative assessment a "magic bullet" (Black & Wiliam, 1998b, p. 3). Black and Wiliam (1998b) summarized problems of practice regarding

formative assessment, observing that a focus on grades has led to assessment practices that stress quantity over quality, reporting over learning, comparing over helping, and superficiality over depth. Truly advancing student learning, they asserted, relies on the imperative that formative assessment results must be used by teachers to adjust their teaching and by learners to adjust their learning if student learning. Echoing both Bloom (1971) and Sadler, they also noted the need to attend to the powerful role affect can play in student assessment.

Close on the heels of Black and Wiliam's (1998a) report of formative assessment effect sizes, the Assessment Reform Group ([ARG], 1999) coined the term "assessment for learning," primarily as a means of distinguishing it from "assessment of learning," which is concerned with grading and reporting student achievement. They noted that assessment policy has concentrated on finding reliable ways of conducting assessment of learning and contended that the focus instead should be on assessment for learning which takes place in the classroom during learning and has a demonstrated positive effect on student achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998a).

ARG (1999) outlined the characteristics that differentiate assessment for learning from assessment of learning, delineating roles for both teachers and students. Teachers must understand assessment as embedded in teaching and learning, must provide clarity about the goals and standards students are to attain, must analyze assessment information, and must provide feedback on current learning and next steps. Students must develop an understanding of the goals and standards, must engage in meaningful self-assessment, and must reflect on assessment data to determine appropriate next steps. Embedded in this understanding of formative assessment is the dual role of feedback and self-monitoring.

ARG (1999) provided a summary list of formative assessment techniques from which a nearly endless array of possibilities can derive. However, ARG made clear that simply engaging

in formative assessment techniques to elicit information as an event is not sufficient, underscoring formative assessment as a process that involves eliciting, making inferences about, and using information (Black & Wiliam, 2009).

Black and Wiliam (2009) attempted to unify the many practices that have been claimed as part of formative assessment by exploring how extant theories are related to formative assessment. By doing so, they hoped to avoid “the problems of superficial adoption” (p. 6), which come when practice is atheoretical. Building on their previous work, Black and Wiliam established five key elements of formative assessment practice:

1. Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success;
2. Engineering effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding;
3. Providing feedback that moves learners forward;
4. Activating students as instructional resources for one another; and
5. Activating students as the owners of their own learning (p. 8).

Black and Wiliams’s (2009) key concepts clearly articulate the importance of the student in formative assessment; however, even though their attempt to construct a theoretical understanding of formative assessment incorporated learners, their focus was mostly upon the teacher’s role in formative assessment, an observation they acknowledged in their conclusion. They grounded their discussion in the first of the three key elements which, taken together, articulate the scope of the formative assessment process. Teachers, they observed, must first provide students a well-considered prompt that is intended to elicit more thinking. Next, teachers must interpret student responses generated by the prompt, a task which relies on teachers’ ability to make accurate inferences, often quickly and with little opportunity to reflect. Finally, they

must formulate feedback that will advance student learning, noting that feedback is contingent upon clarity about the ILO.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Formative assessment's "theoretical underpinnings have been very much in the background" (Stobart, 2008, p. 149), leading to the view that there is no one, comprehensive theory of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2003; Taras, 2010). Formative assessment emerged when behaviorism was in vogue (Crossouard & Pryor, 2012), so its origins "derive from fairly straightforward...stimulus-response theories of learning" (Torrance, 2012, p. 335). However, these early understandings have shifted, giving way to current recognition of sociocultural theory's value for more deeply understanding and exploring formative assessment (Crossouard & Pryor, 2012; Torrance, 2012). As Shepard (2009) notes, "sociocultural learning theory provides theoretical grounding for understanding how formative assessment works to increase student learning" (p. 32), a position held by numerous others (Bennett, 2011; Black & Wiliam, 2009; Clark, 2010; Filsecker & Kerres, 2012; Marshall, 2007; Shepard & Penuel, 2018; Torrance, 2012). Certainly, sociocultural theory has implications for formative assessment, namely that educational assessment should hold as a goal the ability to address the degree to which students have advanced or developed with regard to their learning (Heritage, 2010; Scott & Palincsar, 2014.).

Sociocultural theory emphasizes the social nature of learning and views knowledge as being co-created (Scott & Palincsar, 2014). As such, "ideas appear first in the external, 'social' plane then become internalized by the individual" (Black & Wiliam, 2009, p. 19). Thus, learners initially rely on others with more experience or knowledge but eventually come to rely on themselves (Scott & Palincsar, 2014). This learning is mediated by tools, both symbolic and

physical, which arise from the accumulated yet evolving wisdom of a culture (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Learning, however, is not the same as development (Vygotsky, 1978). Rather, “properly organized learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). To better understand this difference, Vygotsky argues the need to distinguish between two developmental levels: the actual and the potential. He explains the difference as the zone of proximal development, which he defines as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined through independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 68).

Several of these sociocultural constructs are especially relevant to the study of formative assessment, particularly the view of learning as socially constructed. As a process, formative assessment relies on high quality interactions between teachers and students and students and their peers (Clark, 2010). Indeed, Black and Wiliam (2009) refer to these as formative interactions, defining them as “interactions between external...feedback, and internal production by the individual learners” (p. 11). Formative assessment’s reliance on such interactions stresses the view of learning as social and underscores the importance of attending to what teachers, students, and their peers actually do together (Filsecker & Kerres, 2012). Formative assessment’s recognition of both teachers and students as active agents in the process, particularly evident in its emphasis on the role of self and peer assessment, further highlights its alignment with sociocultural theory.

Furthermore, formative interactions emphasize the importance of identifying not only what students *have* achieved but also what they *might* achieve “with the help of an experienced



teacher...or a collaborating peer” (Torrance, 2012, p. 326), an idea which echoes sociocultural theory’s distinction between learning and developing and Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development. Formative assessment as a process is grounded in answering three questions, which derive from the work of Ramaprasad (1983) and Sadler (1989). These three questions — “Where am I going? Where am I now? How can I close the gap?” (Stiggins et al., 2004, p. 41) — are analogous to Vygotsky’s (1978) focus on actual and potential levels of development. As Frey and Fisher (2011) note, formative assessment aims to “reduce discrepancies between current understandings and a desired goal” (p. 9) so that students are able to eventually master competencies initially beyond their reach, an idea explained by Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (Shepard, 2009). To close the gap, then, teachers must use formative assessment to “identify and build on immature but maturing structures, and through collaboration and guidance, to facilitate cognitive growth” (Heritage, 2010, p. 75). Thus, the fundamental goal of formative assessment (advancing student learning) involves moving students from their actual level of development to their potential level of development (Torrance, 2012), an idea undergirded by sociocultural theory.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Formative assessment’s evolution over the last 50 plus years has led to the ubiquitous use of the term and ostensibly its practice, yet some scholars contend that there is little definitional consensus (Bennett, 2011; Dunn & Mulvenon, 2009; Taras, 2010; Torrance, 2012), leading Bennett (2011) to conclude that formative assessment is still “a work-in-progress” (p. 21). However, even though there is an absence of one definition of formative assessment to which all scholars adhere, the commonalities among various definitions actually suggest a growing consensus about the concept and its subsequent practice. The common view is that of formative

assessment as an ongoing process (Black & Wiliam, 1998b, 2009; Bloom, 1971; Formative Assessment for Students and Teachers/State Collaborative on Assessment and State Standards [FAST SCASS], 2018; Heritage, 2007; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008; Wiliam, 2011), one which Black & Wiliam (2009) and Wiliam (2011) expressly outline, noting that formative assessment involves eliciting information, interpreting that information, and then using that information. The use of such information is commonly understood as twofold: to inform teachers and their continued instruction and to inform students and their continued learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Bloom, 1971; Brookhart, 2007; FAST SCASS, 2018; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008; Sadler, 1989; Wiliam, 2011). Feedback, whether self-, peer-, or teacher-generated, is explicitly mentioned as an integral part of this phase of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Bloom, 1971; Brookhart, 2007; FAST SCASS, 2018; Sadler, 1989). The two-fold use of formative assessment highlights the widely accepted view that formative assessment emphasizes both teachers and students as participants in the formative assessment process (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Bloom, 1971; FAST SCASS, 2018; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008; Sadler, 1989; Wiliam, 2011). Multiple definitions also stress the proximal relationship of formative assessment to instruction, with the use of words such as during, continuously, currently, and next underscoring formative assessment as a pedagogical practice embedded in instruction (Bloom, 1971; FAST SCASS, 2018; Heritage, 2007; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008; Sadler, 1989; Wiliam, 2011). The ultimate purpose of formative assessment is to advance student learning. (ARG, 1999; Burke, 2010; Heritage, 2010; McMillan, 2014; Stiggins, 2005).

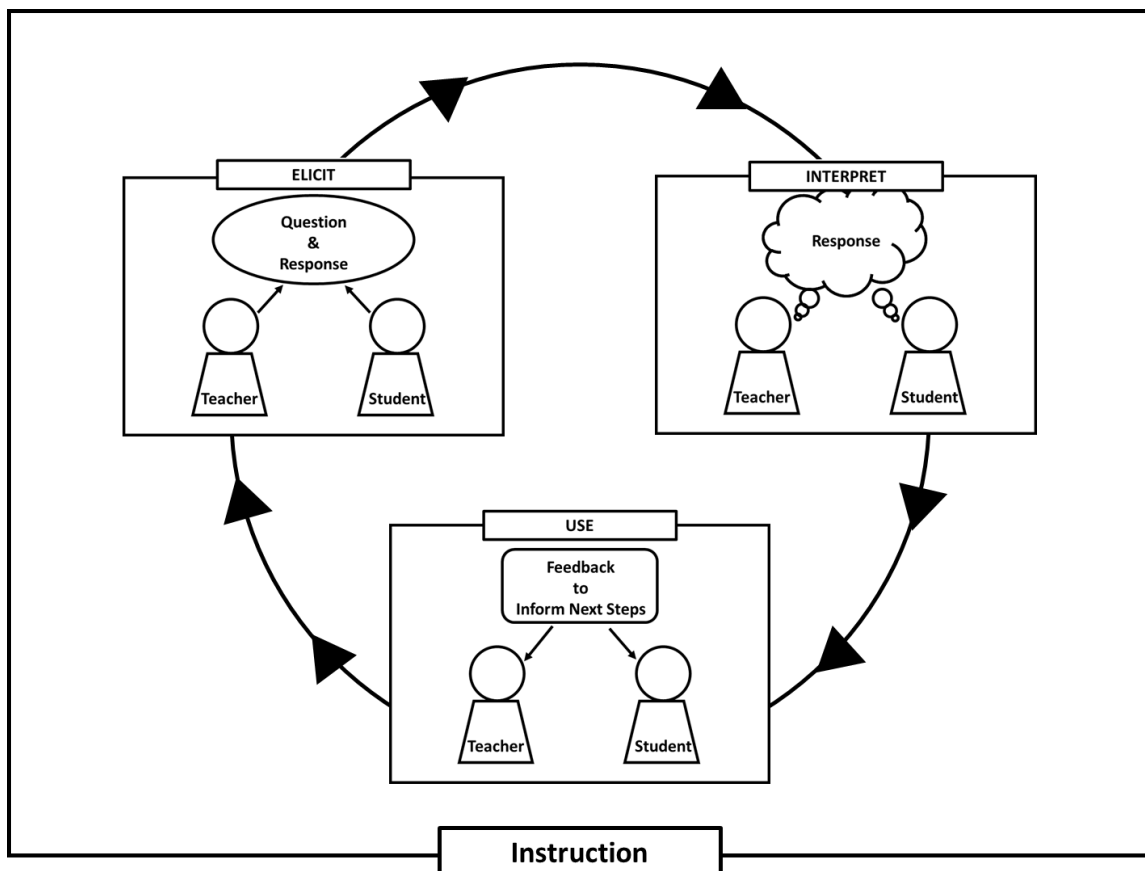
A conceptual framework is “constructed, not found [and] incorporates pieces that are borrowed from elsewhere” (Maxwell, 2008, p. 223). This study’s conceptual framework, then,

represents a compilation of the work of formative assessment scholars and highlights their consensus about several points. Formative assessment:

- is an iterative process of multiple phases,
- is integral to instruction,
- includes both teachers and students as assessors,
- provides information that informs teachers' ongoing instructional decisions,
- provides information, through feedback, that informs students' ongoing learning, and
- serves the ultimate purpose of advancing student learning.

**Figure 1**

*Model of Conceptual Framework of Formative Assessment*



A model of this study's conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1. The model represents these common elements of scholars' understanding of formative assessment. The framework highlights formative assessment as an ongoing and iterative process of three phases: eliciting, interpreting, and using information. In the model, rectangles depict each of the three phases in the model, and the circular structure and arrows indicate the ongoing, iterative nature of formative assessment. "Eliciting" comprises using tools and techniques to elicit evidence of student thinking and progress and to capture this elicited information. "Interpreting" involves analyzing elicited information and drawing inferences about that information that accurately reflect the nature and degree of student learning. "Using" includes feedback to students about the nature and degree of their own learning that will allow them to progress as learners as well as feedback to teachers about the nature and degree of student learning that will allow them to make informed instructional decisions. The framework also stresses teachers' and students' potential roles in each phase of the process, indicated in the model by the appearance of both participants at each stage. For instance, in the "Eliciting" phase, either the student or the teacher may pose a question or activity to elicit information, and either may capture the response. In the "Interpreting" phase, both teachers and students may consider the response as they work to analyze it and make appropriate inferences about the nature and degree of student learning. In the "Using" phase, both the teacher and student receive feedback that each uses differently to advance student learning. The conceptual framework also highlights that formative assessment is integral to instruction, indicated in the model by the larger rectangle framing the three-phase process.

## **Purpose Statement**

As educational scholars call for assessment reform and increased integration of formative assessment, consideration should be given to the perspectives of those on the front lines who will answer this call and ultimately be responsible for implementation: teachers. Because formative assessment is classroom-situated, it is necessarily teacher-controlled, meaning that teachers determine the degree to which formative assessment does or does not occur in their classrooms (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Brown, 2004; Leahy et al., 2005; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008). In short, teachers are the lever for effectively integrating formative assessment into classrooms (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; National Council of Teachers of English, 2013; Tovani, 2011).

Because teachers are those responsible for integrating formative assessment, how they conceive of it matters (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Brown, 2004; Panadero & Brown, 2017; Remesal, 2007). Indeed, teachers' conceptual understanding of formative assessment, their practical experiences of formative assessment, and their values and beliefs regarding formative assessment all impact how they will enact it in their own classrooms (Coombs et al. 2018; Harrison, 2010; Kahn, 2000). Essentially, teachers' conceptual clarity about formative assessment is necessary for effective implementation (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Clark, 2015; Coombs et al., 2018; Popham, 2014), yet the tensions about the varied uses of assessment and the social and cultural values that underpin them have left teachers perplexed and frustrated as they attempt to satisfy all demands (Coombs et al., 2018), leading to wide variety in terms of how teachers understand, value, and enact formative assessment (Deenan et al., 2019).

Given that teachers' conceptual and practical perspectives regarding formative assessment arise from the "situated context of their classroom teaching" (Coombs et al., 2018, p.

134), it is imperative to study what teachers' experiences of formative assessment in those situated contexts are. What is needed, then, is an informed "understanding of teachers' perceptions, practices, and values" with regard to formative assessment (Deenan et al., 2019, p. 41). Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the experiences teachers have had with regard to engaging in formative assessment.

### **Research Question**

As noted earlier, formative assessment is classroom-situated and therefore teacher-driven (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Moss & Brookhart, 2019). Thus, the pursuit of a richer understanding of formative assessment invites inquiry into teachers' engagement in formative assessment as an enacted, lived experience. Indeed, as Heidegger (1927/1998) observes, a phenomenon is something that becomes manifest or appears through the active nature of living in the world. Heidegger's perspective suggests, then, that for teachers, the meaning of formative assessment ultimately lies in their lived experiences of engaging in it. Because these lived experiences encapsulate teachers' perspectives, understandings, conceptions, beliefs, and practices, this line of inquiry provides a means of richly describing formative assessment as it is understood by teachers who engage in it. Therefore, the following research question guided the design and implementation of this study: What are selected secondary English teachers' lived experiences of engaging in formative assessment?

### **Significance of the Study**

Ultimately, this inquiry into secondary English teachers' experiences of engaging in formative assessment was intended to elicit "a grasp of the very nature of the thing" called formative assessment (van Manen, 2001, p. 177). In short, this study sought to uncover the essence of what these teachers experience formative assessment as being. As such, its overriding

significance is to provide greater clarity about the meaning teachers ascribe to the experience of engaging in formative assessment, thus contributing to the existing body of scholarship on formative assessment and elevating teachers' voices in this ongoing conversation. Greater insight into teachers' experiences creates opportunities to determine the extent to which teachers' experiences align with scholars' views of formative assessment and helps to expose gaps that exist between practice and theory, creating opportunities to consider ways in which to bridge those gaps. This may be of particular significance for both pre-service and in-service teacher training, better situating those programs and their providers to make more fully informed decisions regarding their curricula and its implementation. Investigating teachers' experiences of engaging in formative assessment may also help frame the work of policy makers by presenting them with more robust, informed perspectives from which to consider and develop evolving assessment policies. Improved understanding of teachers' experiences may also have implications for teacher evaluation, creating opportunities to refine leaders' expectations of teachers' formative assessment practices.

### **Definitions of Terms**

*Assessment:* the use of tools and techniques to gather information about the nature and degree of student learning (Gareis & Grant, 2008)

*Assessment literacy:* the understanding of and the skill to enact fundamental assessment concepts and procedures

*Curriculum:* a structured series of intended learning outcomes (Johnson, 1967)

*Evaluation:* making a judgment about the nature and degree of student learning based upon information gathered during assessment (Gareis & Grant, 2008)

*Feedback:* information about the nature and degree of student learning that is shared with someone empowered to act on it

*Formative assessment:* a process, integral to instruction, in which teachers and/or students elicit and interpret information about the nature and degree of student learning and then use that information to make adjustments that advance student learning; sometimes referred to as “assessment *for* learning”

*Grading:* assigning a concise and commonly understood symbol to convey evaluation

*Instruction:* the intentional and informed effort to effect learning

*Intended learning outcome (ILO):* the desired objective with which instruction and assessment are aligned; may be of varied grain size

*Knowledge:* content, information, concepts, and relationships that a student knows and understands

*Learning:* sustained change or growth in knowledge, skills, and dispositions that transfers to new settings

*Practice:* teachers’ enactment of pedagogy

*Skills:* processes and procedures that a student can do effectively

*Success criteria:* task and quality criteria that clarify for students and teachers what successful achievement of an intended learning outcome looks like

*Summative assessment:* assessment used for the purpose of reaching a cumulative decision about student learning; sometimes referred to “assessment *of* learning”



## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

To meaningfully inquire about and engage in a thoughtful consideration of teachers' understanding and practice of formative assessment requires a solid foundational knowledge of what formative assessment is. To that end, this chapter first presents a synthesized review of the seminal works of noted formative assessment scholars and focuses on how these scholars define and conceptualize the term. The chapter next presents scholars' recommendations for operationalizing the term to maximize the full potential of formative assessment and explores recommendations for practice situated specifically within the context of the secondary English classroom. The third section of this chapter reviews the limited studies that explore secondary English teachers' conceptions and practice of formative assessment.

### **Scholars' Understanding of Formative Assessment**

The intention of this section is to arrive at an understanding of commonly held views of formative assessment. Because "what is called formative assessment can differ with respect to which characteristics are emphasized" (McMillan, 2014, p. 96), a broader perspective about what is definitionally necessary for an interaction to be considered formative assessment seems most appropriate. As Wiliam (2011) asserts, a good definition of formative assessment should admit the many possible iterations of formative assessment; he thus tacitly calls for the adoption of a broader rather than a more limited view of formative assessment. Greenstein (2010) reiterates this position:

The most important thing you can take away from this discussion of formative assessment is the understanding that no single principle makes assessment formative. It is

through the weaving together of all the principles that high quality formative assessment arises. (p. 24)

This literature review's exploration of what constitutes definitional necessity when conceptualizing formative assessment adopts Wiliam's (2011) broad perspective and seeks to understand formative assessment in its fullest, most nuanced sense.

### **Definitional Clarity vs. Definitional Consensus**

Definitions of formative assessment abound, with scholars crafting a definition that best captures the nuances of their own understanding of formative assessment (Offerdahl et al., 2018). Given this variability, no "single officially sanctified and universally accepted definition" (Popham, 2008, p. 3) exists, nor would any such definition, if it did exist, command absolute agreement (Wiliam, 2011). In the face of this multitude of definitions, it is tempting to argue, and indeed several have (Bennett, 2011; Taras, 2010; Torrance, 2012), that because there is no definitional consensus, the field lacks definitional clarity. However, a review of several illustrative definitions from widely recognized formative assessment scholars and organizations (presented in Figure 2) suggests otherwise.

## Figure 2

### *Illustrative Definitions of Formative Assessment from Leading Scholars and Organizations*

Formative assessment “refers to all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (Black & Wiliam, 1998a, p. 7).
“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” (Popham, 2008, p. 6).
“Formative assessment is a process that takes place continuously during the course of teaching and learning to provide teachers and students with feedback to close the gap between current learning and desired goals” (Heritage, 2010, p. 10).
“An assessment functions formatively to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have made in the absence of that evidence” (Wiliam, 2011, p. 43).
“Formative assessment is the process of gathering evidence of student learning, providing feedback to students, and adjusting instructional strategies to enhance achievement” (McMillan, 2014, p. 93).
Formative assessment is “an active and intentional learning process that partners the teacher and the students to continuously and systematically gather evidence of learning with the express goal of improving student achievement” (Moss & Brookhart, 2019).
“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 self-directed learners” (Formative Assessment for Students and Teachers State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards [FAST SCASS], 2018, p. 2).

The definitions presented in Figure 2 use varied terms, phrasing, and emphases, with some ideas stated explicitly and others implied. Regardless of the variety, these seven illustrative definitions by leading scholars and organizations nonetheless present a consistent view of formative assessment, highlighting that what ultimately matters is not which terms we use but which concepts we mutually value (Wiliam, 2011). Furthermore, these definitions reveal several

central concepts of formative assessment. These 11 concepts, derived from the seven illustrative definitions, are presented as a matrix in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Matrix of Common Components of Definitions of Formative Assessment*

	Black & Wiliam 1998	Popham 2008	Heritage 2010	Wiliam 2011	McMillan 2014	Moss & Brookhart 2019	FAST-SCASS 2018
Teacher Involved	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Student Involved	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Ongoing/ During Instruction		✓	✓			✓	✓
Process		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Elicit		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Interpret				✓	✓		
Provide Feedback	✓		✓		✓		
Use to Adjust Teaching	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Use to Adjust Learning	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Planned/ Intentional		✓				✓	✓
Goal/Purpose Stated			✓		✓	✓	✓

*Note.* FAST-SCASS = [Formative Assessment for Students and Teachers – State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards]

The 11 definitional concepts that surface in these illustrative definitions, presented in the left-hand column of Figure 3, address four fundamental definitional issues that are central to defining formative assessment: goals (*why*), agents (*who*), timing (*when*), and process (*how*). “Goals” addresses the ultimate purpose of formative assessment which broadly focuses on advancing student learning. “Agents” are those who are involved in the formative assessment process, namely teachers and their students who may function both as independent learners and as peer resources. “Timing” refers to when in the learning process formative assessment takes place and stresses that formative assessment occurs while learning is still underway. “Process” incorporates the perspective that, as a process, formative assessment necessarily consists of multiple phases needed to achieve that process, specifically eliciting information, interpreting information, communicating feedback, and using the feedback to adjust teaching and learning. While each of these is necessary, the use to which information is put is a particularly relevant point in terms of defining formative assessment, one which is directly related to the purpose of formative assessment.

Although definitions are concise packages that convey essential ideas about a given concept, they are not able to offer a full explication of that concept. Therefore, although the following sections derive from these particular illustrative definitions, the review that follows is broader in scope and references full texts by these foundational formative assessment scholars as well as the work of additional formative assessment researchers.

### **Purpose of Formative Assessment**

One foundational definitional issue that informs a robust conceptualization of formative assessment is the goal or purpose of formative assessment, an idea grounded in the work of early formative assessment scholars. Working in the field of curriculum development and program

evaluation, Scriven (1967) suggests that novel terms are valuable for distinguishing between the use of data to guide the work and the use of data to legitimize the work and thus proposes the terms formative and summative to make this distinction. Bloom (1971) applies these terms to teaching and learning and argues that effective instruction relies on evidence about whether students have attained mastery (summative evaluation) and on evidence about their progress toward that mastery (formative evaluation). These early uses of the terms suggest that the true distinction between them lies in the ultimate purpose the assessments serve (Wiliam & Black, 1996).

Today, scholars continue to adhere to Scriven's (1967) and Bloom's (1971) early conceptual use of the terms *formative* and *summative* (Popham, 2008). Because the same assessment could be used either formatively or summatively (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Harlen, 2005), the assessment itself must not be understood as what marks the process as formative or summative (Burke, 2010; Wiliam, 2011). Rather, the terms "formative" and "summative" serve as descriptors that refer to the purpose or function the assessment serves rather than to the assessment itself (Burke, 2010; McMillan, 2014; Wiliam, 2011; Wiliam & Black, 1996; Wiliam & Leahy, 2007), and function is determined by the "use to which the information arising from assessments is put" (Wiliam & Leahy, 2007, p. 31), an idea parallel to Scriven's (1967) use of the term "role." Although Taras (2010) argues that formative assessment and summative assessment should not be defined by this distinction, her argument is not that these are unhelpful distinctions but rather that drawing attention to them detracts from our understanding of all assessment as a process. Thus, her argument is not that formative assessment and summative assessment are not defined by their use but that doing so may create confusion on another front.

The distinction between the functions of formative and summative assessment centers on whether the assessment is used to serve student learning (formative assessment) or to draw conclusions about student learning (summative assessment; Burke, 2010; Heritage, 2010; McMillan, 2014), or as McTighe (2007) quips, “You don’t fatten the cattle by weighing ’em” (p. vii). In other words, the difference between formative and summative assessment lies in the fact that the former promotes student learning and the latter judges it (Stiggins, 2005), suggesting that the formative use of assessment accomplishes a dynamic, instructional function whereas the summative use of assessment accomplishes a static, evaluative one (Greenstein, 2010). Indeed, the term *formative* itself suggests that formative assessment “should shape instruction” (William, 2011, p. 40). To highlight the importance of the formative function of using assessment information to advance student learning, Stiggins (2002) advocates using the term *assessment for learning*, a term usually attributed to ARG (1999); however, the term was first used by Mary James in a presentation to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in 1992 (Popham, 2014). Today, the terms *assessment for learning* and *formative assessment* are generally considered synonymous (Burke, 2010; William, 2011) despite the distinctions Stiggins (2002) initially drew between them. The parallel terms *assessment of learning* and *summative assessment* are likewise viewed as equivalent (Burke, 2010).

The ultimate purpose of formative assessment, therefore, is to advance student learning (Brookhart, 2007; Frey & Fisher, 2011; Gareis & Grant, 2008; Greenstein, 2010; McMillan, 2014) and student achievement (FAST SCASS, 2018; McMillan, 2014; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Sadler, 1989; Shepard, 2005). Essentially, this goal involves closing the gap between where students are and where they need to be, an idea that speaks to the goal of using information to make just-in-time adjustments to support and promote student learning and

achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Ramaprasad, 1983; Sadler, 1989). This goal of advancing student learning and achievement relies on addressing students' needs as they work to achieve the ILOs (Leahy et al., 2005; McMillan, 2014) and on supporting student growth as independent, self-directed learners (FAST SCASS, 2018; Sadler, 1989). The observation that formative assessment's goal is "to help teachers teach better and learners learn better" (Popham, 2008, p. 14) recognizes the value of formative assessment for both students and teachers and highlights the reciprocal nature of teaching and learning (Greenstein, 2010; Shepard, 2005).

### **Agents of Formative Assessment**

If formative assessment's goal is indeed "to help teachers teach better and learners learn better," (Popham, 2008, p. 14), then both teachers and students should undertake formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; FAST SCASS, 2018; Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Wiliam, 2011). Thus, a second essential definitional consideration is an understanding of both teachers and students as potential agents of the formative assessment process. These two individuals may fill three roles in the classroom—teacher, learner, and peer (Wiliam, 2011)—and may serve as either the assessor or the assessed (Wiliam & Black, 1996). While the teacher functions almost exclusively as the assessor, the students, as either individual learners or peer resources, can function as both assessor and assessed (Wiliam, 2011). Formative assessment has undergone a shift that stresses the student not only as the object of formative assessment but also as the subject of formative assessment, thereby highlighting that students can be involved in formative assessment not merely as recipients but also as actors (Brookhart, 2007). In short, this shift stresses that students can both receive and create information about their learning (Greenstein, 2010; Lyon et al., 2019). In fact, mutual efforts by teachers and students to



determine how students are progressing and what they need to do next creates “an ideal learning environment or experience” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 88).

Some scholars are firm in their conviction that unless students are engaged as actors, an interaction is not formative. Moss and Brookhart (2019) insist that “the power of formative assessment to improve student learning begins when the teacher *and the students* form an active partnership as engaged assessors and informed decision makers” (p. 25). Their use of the conjunction “and” accompanied by the italicized phrase implies their belief that formative assessment necessarily requires student involvement as active assessors. FAST SCASS (2018), too, is emphatic that students must be involved, noting that their revised definition stresses the collaborative nature of formative assessment by intentionally “identifying participants as ‘students and teachers’ rather than listing teachers first” (p. 4).

Others, however, are less insistent, identifying formative assessment as something that students *may* engage in. Black and Wiliam (1998b) conspicuously use the phrase “by teachers, *and/or* [emphasis added] by their students” (p. 7), drawing attention to the potential for varied agents of formative assessment but not necessitating both teachers and students in every circumstance. Similarly, Wiliam (2011) contends that formative assessment occurs when evidence is “elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, *or* [emphasis added] their peers,” (p. 43), thus opening the possibility of students as assessors and assessed but, again, not requiring student involvement as assessors as a definitional necessity. He also provides a familiar example of formative assessment: At the end of class, the teacher uses an exit slip to elicit information about the students’ learning that day, interprets that information after class, and then modifies their instruction for the next day. Even though students have not been involved as actors in this example, formative assessment has taken place (Wiliam, 2011).

This second, more inclusive position allows for a broader understanding of formative assessment and is in keeping with this review's guiding contention that a good definition admits rather than constricts varied iterations of formative assessment (Wiliam, 2011). Nonetheless, it bears noting that the formative assessment process can be strengthened by involving students as assessors at some stage in the process (ARG, 1999; Clarke, 2005; Leahy et al., 2005; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Wiliam, 2011). In other words, this attribute of students as self- or peer-assessors is not a definitional necessity but rather a strategy for enhancing the efficacy of formative assessment.

### **Timing of Formative Assessment**

Timing is another definitional component that undergirds an understanding of formative assessment, with collective agreement that formative assessment occurs during the teaching and learning process (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Heritage, 2010; Wiliam, 2011). In this respect, formative assessment is widely viewed as integral to effective instruction (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Burke, 2010; McMillan, 2014; Moss & Brookhart, 2019). In their seminal "Inside the Black Box," Black and Wiliam (1998b) assert that instruction is a black box, and they situate their argument for formative assessment within that black box, claiming that "formative assessment is at the heart of effective teaching" (p. 2) and that "opportunities for pupils to express their understanding should be designed into any piece of teaching" (p. 11).

Formative assessment, which provides a bridge between teaching and learning (Wiliam, 2011), may be one of the clearest examples of how assessment is integrated with instruction (McMillan, 2014, p. 93). As Greenstein (2010) observes, "with formative assessment, teaching and assessing become a cyclical process for continuous improvement, with each process informing the other" (p. 7). In fact, the extent to which assessments are embedded within

instruction is a measure of their efficacy (McMillan, 2007), a position that highlights the importance of teachers coming to understand that their instructional and assessment practices are related (Gareis & Grant, 2008). Because formative assessment is such an inherent part of instruction, the lines between the two are often blurred (Leahy et al., 2005; Moss & Brookhart, 2019). When formative assessment is seamlessly integrated into instruction, the result is a continuous loop of teaching, testing, reteaching, and retesting (Bloom, 1971; Burke, 2010). Such seamless integration is the ideal (Burke, 2010).

The collective view that formative assessment is integral to instruction stems, in part, from the understanding that formative assessment provides the most current information about the nature and degree of student learning (Burke, 2010; Tovani, 2011; Wiliam, 2011). National, state, and division-level assessments do not provide timely information, but formative assessment, which is planned for and enacted by classroom teachers, can (Chappuis et al., 2017; Heritage, 2010). With formative assessment, then, teachers have ready-access to classroom-generated data (Heritage, 2010). By providing teachers with “minute by minute, day by day” (Leahy et al., 2005, p. 19) evidence about student learning, teachers can identify challenges and misconceptions as they arise and to make necessary adjustments while teaching and learning are still underway (Burke, 2010; Leahy et al., 2005; Marshall, 2007; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Stiggins, 2005; Wiliam, 2011). Such information is possible because formative assessment permits a finer-grained view of students’ current status on specific learning targets (Heritage, 2010; Leahy et al., 2005), thereby giving students and teachers a clearer picture of which components of an ILO may be the source of confusion and error (Leahy et al., 2005). As such, formative assessment “constitutes the cornerstone of clearheaded instructional thinking”

(Popham, 2008, p. 15) and increases teachers' and students' ability to gauge their own effectiveness (Moss & Brookhart, 2019).

To access timely evidence about student learning, formative assessment must occur during the teaching and learning process (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Heritage, 2010; Wiliam, 2011). However, exactly when during teaching and learning formative assessment occurs varies as formative assessment can take place before, during, or after instruction on a particular ILO (Brookhart, 2010; Frey & Fisher, 2007, 2011; Greenstein, 2010). Therefore, formative assessment might serve as a form of pre-assessment, be embedded in a lesson, or occur after a particular learning target has been discussed and practiced (Brookhart, 2010; Greenstein, 2010). It is also possible to make formative use of a summative assessment as long as feedback that advances the continued learning of current students is provided and used (Bennett, 2011; Brookhart, 2010; Frey & Fisher, 2007; Harlen, 2005).

Several formative assessment definitions (see Figure 2) highlight timing as a component of formative assessment, explicitly using the terms “during” (Heritage, 2010) and “ongoing” (FAST SCASS, 2018). Others imply the importance of timing as a component, noting that the elicited evidence should be used to adjust the “activities in which [teachers and students] are engaged” (Black & Wiliam, 1998b, p. 7), an idea echoed in the assertion that “to be ‘formative,’ assessments must inform the decisions that teachers and their students make minute by minute in the classroom” (Moss & Brookhart, 2019, p. 6), suggesting that a consideration of timing is essential to understanding what formative assessment is. Wiliam and Leahy (2007) state the necessity of formative assessment occurring during instruction unequivocally: “The kinds of formative assessment practices that profoundly impact student achievement cannot wait until the end of a marking period, or even to the end of an instructional unit” (p. 191). Their declaration

stresses the point that, with regard to timing, formative assessment must occur when there is still time to make needed teaching and learning adjustments (Wiliam & Leahy, 2007). Adjustments can take place during the lesson in which evidence is elicited, but they can also take place in an upcoming lesson, provided the subsequent lesson addresses the same ILO (Heritage, 2010; Tovani, 2011; Wiliam, 2011; Wiliam & Leahy, 2007).

### **Process of Formative Assessment**

Definitionally, formative assessment has struggled because of the misappropriation of the term to define assessment instruments themselves (Bennett, 2011; Shepard, 2005; Stiggins, 2005). This misappropriation has been perpetrated most notably by testing companies, who, in an attempt to capitalize on the formative assessment trend, have applied the term to individual tests and activities without regard for a true understanding of formative assessment (Stiggins, 2005). Concern that this misguided perspective could distract others from an accurate and more robust understanding of formative assessment has led scholars to state expressly that formative assessment is not a thing (Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; NCTE, 2013). That is, formative assessment is not a single item or a set of disparate techniques (Heritage, 2010), nor is it merely the use of a collection of such techniques (Shepard, 2005). Rather, formative assessment is a thoughtful process that calls for systematic implementation (Shepard, 2005).

The position that formative assessment is a process has persisted since early introductions of the term, and widespread agreement with this view exists among formative assessment scholars (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Bloom, 1971; Clark, 2010; FAST SCASS, 2018; Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008; Sadler, 1989). Many (FAST SCASS, 2018; Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2014) expressly use the term process as a foundational element of their definition of formative assessment, and even those who don't

directly use the term (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Wiliam, 2011) imply that formative assessment is indeed a process. For instance, implicit in Bloom's (1971) application of formative evaluation for mastery learning is the implementation of a process that allows teachers and students to determine the nature and degree of student learning and then take steps to make adjustments before summative evaluation occurs. Similarly, Black and Wiliam (1998b) do not explicitly use the term process in their definition of formative assessment, but their focus on gathering information to generate feedback which in turn will be used to adjust teaching and learning clearly suggests a multiple-step process. Wiliam (2011), too, chooses to emphasize the steps of the process—eliciting, interpreting, and using—rather than actually using the term “process,” but he observes about his own definition as well as others that “however implicitly, formative assessment is regarded as a process” (p. 38).

Ramaprasad (1983) insists on gathering “information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter [and then using that information] to alter the gap in some way” (p. 4). Essentially, Ramaprasad isolates three critical factors: knowing the intended level of understanding and performance, determining the current level of understanding and performance, and achieving the intended level of understanding and performance. Sadler (1989) directly references Ramaprasad's work in his seminal piece on formative assessment, and since that time, other scholars (Black & Wiliam, 1998b, 2009; Brookhart, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019) have reiterated these three components as the foundation upon which they have constructed their perspectives on formative assessment. Figure 4 provides an overview from selected scholars who have returned to these seminal ideas as a means of grounding the formative assessment process.

**Figure 4**

*Three Components That Undergird an Understanding of the Formative Assessment Process*

	<b>Knowing Intended Level of Understanding and Performance</b>	<b>Determining Current Level of Understanding and Performance</b>	<b>Achieving Intended Level of Understanding and Performance</b>
Ramaprasad (1983, p. 4)	“reference level”	“actual level”	“alter the gap in some way”
Sadler (1989, p. 121)	“possess a concept of the <i>standard</i> (or goal, or reference level) being aimed for”	“compare the <i>actual</i> (or current) <i>level of performance</i> with the standard”	“engage in appropriate <i>action</i> which leads to some closure of the gap”
Black & Wiliam (1998b, p. 10)	“the <i>desired goal</i> ”	“evidence about their <i>present position</i> ”	“some understanding of a <i>way to close the gap</i> between the two”
Stiggins et al. (2004, p. 41)	“Where am I going?”	“Where am I now?”	“How can I close the gap?”
Hattie & Timperley (2007, p. 87)	“Where am I going? (the goals)”	“How am I going?”	“Where to next?”
Black & Wiliam (2009, p. 7)	“establishing where the learners are in their learning”	“establishing where they are going”	“establishing what needs to be done to get them there”
Brookhart (2010, p. 6)	“focus on learning goals”	“take stock of where current work is in relation to the goal”	“take action to move closer to the goal”
Moss & Brookhart (2019, p. 8)	“Where am I going?”	“Where am I now?”	“What strategy or strategies can help me get to where I need to go?”

Ultimately, these three components establish a framework of formative assessment that supports identifying and closing the gap (Sadler, 1989). To accomplish this purpose, ILOs and success criteria must be established, articulated, and understood (knowing desired level); information about the nature and degree of student learning must be elicited and interpreted (determining current level), and the resulting feedback must be communicated to (or understood)

and used by teachers and students (achieving intended level; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Leahy et al., 2005; Wiliam, 2011; Wiliam & Black, 1996; Wiliam & Leahy, 2007).

There are two important definitional points to be made about formative assessment as a process. First, the intention to engage in the formative assessment process is necessary but not sufficient (Clarke, 2005; Wiliam, 2011). Collecting evidence but not using it to effect positive change or growth for students is not formative assessment (Brookhart, 2007; Maxlow & Sanzo, 2018; McMillan, 2014; Sadler, 1989) because it short-circuits the process. Rather, the full process must unfold (Wiliam & Black, 1996). Second, formative assessment is an ongoing process (Heritage, 2010; Maxlow & Sanzo, 2018; McMillan, 2014; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Wiliam & Leahy, 2007) in which teachers and students routinely work to determine where students currently are and to make use of that information to advance student learning (Ramaprasad, 1983; Sadler, 1989). To illustrate this, conceptual models of the formative assessment process often arrange the elements in the process in a circular fashion and use arrows to demonstrate the flow from one step to the next, thereby suggesting the iterative and ongoing nature of formative assessment (Heritage, 2010; McMillan, 2014).

### **Summary**

When defining formative assessment, scholars have generally offered their conceptual position around four definitional issues: purpose, agents, timing, and process. Embracing Wiliam's (2011) view that a good definition of formative assessment should admit all of the many iterations of formative assessment, Figure 5 offers a summary of scholars' commonly held positions on each of these four definitional issues.



**Figure 5**

*Summary of Commonly Held Positions on the Four Definitional Issues*

<b>Definitional Issue</b>	<b>Commonly Held Position</b>
Purpose	To advance student learning
Agents	Teachers and/or students
Timing	Integral to the teaching and learning process; can occur before, during, and after instruction
Process	A process of establishing ILOs and success criteria, eliciting information, interpreting the elicited information, communicating feedback, and using the feedback

Put together, these key positions form the basis for an operational definition of formative assessment: Formative assessment is a process, integral to instruction, in which teachers and/or students elicit and interpret information about the nature and degree of student learning and then use that information to make adjustments that advance student learning.

### **Scholars' Recommendations for Practice**

The previous section on scholars' understanding of formative assessment articulates what is definitionally necessary for assessment to be considered formative. This section, on the other hand, explicates and synthesizes scholars' recommendations for the effective implementation and practice of formative assessment, presenting their suggestions for how to achieve the ultimate goal of advancing student learning. Because formative assessment scholars have begun to pay attention to how the differences in various disciplines may impact the implementation of formative assessment practices (Coffey et al., 2011; FAST SCASS, 2018; Heritage & Wylie, 2020; Lyon et al., 2018; Shepard et al., 2017), this section pays particular attention to formative assessment practices recommended for secondary English teachers, who were the sample for this study's research question. The phases of the formative assessment process are used as an organizational framework for exploring these general and English-specific recommendations.

## **Undertaking the Formative Assessment Process**

The formative assessment process relies on eliciting information about student thinking and learning, interpreting that elicited information to make inferences about the nature and degree of student learning, and using the interpreted information to adjust teaching and learning (Leahy et al., 2005; Wiliam, 2011; Wiliam & Black, 1996; Wiliam & Leahy, 2007). An additional but essential step in this process—communicating the interpreted information to the appropriate agent—is implied, for if individuals are to use interpreted information, it must necessarily be communicated to them. The necessity of feedback in formative assessment (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 1989) speaks to this additional phase. All four of these steps are underpinned and informed by predetermined ILOs and success criteria. Thus, the formative assessment process generally follows the pattern of establishing goals and criteria, eliciting information, interpreting elicited information, communicating the interpreted information (or feedback), and using the feedback (McMillan, 2014).

## **Establishing ILOs and Success Criteria**

This phase of the formative assessment process addresses the question, “Where am I going?” and insists on the need for clearly articulated ILOs and success criteria (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008; Wiliam, 2011). As teachers plan for and implement instruction and assessment, they must have clarity about what knowledge, skills, and dispositions students are expected to learn or develop, they must share those intentions with students in meaningful ways, and they must provide students with criteria that help them to determine if they are advancing in the right direction (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008; Wiliam, 2011).

All assessment relies on ensuring alignment between the assessment and the curriculum (Gareis & Grant, 2008). Therefore, in order to develop effective formative assessment, teachers must first unpack standards into their component learning targets (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012), developing clarity about the content and level of cognitive rigor suggested by the standard (Gareis & Grant, 2008). Teachers should next establish long-term goals which can, in turn, be further sub-divided into shorter-term targets that help students “step up to the more sophisticated year-long goals” (Tovani, 2011, p. 135). Such deconstruction is critical as it creates a scaffold of targets for students to achieve as they build to larger ones (Stiggins, 2007).

### ***ILOs as a Reference Point***

Teachers’ intentional development of and clarity about ILOs establishes a necessary reference point for them as they strive to make accurate and worthwhile interpretations about student learning and to communicate those interpretations to students as useful feedback (Johnson, 1967; Sadler, 1989; Wiliam, 2011). If students are to engage similarly in meaningful self- and peer-assessment, then they, too, must have clarity about the ILOs (Popham, 2008; Sadler, 1989; Wiliam, 2011). Once students have a sense of the direction in which they are headed, they are much more likely to believe they can be successful and to assume ownership of the goal (Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Sadler, 1989). Therefore, teachers must communicate ILOs to students, and they must do so in terms that are accessible to students (Black & Wiliam, 1998b).

### ***Affective ILOs***

In addition to addressing standards that focus on cognitive dimensions of student learning, formative assessment also provides a means of addressing student affect (Greenstein, 2010). Teachers can use formative assessment to delve into students’ beliefs and opinions about

the topic being studied, to scan the room and see how students are responding emotionally to what is being discussed, or to get a sense of how students are feeling about their own progress (Dodge, 2009; McMillan, 2014; Pappageorge, 2013; Tovani, 2011). In these cases, although there may not be articulated or intentionally taught ILOs that address these particular affective dimensions, teachers and students nonetheless still benefit from formatively assessing them (Filkins, 2013; NCTE, 2013; Pappageorge, 2013). In fact, for secondary English teachers, literacy assessment necessarily “includes more than cognitive activities; it also includes a range of practices and perceptions, including beliefs about literacy, dispositions toward literacy, and self-efficacy regarding literacy” (NCTE, 2018, p. 3).

### ***Success Criteria***

If ILOs are what students will know and be able to do, then success criteria are the “look-fors” (Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019). That is, they express how teachers and students “will know – what they will see and hear – to indicate that students are making progress toward meeting the goal” (Heritage, 2010, p. 51). They explain how students can show their developing knowledge and skill (Heritage, 2010; Tovani, 2011), and they act as a guide for students as they learn, allowing them to assess, regulate, and improve the quality of their own learning and work while they are learning and working (Moss & Brookhart, 2019). Teachers, by virtue of their content knowledge and experience, are in a privileged position relative to students when it comes to having skill in assessing student work (Sadler, 1989). Therefore, if students are to engage in effective self- and peer-assessment, teachers must share with them what success looks like (Clarke, 2005; Popham, 2008; Wiliam, 2011). Doing so requires an understanding of the quality of the work as well as the steps in the process; thus, quality and process criteria are both necessary (Clarke, 2005; Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019).

### ***Learning Progressions***

A number of scholars advocate the use of learning progressions to facilitate the scaffolding of ILOs and their related success criteria (Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008). Learning progressions are a teacher-determined sequencing of the knowledge and skills embedded within broader ILOs (Heritage, 2010). Once teachers determine the component building blocks of these “distant, designated instructional outcome[s]” (Popham, 2008, p. 24), they can then arrange these building blocks in a sequence that they anticipate will lead to greater student success and generate accompanying success criteria (Popham, 2008). The value of learning progressions for formative assessment is that they provide a “backdrop against which teachers and students can determine when to collect what sort of evidence regarding students’ current status” (Popham, 2008, p. 27). Having determined the sequence, then, teachers have a timeline for when to elicit formative assessment information and on which component of the broader ILO (McMillan, 2014). Learning progressions, then, support the use of planned formative assessment.

### ***ILOs and Success Criteria for Secondary English***

Marshall (2007), however, cautions that in disciplines such as English, “progression is a much messier business” (p. 136). Wiliam and Leahy (2007) concur, claiming that in subjects such as English, there is likely to be a collection of appropriate goals toward which students and teachers are simultaneously working rather than a single ILO. Learning progressions operate under the premise that the content and skills needed to succeed are known, quantifiable, and reducible to a linear system of teaching (Marshall, 2004). This, however, is not the case in English, where:

defining the qualities of good writing becomes far more problematic than identifying the shortcomings of bad writing [and] where the “strength of the piece” lies...less in the deployment of the criteria and more in the reader’s interpretation of the quality. (p. 103)

In fact, successful writers often “subvert the conventions” (Marshall, 2004, p. 105) of writing. Fundamentally, then, for complex subjects such as those undertaken in the English curriculum, using a fixed set of criteria may be limiting (Murphy & Smith, 2013; Sadler, 1989; J. Wilson, 2018; M. Wilson, 2009) in that “the individual components under-represent the whole of the domain” (Wiliam, 1996, as cited in Marshall, 2004, p. 105). As Hodgen and Marshall (2005) observe:

The difficulty for any English teacher wishing to implement formative assessment is striking the balance between the wood and the trees. Unless pupils understand the specifics of a task they are at risk, to mix metaphors slightly, of feeling at sea. Part of engaging with the subject, however, is to understand that what makes for quality in a piece of work cannot meaningfully be itemized in advance but can be recognized once it is complete, hence the need for pupils constantly to engage with models of good work as better to develop a “nose for quality.” (p. 165)

For complex subjects like English, Sadler’s (1989) recommended alternative to success criteria is to invoke guild knowledge in “which teaching and learning are focused on facilitating the attributes and practices exhibited by ‘good’ writers and readers” (Hodgen & Marshall, 2005, p. 154). Such guild knowledge is vital to formative assessment as it is how students gain sufficient understanding to undertake meaningful self- and peer-assessment (Hodgen & Marshall, 2005; Sadler, 1989).

In lieu of learning progressions that specify daily or weekly learning targets and success criteria, Childress et al. (2019) recommend the use of scales and micro-progressions in the secondary English classroom. Predicated on the understanding that some learning goals in the English curriculum develop over the course of an entire year, learning scales allow students to track their development toward these longer-term goals by providing direction about what development toward mastery of those long-term goals would look like. The micro-progression provides examples of what student skills and/or thinking would look like at each stage of the learning scale and identifies the strategies that might assist students as they move through the stages. While similar to the idea of learning progressions advocated by others (Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008), these learning scales acknowledge the iterative, spiraling nature of English curriculum and instruction (Bruner, 1977) and the need for concurrent attention to overlapping, intertwined elements of the curriculum (Hodgen & Marshall, 2005).

### **Eliciting Information**

To address the question of where students currently are in terms of their learning and thinking (Sadler, 1989), the formative assessment process relies on eliciting evidence about the nature and degree of student learning and thinking (FAST SCASS, 2018; McMillan, 2014; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Wiliam, 2011). As Wiliam (2011) observes:

Teachers must acknowledge that what their students learn is not necessarily what they intended, and this is inevitable because of the unpredictability of teaching. Thus, it is essential that teachers explore students' thinking before assuming that students have understood something. (p. 75)

As an integral part of teaching and learning, formative assessment provides the path for this sort of exploration, creating “a medium for assessing learning that is immediate and accessible to

both teachers and their students” (Moss & Brookhart, 2019, p. 112) and providing opportunities to check for student understanding before moving on (Leahy et al., 2005). This process begins by eliciting evidence from students in ways that makes their thinking visible (Offerdahl et al., 2018; Tovani, 2011).

### ***Questioning***

The fundamental means by which teachers elicit evidence of student learning is by posing questions that shed light on the nature and degree of student thinking and learning, or as Greenstein (2010) asserts, “all of assessment relates to questioning” (p. 82). Therefore, “more effort has to be spent in framing questions that are worth asking” (Black et al., 2003, p. 5). The challenge lies in crafting questions that accurately and adequately reveal how students are thinking about, understanding, processing, and internalizing the content and skills inherent in the ILOs (Frey & Fisher, 2007; Greenstein, 2007; Lyon et al., 2019; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Wiliam, 2011). At the core of the challenge, then, is the need to ensure that the questions or tasks posed to students are aligned with the curriculum (Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019), a fundamental consideration for all assessment (Gareis & Grant, 2008). In addition to the challenge of alignment, questions must also be carefully designed to differentiate between gradations of student learning (Tomlinson, 2014; Wiliam, 2011). This is accomplished by including response options that run the gamut from ones all students can answer correctly to those that only the most able students are able to answer (Wiliam, 2011).

Wiliam (2011) advocates for carefully crafted closed questions that elicit data about the nature and degree of student learning, questions that he refers to as diagnostic. These intentionally crafted questions, typically select response, offer answer choices or “distractors” that are predicated on the consideration of a number of potential misconceptions or potential



processing errors. Intentional, well-crafted diagnostic questions allow the teacher to collect solid evidence of student learning without requiring discussion to determine where student misconceptions might lie (Wiliam, 2011). Some scholars, on the other hand, advocate for open questions, typically supply response, that reveal student thinking and offer multiple entry points for multiple students (Frey & Fisher, 2011; McMillan, 2005; Moss & Brookhart, 2019). Wiliam (2011) refers to these open-ended questions as discussion questions and contends that although they are not as useful for formative assessment as diagnostic questions, open questions can generate valuable information, provided teachers elicit not only a response from students but also a rationale that provides a window into their thinking and processing. A number of authors offer suggestions for eliciting information from students that incorporate both select response and supply response questions (Dodge, 2007; Frey & Fisher, 2011; Greenstein, 2010; Maxlow & Sanzo, 2018). The relative merits of diagnostic and discussion questions for formative assessment may depend on the content area for which the questions are intended (Greenstein, 2010; Marshall, 2007).

### ***Variety of Formative Assessment Techniques***

Teachers can pose questions in traditional and non-traditional ways, thus giving rise to a nearly unlimited array of potential formative assessment techniques (Popham, 2008; see Appendix A). Teachers may pose questions orally or in writing, but they can also create tasks that explore the nature and degree of student learning by encouraging students to create or do something to communicate their thinking (Moss & Brookhart, 2019). Thus, four modes by which teachers can elicit information from students emerge: oral (Dodge, 2007; Ruiz-Primo, 2011), written (Dodge, 2007; Frey & Fisher, 2011; Ruiz-Primo, 2011), visual (non-verbal; Dodge, 2007; Frey & Fisher, 2011; Maxlow & Sanzo, 2018; Ruiz-Primo, 2011), and kinesthetic (Dodge,

2007; Maxlow & Sanzo, 2018; Ruiz-Primo, 2011). Whether teachers elect to have students explain their thinking about a wrong answer or create a graphic organizer to demonstrate their processing or move to sections of the room to indicate their response hinges upon teachers' professional determination of which will be the most effective means of posing questions so that students are able to communicate their progress and understanding (Frey & Fisher, 2007).

To overcome a common problem of questioning, namely lack of engagement and participation by all students, teachers may also use helper practices (Heritage, 2010), techniques which are not aligned to any particular ILO but which nonetheless contribute to the effective implementation of formative assessment techniques (Clarke, 2005; Heritage, 2010; Leahy et al., 2005). For instance, practices such as all-student response systems, wait time, think/pair/share, and no hands up allow teachers to maximize the potential of questioning to elicit meaningful and useful evidence of student learning, which in turn contributes to the efficacy of the elicitation phase of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Greenstein, 2007; Lemov, 2010; Wiliam, 2011). Thus, the variety afforded by multiple formative assessment techniques and their tandem helper practices contribute to student engagement (Burke, 2010).

### ***Planned and Unplanned Elicitation***

The term "planned" appears explicitly in three of the illustrative definitions offered in Figure 2 earlier in this chapter (FAST SCASS, 2018; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008), and there is wide consensus that teachers should intentionally plan for and design formative assessment opportunities that will elicit information about their students' understanding and ability (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Brookhart, 2007; FAST SCASS, 2018; Heritage, 2010; Leahy et al., 2005; McMillan, 2014; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008; Wiliam, 2011). Planning formative assessment opportunities involves not only deciding what questions to ask and which

prompts to use but also determining the strategic moments in the lesson when these opportunities should occur (Greenstein, 2010; Heritage, 2010). These hinge points (Leahy et al., 2005; Wiliam, 2011) create moments of contingency (Leahy et al., 2005) that offer insight into students' current thinking and assist teachers with deciding how to move students' learning forward. Engaging in systematic planning for how and when information will be elicited from students during instruction increases the likelihood that the generated evidence will be aligned with the ILO and therefore useful to teachers and their students (Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Wiliam, 2011).

It is tempting to insist, as some do, that in order to be formative, the elicitation of evidence *must* be planned and does not therefore include ad hoc, spontaneous generation of information (Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008). However, while the value of planning how and when to elicit evidence from students should not be dismissed, a more nuanced view acknowledges the merit of embracing unplanned formative assessment opportunities as they arise (Brown, 2004; Burke, 2010; FAST SCASS, 2018; Heritage, 2010; Leahy et al., 2005; Ruiz-Primo, 2011; Wiliam, 2011; Wiliam & Black, 1996). If “everything students do...is a potential source of information about how much they understand” (Leahy et al., 2005, p. 19), it would be unfortunate indeed to reject those responses that “bubble up” during instruction merely because they had not been planned. Furthermore, observation is inherent to the act of teaching, and “teachers cannot separate themselves from the observations make” (Brookhart, 2007, p. 53). The implication for formative assessment, then, is that the observations made while teaching necessarily inform teachers' decisions and actions, a more rudimentary form of formative assessment, perhaps, but a viable one nonetheless. In fact, when students spontaneously generate evidence of their understanding or ability, their response may well provide an even richer and

more accurate view of their true ability because it occurred in the absence of a planned prompt (William & Black, 1996). McMillan (2014) distinguishes between these planned and unplanned elicitations of evidence, referring to them as informal and formal formative assessment, without prejudicing one over the other. In fact, McMillan extends informal formative assessment to include attending to students' vocal cues, gestures, and body language, an idea Tovani (2011) echoes. Embracing unmediated as well as mediated formative assessment acknowledges the role of the teachable moment and invites teachers to maximize formative assessment by planning well *and* by embracing unplanned opportunities as they arise (Heritage, 2010; McMillan, 2014; William & Black, 1996).

### ***Eliciting Information in Secondary English***

When eliciting formative assessment information, secondary English teachers should use multiple measures and use them often (Noskin, 2013). Because “literacy assessment is varied, [it should] include multiple measures of different domains, including processes, texts, and reflection. Accordingly, no single measure informs literacy instruction” (NCTE, 2018, p. 3). Varied measures for literacy assessment should encourage students to “interact with texts on their own terms” (Hamel, 2003, p. 78), and all literacy assessment should rely on authentic literacy activities (International Literacy Association, 2017). Similarly, writing ability must also rely upon multiple authentic measures, with students having the opportunity to demonstrate their skill in multiple genres, for varied audiences, and on different occasions (NCTE, 2014).

Open-ended questions, which lie at the core of these multiple, authentic measures, are particularly critical in the secondary English classroom, for “if there is only one right answer to the questions asked, student responses won’t [provide] a lot of information about what they need to become better readers, writers, and thinkers” (Tovani, 2011, p. 74). Writing and literacy

assessment requires students to consume, create, and critique (NCTE, 2014, 2018) and thereby necessitate open-ended, supply response questions that allow students to demonstrate which aspects of the writing and reading processes they do well by engaging them in authentic activities that demonstrate the strategies and skills they have learned (NCTE, 2014).

Black and Wiliam (1998b) observe that all formative assessment relies on quality dialogue that “evokes thoughtful reflection” (p. 8), and such formative use of dialogue is strongly endorsed for use in the secondary English classroom (Brindley & Marshall, 2015; Hodgen & Marshall, 2005; Marshall, 2007; Roskos & Neuman, 2012). Marshall (2004) recommends that English teachers and their students engage in “classroom talk,” a formative assessment technique in which English teachers and their students listen attentively to each other and then respond in ways that offer feedback or that ask students to build on their own and others’ initial responses (Hodgen & Marshall 2005). Interpretive whole-class discussion of text at high cognitive levels provides insight into students’ thinking processes, rationale, and degree of understanding (Beck et al., 2018; Lyon et al., 2019; Torgesen & Miller, 2009). Brindley and Marshall (2015) observe that when English teachers utilize class talk formatively, they “exchange ideas with pupils in a spontaneous, unplanned manner” (p. 122), suggesting that formative assessment in secondary English can make effective use of unplanned elicitions. Because the paths students follow as they engage in learning and assessment tasks may take unanticipated turns, teachers must be willing to be flexible and spontaneous in terms of their formative assessment of students (Brindley & Marshall, 2015).

The value of dialogue is also addressed in recommendations for small group discussions which provide opportunities for authentic conversation and allow English teachers to assess individual students’ strengths and areas for growth (Lyon et al., 2019; Pappageorge, 2013).

Similarly, one-on-one discussion with students in the form of conferences create opportunities to formatively assess students' reading and writing skill (Hamel, 2003; NCTE, 2018). Conferences create opportunities for teachers to elicit information from students about their reading and writing preferences, processes, and intentions (Hamel, 2003; NCTE, 2018). Another form of dialogue-centered, one-on-one formative assessment is a student think-aloud protocol, during which teachers observe and listen to students as they compose (Beck et al., 2018). This practice generates different information about student writing ability than what could be gleaned through teachers' assessment of the written product only and thereby provides more insight into students' ability to evaluate, revise, and manage their own writing process (Beck et al., 2018). Similarly, the International Literacy Association (2017) recommends that teachers "observe and document students' oral reading behaviors" (p. 4) to glean information about how students prepare to read and how they work through text (Hamel, 2003).

In addition to dialogue-centered formative assessment techniques, secondary English teachers also make use of several other formative assessment techniques. Annotations make students' thinking about the texts with which they are engaging visible to teachers and creates a written record of that thinking (Hamel, 2003; Tovani, 2011). Portfolios, too, hold value for formative assessment in the English classroom because they allow for both teacher assessment and student self-assessment of developing writing, reading, and speaking skills (Murphy & Smith, 2013) and because they create a means by which assessment hinges not only on one product but rather a series of them (NCTE, 2014). Surveys and polls are also suggested formative assessment techniques for secondary English because they not only provide cognitive information about student learning but also serve as a means of collecting affective information about students' reading and writing attitudes and preferences (NCTE, 2013; Tovani, 2011).

## **Interpreting Information**

Teachers' determination of what students know or do not know at any given point in time is "the core of formative assessment" (Frey & Fisher, 2011; p. 105). Therefore, once teachers have elicited student responses, they must then be intentional about interpreting them (Tovani, 2011), a "process of attending to and constructing meaning from information" (Lyon et al., 2019, p. 302). Of the seven illustrative definitions offered earlier in the chapter, only Wiliam's (2011) explicitly includes the term "interpret;" however, the notion of formative assessment as a process clearly implies that if teachers are to use elicited information to advance student learning, they must first make necessary interpretations of that information, for student responses do not become useful evidence of their learning until they are interpreted (William & Black, 1996). Indeed, teachers' analysis of misconceptions and errors lets them make intentional decisions about which students need what instruction and how to offer that new instruction (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; Frey & Fisher, 2011). Essentially, such interpretation involves identifying the gap between where students are and where they should be (Heritage, 2010; Sadler, 1989).

## ***Interpretive Listening***

As students provide responses to formative assessment questions and tasks, teachers tend to listen or look for the correctness of student responses, engaging in what Davis (1997) terms evaluative listening (Leahy et al., 2005; Wiliam, 2011), but formative assessment "requires attention to more than the correct response" (Frey & Fisher, 2011, p. 8). To engage effectively in formative assessment, teachers should instead listen and look interpretively as a means of seeking insight into students' thinking and learning (Davis, 1997; Leahy et al., 2005; Wiliam, 2011), thereby honoring the view of questioning as a "complex progression" (Frey & Fisher, 2007) rather than a simple matter of a question followed by an anticipated answer. When

interpreting students' responses, teachers must work to recognize student mistakes, misunderstandings, and misconceptions and to make sense of those shortcomings (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; Black & Wiliam, 2009; FAST SCASS 2018; Greenstein, 2010). Essentially, these assessment-based inferences focus on whether students have fully mastered the content and skills embedded in the ILO, have partially mastered them, or have not mastered them at all (Popham, 2008). In addition to discovering whether students have hit the mark, teachers must also determine what thinking lies beneath the answers students give (Tovani, 2011). As part of this work, teachers must recognize that "imperfect output may be evidence of a number of different problems" (Black & Wiliam, 2009, p. 17). For instance, students may have misunderstood the task, the purpose, the language, or the quality criteria, or they may have used an inappropriate or ineffective strategy or neglected to provide a sufficient explanation (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Making these determinations is always challenging, but this is particularly the case when teachers strive to make interpretations in real time as instruction unfolds (Popham, 2008). Ultimately, making such inferences provides teachers with the evidence needed to make instructional decisions; thus, the "effective use of formative assessment depends on these judgments" (Heritage, 2010, p. 28).

Teachers must make these inferences in reference to something, a step which is necessarily comparative (Sadler, 1989) and which can be accomplished by comparing student responses to established ILOs and success criteria (Greenstein, 2010; Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008) or to collectively held guild knowledge (Sadler, 1989). Teachers' interpretation of student responses involves determining the degree to which those responses fit, rather than match expectations (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Wiliam & Black, 1996). Even if teachers do not expressly articulate the criteria to which they are making comparisons,



they nonetheless hold those non-exemplified criteria in their own minds and use them to make inferences about student learning and thinking (Sadler, 1989).

### *On the Fly and After the Fact*

When teachers consider the questions and tasks they pose in order to elicit information, they must also pay heed to the mode in which students will respond, considering the advantages and limitations of the various modes available to students (Heritage, 2010). Permanent responses—those that are written, drawn, or recorded—may mask the full process the student undertook to arrive at these products (Sadler, 1989). On the other hand, transient responses—those that are oral or kinesthetic and occur in real time—may be more likely to reveal the procedural thinking in which students have engaged to arrive at their responses (Popham, 2008; Sadler, 1989; Wiliam & Black, 1996). Because “the evanescent nature of ephemeral evidence means that it must be captured immediately or lost” (Wiliam & Black, 1996, p. 542), a logical adjustment might be to ask students to convert fleeting responses to a more permanent form. However, this sort of conversion requires additional skills, the lack of which in some students may alter rather than appropriately capture their thinking (Sadler, 1989). Alternatively, teachers may use a variety of methods such as checklists and charts to record students’ transient thoughts (Dodge, 2009; Heritage, 2010).

Additionally, this issue of permanent and transient responses has ramifications for when interpretation occurs (Heritage, 2010). For instance, if a student offers a fleeting, verbal response to a question, that answer must be interpreted on-the-fly; similarly, if a student responds to the same question in writing, that answer can be interpreted after the fact. In other words, more ephemeral responses must be interpreted as they occur, requiring the teacher to be fully attuned to what is occurring during instruction while simultaneously being mindful of the ILOs to which

the formative assessment question or task is aligned (Popham, 2008; Wiliam, 2011). Anticipating potential responses before instruction provides teachers with an opportunity to consider appropriate adjustments beforehand, better enabling them to make interpretations on the fly (Heritage, 2010; McMillan, 2014). More permanent responses, on the other hand, allow the possibility of interpreting information after class and in more depth (Heritage, 2010).

### ***Students as Interpreters***

As noted earlier, teachers are not the only agents who may engage as actors in the formative assessment process (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; FAST SCASS, 2018; Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008; Wiliam, 2011). Rather, the best formative assessment occurs when both teachers and students engage in the formative process by reflecting on and reviewing student work (Brookhart, 2010; Greenstein, 2010). Students, then, should be actively involved in their own learning (ARG, 1999), both as self-assessors and as peer-assessors (Clarke, 2005; Leahy et al., 2005; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Wiliam & Leahy, 2007). Both self- and peer-assessment allow students to reflect on what they have learned, to practice applying standards objectively, and to identify potential ways to improve their own work (Greenstein, 2010). For such endeavors to be effective, teachers should be mindful of their intended goals (Greenstein, 2010) as well as thoughtful about establishing and maintaining a classroom culture that supports the affective needs of students who are engaged as self- and peer assessors (Moss & Brookhart, 2019).

Self-assessment is a crucial component of implementing effective formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Clarke, 2005; FAST SCASS, 2018; Heritage, 2010; Leahy et al., 2005; McMillan, 2014; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008; Wiliam, 2011). When students engage in self-assessment, they become “owners of their own learning” (Leahy et al., 2005) and

develop their ability to self-regulate, coordinating “cognitive resources, emotions, and actions in the service of [their] learning goals” (Wiliam, 2011 p. 147).

Peer assessment is necessarily a collaborative learning venture (Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Wiliam, 2011) as two or more students work together as instructional resources for one another (Leahy et al., 2005). Assessing the work of a partner has several formative advantages for students, namely that

(a) the work is of the same type and addressed to the same task as their own, (b) students are brought face to face with a wide range of moves or solutions to creative, design, and procedural problems, and exposure to these incidentally expands their own repertoire of moves, (c) other students' attempts normally cover a wide spectrum of imperfections, including global and particular inadequacies, and (d) the use of other students' work in a cooperative environment assists in achieving some objectivity in that students are less defensive of, and committed emotionally to, other students' work than to their own.

(Sadler, 1989, p. 140)

Peer assessment's advantages point to it being primarily a learning experience for students (Moss & Brookhart, 2019) though it can also result in the provision of feedback to peers (Leahy et al., 2005).

As students assume the role of assessor (Wiliam & Black, 1996), they must develop skill in interpreting responses (Heritage, 2010; Sadler, 1989; Stiggins, 2005). To do so requires teachers to assume responsibility for ensuring that students not only understand the ILOs but also “hold a conception of quality similar to the teacher's” (Heritage, 2010, p. 13). Students arrive at such a conception by “learning and internalizing the standards by which others will judge [their]

performance” (Shepard, 2005). Sharing rubrics, exemplars, and success criteria may help to define quality work (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; Greenstein, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019).

### ***Interpreting Information in Secondary English***

Secondary English teachers must engage with and be responsive to the “substance of [students’] ideas and reasoning” (Coffey et al., 2011, p. 1131) in order to be mindful of the nuances in student thinking (Hamel, 2003). English teachers must be adept at attending to information not only after the fact when they have more time to review student work but also on-the-fly as they engage in discussion with students (NCTE, 2013). In terms of literacy assessment, teachers must work to interpret and analyze students’ “intentions, processes, and/or products” (NCTE, 2018, p. 5) to uncover students’ strengths and weaknesses with regard to how they approach and interact with text (Hamel, 2003). Assessing student annotations involves discovering what they reveal about students’ thinking as they read (Tovani, 2011). As secondary English teachers work to make accurate interpretations of student writing, they must attend to patterns and work to differentiate between mistakes (when students know better) and errors (when students don’t know better) as this will inform their eventual use of the information (Frey & Fisher, 2013). “Teachers have to be able to unpack what writers are doing as they engage in the writing process, including the strategies more expert writers use in the complex activity of writing” (Parr & Timperley, 2010, p. 71).

As information is elicited in the secondary English classroom, teachers need structures in place to capture the data they collect (Frey & Fisher, 2013; Pappageorge, 2013). To ensure a responsive formative assessment system for writing, Frey and Fisher (2013) suggest using what they call an error analysis tool, a chart that includes the criteria for an ongoing assignment and space to indicate by initials which students are struggling with which criteria. Tovani (2011) and

Pappageorge (2013) recommend keeping conferencing notes and running records that track the progress and needs of individual students, whether field notes, checklists, or observation guides (NCTE, 2013, p. 4).

Teachers are not the only assessors in the secondary English classroom. Effective literacy assessment calls for students to develop as “self-reflective literacy learners” (NCTE, 2018, p. 4), a process guided by the collaborative efforts of students and teachers and by opportunities for students to monitor and assess their own learning. Similarly, recommendations for best writing assessment practices urge that students engage in both self- and peer-assessment (NCTE, 2014), for as Marshall (2004) asserts, these are fundamentally key English instructional practices. Peer assessment in the English classroom generates multiple audiences for student writing, and self-assessment “holds particular promise as a way of generating knowledge about writing and increasing the ability to write successfully” (NCTE, 2014, p. 4). Self- and peer-assessment can be supported by rubrics, checklists, process reflections, and student-led conferences (NCTE, 2013).

### **Communicating Feedback**

For assessment to be formative, the information that has been elicited and interpreted must also be used (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Wiliam, 2011). In some instances, the individual who interpreted the information can make direct use of that data themselves, either to adjust instruction (as in the case of teachers who have interpreted students’ responses) or to adjust learning (as in the case of students who have interpreted their own responses; Heritage, 2010). In other instances, however, the individual who interpreted the information, whether teacher or student, must first communicate that data to the individual whose response they interpreted (Frey

& Fisher, 2011; Heritage, 2010). In those cases, then, the formative assessment process involves the additional step of communicating formative feedback.

Formative feedback communicates information to students about aspects of their demonstrated understanding or performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008). As the “heart and soul of formative assessment” (Burke, 2010, p. 21), formative feedback allows students and teachers to understand how students are progressing relative to ILOs (Bloom, 1971; Burke, 2010; Guskey, 2007; Heritage, 2010; McMillan, 2014). When students have access to information about how close their actual level of understanding or performance is to the intended level of understanding or performance, they are prompted to think about and self-regulate their own learning (Gareis & Grant, 2008; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Moss & Brookhart, 2019). Therefore, offering effective feedback creates conditions that promote opportunities to close the gap and thus progress the formative goal of advancing student learning (Moss & Brookhart, 2019).

### ***Criteria of Effective Feedback***

As teachers work to enact formative assessment, the quality of their feedback merits their closest attention (Sadler, 1989) and should be “approached as purposefully as other aspects of instruction” (Frey & Fisher, 2011, p. 64). To be effective, feedback must provide students with the information they need in order to adjust their efforts (Maxlow & Sanzo, 2018). To that end, effective formative feedback must be descriptive (Brookhart, 2007; Stiggins, 2005); accurate (William, 2011); specific (Gareis & Grant, 2008; Maxlow & Sanzo, 2018; Shute, 2008; Wiggins, 1998); timely (Shute, 2008; Wiggins, 1998); constructive (Brookhart, 2007; Gareis & Grant, 2008); understandable (Gareis & Grant, 2008; Wiggins, 1998); and actionable (Wiggins, 1998). In short, teachers should offer students feedback that sets them on a path of continued learning

and improvement (Frey & Fisher, 2011). Grades, which do not meet a number of these criteria, are not feedback (Bloom, 1971; Brookhart, 2010; Wiliam, 2011). Merely receiving a grade does not tell students how to improve (McMillan, 2014), and may, in fact, cause learning to stop rather than progress (Shute, 2008; Wiliam, 2011). Furthermore, even if quality feedback is offered along with a grade, the presence of the grade diminishes the value and utility of the feedback (R. Butler, 1988; Wiliam, 2011). Although quality feedback is necessary for student improvement, it is not sufficient (Sadler, 1989). Nonetheless, providing quality feedback opens an opportunity for improvement that would not otherwise exist (Moss & Brookhart, 2019).

### ***Offering Effective Feedback***

To be effective, feedback should be differentiated (McMillan, 2014), with teachers tailoring feedback to the needs of each student (Frey & Fisher, 2011) and ensuring that they use language appropriate for each student (Sadler, 1989). Teachers should provide information about the “particular qualities” (Black & Wiliam, 1998b, p. 9) of each student’s work as well as advice on what they should do in order to improve (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019). Thus, in order “to convey instructive meaning about [their] judgments” (Gareis & Grant, 2008, p. 164), teachers’ feedback must address two questions: how the student is doing and what they need to do next (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Addressing these questions involves sharing information about the nature and degree of student learning regarding specific ILOs *and* offering specific strategies for the next steps to take (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Shute, 2008). Because formative feedback is a “recipe for future action” (Wiliam, 2011, p. 121), students who receive such feedback can “confirm, add to, overwrite, tune, or restructure” (D. L. Butler & Winne, 1995, p. 265) their efforts. If the proffered feedback does not offer next steps, then students are left with what Sadler (1989) refers to as “dangling

data” (p. 121), evidence that gets generated but is not communicated or used. Because such data does not improve performance, it is not feedback (Ramaprasad, 1983) and fails to contribute to effective formative assessment (Sadler, 1989).

When providing feedback to students, teachers may offer feedback at four levels: feedback about the task, about the process used to complete the task, about students’ degree of self-regulation, or about students themselves (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback that evaluates students as people is “ego-involving feedback” (Wiliam, 2011, p. 110), and because it does not contain task-related information, it does little to promote student engagement, commitment, self-efficacy, or understanding (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and should therefore be avoided (Wiliam, 2011). Ultimately, teachers’ feedback should make clear that ability is not fixed but incremental, rooted in students’ effort, motivation, and persistence (Dweck, 2006; Wiliam, 2011).

When receiving feedback, students may attribute their progress or lack thereof to a number of factors (Dweck, 2006) and may respond by exerting more or less effort, by increasing or decreasing their aspiration, by deciding that the goal is too hard or too easy, or by rejecting the feedback as being irrelevant (Wiliam, 2011). Therefore, when offering feedback to students, teachers must consider what their feedback conveys to students and strive to ensure that their feedback provokes a cognitive reaction, not an emotional one (Wiliam, 2011). Teachers’ attention to the tone, structure, and timing of their feedback can mitigate negative emotional responses to feedback (Frey & Fisher, 2011).

Feedback can be conveyed orally or in writing (Moss & Brookhart, 2019), though the value of written feedback is contingent upon the willingness of the teacher to take time to write



comments, the ability of the teachers to accurately express their ideas in writing, and the ability of the student to interpret the writing (Sadler, 1989).

### ***Communicating Feedback in Secondary English***

In the secondary English classroom, feedback is a powerful instructional tool (Graham & Perin, 2007; M. Wilson, 2009). In order to realize that power fully, formative feedback, whether on reading or writing, should be “feedback that fortifies” (Earl, 2003, p. 105). NCTE (2018) asserts that if literacy and writing assessment is to be meaningful to students, then it must include feedback to the learner. In terms of writing assessment, Lucero et al. (2018) note that teachers’ comments on students’ written compositions “is a fundamental didactic resource for improving written competence” (p. 158). Because grading essays “misrepresents the goal and nature of writing and reading” (M. Wilson, 2009, p. 59), English teachers should focus instead on providing students with a narrative of the reader’s response which gives them a sense of the effect of their written words (M. Wilson, 2009). Responses from multiple readers are recommended (NCTE, 2018; M. Wilson, 2009), for then feedback not only serves the purpose of helping them progress their development as writers but also gives them insight into readers’ needs (Parr & Timperley, 2010). Furthermore, in the face of responses from multiple readers, students are able to consider patterns versus the preferences of individual readers as they work to revise their writing (M. Wilson, 2009). The single-point rubric allows for such feedback because rather than providing explicit criteria for a range of success (e.g., developing, proficient, exceeds), it instead provides space for the reader to share what they considered particularly successful or in need of more effort (J. Wilson, 2018). In terms of written feedback on formative assessments of literacy, comments to students on annotations offer students useful information regarding their developing skill in reading and analyzing literature (Tovani, 2011). Formative

feedback can also be given orally, either in informal classroom interactions or during more intentional conferences (Parr & Timperley, 2010). Regardless of the mode in which feedback is delivered to students, it must promote student learning by posing ideas and actionable recommendations for students to contemplate as they decide how to move forward (Parr & Timperley, 2010).

### **Using Interpreted Information**

Formative assessment is instructionally informative (Greenstein, 2010). It presents teachers with information they can use to make instructional decisions, and it presents students with information they can use to make improvements in their learning (Brookhart, 2007; Popham, 2008). In fact, such information *must* be used, for assessment is not formative unless the data that has been elicited, interpreted, and communicated is also utilized (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Wiliam, 2011). Clarke (2005) emphasizes the necessity of this phase of the formative assessment process, stating that the real work of formative assessment “happens after the finding out has taken place” (p. 1). “After the finding out” is the space in which teachers and students make use of the information to adjust teaching and learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Brookhart, 2007; Clarke, 2005; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Wiliam, 2011). These dual functions of formative assessment—adjusting teaching and adjusting learning—are how teachers and students work to close the gap between the intended level of understanding and performance and students’ current level of understanding and performance.

### ***Students’ Use of Interpreted Information***

Effective formative assessment involves students using the feedback they have been given to improve their learning (Wiliam & Leahy, 2007). Students’ thoughtful review of feedback gives them opportunities to consider what changes they need to make, and their active

engagement with feedback gives them opportunities to implement those changes (Popham, 2008). In other words, both students' learning tactics and the products they generate stand to improve when students are provided time to interact with the feedback they have received. Therefore, it is incumbent upon teachers to provide opportunities for students to use feedback (FAST SCASS, 2018; Frey & Fisher, 2011). Ideally, the decisions that students make about how to use the feedback they have received is "student-determined, [not] teacher-dictated" (Popham, 2008, p. 73).

### ***Teachers' Use of Interpreted Information***

Teachers' effective use of formative assessment data is dependent upon their exercise of professional judgment as they adjust their instructional practices (McMillan, 2014). This requires teachers to call upon their pedagogical expertise, for as Popham (2008) asserts, "the more pedagogical prowess a teacher can bring to the adjustment altar, the better" (p. 68). Because teachers must offer corrective instruction in ways that differ from how the material was initially taught (Bloom, 1971; Burke, 2010; Dodge, 2009; McMillan, 2014), they need a substantive repertoire of instructional strategies at their disposal (Popham, 2008). They must also exercise professional judgment in terms of their flexibility as they adjust the pacing and sequencing of their instruction (Burke, 2010). As Guskey (2007/2008) observes, "teachers must keep in mind what the class needs to accomplish by the end of any learning sequence, but they also must see students' pathways to that end in more flexible and accommodating terms" (p. 34).

Once elicited information has been interpreted, teachers can enact a variety of instructional responses (Greenstein, 2010). At the most fundamental level, teachers' options for how to adjust instruction are to provide more instruction or to provide less (Popham, 2008). McMillan (2014) expands on these options and introduces the idea of pacing as another

consideration for teacher adjustment, noting that teachers can slow down, speed up, review, or move on. More specifically, teachers can:

- change a particular lesson in the unit,
- select different or additional sources,
- use different instructional strategies,
- group students homogeneously (for differentiation) or heterogeneously (for collaborative learning),
- make the content more accessible,
- adjust pace or sequence, and
- provide opportunity for choice. (Greenstein, 2010)

Teachers can also use formative assessment information to determine students' readiness for summative assessment (Brookhart, 2010; Greenstein, 2010). As Brookhart (2010) observes, "formative assessments give a teacher information about how long to 'form' and when to 'sum'" (p. 4).

### ***Using Interpreted Information in Secondary English***

Formative feedback in both writing and literacy assessment should "assume a classroom learning context [in which] assessments help stakeholders focus on...goals for improvement and actions to be taken" (NCTE, 2018, p. 3). In terms of students' use of formative information that has been interpreted and shared, Frey and Fisher (2013) note that once students have received feedback on their writing, they need time to apply that information and to do so with the support of a skilled teacher. Students should act on the formative feedback they receive, using it to "develop and shape ideas, as well as organize, craft sentences, and edit" (NCTE, 2014, p. 3).

Regarding teachers' use of interpreted information and shared feedback, formative assessment in the secondary English classroom should be driven by the "lived, daily embodiment of a teacher's desire to refine practice based on a keener understanding of current levels of student performance" (NCTE, 2013, p. 2); therefore, best assessment practice in secondary English classrooms is marked by assessment that informs teachers' curricular and instructional decisions (NCTE, 2014). For a formative assessment technique to fulfill its promise of improving student reading and writing ability, teachers must be skilled at knowing how to use the information that was elicited and interpreted (Lucero et al., 2018). Teachers should use the data they have collected on students' writing and reading progress to "consider what kinds of support and instruction students need in order to continue developing and to select, design, and implement pedagogies [that] provide such support and direction" (NCTE, 2014, p. 3). In making these decisions, teachers must prioritize what students most need next (Tovani, 2011). Suggested actions for teachers to take based on formative data include selecting the focus for the subsequent lesson and making grouping decisions that support needed differentiation (Tovani, 2011).

### **Summary**

A number of formative assessment practices, both general and English-specific, are recommended by scholars and professional organizations. These suggestions provide conceptually grounded ideas for effectively implementing and practicing formative assessment at each phase of the formative assessment process: establishing ILOs, eliciting information, interpreting information, communicating feedback, and using interpreted information/feedback.

### **Teachers' Beliefs and Practices of Formative Assessment**

Fullan (2005) observes that “terms travel well, but the underlying *conceptualization and thinking* do not” (p. 10). As a term, formative assessment has certainly traveled well. The question, though, remains as to whether the underlying concepts and premises of formative assessment as articulated by numerous scholars have come along for the ride. This section of Chapter 2 presents empirical studies that speak to this question. First, this section reviews studies that have investigated teachers’ beliefs and practices of formative assessment as well as their view of assessment as serving primarily a formative function. Next, this section reviews a handful of studies that offer some insight into assessment in the secondary English classroom.

### **Studies About Teachers’ Formative Assessment Beliefs and Practices**

Several studies have focused on teachers’ beliefs about and practice of formative assessment. These studies are generally guided by research questions that attempt to understand how teachers conceive of formative assessment and how they practice it in their classrooms. For instance, in a 2010 study, McMillan et al. explored the nature of secondary teachers’ formative assessment practices. A total of 161 teachers from the United States (75 middle school teachers and 86 high school teachers) completed a quantitative survey of 60 Likert scale items on a variety of assessment topics with seven of the items specifically addressing formative assessment. Results, which were based on responses to only these seven items, reveal that 60% of the respondents reported making extensive or moderate use of formative assessment in their classrooms. However, results further show that these teachers actually make limited use of formative assessment, particularly those practices that might “guide further instruction, diagnose student weaknesses, and give feedback that contains suggestions to students for further learning” (McMillan et al., 2010, p. 9). Teachers were more likely to engage in formative assessment practices that monitored and diagnosed current learning rather than in those practices that guide

future learning. One conclusion of this study is that although teachers value formative assessment, they nonetheless struggle to practice it effectively.

Similarly, Deenan et al. (2019) investigated teachers' values, proficiency, and practice with regard to formative assessment. In a study of 881 teachers and 27 administrators from Singapore, teachers indicated the degree to which they value, feel proficient in, and practice formative assessment on four constructs: (a) aligning with curricular aims, (b) sustaining student engagement, (c) involving students in self- and peer-assessment, and (d) grading and reporting. Overall, the authors found that teachers most highly value student engagement in assessment and self- and peer-assessment; however, these constructs were the ones for which they felt the least proficiency. Conversely, even though they least valued summative assessment and grading, they reported high degrees of practice and proficiency for this task. The authors conclude that these teachers believe in the formative power of assessment but struggle to enact it in practice and assert that this may be due to their perception that external accountability and summative assessment is the mandated policy whereas formative classroom assessment is merely a suggested one.

This disconnect between teachers valuing formative assessment but not feeling prepared or adept at implementing it was also the subject of Brink and Bartz's (2017) study of three high school teachers from the United States. In this mixed methods study, the three teachers, who taught math, physical education, and foreign language, participated in professional learning and received ongoing support as they attempted to increase their implementation of formative assessment practices in their classrooms. The study revealed that these three teachers experienced an increased positive perception of formative assessment as they enjoyed support that enhanced their feelings of proficiency. More specifically, these teachers indicated that

professional support and guidance on how to manage and track data about student progress, how to provide useful feedback, how to adjust instructional strategies, and how students can play a role in formative assessment increased their positive perceptions of formative practice. In short, the authors concluded that increased proficiency enhanced teachers' already positive views of formative assessment.

Lyon et al. (2019) explored teachers' use of practices that support or inhibit the integrated implementation of formative assessment. The six secondary teachers involved in the study (three English teachers and three math teachers) participated in a professional development initiative focused on improving teachers' formative assessment practice. These participants were observed six times over the course of one semester to determine what strategies and approaches constituted their practice and how these strategies and approaches combined to foster conditions that allowed for fully integrated formative assessment. Observers used the High-Impact Classroom Assessment Practices protocol to rate the lessons they observed on three domains that allow for meaningful implementation of formative assessment: (a) structures that facilitate teaching and learning (preparation, use of technology, and learning targets); (b) iterative content development (content development of students/content knowledge of teachers, effective questioning, and use of evidence); and (c) activating students (student involvement including self- and peer-assessment and student engagement). The authors found key differences in how teachers implement formative assessment and factors that both support and inhibit an integrated approach to formative assessment. Of the three English teachers, one demonstrated a well-rounded practice of formative assessment, another had limitations in one domain (activating students), and the third had limitations in all domains. All three had less than robust ratings for sharing learning targets meaningfully with students, but the two teachers who demonstrated



strength in other areas engaged in a number of activities that supported the integration of formative assessment, though each exhibited variety in the activities they chose and implemented them with varying degrees of success. The researchers concluded that “formative assessment requires the implementation of a set of complex and interrelated classroom practices” (Lyon et al., 2019, p. 331) which some teachers are not prepared to enact. Furthermore, all teachers have varying levels of skill with the multitude of strategies that enhance formative assessment integration.

Specific formative assessment strategies were investigated in Volante and Beckett’s (2011) study of 20 teachers (nine elementary teachers and 11 high school teachers) from Ontario. Interview questions prompted teachers to discuss their use of questioning, feedback without grades, student self-assessment, peer-assessment, and the formative use of summative assessments. Qualitative analysis of interview transcripts revealed that these teachers considered questioning a powerful formative assessment tool and that questions as a tool for formative assessment must be crafted such that they elicit students’ higher order thinking. They also reported that they highly value the practice of providing feedback without grades, but they noted the tension they felt between needing to balance feedback as a positive formative assessment tool and grading as a required summative task. Furthermore, despite valuing student self-assessment and peer-assessment, these teachers admitted that these two aspects of formative assessment practice were particularly challenging and were thus something they did not practice as often as they would like. Peer-assessment was particularly frustrating for these teachers as they worried about students’ subjectivity and lack of content knowledge. Volante and Beckett (2011) concluded that teachers value formative assessment but lack a balanced use of high-yield formative assessment strategies.

The particular challenge of peer-assessment as a component of effective formative assessment was explored by Panadero and Brown (2017), who researched the beliefs and experiences of 751 K-12 teachers from Spain with regard to peer-assessment. The authors used a self-report survey of 75 items, 10 of which directly addressed their views and use of peer-assessment. Survey results revealed that 75% of these teachers reported that they believed student participation in peer-assessment to be a necessity, but only 55% of these teachers used it in their courses, and the majority of those used it only occasionally or rarely. Generally, teachers who felt more optimistic about the advantages offered by peer-assessment and who had effectively used peer-assessment in their classrooms in the past were more likely to report a higher incidence of using peer-assessment. Teachers in this study particularly struggled with providing feedback. Most of these teachers reported that feedback is not given individually (86%), in working groups (72%), or in the classroom (84%), leaving the authors unclear about how students do receive feedback from peer-assessment. The study concluded that “teachers like the idea of [peer-assessment], struggle somewhat with inherent difficulties, and that their self-reported use depends largely on previous positive experiences” (Panadero & Brown, 2017, p. 149).

In another study, McMillan (2005) interviewed 12 secondary English and 15 secondary math teachers to determine what drives their assessment decisions. Qualitative analysis of those interviews revealed that they valued assessment that makes student thinking visible and allows them to use assessment to check for student understanding at deeper levels, thereby implying that these teachers operate with the view that assessment should be, at least in part, formative. To collect such formative information, these teachers stated a clear preference for supply-response questions. McMillan concluded that although these teachers preferred such assessment

opportunities, they operated with an awareness of an inherent tension between their own values and the demands and expectations from external forces. In fact, the teachers in this study were resigned to modifying their classroom practices in order to align with the expectations of external accountability tests.

Collectively, these studies suggest dissonance for teachers between the high value they ascribe to formative assessment and their self-reported lack of its use (Brink & Bartz, 2017; Deenan et al., 2019; McMillan, 2010; Panadero & Brown, 2017; Volante & Beckett, 2011). Furthermore, teachers in these studies generally attribute their lack of use of formative assessment to a corresponding lack of proficiency for it (Deenan et al., 2019; McMillan, 2010; Volante & Beckett, 2011) or, conversely, their increased use to a corresponding increase in their proficiency (Brink & Bartz, 2017). Also, the tensions potentially created by the pressure of external summative assessment may inhibit their use of formative assessment in their classrooms (Deenan et al., 2019; McMillan, 2005; Volante & Beckett, 2011).

### **Studies About the Formative Purpose of Assessment**

In addition to these studies which directly address formative assessment, several other studies that address assessment more broadly also reach conclusions about formative assessment, namely by investigating teachers' beliefs about the purpose of assessment. These studies generally reveal that teachers favor formative functions of assessment over summative ones. For instance, in DeLuca et al.'s (2018) study, teachers of varied disciplines and grade levels from Canada and the United States took the Approaches to Classroom Assessment Inventory, which measures teachers' perspectives on assessment purposes, assessment processes, assessment fairness, and measurement theory. Regarding assessment purpose, 84% of the 404 respondents prioritized formative assessment over summative assessment (4%), with most indicating that

they value the analysis and use of assessment data to inform teaching decisions and to support student learning. Furthermore, their responses to statements about assessment processes indicate their perception that they have skill in offering students timely and useful feedback, a practice which is foundational to effective formative assessment. These teachers do not, however, often engage students in monitoring their own learning, another practice which supports formative assessment.

Brown's (2004) study of teachers' perceptions about the purpose of assessment found that teachers believe assessment should serve primarily a formative function of advancing student learning. In New Zealand, 525 primary teachers responded to a survey using the Conceptions of Assessment-III questionnaire. The study established four possible factors for how teachers conceive of assessment: (a) assessment is irrelevant, (b) assessment's primary purpose is for student improvement, (c) assessment's primary purpose is for school accountability, or (d) assessment's primary purpose is for student accountability. Brown found that overall, teachers reject the view of assessment as serving summative, accountability purposes and instead hold that assessment should serve primarily a formative function of improving student learning. The study finds a significant positive correlation between this view of assessment for improvement and the belief that assessment is relevant to teaching and learning. The study concludes with the caution that the two-dimensional view of assessment as either formative or summative creates a false dichotomy that belies the more interrelated and complex conceptions of assessment.

Remesal (2007) also raised the concern that teachers' views about assessment be understood as more than a mere yes or no choice between formative and summative. In the study, Remesal interviewed and reviewed the submitted teaching materials of 30 elementary and 20 high school math teachers in Spain to determine their perspectives on the purposes of

assessment. Qualitative analysis identified four dimensions of assessment functions: (a) assessment's role in learning, (b) assessment's role in teaching, (c) assessment's role in the certification of learning (student learning and achievement), and (d) assessment's role in accountability (for teachers and schools). These dimensions establish a continuum that moves from a pedagogical conception of assessment to an accounting conception of assessment. Arranged along this continuum, teachers' overall response ranged from extreme pedagogical to extreme accounting with three mixed categories between: mixed but leaning to pedagogical, mixed with no clear preference, and mixed but leaning to accounting. Of the 20 secondary teachers, 75% were identified as either mixed accounting (45%) or extreme accounting (30%) while only 10% were identified as extreme pedagogical and none were identified as mixed pedagogical. Thus, unlike DeLuca et al. (2018) and Brown (2004), these results indicate that these secondary teachers lean toward a summative perception of assessment. Remesal posits that this may be due to systemic policy demands to which they are subject rather than to teacher preference. Nonetheless, these teachers' conceptions do fall along a continuum, leading Remesal to conclude that there is "a need to challenge the strong dichotomy between the formative and summative function of assessment" (p. 36).

In summary, then, these additional studies support that teachers' conceptions of assessment tend to align more strongly with formative purposes (Brown, 2004; DeLuca et al., 2018). However, others caution that these conceptions are more complex than a simple choice between formative and summative assessment, suggesting that a richer conception of assessment rests upon awareness of assessment as multidimensional and interrelated (Brown, 2004; Remesal, 2007). Furthermore, when taken together with the studies previously mentioned, a consistent and positive view of teachers' regard for formative assessment emerges (Brink &

Bartz, 2017; Brown, 2004; Deenan et al., 2019; DeLuca et al., 2018; McMillan, 2005; McMillan et al., 2010; Panadero & Brown, 2017; Remesal, 2007; Volante & Beckett, 2011).

### **Studies About Assessment in Secondary English**

Studies that specifically address secondary English teachers' understanding and practice of formative assessment are scarce (Gillis & Van Wig, 2015; McMillan et al., 2010; Tolley, 2016). The studies presented in this section offer research into some practices of English teachers that are related to formative assessment, but they do not ultimately suggest any consistent, cohesive pattern to the study of formative assessment from the perspective of secondary English teachers. For lack of a more cohesive means of structuring these studies, they are arranged by several strands that are relevant to the secondary English curriculum, namely literacy, writing, and literature.

#### ***Literacy***

Fisher et al. (2006) investigated the link between literacy instruction and literacy assessment. The authors designed a three-course sequence that focused on literacy and literacy assessment. In particular, the coursework stressed the assessment to instruction link, namely the value of using assessment information to inform instruction, a critical step in the formative assessment process. Their interviews with and observations of 25 secondary English teachers who participated in the sequence of courses revealed that teachers' participation in the course led them to adopt the view that they needed to differentiate instruction for students, including being thoughtful about the texts they chose. The study also found that teachers moved away from a reliance on summative assessment practices such as quizzes, tests, and exams and instead moved toward regularly collecting assessment data that they then used to adjust their instructional decisions and practices. This move highlighted the teachers' increased awareness of the need for

multiple measures and the extensive variety of options available for eliciting the information they needed.

Similarly, Powers and Butler (2006) explored how a year-long course in literacy and literacy assessment impacted teachers' beliefs and practices with regard to literacy instruction and assessment. All four of the teachers involved in the study (three elementary teachers and one secondary teacher) were undertaking graduate work, and all worked one-on-one with a struggling literacy learner in the university's clinic. The authors found that these teachers came to view the teacher as the most important assessment instrument in students' literacy development. The one secondary participant noted that prior to the class, her concern had been primarily with the grades she wanted her students to achieve. After the course, assessment for this teacher revolved around determining what she needed to know about student learning in order to determine the best means of eliciting that information.

### ***Writing***

Using data from the School Achievement Indicators Program Writing III Assessment, a self-report questionnaire that explored the tools secondary English teachers choose and use for writing assessment, Hunter et al. (2006) found that those teachers are more inclined to make use of examples of students' own writing, open-response prompts and questions, and essay tests than they are to use select-response items. The teachers also reported that they regularly provide whole group feedback to students on their writing and that they only infrequently use self- and peer-assessment as a tool for writing assessment, echoing similar findings in the DeLuca et al. (2018) study.

Brimi (2012) investigated the impact of a state-mandated writing assessment on five secondary English teachers' beliefs and practices about teaching writing. Qualitative analysis of

interviews conducted with each of the participants revealed that these teachers considered the external summative writing assessment to be detrimental to the writing curriculum. They stated their motivation to teach students how to navigate and pass the state-mandated test and acknowledged that this external policy requirement impacted their allocation of instructional time. However, they also noted that even though the expectations attendant with student achievement on the test impacted their writing instruction, it was not a dominant factor in how they taught writing. The results of the study also indicated that even those these teachers expressed their belief that students should engage in writing as a process, their comments about their practice suggested little emphasis on process and more on product. Most notably, revision was generally done after students had received grades on their written work, and teachers adhered to a five-paragraph format. Teachers also showed little inclination to assign multi-genre writing and focused instead on academic writing. The author concluded that the external pressures of a mandated, summative writing assessment may endanger quality writing instruction.

Beck et al. (2018) explored how teachers' identification of students' challenges as writers using two different assessment methods linked or did not link with their priorities for future writing instruction. Five secondary teachers (three English teachers and two ESL teachers) were asked to analyze and evaluate three pieces of student writing and to describe what instructional supports they would institute to address the challenges they identified. These same teachers were also asked to use the Think Aloud Protocol Assessment in which they observed and listened to three students as they undertook and completed a 30-minute writing exercise. The authors found that with both methods, teachers identified challenges with structure and accordingly set those challenges as an instructional priority. With the Think Aloud Protocol Assessment, teachers



identified more challenges for students, particularly with regard to pre-writing, outlining, evaluating, revising, analyzing, and managing the process, but they did not prioritize future instruction in these areas. The authors conclude that even when teachers make inferences about students' needs as developing writers, they do not know how to address those issues instructionally.

Lucero et al. (2018) examined the nature of teachers' written feedback on student writing. In this study, 41 teachers (22 elementary teachers and 19 secondary teachers) were asked to provide written feedback to students on student-generated fictional narratives but were given only the direction to assess the writing as they typically would. In their analysis of the presentation of the feedback, the authors found that elementary teachers were more likely to rely on verbal messages whereas secondary teachers were more likely to use a combination of verbal and non-verbal messages to students (e. g., circling and underlining). With regard to the content of the feedback, all of the teachers regardless of grade level demonstrated an overwhelming preponderance of comments on superficial corrections and rarely made suggestions for how to expand or improve, though secondary teachers were more likely to provide other types of feedback than elementary teachers, including questions, suggestions, and justifications for their suggestions. The authors concluded that even though superficial rather than substantive feedback predominated, the context of the study, which did not stipulate that teachers would discuss the writing with students or that students would be expected to revise the writing, may have limited the findings.

Graham and Perin's (2007) meta-analysis, which reviewed 123 publications, focused on instructional practices that enhance the quality of student writing. Of the 11 practices and treatments for which they calculated effect sizes, two have connections to formative assessment.

The first of these, peer assistance, had an average weighted effect size of 0.75, and the second, setting product goals, had an average weighted effect size of 0.70. Based on these findings, the authors conclude that adolescent students (Grades 4 through high school) should engage in collaborative activities as they plan, draft, edit, and revise their writing. Their second recommendation—that students should have a clear sense of the purpose of their writing and should set specific goals that highlight the characteristics of a successful final product—is applicable only to students in Grades 4–8.

Graham et al.'s (2015) meta-analysis focused specifically on classroom-based formative assessment practices in writing instruction for students in Grades K-8. The authors explored the effectiveness of teacher feedback, peer feedback, self feedback, and computer feedback, calculating average weighted effect sizes of 0.87, 0.58, 0.62, and 0.38 respectively. They conclude that formative assessment that provides students with feedback on their written work and their progress as writers leads to positive gains for students. The study also examined the impact of teachers monitoring student progress, but the authors did not find a significant impact for this particular formative practice, a surprising finding which they attribute, in part, to the types of measures of student progress used in the included studies (e.g., correct spelling, total words written, etc.).

### ***Literature***

Kahn's (2000) study of secondary English teachers in the United States reviewed their planned summative assessments over the course of a semester, with the majority of the assessments focused on literature study. The study concluded that although teachers stated rigorous expectations for students with regard to skill development, their assessment practices failed to assess student achievement of these particular goals. Instead, they relied largely on

select-response questions that posed questions about literary terms and literature content covered in class. In fact, only 35% of the reviewed assessments employed supply-response questions. Furthermore, only 9% of the reviewed assessments asked students to read and respond to literature that had not been directly studied during instruction. The teachers expressed concern about the fairness of including such questions and worried about the challenges of grading responses to open-ended prompts. Kahn concluded that teachers' decisions about which tools they should design and use was strongly influenced by their "concerns about maintaining student attention, cooperation, and classroom control" (p. 286).

Brindley and Marshall (2015) undertook a case study of one secondary English teacher to determine this teacher's approaches to using dialogue as formative assessment. The authors observed the teacher leading a department meeting about dialogic assessment, observed a lesson in which he implemented it, and conducted a post-observation interview with the teacher. The authors observed that during the department meeting, the teacher expressed his views that formative assessment in the English classroom is integral to teaching, noting that assessment is not a separate event. As he planned with his department to enact dialogic assessment, he noted the importance of being intentional about the type of dialogue that will promote learning intentions, of being patient during the dialogue, and of establishing a classroom culture that supports such assessment. Based on the classroom observation and interview, the authors identified several key strategies that promoted the effective use of dialogue for assessment, namely (a) asking authentic questions; (b) encouraging various interpretations; (c) listening actively; (d) providing authentic—and therefore unplanned—responses; (e) providing students with sufficient time to think; (f) suspending teacher's personal views; (g) using content knowledge to guide the conversation; and (h) engaging in extended dialogue with one student

(3–6 minutes) as other students listened. The authors conclude that these key practices require teachers' willingness to move from telling to guiding and from fixed plans to flexible plans. Teachers, they submit, must also be intentionally engaged in creating a classroom culture that supports dialogic assessment.

### **Summary**

Taken together, these various empirical studies support the need to investigate the research question posed in this dissertation. Teachers in general clearly value formative assessment, but evidence suggests that their practice does not match their enthusiasm. Some studies posit that this may be due to their lack of knowledge or skills in formative assessment or because of the dissonance created by wanting to enact formative assessment in a teaching context still heavily influenced by external summative tests. Evidence about secondary English teachers' understanding and practice of formative assessment, however, is meager. Although there is evidence to suggest that secondary English teachers do engage in activities that support formative assessment, there is scant research that addresses their understanding of what formative assessment is or that investigates whether they interpret their actions in the classroom as formative in nature and, if so, how. This study, therefore, investigated selected secondary English teachers' lived experiences of engaging in formative assessment.

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODS**

This chapter presents this study's design, offering an explanation of its paradigm, research approach, sampling methods, data generation, data analysis, and ethical considerations. This interpretivist study used a phenomenological approach to explore this research question: What are selected secondary English teachers' lived experiences of engaging in formative assessment? Data generation involved semi-structured interviews and lived experience descriptions (van Manen, 2001), and data analysis involved Giorgi's (1997) whole, part, whole analysis.

#### **Social-Constructivist Paradigm**

This study used a social-constructivist paradigm, which holds that reality is socially constructed and which calls for researchers to interpret the meanings that others have constructed about the world (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ontologically, a central assumption of this paradigm is that there is no single reality or truth but rather multiple and varied meanings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Epistemologically, then, as individuals seek to understand the world, they subjectively make meaning of their experiences, often in conjunction with others (Hammersley, 2013; Laverly, 2003). Meanings, therefore, are value-laden, an axiological assumption of social constructivism that to "know" reality involves interpreting the underlying meaning of events or experiences rather than arriving at an absolute truth. Researchers working within this paradigm recognize their own position within their research, acknowledging that their interpretation of generated data flows from their own experiences of the world. They pose research questions and, through inquiry and analysis,

inductively develop meaning from the data they generate (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In order to explore how others make meaning about the world, researchers operating from the social constructivist paradigm must be open to learning how “to understand the distinctive perspectives of the people involved” (Hammersley, 2013, p. 4). Thus, social constructivism, which requires the researcher to strive to understand and honor the varied perspectives of others and to seek patterns that may exist (Hammersley, 2013), is well suited to this study, which explores the diverse perspectives selected secondary English teachers have with regard to their lived experiences of engaging in formative assessment and which sought to uncover the essence of those experiences across participants.

### **Descriptive Phenomenology**

Social constructivism is particularly “manifest in phenomenological studies” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 25). Although there are multiple phenomenological methodologies, including descriptive, interpretive, and post-intentional (Vagle, 2018), this study’s research focus aligns most closely with descriptive phenomenology, which is both a philosophy and a methodology, creating potential confusion (Laverty, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Vagle, 2018). To clarify, Vagle (2018) distinguishes between the two, noting that phenomenology as a philosophy offers the view from 30,000 feet while phenomenology as a methodology offers the view from 10,000 feet; specific methods and decisions for enacting phenomenological methodology entail actions on the ground (Vagle, 2018). In short, all phenomenological methodology should be grounded in phenomenological philosophy (Giorgi, 1997; Laverty, 2003; Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Vagle, 2018).

## Philosophy

Philosophically, descriptive phenomenology has its origins in the thinking of Edmund Husserl whose work from the early 20th century was a response to his concern that the methods of research in the natural sciences were not appropriate for working with living participants (Giorgi, 2008), who not only react to stimuli but who are also capable of creating meaning from their experiences with and perceptions of these stimuli (Lavery, 2003). Husserl held that experiences and how they are perceived by human consciousness should be valued as worthy of scientific study (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Key features of Husserl's phenomenology include lived experiences and intentionality, essence, and reduction (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Husserl's work focuses on the world of lived experience (Willis et al., 2016), which can be understood as the space where subjects (human beings) and objects (all other things, people, and ideas) are "inseparably connected" (Vagle, 2018, p. 28). In lived experiences, the subject's consciousness always takes an object; it is always *of* something (Dowling, 2007; Giorgi, 1997; Vagle, 2018). Intentionality, then, is the process of directing the consciousness toward an object and thus co-creating a dialogue between a person and the world (Lavery, 2003). This merging of subject and object was fundamental to Husserl's philosophy. Also central to Husserl's philosophy is the belief that for any lived experience, there are features that are held in common by those who have that experience (Lavery, 2003). These features form the essence, or invariant structure, of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997; Hoffding & Martiny, 2016; Lavery, 2003; Vagle, 2018). Another key principle of Husserlian philosophy is the idea of the phenomenological reduction which involves suspending judgments and beliefs about the objects so that the phenomenon can be studied as the lived experience of the subject (Giorgi, 1997; Hoffding & Martiny, 2016; Lavery, 2003; Vagle, 2018).

## **Methodology**

Husserl's philosophy, however, is not a methodological approach (Englander, 2012; Giorgi, 1997; Vagle, 2018). Rather, his work provides the foundation upon which Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology is built (Vagle, 2018; Willis et al., 2016). Thus, Giorgi (1997, 2009) has integrated qualitative research with Husserl's philosophical stance on phenomenology (Hoffding & Martiny, 2016), establishing a methodology grounded in Husserlian phenomenology and appropriate to the demands and expectations of scientific research (Dowling, 2007; Vagle, 2018).

As a methodology, descriptive phenomenology explores individuals' lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Laverly, 2003; Vagle, 2018) with the goal of arriving at a rich, composite description of that phenomenon (Creswell et al., 2007; Finlay, 2009) or of eliciting, as van Manen (2001) contends, "a grasp of the very nature of the thing" (p. 177). Giorgi (1997) observes that a phenomenon is "the presence of any given precisely as it is given or experienced" (p. 2), highlighting the importance of studying not the participant or any particular object but rather how a phenomenon appears and reveals itself to the participant (Vagle, 2018). Thus, in descriptive phenomenological research, the researcher is not studying the subject or the object, but rather the lived experience that arises from an intentional relationship between the subject and the object (Vagle, 2018). This suggests, then, that the phenomenon is not the object but rather the object as it is understood by the experiencing individual or subject (Giorgi, 1997). Vagle (2018) asserts that the phenomenon itself is "everyday [or] obvious" (p. 11), noting that phenomenologists strive "to reveal things that have become so 'normal' that we do not even notice what might be at work" (p. 10). These phenomena may be "specific or general, real or fictive, amorphous or defined" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 3).



The role of the researcher, then, is to elicit and consider participants' accounts of how the phenomenon has manifested in their own experiences (Willis et al., 2016). By eliciting rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences, researchers "bring forth and bear witness to another human being's account of subjective experience" (Willis et al., 2016). In doing so, they are called to know the phenomenon as the participants describe it (Dowling, 2007). This is achieved through in-depth interviews which are broad and either open-ended or semi-structured.

Descriptive phenomenology involves assuming a phenomenological attitude, which calls for the researcher to question what they take for granted (Vagle, 2018). This practice, known as the phenomenological reduction, is considered a principle tenet of descriptive phenomenology (Finlay, 2009; Giorgi, 1997). To undertake phenomenological reduction, the researcher must practice bracketing, which involves becoming aware of one's own assumptions, biases, and perspectives in order to avoid imposing them on the study as it is undertaken (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Finlay, 2009; Giorgi, 1997; Laverly, 2003; Vagle, 2018). As such, bracketing promotes researchers' willingness to suspend their judgment and thus be more open to seeing the studied phenomenon in a new light (Finlay, 2009; Giorgi, 1997; Laverly, 2003). Fully eliminating researcher subjectivity is not the aim of bracketing (Giorgi, 1997); rather, researchers should strive to acknowledge their own views in order to then be able to set them aside. Bracketing in descriptive phenomenology is essential as data is being generated and analyzed in early stages, but descriptive phenomenologists call for the use of significant theoretical or conceptual understandings during later analysis (Giorgi, 1997; Vagle, 2018). In other words, "using those same bracketed theories in later analysis to situate the work in particular fields is equally important" (Vagle, 2018, p. 81). Giorgi (1997) notes that researchers must examine the expressed ideas of participants in order to re-describe them in terms that are grounded in the

discipline relevant to the topic of study. Thus, as Vagle (2018) and Giorgi urge, this study's conceptual framework was brought to bear in later stages of data analysis as a lens for analyzing and synthesizing the generated data. In order to adhere faithfully to the concept of bracketing, I created a researcher as instrument statement in which I explored my own experiences, beliefs, perspectives, ideas, and values with regard to formative assessment. I also maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study as a means of routinely bracketing my assumptions and beliefs.

Descriptive phenomenology rests upon the assumption that there is an underlying structure or "essence" of a given phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Giorgi, 1997). Ultimately, descriptive phenomenology aims to uncover and describe those structures of a phenomenon that are essential and invariant (DeCastro, 2003; Giorgi, 1997, 2009; Hoffding & Martiny, 2016), or as Vagle (2018) notes, it is the search for that which "make[s] 'the thing itself' the 'thing itself'" (p. 12). With the descriptive phenomenological method then, the researcher's intent is to determine what makes the phenomenon being studied identifiable as something unique from other phenomena (Lavery, 2003; Vagle, 2018). Thus, the researcher seeks those features which are common to all who experience the phenomenon (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Giorgi (2009) clarifies that the intention is not to determine with finality the structures of a phenomenon but rather to unearth those features that are common to the participants who have shared their lived experiences. Descriptive phenomenology, then, seeks to uncover what the subject is conscious of and is less concerned with the historical, social, and political factors that individuals bring to bear on their understanding of the phenomenon (Dowling, 2007; Lavery, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004).

## **Alignment of Methodology With Research Question**

Descriptive phenomenology aligns well with this study's research question. Research undertaken with this methodology "begins with...a need to understand a phenomenon from the point of view of [participants'] lived experience in order to be able to discover the meaning of it" (Englander, 2012, p. 16) and focuses on uncovering the invariant structures of participants' "embodied, experiential meanings" (Finlay, 2009, p. 6). These objectives of descriptive phenomenology support this study's intended exploration of selected secondary English teachers' lived experiences of engaging in formative assessment.

### **Participants**

Qualitative research frequently uses purposeful sampling, which involves intentionally selecting individuals because they can provide information relevant to the specific topic being studied (Maxwell, 2008; Patton, 2015). Phenomenological approaches to research often rely on criterion sampling, a more specific type of purposeful sampling that calls for selecting participants who meet predetermined criteria, a necessary strategy as all participants must have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure that all participants had knowledge of and experience with formative assessment, I used criterion sampling for this study.

### **Target Participants**

To be considered for participation in this study, individuals had to be secondary English teachers who are currently teaching and who have taught for at least 3 years. The decision to concentrate on teachers with at least 3 years of experience, which typically marks the end of a teacher's initial probationary period in this state (Code of Virginia, 2013), derives from the desire to have participants who have had more opportunity to engage in formative assessment as

teachers. The decision to concentrate on secondary English teachers—those who teach English in Grades 9–12—was guided by several factors. First, my own teaching experience was at this level. Shaping research decisions around a researcher’s personal experiences may prove beneficial to the research process as it allows the researcher to draw on her own depth of knowledge and insight about the phenomena (Englander, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Additionally, a number of changes regarding the state’s English curriculum and assessment policies have been enacted over the past few years, including (a) revised standards of learning for K-12 English; (b) the replacement of the state-mandated, year-end writing assessment in the fifth grade with a locally developed performance assessment to verify credit in writing; and (c) the option to replace the state-mandated, end-of-course writing assessment in the 11th grade with a local alternative assessment or assessments to verify credit in writing (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2017, 2018). Such changes have created the possibility of renewed discussion of and interest in assessment in the secondary English classroom, which, in turn, may inform those teachers’ experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, because there has been little research on secondary English teachers’ experiences of engaging in formative assessment, this study focused specifically on this content area.

Phenomenological approaches vary in the number of participants that are recommended, but general guidelines suggest 3–15 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Giorgi (2008) calls for at least three participants, contending that differences among the participants will make it easier to identify those invariant structures which they hold in common. This study initially targeted 11–15 participants, and ultimately 12 secondary English teachers participated, offering a breadth of experiences. Figure 6 presents salient information about each of these participants.

Participants’ teaching experience ranged from 3–25 years, with an average of just under 10

years. On a preliminary sampling survey, 10 of the 12 participants self-reported that they were quite familiar with formative assessment; one indicated that she was somewhat familiar. All 12 participants reported that they practice formative assessment frequently in their classrooms. Regarding professional development, participants had experienced a broad range of different types of professional learning in formative assessment; just under half of the participants had engaged in multiple forms of professional learning about formative assessment.

**Figure 6**

*Participant Information*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Years Teaching</b>	<b>Grades Currently Taught</b>	<b>Familiarity with Formative Assessment</b>	<b>Frequency of Practicing Formative Assessment</b>	<b>Professional Development in Formative Assessment</b>
Mason	7	English 10 Honors English 11 English 12	Quite Familiar	Frequently	Multi-Session Single Session PLC
Margaret	7	English 10 Honors English 11	Quite Familiar	Frequently	Multi-Session Single Session PLC
Jackie	4	English 10	Quite Familiar	Frequently	Single Session PLC
Claire	14	English 9 Honors English 12 DE	Quite Familiar	Frequently	Multi-Session
Steve	25	English 10 English 10 Honors	Quite Familiar	Frequently	Single-Session PLC
Charity	17	English 10 English 12	Quite Familiar	Frequently	Single-Session
Ruth	23	English 9 English 12	Quite Familiar	Frequently	Multi-Session
Rich	7	English 9 Honors English 11	Quite Familiar	Frequently	Single Session PLC
Julie	3	English 10 English 11	Quite Familiar	Frequently	PLC
Ginger	23	English 9 English 11	Quite Familiar	Frequently	Single Session PLC
Stacy	20	English 11 English 11 Honors	Quite Familiar	Frequently	Single-Session Multi-Session PLC
Nick	36	English 10 English Pre-AP	Quite Familiar	Frequently	Single Session PLC

*Note.* PLC = [Professional Learning Community]; DE = [Dual Enrollment]; AP = [Advanced Placement]

## **Procedures for Participant Selection**

The state is divided into eight superintendent's regions. Participants were selected from school districts across two regions. These regions incorporate the county in which the university is geographically located and represent a number of districts and schools that have existing relationships with the university. Furthermore, the two regions comprise a combination of rural districts, towns, suburban districts, and cities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015; VDOE, 2009), thereby providing some variety with regard to teaching contexts. Collectively, there are over 30 districts and 75 high schools within the two regions; all but four of the high schools were fully accredited (VDOE, 2019). I began by focusing on Region X and created a spreadsheet that listed all of the districts and high schools within that region which were fully accredited. Next, I conducted a Google search to determine which of the identified high schools listed their English department members and provided their email addresses, eliminating those schools for which this information was unavailable. In an attempt to generate a sample that included teachers from each of the four locale descriptions (e.g., rural, town, suburban, and city), I selected one fully accredited high school from each district. For those districts with only one high school, that high school was the selected school by default. For those districts with more than one high school, I randomly selected the school. Once high schools from each district in the region had been selected, I emailed teachers listed as English faculty, using email addresses as provided on the schools' websites and apprising them of an opportunity to participate in an upcoming study (Appendix B).

After sending the initial email, I sent a second email several days later (Appendix C) to explain the study and share the consent form. Interested candidates were asked to click on a link to respond to a short sampling survey (Appendix D) designed to ensure that they met the

sampling criteria. These criteria included being currently employed as a secondary (Grades 9-12) English teacher and having taught for at least 3 years. Additionally, the sampling survey asked teachers to self-report information about the degree of familiarity they have with formative assessment, the extent to which they engage in formative assessment in their classrooms, and their involvement in professional learning opportunities regarding formative assessment. Completing the form indicated their consent to be contacted further but not their consent to participate in the study. As teachers completed the survey, I determined if they met the sampling criteria, selecting participants who reported the most engagement in and knowledge of formative assessment.

Over the course of 5 months, I repeated this process six times. The first four rounds of emails were sent to teachers in Region X. When this did not generate enough participants, I moved to Region Y, sending the fifth and sixth rounds of emails to teachers in this second region. Ultimately, I sent six rounds of emails, contacting nearly 720 teachers. Thirty-nine teachers who met the sampling criteria (currently employed high school English teachers with at least 3 years of experiences) responded to the survey, and based on their responses to the sampling questions about formative assessment, I issued 30 email invitations to teachers to participate. Of those, 16 teachers responded, with four eventually electing not to participate. Reasons for not continuing in the study included a death in the family, additional responsibilities related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and a lack of interest in the study topic. Ultimately, there were 12 study participants representing, collectively, two regions, six districts, and nine schools. The six represented districts include three city school districts, one suburban school district, and two rural school districts.

Once teachers had been selected as participants, I sent them an email to arrange a brief meeting via Zoom prior to beginning data generation. Conditions due to the current COVID-19 pandemic required that all interactions with participants be conducted electronically, creating the possibility that not meeting face-to-face may have imposed unforeseen limits on the relationship between the researcher and participants, thereby diminishing the ease and comfort of the participants. This meeting was conducted to help mitigate these potential limits and provided an opportunity for the participants to meet me, to ask any lingering questions, to discuss the LED protocol, and to schedule a time for the interview. The meeting also gave us an opportunity to review the consent form (Appendix E) which apprised participants of the purpose of the study, how they had been selected, and what was requested of them. The consent form also made clear declarations that their participation was voluntary, confidential, and could be terminated at any time. I collected their electronically signed consent forms by email. Once participants had consented, I worked with them to schedule a time for their interview. Figure 7 outlines these correspondences.



**Figure 7**

*Sequence of Initial Correspondences with Participants*

<b>Contact Sequence</b>	<b>Email Message</b>
<b>Email 1</b>	<b>Purpose:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• apprise participants of opportunity to participate</li></ul> <b>Attachment:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• none</li></ul>
<b>Email 2</b>	<b>Purpose:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• explain study</li><li>• invite teachers to complete sampling survey</li></ul> <b>Attachments:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• consent form</li><li>• sampling survey</li></ul>
<b>Email 3</b>	<b>Purpose:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• invite teachers as participants in the study</li><li>• arrange time for brief initial meeting</li><li>• request teachers' return of the consent form to acknowledge their consent to participate</li></ul> <b>Attachment:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• consent form</li><li>• lived experience description protocol</li></ul>
<b>Initial Zoom Meeting</b>	<b>Purpose:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• provide opportunity to meet each other</li><li>• answer participants' questions</li><li>• review consent form</li><li>• review lived experience description protocol</li><li>• schedule interview</li></ul>

**Data Sources**

Phenomenological approaches commonly make use of interviews as a primary data source (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lavery, 2003; Vagle, 2018). However, researchers are urged to use whatever techniques might best help them to explore the phenomenon their study addresses; therefore, written descriptions, observations, and artistic renderings—although less common—all have a place in phenomenological data generation (Vagle, 2018). This study made use of in-depth interviews and written lived experience descriptions to generate data.

## **Semi-Structured Interviews**

The most appropriate data source for phenomenological research is the “profound interview” (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, p. 104), a depth strategy intended to elicit rich descriptions in terms of nuance and depth (Englander, 2012). Such interviews should be “dialogic and conversational” (Vagle, 2018, p. 86) and can be either open or semi-structured (Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2018). The interview process needs to be “disciplined by the fundamental question that prompted the need for the interview in the first place” (van Manen, 2001, p. 87); however, it is not necessary or even desirable to pose exactly the same questions across all of the interviews (Vagle, 2018).

During the interview, the researcher should maintain a focus on the phenomenon and pose questions that elicit descriptions that speak to the research question (Hoffding & Martiny, 2016; Vagle, 2018). Nonetheless, the researcher should also hold in abeyance any pre-established theories, conceptions, or beliefs about the phenomenon thereby “letting the descriptions themselves come to the fore” (Hoffding & Martiny, 2016, p. 542). Interview questions should be open-ended and designed to elicit rich descriptions of the participants’ experiences of the phenomenon (DeCastro, 2003; Giorgi, 1997; Laverly, 2003; Vagle, 2018). In addition to posing initial questions, the researcher should also probe for details and verify the participant’s point of view (Willis et al., 2016). Probing questions should prompt clarification, reflection, and deeper description (Hoffding & Martiny, 2016; Padilla-Diaz, 2015), and the researcher may request instantiation and anecdotes (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Essentially, additional probing questions should allow space for whatever follow-up discussion is appropriate (Laverly, 2003), adhering to the view that methods should be “emergent and flexible” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 41). Silence and what is not said also warrant the researcher’s attention (Laverly,

2003). To align with these principles of descriptive phenomenology, this study used an interview guide comprised of several open-ended questions designed to provide multiple ways to approach the participants' experiences of engaging in formative assessment (Appendix F).

### **Lived Experience Descriptions**

Vagle (2019) recommends writing as a useful source of data. Although he notes that such writing might take any number of forms, he particularly advocates for the lived experience description (LED), a protocol initially suggested by van Manen (2001). The LED invites participants to describe a prompt regarding a specific moment when they encountered the phenomenon being studied, encouraging them to describe what was said, what they heard, what they thought, and how they felt (Vagle, 2018). Participants are urged to write their descriptions in a straightforward manner, avoiding flowery language, "causal explanations, generalizations, or abstract interpretations" (van Manen, 2001, p. 27). When used as the initial data source, LEDs provide an opening for participants to begin to dwell in their experiences and will be likely to suggest ideas to explore during interviews (Vagle, 2018). This study used an LED protocol (Appendix G) as a second data source. The protocol consisted of (a) a prompt that asks participants to describe a time they engaged in formative assessment and (b) suggestions for crafting their response.

### **Data Generation**

As previously noted, data for this study was generated using interviews and LEDs as data sources. Participants were asked to complete the LED before the interview as a way of stimulating their thinking about the phenomenon. Furthermore, this provided insight into potential lines of inquiry for the interview. Data generation occurred over 5 months, and all

generated data were kept in secure electronic files (for electronic sources) or in a locked file in my private residence (for paper sources).

### **Lived Experience Descriptions**

Participants in this study were asked to generate a written LED in which they described a time they engaged in formative assessment. After meeting with participants briefly via Zoom and discussing the LED protocol, I sent them an email that provided them with the prompt and guidelines for responding (Appendix G). I asked participants to provide their written response to me via email and urged them to respond within two weeks of their receipt of the prompt. In all 12 instances, participants completed and sent the LED within a week. Member checking, which is the practice of determining the accuracy of the researchers' understanding of participants' shared ideas by asking participants to affirm, amend, or refine these ideas so that they accurately reflect what the participant intends (Creswell, 2014), occurred during the interviews that followed. I used my reflexive journal to reflect on this method of generating data, noting frequently that it provided not only valuable data in its own right but that it also worked effectively as a jumping off place for beginning the interviews.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Participants in this study were asked to participate individually in a semi-structured interview about their experience of engaging in formative assessment. I typically sent a reminder email 2–3 days before the scheduled interview. Given current limitations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted via Zoom, so the reminder emails also included the necessary Zoom link. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes; the shortest interview was 1 hour, 19 minutes, and the longest was 1 hour, 35 minutes. In an effort to establish rapport in a safe and trusting environment (Laverty, 2003), I began the interviews by introducing myself

and my research topic and by encouraging the participant's questions. I also briefly explained how the interview would proceed, with questions about their LED comprising the first portion of the interview and then more general questions about their experiences of formative assessment. In each instance, I asked their permission before beginning the recording.

During the interview, several open-ended questions served as an interview guide (Appendix F). Due to the flexible and emergent nature of the interview, I asked additional probing questions that provided clarification, extension, or explanation, and which thereby served as a means of member checking during the interview. As part of such member checking, Willis et al. (2016) urge the researcher to "probe for detailed description and clarification...and [to] verify the participant's point of view" (p. 1190). Iterative questions that invited deeper description and reflection were also included. In closing the interviews, I thanked the participants and briefly outlined what they could expect in terms of future communication and data requests. I explained that they would receive a member-checking email within a month of the interview and asked if they would be amenable to answering any follow-up questions that may arise as I compiled the study's findings. I also told them that I would share the completed dissertation with them via email. Interviews were audio-recorded using the Zoom recording feature and a voice recorder app on my phone as a backup. This backup recording was used in only one instance when a thunderstorm interrupted the Zoom recording.

Following the interview, I spent time creating a memo that summarized my recollections of key experiences and ideas that the participant shared. I found this to be particularly helpful in establishing an overall sense of the interview as well as in providing a valuable point of comparison with the actual transcript. In all cases, I found that while the memo certainly missed some salient points from interview, it nonetheless accurately captured many of the experiences

and ideas shared by the participant. The audio-recording was transcribed using Temi, an automated online transcription service. After downloading the generated transcript, I listened to the full interview, making necessary corrections to the transcription and occasionally inserting notable pauses and sounds. As part of the initial phases of data analysis, I generated a summary of highlights from the interview and emailed this summary to participants, inviting them to verify or amend the information so that it accurately reflected their perspectives (see Appendix H), thereby providing another opportunity for member checking. In addition to the summary points, I also used the review tab in the Word document to pose follow-up and clarification questions, inviting participants to respond as they felt so inclined. After each interview, I used my reflexive journal to reflect on the interview process and to capture my initial thoughts and emerging ideas.

### **Data Analysis**

Although various phenomenological approaches may use different terms for phases of data analysis, they generally agree on and are committed to procedures that utilize a whole-part-whole analysis process (Dowling, 2007; Vagle, 2018). Such analysis emphasizes the phenomenological commitment to remaining focused on a holistic view of participants' experiences (the "whole") even as the researcher considers particular moments and events (the "parts"; Laverly, 2003). Ultimately, the researcher places the extracted moments or parts in conversation with each other with the aim of uniting them in a new "whole" that has significance and meaning with regard to the phenomenon being studied (Vagle, 2018).

Giorgi (1997) recommends a four-step data analysis process that adheres to this whole-part-whole method. In brief, this process calls for reading the data, dividing the data into parts, organizing raw data into disciplinary language, and expressing the structure of the phenomenon

(Giorgi, 1997). I used this approach to analyze the data generated in this study. Table 1 below summarizes the data sources and accompanying data analysis methods for this study’s research question. As indicated in the table, data sources for this study included a written lived experience description and a semi-structured in-depth interview, resulting in written descriptions and verbatim transcripts of the interviews. Giorgi’s whole-part-whole method was applied to both the interviews and to the lived experience descriptions.

**Table 1**

*Data Sources and Analysis for Research Question*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Data Sources</b>	<b>Data Analysis</b>
What are selected secondary English teachers’ lived experiences of engaging in formative assessment?	Lived experience description Semi-structured interview	Whole-part-whole analysis (Giorgi, 1997)

**Reading the Data**

The first phase of Giorgi’s (1997) data analysis process requires an initial holistic reading of generated data. The researcher should undertake this first reading to establish “a global sense” of the data (Giorgi, 1997, p. 10). No effort should be made to look for themes; rather, the researcher should seek to apprehend the whole of the participants’ experience (De Castro, 2003). As I began data analysis, I reviewed and read the data source (LEDs and transcripts), striving to achieve a broad sense of the whole. Although Giorgi recommends reading through all of the data before beginning any analysis, a practical concern for the timeline of this dissertation necessitated that data analysis begin before all of the data were generated. Finlay (2003) notes that such pragmatic interests must be recognized, and Vagle (2018) acknowledges that researchers will need to make their own choices about how to amend the analytic process. Thus, for this study, I began reading the data as LEDs were submitted and interviews were scheduled.

## **Dividing the Data into Parts**

The next phase in Giorgi's (1997) data analysis process entails re-reading the generated data more slowly and dividing the text into what Giorgi terms "meaning units." These units are portions of the text that have meaning relevant to the study. The researcher should note transitions or shifts in meaning, annotating the text directly to note these shifts. Vagle (2018) recommends taking careful notes and marking whatever excerpts of the text appear to have initial meaning. The end result of this careful reading and initial analysis is a series of meaning units that are still expressed in the participant's own words (Giorgi, 1997). De Castro (2003) cautions that the researcher must not treat individual meaning units as separate wholes but rather must continue to situate them as part of the whole text. Therefore, meaning units must not be artificially determined (e.g., by sentences, by lines, or by utterances); instead, they should be guided by the researcher's understanding of the discipline or concept being studied. As Giorgi (1997) contends, the researcher must assume "an attitude that is sensitive to the discipline...as well as one that is sensitive to the phenomenon being researched," (p. 10) thus suggesting that the researcher's educated perspective should be brought to bear during this phase of data analysis. He cautions, however, that because phenomenology is discovery-oriented, the researcher must maintain an attitude that is open to whatever unexpected meanings the analysis may unearth.

Adhering to this phase of data analysis, I created a three-column transcription with the LED or transcript in the left column and space in the middle column to take notes, to mark shifts, and to capture meaning units by noting the participant's significant statements. The third column I used for coding, leaving it blank during this phase of analysis. As I engaged in this phase of analysis, I again read the transcript, underlining portions of the transcript and making notes in the



second column. I worked carefully to remain open to the data as it emerged. I also made note of questions that I wish I had asked during the interview as well as clarifying questions to ask in the member-check email I sent following each interview. I continued to memo and journal during this phase to capture my own emerging ideas and questions.

After analyzing the interview data in this way, I prepared a summary of each interview to share with the participants as part of my member-checking efforts. These summaries were typically four to five pages in length and were organized under broad headings that I created by grouping their descriptions and ideas according to the topics they were discussing. For instance, I might group some of their comments and descriptions as “feedback” or others as “the writing process.” I did this primarily to make their review of the member-check document easier, but I found that this thinking allowed me to begin to ponder codes and even potential themes. I also used the “Review” feature in the member-check documents to pose the questions that I had generated in the second column of the transcription analysis. Of the 12 participants, seven responded to the member-check email, with each affirming the summary as accurate, and five of them providing responses to my questions. I added these responses to the bottom of the transcripts and treated those as additional data for analysis.

### **Organizing Raw Data Into Disciplinary Language**

This third phase of Giorgi’s (1997) data analysis process involves two parts: (a) determining what is essential and what is not and (b) transforming the meaning units into terms that are relevant to and appropriate for the field of study under consideration. Although listed as two tasks, researchers generally accomplish them simultaneously rather than in linear order (De Castro, 2003). To accomplish these tasks, the researcher engages in imaginative variation, which De Castro (2003) defines as “interrogating each meaning unit in the light of the topic under

study” (p. 52). Using imaginative variation, researchers consider circumstances under which the meaning unit would and would not be essential to the phenomenon, ultimately discarding meaning units that were originally identified but which no longer appear relevant to the topic of the study (Giorgi, 1997). Imaginative variation also guides researchers as they re-describe the original meaning units in terms appropriate to the discipline or concept being studied. The goal is for the meaning units to be “transformed by the researcher to be in accord with the researcher’s disciplinary intuition” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 11). Vagle (2018) more concisely notes that this phase involves identifying themes and giving them labels appropriate to the field of study.

During this phase of data analysis, I returned to the three-columned transcription and reviewed the meaning units I had identified previously. I worked my way through the transcripts, generating codes for each identified meaning unit by using language consistent with formative assessment scholarship. I also determined which of the original meaning units were non-essential to these teachers’ experiences of formative assessment and omitted those. These omissions were infrequent, and I occasionally identified additional meaning units upon my return to the data. Ultimately, I identified 214 codes, which I recorded in a code book.

### **Expressing the Structure of the Phenomenon**

During this final phase of Giorgi’s (1997) analysis process, the researcher again uses imaginative variation to decide which of the transformed meaning units are essential for the phenomenon. The researcher then attempts to integrate the transformed meaning units to arrive at a consistent, synthesized structure that incorporates the essence of the phenomenon for all participants (Giorgi, 1997). Giorgi recognizes that the ideal is to derive one single structure that effectively represents all participants’ essential experiences but observes that this may not happen.

For this phase of data analysis, I first reviewed all of the codes and then sorted them into 26 broad themes. Having identified these broader categories, I then color-coded all of the transcripts, assigning one color to each participant. Next, I organized the color-coded participant statements by themes, thereby creating a record of what each participant said relative to that theme. As I did this work, I further refined the groupings so that the original 26 ultimately became nine. This was an iterative process that included returning to the data frequently, using imaginative variation to determine which themes truly captured the essence of the participants' experiences of engaging in formative assessment, and arranging and rearranging many, many sticky notes. As I homed in on the final nine themes, I returned to the transcripts once more, reading them without any of the annotations or codes that I had generated previously. Doing this allowed me to regain something of a holistic perspective about the data and to gain a sense of confidence about the findings I had identified. I utilized frequency counts to help determine which themes to include in the synthesized structure, using as the final nine themes those that appeared in roughly at least half of the participants' articulated experiences. Although Giorgi (1997) does not advocate the use of such frequency counts, other phenomenologists do include quantification as part of their data analysis (De Castro, 2003). Applying the 50% guideline rigorously would likely have excluded a number of themes or ideas that emerged during data generation and analysis, so I used it as a "rule of thumb," reporting some of these variant structures as well, for as Vagle (2018) asserts, "sometimes a single statement, from one participant, at one moment in time is so powerful that it needs to be amplified" (p. 109). I have reported the findings in Chapter 4 by the nine identified themes.

## **Trustworthiness Considerations**

While quantitative research relies on establishing standards of validity and reliability, qualitative research focuses on establishing a study's trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Trustworthiness attempts to answer the central question, "How do we know that the qualitative study is believable, accurate, and plausible?" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 206). To differentiate quantitative and qualitative research and to counter claims that qualitative research is less rigorous, Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four criteria that contribute to a qualitative study's trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility calls for the researcher to represent accurately and fully the complexity and richness of participants' perspectives whereas establishing dependability requires the researcher to document clearly the research process in a manner that is logical and traceable. Confirmability involves the researcher demonstrating that findings and interpretations clearly derive from the generated data, and transferability addresses the study's potential applicability to others in different contexts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend a number of strategies that facilitate establishing these four criteria, including the reflexivity of the researcher, thick description, triangulation of data sources, sufficient engagement with participants, member checking, and an audit trail.

The reflexivity of the researcher contributes to a study's credibility and confirmability by encouraging the researcher to address mindfully their own understanding and beliefs of the research topic and to strive to exclude those views as they explore participants' ideas and experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This is a necessary step in descriptive phenomenology, which calls for researchers to first be aware of their biases and then to bracket them so that they can remain open to participants' experiences of the same

phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997). To accomplish researcher reflexivity, I have written a researcher as instrument statement and have maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study's duration as a means of exploring my own preconceptions, perspectives, and biases with regard to those issues that may impact this study of formative assessment. Engaging in self-reflective practice has supported my efforts to provide an accurate representation of participants' experiences of engaging in formative assessment and to ensure that the study's findings and interpretations are derived from the generated data rather than from my own preconceived notions.

Thick description of the research process and findings is one means of enhancing a study's dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2008). This chapter provides a full description and account of the study design and research process so that others will have clarity about the process and procedures I have undertaken and will be able to trace the study's logical development and progression. Thick description also refers to providing rich, robust, and full descriptions of the findings, thereby providing the information needed for others to determine the study's transferability, or the applicability of the study's findings to their own context. Therefore, in keeping with the aims of descriptive phenomenology (Giorgi, 1997), I have offered a thick description of the participants' lived experiences of engaging in formative assessment by drawing heavily on quotes from both the interviews and the LEDs as I presented the findings in Chapter 4.

Triangulation, which promotes a study's credibility and confirmability, involves gathering data from multiple sources to create opportunities to cross check or affirm the consistency of that data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2008; Nowell et al., 2017). For this study, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews and asked participants to write descriptions of a time they engaged in formative assessment as a teacher. Furthermore, several

participants offered additional comments through member checking which were added as data sources themselves. Using multiple data sources helped me to corroborate data that was generated via different methods, a means of triangulating sources which has, in turn, enhanced the robust presentation of participants' perspectives.

Member checking, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider the most essential strategy for establishing a study's credibility, is a process in which participants are afforded the opportunity to affirm, amend, or qualify the researchers' findings and interpretations. During the interviews, I began by member checking their written responses from the LEDs, posing questions that had arisen as I read the LEDs prior to the interviews. I also worked to clarify my understanding of participants' responses by asking them to elaborate and further explain their descriptions and responses. In addition, I generated summaries of the interviews and sent these member check documents via email to all participants following their interview with the invitation to verify, add, or amend so that their perspectives were accurately represented. I also posed additional questions that arose as part of my initial readings of the transcripts and invited the participants to respond to those as well. The combination of these efforts served as a robust form of member checking.

An audit trail provides a clear record of the researcher's methodological decisions made throughout the research process and lends credence to a study's dependability and confirmability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017). Throughout this study, I have documented decisions regarding data generation, data analysis, and the presentation of my findings in my reflexive journal and have maintained a system for storing and organizing transcriptions, memos, and field notes.

## **Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions**

This section addresses the choices and decisions I have made over the course of this study as well as those external circumstances which have constrained or impacted this study. It would be remiss not to mention the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning in early March 2020, the pandemic has led to significant changes in public K-12 schools which have responded with a series of closures, frequently amended schedules, and pivots to virtual and hybrid learning; flexibility and grace have become the keywords for working in this shifting environment over the last year. For this study, the pandemic necessitated methodological redesign, postponement of data collection and generation, and the challenge of finding participants who were working as teachers while struggling to adapt to changed expectations.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are the decisions made by the researcher about a study's design, "arising from specific and intentional choices made by the researcher" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 207). Unlike a study's limitations, the researcher controls a study's delimitations. Delimitations of this study included the following:

- The focus of this study was formative assessment, and the intended audience is those interested in formative assessment. Although the study used secondary English teachers as the sample (see the fourth bullet point in this section), the intent was not to explore their experiences of writing or literacy assessment in particular but rather to explore their experiences of formative assessment.
- The research sample included teachers from two regions of the state. The decision to sample from these two regions of the state derived from the fact that one of the regions includes the county in which the university is geographically located and both

represent a number of districts and schools who have existing relationships with the university. Also, with a total of 33 districts between them, the regions provided a sufficient population from which to draw a sample for this study.

- The research sample included teachers only from fully accredited schools. The intention with this delimitation was to study teachers who are not working in deficit situations which may impact assessment practices and expectations.
- The research sample was delimited to secondary English teachers. There were three reasons for this decision: (a) the researcher's own experience is at this level and with this discipline, (b) recent changes to the state's English curriculum and assessment policies have potentially generated renewed interest in and conversation about assessment among this subset of teachers, and (c) this is an understudied sample in extant formative assessment literature.
- The research sample did not include teachers with whom I have personal or professional relationships. This step was taken as a way of reducing researcher bias.
- The research sample required teachers to have more than 3 years of experience. There were two reasons for this decision: (a) the state's probationary period typically ends after 3 years and thus signals their being fully licensed teachers and (b) unlike novice teachers, these teachers will have had more opportunities to engage in formative assessment.
- The research sample did not require teachers to have had extensive years of teaching experience. This decision was made to make it easier to obtain the desired sample size and acknowledged the possibility that younger teachers may be more likely to



have been exposed to formative assessment practices in their teacher training than older veteran teachers.

- An interview guide was used during the interviews. Although phenomenological interviews are often completely open-ended and flexible, this study made use of an interview guide with the view that such a guide would be beneficial for me as a novice researcher.
- Artifacts were not included as a source of data generation. The reasons are both practical and personal. Practically, the current circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic may make locating appropriate artifacts quite challenging for teachers. More personally, I view formative assessment as a process, and I feel strongly about not conveying in any way the idea that that process can be reduced to an artifact.
- LEDs were used as a data source for this study. Having a second data source enhances this study's credibility, and because they were completed prior to the interview, the LEDs provided insight into possible directions for the interview.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are imposed by external factors, including inherent characteristics of the study design (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Limitations for this study derived primarily from the current COVID-19 pandemic, which has created conditions that impacted the study's design.

Limitations for this study include the following:

- The state department of education issued information and recommendations intended to promote continuity of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report included clear directives that assessment of and for learning should be given priority over assessment of learning (VDOE, 2020). This report may have influenced

teachers' current experiences of engaging in formative assessment as they work to teach remotely.

- No face-to-face interviews were conducted. Conditions of the pandemic necessitated interviewing participants electronically via Zoom. Some of the beneficial aspects of face-to-face interviews (e.g., body language, facial expressions, and other non-verbal cues) were diminished as a result. Furthermore, not meeting face-to-face may have imposed unforeseen limits on the relationship between the researcher and the participants, which, in turn, may have diminished the ease and comfort of the participants. A brief initial meeting via Zoom was conducted to help mitigate these circumstances by allowing the participants to meet the researcher prior to the interview, ask any lingering questions, and familiarize themselves with any technology features needed for the subsequent interview to run smoothly.
- No observations of teachers were conducted. Conditions of the pandemic excluded the possibility of including observations of the participants as a data source. This limitation eliminated the use of an otherwise viable data source for this study.

### **Assumptions**

Several assumptions were at play in this study design:

- This study's methodological approach relied on participants' willingness to share their experiences fully, an assumption based on their consent to participate. This is related to the phenomenological assumption that individuals are able to articulate their lived experiences.
- To ensure that participants met the sampling criteria, part of the study design involved potential participants completing a sampling survey to provide information needed to

- make the final selection of participants, including three questions that addressed the potential participants' knowledge and practice of formative assessment. Use of this strategy assumed that teachers honestly and accurately self-reported this information.
- The delimitation of at least 3 years of teaching experience assumed that teachers who are no longer in a probationary period are fully licensed in the state.
  - The delimitation of selecting teachers only from fully accredited schools assumed that full accreditation is one reasonable measure of schools' academic success.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Researchers have a moral obligation to be aware of ethical considerations and to conduct research in a way that minimizes any potential harm to participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The Belmont Report outlines three ethical principles that should guide research with human subjects: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects, 1979). The first of these, respect for persons, involves recognizing and protecting the autonomy of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Beneficence, referred to by Creswell and Poth (2018) as “concern for welfare” (p. 54), is concerned with minimizing potential harm to participants and maximizing possible benefits. Finally, justice encompasses the fair and equitable treatment of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Efforts to ensure that these ethical standards are met should pervade all aspects of the study design (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Fundamental to maintaining high ethical standards is first securing approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. Upon successfully defending this study's proposal to my dissertation committee, I submitted my proposal, along with the consent form and all other relevant documents, to the EDIRC, the review board for the

university's School of Education, and received permission to conduct the study from that board on June 1, 2020. I completed the refresher courses offered by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) on-line training in order to be in compliance with the university's requirement for human subjects certification.

Receiving fully informed consent from participants is another essential step in ensuring that ethical standards are being met. The consent form was included in the second email sent to potential participants, thereby giving them an opportunity to review the document and to establish a sense of what the study would involve and what rights and protections they would be afforded. The consent form expressly outlined the purpose of the study, the benefits and value of their participation, information about how participants were selected, and what was requested of them. To maintain the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, the consent form clearly articulates the following:

- Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.
- The confidentiality of your personally identifiable information will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.
- Your name and other identifiable information will be known only to the researchers through the information that you provide.
- Neither your name nor any other personally identifiable information will be used in any presentation or published work without prior written consent.
- The audio recording of the interview will be erased and the LED deleted after the study is complete.
- You may refuse to answer any questions during the interview if you so choose.

- You may terminate your participation in the study at any time (To do so, simply inform the interviewer of your intention.).
- Any actions of refusal or termination will not incur a penalty of any type with The College of William and Mary.
- There is no compensation for participating in this study.
- There are no foreseeable risks in study participation.

I collected electronically signed consent forms and store them in a password-protected file on my personal computer. Throughout the study, participants' identities have been, and will continue to be, protected by the use of aliases and by guarding information that may otherwise make the participants identifiable. Transcriptions, memos, and other documents generated as part of this study have been stored in a locked file in my private residence and/or stored in password-protected files on my personal computer.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to learn what meaning these teachers ascribe to the experience of engaging in formative assessment. The research question—What are secondary English teachers’ lived experiences of engaging in formative assessment?—was intentionally broad and in keeping with the phenomenological tradition. To answer this question, I generated data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and lived experience descriptions (LEDs) in which the teachers wrote about a specific time they engaged in formative assessment in their classrooms. The 12 participants were high school English teachers who are currently teaching and who have at least 3 years of teaching experience. In addition to these criteria, these teachers reported having familiarity with formative assessment, using it frequently in their classrooms, and attending professional development on it. Collectively, these teachers’ experiences revealed a number of common perspectives on formative assessment, providing a rich, composite description of their lived experiences of formative assessment.

This chapter presents those findings, relying heavily on the teachers’ own words and narratives. The findings are organized into nine sections. In most instances, I have provided the number of participants who articulated a position on the topic. For instance, if seven of the teachers shared thoughts about the integral nature of formative assessment, then that number is given in the opening paragraph for that finding. If there were alternative or dissenting views, I have shared those as well. The reader should infer, therefore, that the remaining teachers did not significantly address the topic. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of the findings.

## **Multiple Purposes of Formative Assessment**

The teachers in this study experience formative assessment as having multiple purposes. According to these teachers, one purpose of formative assessment is to determine what students know and where they are in their learning. Another purpose of formative assessment for these teachers is to use formative assessment information to inform their instruction. The third purpose of formative assessment addressed by these teachers is to inform and advance student learning.

### **To Determine Where Students Are and What They Know**

All 12 of these teachers consider one of the primary purposes of formative assessment to be monitoring student progress and determining what students know. Julie succinctly captured this purpose of formative assessment, explaining that for her, formative assessment “is a tool for teachers to learn more about students’ learning.” Margaret concurred, saying:

When I learn what they've learned, or when I learn where they're at, or when I learn...you know, how much they understand about themselves in a self-assessment; when I learn something about my students more, more academically..., then, then I believe that formative assessment has happened.

Some emphasized the necessity of using formative assessment for this purpose in their teaching. Ginger explained that “there is no way, no matter how good I am, I can know exactly what everyone’s thinking in that moment without some sort of help, so I use it [formative assessment].” Nick highlighted just how essential this purpose of formative assessment is, asserting, “You cannot teach if you can’t see how the students are doing. It’s impossible.” Rich stated it this way:

If you don't have some way that you're purposefully checking in with what students are doing, then, then how do you know? What the hell are you even doing? You know? And

so, so formative assessment, that's...why it's so important: because...there needs to be some way for me to check in with how things are going, and that's what formative assessment...provide[s].

Ten of the study participants talked about the use of formative assessment to gauge and monitor student progress and mastery by determining *where* students are in their learning. As Stacy asserted, formative assessment answers the question, “Where are my kids right now?” Charity and Ginger posed virtually the same question, and Claire noted that “at all points, you’re kind of evaluating where your students are in the process.” Jackie echoed this idea, saying, “How do I know who’s still under the water, who’s flying above?...Formative assessment helps me to see where they are compared to where they need to be.” Margaret, too, noted that formative assessment allows her to compare students’ current work with the ILO, stating that as she conferences and checks in with students, she is assessing “where are we, where do we need to be?” For her, formative assessment is “figuring out where everybody is and getting them where they need to be and making sure that they’re getting to where they need to be and not just kind of thinking it.” Formative assessment, these teachers asserted, allows them to affirm whether students are progressing or not rather than merely assuming they are.

Several teachers used figurative language as they talked about using formative assessment to determine where students are in their learning. Nick used this simile:

Formative assessment is like a set of, of gauges in the car as you're driving to see whether or not the engine is running smoothly, whether...you're moving along. Formative assessment, the various types of formative assessment, allow me to know that my kids are moving forward.



Mason echoed this driving metaphor, observing that formative assessment provides “a data point along the route that helps inform me whether we continue the formative assessment or if we can wrap up.” Rich also touched on this metaphor:

A formative assessment is something that takes place, uh, on our way there. And it's kind of a way it's a, um, you know, it's a way of stopping and saying, okay, you know, what is going well, what's not going well. Um, what do we still have left to learn, you know? How are we feeling, uh, on this journey?

Others drew on a medical metaphor as they shared their view of the purpose of formative assessment. As Steve says, formative assessment allows him “to gauge what [students] know, where they are and maybe like, you know, get a pulse to, to get a pulse of the class.” Doing so helps him determine if his students “are going in the right direction.” Similarly, Claire added, “you’re always taking the pulse of student progress.”

For these same ten teachers, gauging where students are involves finding out what their students know and understand and to what degree. Ruth noted, “When I think formative assessment, I think of an assessment that...should show what a child has learned.” Julie explained that she uses different techniques to gather information about students’ degree of understanding, explaining that as she teaches, she says, “Give me a head nod if you understand. Like thumbs up/thumbs down, on a scale of one to five, how much do you understand what was just said?” Steve also highlighted the use of formative assessment for this purpose, observing that something is formative assessment if he gets “feedback from it in regards to what they, you know, what they seem to have learned...or not.” Rich expressed a similar view that formative assessment allows him to determine which students are getting it and which ones are struggling. He said:

What I want to figure out is...which of my students is comfortably using the tools that we've been practicing, you know, over the course of the unit or the year..., so which among my students are feeling comfortable with the tools that we've kind of practiced using and is on track to producing a finished product that I think is going to meet kind of the standards of what we expect and then who is either missing something or struggling.

These 10 teachers, then, spoke at length about their use of formative assessment to monitor student progress and to determine the degree of student knowledge, understanding, and skill. In short, they talked about the purpose of formative assessment being to learn *where* students are and *what* they know and do not know.

### **To Inform and Adjust Instruction**

Another significant purpose of formative assessment for these teachers is to inform and adjust their instruction. Eleven teachers in this study spoke about experiencing formative assessment as a means of informing their instructional decisions. Responding to a question about the purpose of formative assessment, Claire said simply, "It should inform everything that the teachers are doing," and Ginger remarked, "I think the overall purpose should be to drive instruction." Julie voiced this idea directly as well:

The biggest thing for me is that it helps inform my teaching...I would put that as my number one goal of formative assessment, you know, whether it's informal or formal, it's to know what they need to know and what I need to fix it.

Charity added:

It's a tool to inform, inform or to guide. Kind of a guide, um,...a validation, um, a, a reality check. But I think ultimately, it's, it's a, it's a guiding light. It's a way to guide whatever needs or need not come next or what needs to be revisited.

Rich summarized, “What *isn't* formative assessment is something that does not provide you the opportunity to make changes in the future.”

For these teachers, formative assessment particularly informs their decisions about whether to reteach or to move forward. Jackie explained:

[The] purpose is to drive teacher instruction...Cause the students give that feedback back to the teacher, or they give the work back to the teacher, and then the teacher's able to use that to drive instruction and continue, um, either reteaching or moving on to the next teaching.”

Claire, too, highlighted this point:

I think formative assessment is always adjusting or allowing for formative assessment to adjust your practice. And you're like, “Oh, well, that was the plan, but that is not where we need our work today.” Or, “We are like seven steps in and I misread the room,” right? And so we need to go back. So I feel like it is always adjusting.

For Nick, formative assessment lets him know when his students are not ready to move on. As he shared, “I'm not a teacher who simply bulls forward to teach the material and to teach the skills, unless I know my kids are with me. And how do I know that? I know that from formative assessment.” Ginger pointed out that, in addition to telling her when to reteach, formative assessment also lets her know when to move on:

I firmly believe why am I going to waste my time teaching you something if you have mastered this content? Um, so I use these formative assessments to see, is this a concept I can skip?... You know, like right now, my kids all understand purpose pretty well. Great. I'm not gonna linger there...you've mastered that concept. Let's move on. So I do use it to drive my teaching pretty much daily and, and in some cases hourly.

Two teachers noted that although informed instruction *should* be the purpose of formative assessment, formative assessment may not always be used in that way. Charity explained:

The teacher may not have an opportunity to do anything about that because the next day his lesson plan says that we're supposed to move on to the next thing. Um, hopefully the teacher would take some time to go back and revisit concepts and those types of things, but sometimes they may not be able to, so it's not really used, um, in the manner in which it *should be* used or could be used in terms of the value. Um, and in that case it becomes novelty...Okay. It's cute, whatever. But, um, I don't know if it's really used to the degree in which, in which it could be used.

Mason elaborated, noting that he does not always have the autonomy to make decisions based on the formative assessments he and his students undertake. He shared:

Gosh, I wish I could say that it tells me whether or not we're ready to move on...I look at those and I read those and I know I'm supposed to, um, decide if they've mastered it or not, but I know that my PLC [Professional Learning Community] has already decided we're going to move forward. Like there's just not much flexibility. So I know I should be using that to decide whether we should move on to the next concept or reteach the old one.

These eleven teachers, then, experience formative assessment as serving the purpose of informing their instruction, noting that it allows them to make adjustments for what comes next. Most often, they shared that this is a matter of determining whether to move forward with instruction or to revisit or reteach content and skills that students appear to be struggling with. Even in circumstances when teachers do not use the information they glean to inform their next steps, they nonetheless expressed their belief that it *should*.

## **To Inform and Advance Student Learning**

Five of the study's participants discussed a third purpose of formative assessment, namely to advance student learning. When asked about the purpose of formative assessment, Nick responded, "Learning. Formative assessment is learning. You cannot learn without formative assessment. If you are not formatively assessing, you are not learning." Claire echoed this idea, stating that the purpose of formative assessment is "to allow for student growth in a way that allows for...learning from failure," explaining further that "the ultimate goal is definitely the student outcome [where] it's okay to make a mistake because this is just one step in the path." Similarly, Mason stated clearly that the purpose of formative assessment is "Learning. Continued learning. The continued...pursuit of mastery." Mason explained:

[Students are] also supposed to gain knowledge from doing the assessment. Mmmm, which I suppose does happen when they get their feedback....They either confirm or correct what they were not understanding before and they progress from there. So I guess it's, it's progress. That is the embodiment of formative assessment.

Stacy, too, expressed her view that formative assessment was about "the formation of student...learning and access to learning, um, based on their particular needs and their particular situation, which can't happen unless you are formatively assessing." Rich spoke at the greatest length about how formative assessment serves students and their continued learning: "Formative assessments are more for the kids...because I'm looking for them to take action, right? Like formative assessment, when I give it to a kid, hopefully, it arms them to take action going forward." Later, he returned to this idea and added:

Formative assessment is the idea that we are doing something that will help you [the student] come closer to a goal you might have in the future. So that, that, so that's the

most positive, I think, interpretation of what formative assessment means in the classroom, or can mean. You know, like, it's helping shape you into the writer or the reader that you want to become.

Others were less adamant, mentioning this purpose of formative assessment only briefly and in passing. After discussing the value of formative assessment for teachers, Charity added, "It should be a guide for students as well" but did not elaborate further. When asked why she thought of the LED she shared as formative assessment, Margaret noted that it allowed "my kids to go back and see what they know and where their gaps are as well," but she did not explicitly share this as a purpose of formative assessment.

Though discussed less frequently than the previous two purposes of formative assessment, some of the teachers in this study nonetheless experience the improvement of student learning as the ultimate purpose of formative assessment. They shared that this goal can be achieved when students pause to reflect metacognitively on information about the nature and degree of their learning in order to know how to progress toward mastery.

### **Linked Purposes**

As teachers talked about the purposes of formative assessment, they frequently linked one purpose of formative assessment to another. The purpose first discussed above involves determining where students are and what they know and can do relative to ILOs; the purpose next discussed centers on informing teachers' next instructional steps. Eight teachers recounted using formative assessment in a way that connects these two purposes. For instance, Steve linked these two purposes when he said, "The way I would look at formative assessment would be really. . . you know, in terms of what did they do well? What did they struggle with? And then that can help me make changes later on." Similarly, Julie discussed this example:

In my [LED], I talked about the 3, 2, 1 exit slip. Like I said, that's probably one of my favorite ones. It's a great way for me to see what the students have learned, what they need to learn more about. And it's just a check-in in their learning...over the entire class period...that does help me, um, drive how I'm going to teach for the rest of the week.

Jackie also offered an example involving exit slips:

It's an exit ticket, so it's more, how did you understand what we did today? What are you still having [trouble] with? So did you understand the thesis statement? Do you still have trouble developing your own thesis statement? And...I can take that and develop an immediate next lesson, um, for the very, for the next day. Cause I, even though we plan for weeks or for the week, um, and I submit a lesson plan for the whole week I adjust it daily because I can't move on to the next step if the students are still struggling.

Rich also made this connection:

I'll say, "Oh, man, none of these kids, you know, is writing good thesis statements...Like I better, I better make sure the next unit we do that again." Or, "All of these kids have gotten, you know, like more simple things like, you know, they know how to use MLA [Modern Language Association] format to embed their quotes. Great. I'm not going to really focus on that next time around."

In these instances, the teachers first undertook formative assessment to find out what students know or do not know and then used that information to inform their instruction, indicating that they experience a natural link between these two purposes.

One teacher not only drew a connection between these two purposes of formative assessment but also linked them to the ultimate purpose of advancing student learning. Stacy explained:

So formative assessment is when the teacher observes or assesses a student's current condition or state, whether it's academic or behavioral, in order to improve instruction to produce better outcomes. So observing and assessing student behavior or academic results/outcomes in order to help the student make gains. Um, wherever that takes them. Um, it might be, you know, pull you out in the hall. It might be, you know, we need to talk more about semi-colons. We need a conference, or any of those things. It doesn't matter what it is. The ultimate goal of formative assessment to me is a frequent measure of where they are now, so that I can help them make gains.

Thus, these teachers not only identified multiple purposes of formative assessment, they also made connections among these purposes, explaining how one purpose leads to another.

### **Formative Assessment as a Series of Actions**

The teachers in this study experience formative assessment as involving a series of actions that teachers and/or their students undertake. All 12 participants recounted instances of undertaking formative assessment, both in their LEDs and throughout their interviews. When asked to share an example of engaging in formative assessment with their students, the teachers most often provided examples that involved a series of actions that they or their students had taken as the formative assessment was underway. For instance, Steve shared this example of a formative assessment involving multiple steps:

This would be formative: We'll...read together in class, and I'll have a checklist of four things that we look for, and it could be like pacing, enunciation, volume, inflection. And so as the kids are reading, you know, I'll have a little checklist and then I'll have a quick little conference with them.

Nick provided a similar example:



I'll give you this formative assessment...I would give them a sentence, and I would say, "Identify every word in the sentence." And then they would all turn in their sentence with the answers—and this is, by the way, on a three by five card. And then I would look through it, and I would choose the most interesting mistake. And that's what I would put on the screen and say, "Here's the most interesting mistake. What did this person do wrong? How could this person have gotten it right?"

Similarly, Claire explained the first portion of a lesson on drafting rhetorical analysis essays:

To begin the formative assessment work, students determined the author's purpose for the prompt in partners. Students then shared with another team of partners, and they shared out their purpose phrases. I wrote a few on the board to evaluate, and we discussed strength in phrasing and how to strengthen wording for clarity. Students gained confidence in their work and revised their purpose statements independently following the class discussion.

In these examples, the teachers undertook one formative assessment which they described by discussing a series of actions they undertook.

The examples given in the teachers' LEDs also followed this pattern of teachers recounting a time when they engaged in formative assessment by sharing a sequence of actions they undertook. In his LED, Rich noted that as class started, he asked students to "open their essays...and use the highlighting tool to highlight their thesis statement in yellow, evidence and commentary relating to one of their selected texts in pink, and evidence and commentary related to the other in orange." Next, students shared their selected evidence with the whole class. Rich noted that as they did this, he was

listening for two things when students share out: whether or not they've found a convincing or compelling way to attach a literary device to their selected quote...and whether or not the students are adding any commentary of their own yet.

Following this conversation, the class moved into a writer's workshop with students working on their essays as he conferenced with individuals. During those conferences, he undertook these actions:

My first check is their highlighted material...I check for presence, then I check their thesis more closely, engaging them in conversation as I do. We both have their essay open our computers simultaneously so we can both type on it or make comments or highlight relevant passages. The conversation is centered on whether or not they've identified a theme...If they do not yet have one, most of our conversation...is me asking probing questions aimed at getting them to find their own theme. When the discussion is centered around his, I typically will try to point students towards passages that might be helpful to find examples from. Other students...might be having trouble finding quotes to fit them...Other students might need help building commentary. For them, I focus our discussion on the definition of each literary device and ask questions about what each device tends to do or how it is used.

In this example, Rich undertook a series of actions as he and his students engaged in this particular instance of formative assessment, and during the interview, he made clear that "the whole lesson that I...outlined is all...one big formative assessment with a few different parts."

Margaret, too, provided an example of formative assessment comprised of a sequence of actions. In her LED, she described an experience of engaging in formative assessment in which students worked in groups to create assessments that covered the content and skills about which

they had been learning. After Margaret explained the task to her students, the formative assessment unfolded this way:

Students then use collaborative documents...to work on the creation of this assessment. As students are working, I walk around, I ask clarification and guiding questions about their graphic organizer to see where students are initially.....After student groups turn in their rough drafts of student assessments, I look through them and leave comments about accuracy and confusing word choice. The next day, a mini-lesson is taught based on one main student need. Students will then spend part of the next day in conferences with their groups to improve their assessment. After, students are given a chance to correct their work based on comments left.

Just as other teachers did, Margaret laid out her experience of this particular formative assessment as a series of actions she and her students take. Like Rich, she explained that “it was one formative assessment...[where] the umbrella is this one thing, but you don't really realize all these other little pieces that are going into it, too.”

All of these examples involve a series of actions that the teacher and/or their students undertook as one instance of formative assessment. However, in recounting these instances of formative assessment, the majority of the participants did not explicitly identify formative assessment as a process. In fact, only two teachers used the term “process” to define formative assessment. At the very end of his interview, Nick stated that his definition of formative assessment is “the process of evaluating the learning process in an attempt to know which direction to go down next. Something like that.” This was the only time he mentioned formative assessment as a process in either his interview or his LED, and he did not elaborate further. Julie,

however, not only declared formative assessment a process, she also identified the steps of that process:

Uh, a process, I guess. Um, you know, 'cause...I do think in class, and then I take the product from the thing and I analyze it, and then I use that information that I got from analyzing it to then, you know, form my teaching or [to] create small groups or you know, to, to do something with it. So it is more of a process and not just that first step of "do the thing."

Later, as she offered her definition of formative assessment, she explained further:

I want to throw the word process in there somewhere, wherever it fits best... You know, like formative assessment on the teacher side is very much a process. It's not just do the thing and you're done. It's all the steps that come afterwards. So I want to put that in a nice little sentence for you. The process of collecting... The process of collecting, analyzing, and utilizing ongoing feedback for students.

For Julie, then, formative assessment is a process that involves gathering information about student learning, analyzing that information, and then using the feedback that generates.

Although Charity did not explicitly refer to formative assessment as a process, she did allude, as Julie did, to formative assessment being more than just "doing the thing." She observed:

[If] it's not really used, um, in the manner in which it should be used or could be used, um...in that case it becomes novelty, which is why I don't do exit tickets because it has a novel value to it, you know? Okay. It's cute, whatever. But...they're only just like anything. They're only worthwhile if they're actually used. I mean, if, uh, if a teacher

does an exit ticket and asks a question, you know, “What are three things you learned today?” Um, it's only going to have value if the next day... somehow that is addressed.

Charity summarized her position, noting that it is not formative assessment unless the information gets used; “otherwise, it’s just, you know, it’s an, it’s an activity [*laughs knowingly*].” Stacy, too, made a similar observation:

If you're not reflecting on it, what's the point? If I'm just collecting data, it doesn't matter. Like if I don't do anything with the data, if all I do is report it—“Oh, 50% of kids are getting colons wrong,” if I don't do anything about it, there was no reason to even give them a formative assessment.

For Stacy and Charity, if a technique used to gather information from students is not followed by subsequent related actions, it is merely an activity rather than meaningful formative assessment.

Thus, though all of the teachers in this study shared experiences of formative assessment as a series of actions they and/or their students undertake, they did not, with two exceptions, explicitly state that they view formative assessment as a process. Two additional teachers did observe that something must follow the collection of information about student learning or else formative assessment does not fulfill its purpose.

### **Degree of Formality**

All 12 teachers in this study addressed the degree of formality of formative assessments. Seven teachers noted that district-mandated formative assessments such as benchmarks and quarterly tests are highly formal. As Jackie stated, “this one’s more formal because it is put out by [the district].” She explained that these tests don’t “leave ways for them [students] to collaborate or make it less formal or engage with me or with one another, so it’s a much more

strict kind of formative assessment.” Ruth noted that as her department discusses the district-mandated tests, they refer to them as formal:

That's how we use the term formal assessment... is, is okay, we have the formal assessment coming up at the end of the 9 weeks, or we have a formal assessment in the mid, the mid-term. So those are what we have in our heads. That's what we think of as formal assessments.

In fact, Ruth expressed the view that formative assessment is exclusively formal. When asked what comes to mind when she hears formative assessment, Ruth answered:

I think it is a longer thing, more time consuming. Um, it is probably something I might not have control over. It may be something that others use for data rather than, or not just me, but others use for data...Fearful...I think, I think formal. Um, no, no, no collaboration. Students can't collaborate with each other. So formative is just students in isolation answering the questions or doing whatever it is they're doing. Um, and no teacher help, I guess. Yes. So formative would be you're on your own. Don't ask questions. Don't talk. And then, and then data goes to other people.

For Ruth, formative assessment generally refers to the district-mandated tests given twice per quarter. As she noted during member checking, “We usually only hear formative assessment when it comes from the [district].” She stated later that formative assessment “is the big one, the one the kids take seriously...Formative assessment sounds quite grim.” In fact, Ruth’s reaction to formative assessment was consistently negative. When expressing her opinion of formative assessment, she said, “I find formative, the word formative assessment, I don’t know, it’s like *[draws a deep breath through clenched teeth to convey her anxiety]*.” In her LED, Ruth wrote about her frustration and anger when she administered a district-mandated mid-term formative

assessment. She observed, “I get so angry AGAIN with this testing situation,” noting that as the test draws to a close, she is “left in the class feeling exhausted...and asking myself what in the world has just been achieved.” During the interview, she shared that she had chosen to write about this particular experience of formative assessment because “this is for me an example of a formative assessment which should not have taken place.”

Asked what she might consider to be a more positive formative assessment, Ruth shared an example of a unit test she had recently created and administered. She found this a more positive formative assessment because she was able to ask them, “Why did you choose that answer?” For Ruth, the distinction between a poor formative assessment (such as the district-mandated midterm) and a more positive formative assessment (such as her teacher-created unit test) lies in whether students have the opportunity to explain their thinking. As she stated, poor formative assessment involves “any kind of tests where there’s no student feedback [to the teacher].”

Although Ruth expressed a negative view of formative assessment, she talked positively about the informal daily classroom assessments she undertakes with her students. She described them this way:

Shorter pieces of knowledge...Nobody else looks at it, except for me, it may or may not be graded. It may just be a check. Um, it could be something really quickly. Just me throwing out questions to the students. Um, it could be the students actually writing something on the board quickly or doing a sticky. What do you call them, uh, Post-It notes? Um, or it could be, um, something I pick up and, and grade myself for a class work grade. It could be questions I've asked, and I grade them. It could be a paragraph they write. It could be their journal entries. Um, quick, not necessarily something they've

studied for, used by me only. Uh, um, yeah, I guess, and something I don't, I don't have to post as a, as a, I don't have to let them know about. It's just happening in the classroom. This is what we're doing right now. And they do it. So stress free. Should be not full of anxiety. It should be something the students enjoy. Um, it should be based on what I'm doing, what we are doing.

During member checking, Ruth clarified that she does not experience these daily assessments as formative assessment because she sees formative assessment “to cover more material than what each day’s lessons cover.” Thus, Ruth experiences formative assessment as a formal means of assessing students and does not consider the informal daily classroom assessments that she undertakes to be formative assessment.

The other 11 teachers, however, drew distinctions between formal and informal formative assessment by sharing the characteristics of each. Some teachers observed that formal formative assessment tends to be more intentional and planned. As Margaret explained:

I think that there are intentional ones that I do, like, um, having them create an exit ticket or a, um, test or something or a project or something like that, um, to kind of check in with them. And then there are other ones that kind of happened by happy accident or just the structure of our classroom.

Claire echoed this idea:

I think there are more formal options or opportunities that I have...to assess student progress before a summative assessment. You know, like collecting a draft of an essay, collecting a draft of a paragraph and then giving them feedback, or even, you know, like...the worksheet and checking a response or checking the responses, I think. But then there's the less formal formative assessment that's happening all the time when you're



walking around in a classroom and saying like, “Hey, I think we need to get together outside of class. You know, like, I don't think you're maybe getting enough one-on-one attention now based on what I'm seeing on your essay, and I'd like to sit down with you...and talk.” So I think that happens when you walk around the classroom.

Charity expressed a similar view:

It could be something that's not planned, like maybe the teacher notices, okay, they're not understanding, and...they decide to stop and ask some questions or to do some things, um, in order to just kind of see where the students are.

Rich referred to these informal, “on the feet” formative assessments as anecdotal, noting that he “check[s] in anecdotally every day...I'm checking in with their understanding, and it's kind of guiding how I talk within the period.” These teachers indicated that, for them, the distinction between formal and informal formative assessment lies in whether the formative assessment is planned or happens, as Margaret said, “by happy accident.”

Highlighting this view of informal formative assessments as unplanned, five teachers pointed out that informal formative assessment is something they would not include in a lesson plan. As Julie explained:

It's not necessarily something I would write, like if I was writing my lesson plan and I had to write types of formative assessment I use, I probably wouldn't write, “walk around and talk with students” because you should be doing that anyway. Um, but the walking around and talking to my students does help me reach the same goal.

Ginger added:

Those sorts of things, you know, the big activities that are meant to kind of...let me see what I'm dealing with? All of those, I'll write those down, but in the moment, the five to

ones and thumbs ups, thumbs sideways, thumbs down, popcorn questioning, that sort of stuff is, is... it's on the fly. It's reading the room, you know, it's very much reading the room.

Charity, too, expressed this view:

Cause I know, uh, we might plan formative assessments, but usually there are a lot of formative assessments along the way, you know. There's just a constant litmus of, uh, understanding or assessing students' understanding. It doesn't have to be quote unquote "formalized" per se. Do you know what I mean?

Others pointed to duration and mode when talking about the distinction between formal and informal formative assessment, asserting that formal formative assessments tend to be written and perhaps take more time whereas informal formative assessments tend to be verbal or visual cues and shorter. Julie observed:

I definitely think formative assessment is a very broad term. Um, and there can be more like substantial formative assessments, like written things versus, you know, just like the fingers up checking kind of thing. Um, I do love when I'm presenting to use, like, you know, give me a head nod if you understand, like thumbs up thumbs down, on a scale of one to five, how much do you understand what was just said? Um, and I think like those are formative assessment, cause I'm getting feedback from the students right away, but it's very low stakes, very low key, you know, very easy to understand. Um, versus, you know, if I have them complete an exit ticket, saying like one thing that they learned that day, or, you know, take a poll, um, those are a little bit more require a little bit more thinking than thumbs up, thumbs down kind of formative assessment.

Ginger echoed this distinction:

Entrance and exit tickets or the quick quizzes, you know, like, here, you're going to take a quiz. like hand out a piece of paper, [these are the] highest level formality . . . while I would argue that the one to five, thumbs up/thumbs downs are incredibly informal. Like it is so informal, no words are said. It is all motions. You know, with the conversation pieces somewhere in the middle there.

As Nick asserted:

A formal...assessment is everybody gets quiet. You pass out the sheets of paper or you pass out the quiz. They can't talk to anybody. They are doing it and turning it into you. That's, that's formal. Informal is, "Hey, guys, give me a one to five. How are we doing?" Quick, dirty, just boom. You're done.

These teachers, then, experience formative assessment as sometimes formal and sometimes informal, with formal formative assessment being understood as planned, somewhat longer, and generally written, and informal formative assessment conceived of as unplanned, short, and often oral. They described using both formal and informal formative assessment as part of their practice, but they particularly stressed informal formative assessment as the type of formative assessment that occurs organically throughout daily lessons. With the exception of Ruth, who experiences all formative assessment as formal and who shared strong, negative reactions to it, the other participants did not voice positive or negative impressions related to the degree of formality of various formative assessments.

### **Formative Assessment as Integral to Teaching**

Most of the teachers in this study discussed at length the integral nature of formative assessment in their daily teaching. These teachers' descriptions of formative assessment emphasize that for them formative assessment is essential, embedded, and ongoing. That is, their

view of formative assessment as integral touches on their understanding that formative assessment is necessary, is situated within instruction, and occurs frequently on a day-to-day basis.

### **Essential and Embedded**

Nine of the teachers in this study experience formative assessment as an embedded part of their daily instruction. In fact, Margaret stated simply, “It *is* teaching,” a point Nick reiterated when he observed, “It is part of teaching... Show me a teacher who’s not doing formative assessment, and I’ll show you a teacher who’s not actually teaching.” Claire, too, commented on this idea:

I think formative assessment is actual instruction in an English classroom. Uh, I think it is "the work." I think, I think sometimes by calling, like giving it a name sometimes makes people think that it's outside of just normal instructional practice, but I do, uh, think that formative assessment though, is just, I think it's an integral part of good teaching.

Claire expounded on this perspective, noting that she has “started to see most of the instruction and most of the work as leading to ways to evaluate student understanding.” She continued later:

I think in a skill-based classroom, like an English classroom, particularly, I, I don't know how you would teach effectively without all the time assessing student mastery. And I just don't, I don't know how you do it. It'd be tough, I think.

Rich repeated this view of formative assessment, explaining:

Probably the best things are always both of those things [teaching and formative assessment] at the same time. You know, like, uh, if it's, if I'm doing something in the classroom with the kids, the most useful things to do are things that (1) help them to learn something, but then (2) help them to learn something in a way where there's some sort of

result that I can look at and I can tell whether something has happened inside their brain.

Uh, and then so like, you know, you, you want as many things as possible to be both of those things.

In talking about formative assessment as an embedded, integral part of their instruction, these teachers also alluded to its necessity for effective teaching. As Claire said, “I think, I think formative assessment is maybe the most important work of teaching.” Rich echoed this view, remarking that formative assessment “is one of the most important things that we do,” and Mason, too, shared this perspective, stating, “It’s important, and it’s always happening. The more it happens the better.”

These teachers, then, experience formative assessment as integral to their teaching, stressing that it is both an essential and an embedded part of their instructional practice. Ginger provided an apt summary in her LED: “Formative assessment is as natural to me as breathing.”

### **Ongoing**

Not only is formative assessment an essential part of teaching, these teachers also view it as ongoing. When asked when formative assessment happens, Rich answered, “all the time is what I say.” Similarly, Steve shared that when he thinks of formative assessment, the word that comes to mind is “ongoing...you’re constantly doing formative.” Ruth, too, expressed this view, remarking that “most teachers constantly check, whether through class questions, individually walking round and helping, or in quick quizzes, exit slips, et cetera” Stacy also observed that formative assessment happens “all the time.” She elaborated:

Probably in ways that we don't ever realize we're doing it, especially people who are instinctual teachers. Um, like they're gathering data all the time from kids. Whether they realize it or not, like they're looking at their body language; they're listening to the way

their voice is sounding. They're listening to the way they're reading; they're hearing and seeing what they're doing. And they're, they're making judgements and assessing based on those things. So I think that they don't know they're doing it. I think instinctual teachers don't recognize they're doing it. They just do it because it makes sense.

Charity shared this view, stating, “And you know, we're always formatively assessing our, our students, uh, whether we, you know, are even cognizant of that or not...It's ongoing. I mean, I think it, it happens, um, even unconsciously.” Nick expressed a similar perspective:

[Formative assessment happens] across the class period. Multiple times. But half the time, I don't even know that I'm giving...I don't stop and think, well, let me give some formative assessment. No, I think the teacher formatively [thinks]...Is everyone in the room? Is everyone engaged? Um, I'm asking a question. How are the kids doing on the question? Are they thoughtfully doing it?...So I would say a good teacher is, is, is assessing formatively multiple times across, across the period.

For these teachers, then, formative assessment is not only essential to and embedded in their instruction, it is also ongoing. Formative assessment as ongoing refers to their view that formative assessment happens frequently throughout each lesson, with many of them using phrases such as “all the time” and “continually.” They also associated the ongoing nature of formative assessment with instinctual practice, stating that teachers may engage in formative assessment without even realizing that they have.

### **Formative Assessment as a Conversation**

Ten teachers' experiences of formative assessment particularly emphasized the daily, ongoing conversations they have with their students as they check in with them and drift among them as they work. Such conversations afforded them opportunities not only to gather

information from their students but also to pose additional questions to better interpret the nature and degree of their learning and to offer feedback and additional instruction.

Six teachers directly discussed formative assessment as a conversation. As Stacy asserted, “I think it’s entirely a conversation, and it’s an ongoing conversation.” Julie remarked, “conversation and discussion and dialogue is a big part of...understanding what students know,” and Claire, too, stated this perspective, saying “I think it’s all about conversation.” Later, when asked what images come to mind when she hears the term formative assessment, Claire returned to this idea of conversation:

I do think a lot, I think a lot about like conversation. I like when I imagined my classroom, I think about—a lot—the conversation in the class. I think, I think about the noise, you know, like in being comfortable with conversation and questions and not having an answer necessarily to like what the best way to do it is, but opening that up for a conversation in the classroom so that you can kind of figure out where they are in their mastery and in their understanding through their conversation. So those are kind of like the images I have, I think, like the commenting, the writing and then a lot of chatter.

Similarly, Rich noted that conversation is “very much so” formative assessment. He explained:

Because you, you know, you learn, um, you learn, I think you learn a lot about your students, maybe the most by sitting down and talking to them one-on-one, you know?...You know, the, the other kinds of assessment that you do, like, a quiz is a formative assessment, right?...But what, what I guess they lack that the conversation makes up for is, I don't know why the student got something right or wrong on a quiz or a thing. And then, so I can tell you whether they're right or wrong, but that's not always, that's not always that helpful of an insight. Whereas in a conversation...understanding

their thinking is more important because then I have an understanding of why something's either working or not working or when it's working, um, why, uh, you know, like whether it's going to continue working in the future or not.

Ruth, too, noted the value of conversation in learning what students truly know, stating that conversation “is the key to understanding.” She expanded on this idea:

And that conversation can be, um, oral or it can be a written piece. And it's just, it can just be a few quick questions, just, you know, just a short couple of sentences. Um, you know, you start the class, or the, the exit passes are just a few lines. Um, it's just, I, it's interesting when you, I learn so much by asking students why they come up with the answers they come up with.

Engaging in such conversation, she pointed out, allows her to see that even if students have “a different way of thinking,” they may still be “perfectly correct.”

These teachers, then, highlighted conversation as formative assessment, and their descriptions of formative assessment as conversation point to the interactive nature of that conversation. That is, formative conversation, for these teachers, involves a sort of back-and-forth dialogue between students and teachers. They also expressed that, for them, the value of such formative assessment lies in the opportunity to explore students' thinking in greater depth.

Others pointed to the power of conversation as a more authentic, honest form of formative assessment. As Margaret explained:

I get to talk to my kids a lot more constantly so that whenever I am checking in with them, they feel okay to say whatever it is that they need to say. Um, so yeah, doing those kinds of conferences and whatever, feel...natural in my setting.

Charity also noted the authentic nature of conversation of formative assessment:



That's why, that's why conversation is so beneficial. Cause conversation, sometimes it's spontaneous, it's a bit random, it's more organic versus, you know, "Here's a form, fill it out, tell me what you do or do not know."...So I think of it as, a formative assessment as, a bit more organic. You have at least somewhat of a better chance to get an authentic response.

Julie made a similar observation:

I don't really sit down during formative assessment. Cause even if they are writing something and that's their formative assessment, I'm still walking around and looking at them and making sure that, you know, they're all on the right track. And there's no like, you know, at-a-loss-for-words students, um... [It's] very authentic, um, you know, because it is not graded, so students don't necessarily have to be afraid if they get it wrong. And so they can, you know, speak out any answers or any thoughts that come to mind. And so that does make it more authentic, even if they are wrong, at least they're authentic about it.

Thus, for these teachers, conversation as formative assessment increases their ability to explore the depth of student thinking more authentically.

Steve presented an alternative view about classroom conversation. Rather than considering conversation to be formative assessment, he viewed formative assessment as "a catalyst for a discussion." He explained:

I guess another example of maybe formative assessment would be just simply like, you know, I might put up a visual on the board...like three or four objects, maybe symbols from a book, like the *Joy Luck Club*. And I might say like, "Okay, tell me, you know,

how do these symbols relate to the chapter you read last night?” So it could just be a way to really generate a discussion.

For Steve, then, the discussion itself is not formative assessment. He clarified this point as he discussed the formative assessment from his LED, remarking, “Quite frankly, I don't know if I'm necessarily thinking about assessing. I think...it's, it's more, that it's more about...the discussion.” Steve's statement indicates that he views formative assessment as a means of generating discussion rather than as a means of assessing students. However, he did not comment, as other participants did, on whether he thought the discussion that arose might serve assessment purposes.

### **Listening to Gather and Interpret Information**

These same 10 teachers noted that engaging students in conversation and listening to their conversations with each other are means of gathering and interpreting information about the nature and degree of student learning. When asked how she informally formatively assesses her students, Ginger answered, “I listen in to their conversations.” Margaret responded similarly:

Eavesdropping. Absolutely. 100%...Um, I will be sneaky and talk to big groups of people and watch body language. Um, especially if you know that you've got a student who is not comfortable talking. So if you don't want to talk to me, but you're sitting next to this person, I will talk to this person, but watch you. You know, um, anything to...I know this sounds, it probably sounds crazy, but I will, I will gather as many data points as I can to make sure I'm doing the best I can for my students.

As Claire pointed out:

Having that conversation does allow the teacher like me to kind of walk around and hear how they're discussing and what they're saying and to reinforce and say, “That's a great

point,” and [also]...to help kind of bring out other nuanced understandings so that if they were doing that silently, I wouldn't necessarily have that opportunity to kind of gauge mastery and understanding, I think.

Nick shared a similar perspective:

So I literally would drift around from group to group and sit in and listen, and I might get involved in the conversation...So, um, I think drifting, jumping from group to group is an informal way of saying, “Okay, are the kids are on? Are they on task? Are they actually learning?”

Julie added:

While the students were writing, I walked around, and I checked in, and I mean, that could be a type of formative assessment in itself, of like seeing what do the kids understand? What do they not?...Cause that shows me that, you know, it wasn't fully ingrained. They still need to go back and study it. Um, so the walking around...is a formative assessment in itself.

These participants all stressed that the value of this interpretive listening which occurs as they walk around the classroom and check in with their students. They also discussed what they think about as they engage in and listen to classroom conversations. Nick shared that he asks himself questions like, “Is everyone in the room? Is everyone engaged?...How are the kids doing on the question? Are they thoughtfully doing it?” Rich explained that as he undertakes formative assessment, he listens intentionally for evidence that his students are learning and progressing:

[Conversation] is assessing because what it's letting me do is it's letting me know (1) At the most basic level, does the student understand the meaning of the literary devices we've learned? Which I can hear from how they're, what they're picking up and matching.

(2) Is this student, uh, you know, using the kind of different connections we've talked about to write about these things? You know, (3) Does this student have a good understanding of what we mean when we say theme?

Mason observed:

I'm thinking about what kind of feedback to give. Um, I'm thinking about how I can assist the students use a higher level of Bloom's, perhaps. Mmm, I might want them to, uh, engage in some sort of metacognition. And, um, it never hurts to ask, "Why do you think that?" or "How do you know?" And, um, I guess I'm imagining myself going around during, walking around during the cooperative learning discussion portion of the lesson, listening in, making sure that the conversation is productive and thoughtful, making sure they're citing examples from the text, or making connections in real life, to other classes or to their own lives as well.

Charity, too, shared that she listens with an ear for evidence about student learning, though not always with a preconceived notion of what that evidence might be:

I would be listening for maybe like...kind of the gist or the concept of whatever it is...that is under study or what they need to understand. Um, in whatever fashion.

Though in my mind, I would just be listening for certain things, and it may not even be in a way that I even thought about it, you know, and it might be in a way of, of an example or something that relates to their own life, but something that would, um, you know, strike me as, okay, they get it, you know?

Stacy echoed this idea of open-ended listening:

Something might come up out of nowhere that you weren't even thinking about. Like that introduction piece. I'm like, "What are...? What?! Just a thesis?! Where's your intro?"

Like, you know what I mean? Like, I wasn't even looking for that. And now I know I need to talk about it.

These teachers, then, value what they can learn about their students as they walk around their classrooms and listen to students as they think and work. Their various examples indicate that they listen for student engagement, student understanding, and critical thinking, and they consider open-ended listening to be an effective way of ascertaining these things.

### **Adjusting in the Moment**

For these teachers, engaging in conversation with their students gives them insight into how the students are thinking and progressing. They pointed out that doing so allows them to make necessary adjustments and provide feedback to students in the moment. Ginger termed this sort of in-the moment adjusting *pivoting*, saying, “on-the-fly formative lets me make those pivots that I need in my day-to-day teaching.” Ginger explained that by tracking how many students appear to be “getting it,” she has a sense of whether or not to proceed:

And in that moment, what I've done is like if two-thirds of the class have the correct answer and one-third doesn't, I can say, well, we need to remember. Cause I know it's something they should have learned, but we gotta re-awaken those brain cells.

Claire made a similar observation:

So when we're having, when they're digesting the text at the beginning, when they're having partner conversations, I think that I'm, you know, pinpointing around the room, the conversations that I need to kind of maybe direct in different directions or add additional information to. But I do think that as a whole, that's like a class temperature thing kind of figuring out, okay, like I'm hearing all over the classroom that we're missing this component of diction. So now I'm going to go back to the drawing board or literally

go back up to the board and say like, Hey, let's all take a look at this together so that we can maybe move forward in a way that's a little bit more productive.

Margaret added:

When they say things,...I listen, and I take a couple notes, and then I review those notes, and I come back to them the next day, and I say, “Hey, like I heard you say this, this and this. What about *this*?” And you know, sometimes that'll spark an idea, or sometimes they'll come right back with, “Yeah, yeah. I thought about that, too.”

Julie explained:

If I walk around the room, and if I know in my head, you know, Johnny had a confused look on his face or he did a thumbs down at one point, [so] I need to check in with him at the end of class. I can go and be like, “Hey Johnny, like what's going on?” And you know, I, in, in my experience, they're much more willing to talk to me one-on-one than they are to raise their hand in front of the whole class and say, “I didn't understand that; go back.” Um, and so if I do those one-on-one check-ins, um, again, it helps me understand what they don't know. It helps me form my teaching.

For most teachers in this study, formative assessment relies heavily on the informal interactions and conversations they have with their students. Such formative conversations allow them to ascertain how their students are doing and to take appropriate next steps, which may involve reteaching, redirecting, posing additional questions, offering feedback, or following up with individual students.

### **Feedback and Formative Assessment**

All 12 teachers in this study addressed the role of feedback in formative assessment, observing that providing feedback to students is an essential part of formative assessment. As

Claire asserted, “feedback is probably the most important component of formative assessment, or it’s not really formative assessment.” Similarly, Steve stated, “When I think of formative, I think of, it’s just, you know, the...feedback,” adding later “I’m equating feedback with formative.”

Nick, too, drew this connection:

I think feedback is formative. Uh, I think it's like coaching. Again, if you...say, “Here's where you need to get to by the end of the year,” and you're giving them no coaching along the way, you're giving them no formative assessment along the way, you are not forming anything. You are simply hoping the kid will get there. And most likely they won't get there because they don't have any guidance.

He explained further:

If you want to get a class to hate you, don't give them regular feedback...So as far as I'm concerned, if you want to give an argument for formative feedback, show me a teacher who gives great, consistent, regular formative feedback, and I'll show you a teacher who is beloved of their students and who is doing extremely well. On the contrary, or in contrast, give me a teacher who doesn't give feedback regularly and it will drive your students crazy.

When asked to elaborate on her experiences of feedback, Julie noted that feedback’s role in formative assessment is “huge...cause if you’re not giving the feedback to students, then they don’t see the value in the formative assessment. They see it as you do the thing, and you’re done.” Rich summarized, “I guess I think feedback is the end goal of a formative assessment, right?...Formative assessment is the tool, and then the result hopefully is meaningful feedback. Actionable feedback.” These teachers’ descriptions of feedback highlight the high value they place on the essential role of feedback in enacting effective formative assessment.

## **Formative Feedback as Conversation**

In addition to experiencing feedback as indispensable for effective formative assessment, many of these teachers also experience formative feedback as an unfolding conversation with their students. Seven teachers pointed to the conversational nature of formative feedback in their classrooms. Stacy noted that as she provides written feedback to students, she “set[s] it up to be like a conversation. Instead of just saying, ‘We need to elaborate more here,’ I’m like, ‘How can you better describe this situation?...What made it that way? What did they do? I make it like a conversation.’” She explained further that “when they respond to my feedback, either by asking questions or by actually making changes, that’s dialogue.” Claire referred to this series of questions and responses as a “feedback loop,” noting that she tells students:

“On the back of your essay, tell me a place where you want me to give you the feedback. Where are you struggling the most? Where do you, where are you having trouble?” And so that is a direct conversation with the student about like my, you know, “My, my introduction paragraph is... I really struggled with, and I'm not sure it's where I want it to be. Do you have any ideas?” And I can spend a little bit more time there because I know it's a place that they feel that they're not living up. or I can reassure like, “No, your introduction is great. You have doubts, but I don't.” And that's all communication.

Mason, too, observed that formative feedback opens conversations with students. He remarked:

Sometimes they'll come to me in class, if I ask a question in their feedback, and they'll just tell me, or they'll actually write on the paper and hand it in again. Um, I don't really have a clear expectation that they do that, but it happens a lot. If I, if I write a question and they read the feedback, they try to answer it.



For Ginger, feedback occurs “when they ask you a question when they are working in groups... They’re not always getting that... formal rubric, but it’s usually more... social in that, ‘Okay, well, I see this, I see that. And where are we heading with this?’” Margaret echoed this view of formative feedback as social:

Even when I’m just checking in on a student’s notebook, I’m still giving them feedback, and while that is a very basic element of the social aspect within the classroom, that student now has feedback that they can say, “You left this in my notebook. What does it mean? What do I need to learn?”

Thus, these teachers view formative feedback as a sort of conversation that unfolds between themselves and their students, whether orally or in writing. They shared that they achieve such conversation by offering suggestions, which they often pose as questions in order to invite their students to respond, and one teacher also described having students pose questions for her on their work. In these ways, then, feedback in their classrooms becomes a dialogue they engage in with their students.

### **Peer Feedback**

Ten teachers in this study view feedback as unfolding not only between teachers and their students but also between peers. As Stacy stated, peer feedback is “a very useful form of formative feedback.” When talking about writing workshops, Mason commented that students “really rely on each other for a process of feedback,” and Steve, too, noted that peer feedback allows students to “help each other to improve their learning and their understanding with the comments that they’re giving.” Claire echoed this view:

I think it’s like the best friendship, right? Like, you’re able to say something to a friend that causes them to think about an action or something that they’ve done differently. I

think the same is true for good peer work. A peer can say something about your own work, and you say, “Oh, that’s a really great idea. I hadn’t thought about that that way,” and then in the future, you can think about it that way.

Six teachers observed that in addition to helping one’s peers, giving peers feedback also helps the student who provides the feedback. As Nick explained, “The goal [is] not just to help each other evaluate the story but also to give them practice in therefore assessing their own story.” Ginger reiterated this view, sharing that when students review each other’s work, she encourages them to ask, “What can you pull from them to learn?” She explained further:

I do reverse peer editing, I guess. I mean, they’re still writing all over it, and they have questions they have to answer and stuff like that, but I make it about them, not about the person with whom they’re reading.

These 10 teachers experience feedback as having value not only for students when they receive feedback but also when they provide it to others. In other words, they value formative feedback because it prompts student learning for both the receiver and the giver of the feedback.

Several of these teachers, however, did offer cautions about peer feedback. As Stacy remarked, students “have to know what they’re doing to give feedback.” Rich echoed this concern, saying:

You gotta be real careful with the, what it is that you allow them to edit or assess with each other. Like, you know, I almost never like it when it comes to stuff like uh technical or grammar things. I don't, I don't find that it's particularly useful for kids to peer edit because, you know, often their understanding of those things are imperfect at best and they're just going to confuse each other.

Claire summarized this point, asserting that peer feedback can be valuable “if they know what they’re talking about.”

Three participants shared that if students are to provide meaningful feedback, it is incumbent upon them as teachers to offer guidance on how to do this. As Charity stated, peer feedback “is very valuable, but it's, it's a skill that needs to be taught.” Margaret, too, emphasized the importance of teaching students how to give feedback, observing, “I cannot, as a teacher willingly say to these kids, ‘Why aren't you doing this right when you were never taught. So let me show you.’” She explained how this developed for her:

I attended a lot of conferences about feedback and about how feedback or virtual conferences as well, um, and about how feedback matters and what feedback should look like. Um, and then I started to bring my students into it too. And I said, look, when you're giving feedback on peers, here are three sentence stems you can use. Do not vary; these are the three sentences stems you can use.

As Margaret learned more about providing feedback to students herself, she, in turn, shared that information with her students so that they might be more adept in offering their peers useful feedback. For Margaret, useful feedback from peers was more specific, a point Ginger noted as well. As she reviewed peer feedback with her class, she said to them, “Really is ‘Hey, that was great,’ is that useful at all? No, no...I'm glad, I'm glad you think it was great. What was great about it?” Both Margaret and Ginger, then, stressed the importance of guiding students to offer more substantive, specific feedback to their peers. As Margaret concluded, “I mean, they’re going to be giving feedback for the rest of their lives.”

Thus, despite the value they attribute to peer feedback, these participants also acknowledged the potential pitfalls, particularly their concern that students may not have

sufficient content knowledge or skill to offer accurate feedback. A handful of participants noted that teaching students how to provide feedback can lead to feedback that is more specific and useful to their peers.

Several teachers also remarked that students can sometimes be more receptive to feedback from their peers. Charity explained:

Another student says, you know, “Oh yeah, you know, I agree,” or “They're right in what they're saying” versus someone else that might say, “Well, no, that doesn't make any sense.” So that happens cause the students will definitely, um, let each other know...And sometimes that comes better from their peers than it does from the teacher. They might be more inclined to listen to that and accept that if another peer is able to, you know, say to them...“Your idea of this is, is not really where we're going right now.”

Rich added that critical comments in particular might better come from peers:

In the Socratic dialogues, they're the ones who say things like, “Well, man, what I think you're saying actually is completely discounting a horrific experience like that.” I want another kid to say that to another kid. I don't want to say that.

These teachers, then, perceive peer feedback, particularly more critical feedback, as being better received than feedback from the teacher.

### **Feedback and Trust**

Several teachers asserted that regardless of whether the feedback comes from the teacher or from other students, students' receptiveness to feedback is tied to factors such as trust, safety, and relationships. Jackie shared that when it comes to students being receptive to what their peers have to say, “there's definitely a trust factor” at play. Rich echoed this view that the relationship among peers is of “critical importance.” He stated:

That's what matters most. It's like the kid's opinion of you or the person they're talking to matters more than almost anything else when it comes to whether they're going to accept that feedback as valid and whether they're going to be willing to say...whether they like the thing

Stacy, too, referenced the trust and relationships that need to be in place for feedback to be received:

There has to be some level of understanding and, like, standard or community within a room. Um, otherwise they're not open. People are not open to feedback if they feel like they're just being judged. They're open to feedback when they feel like you're trying to help them and you're trying to improve them and you're... You've got their best, you know, in your heart, their best intentions in your heart. And I think that begins with a relationship.

In addition to echoing the importance of trust when giving feedback, Claire also pointed to the role feedback plays in establishing the value of formative assessment for students. She remarked, "You do have to give meaningful feedback for them to see the value in it [formative assessment] and, you know, they...need to trust that you'll do that for them, that you'll kind of like spot check their work." Julie, too, noted that by giving encouraging, positive feedback, students can "start to build that confidence and know that I take this seriously and that it does matter and they need to actually think about this stuff." These teachers find that providing effective feedback helps their students appreciate the value of formative assessment, and they perceive trust as being foundational if students are to be receptive to that feedback, both from their peers and from their teachers.

### **Using Feedback**

Six teachers discussed the importance of students making use of the feedback that they receive, with many of their descriptions emphasizing the ways in which they have students work directly with the feedback they receive. As Steve explained:

My whole philosophy is to sort of guide the kids and then let them see and make the change, you know, make the corrections. So if I give a paper back to them with that feedback, I'll give them time to go through and make the change and correct them in class. And I'll go around and I'll touch base with every kid.

Jackie noted that she has students work with the feedback she gives them, saying, “They have to read it, they have to highlight it, they have to respond to it...I remind them to use that, that strategy in their next essay.” As Nick shared, “If I’m going to give feedback, I want my students to learn from that so that they can build into the next part of the learning experience.” Stacy provided this detailed example of what that might look like in her classroom:

I made a video where I went over each and every answer and why this was the right answer. They were responsible for charting, so, “Here was number one; it was rule two; I got it wrong. Number two, rule two, I got it wrong. Oh, I’m already starting to see a pattern.”...What they do is once they get their data in there—this is what I got right; this is what I got wrong—now I ask them to reflect. What patterns do you see? What are you getting right most of the time, which means 75% of the time or more, what are you getting right? Um, what do you seem to be getting incorrect a lot of the time? And then I ask them, so now, which skills are you going to focus on? And then I asked them to come up with a list of strategies of how they're going to do it. Sometimes they say, I'm going to ask Ms. X for more practice activities in Quill. Um, some of them talk about coming to academic appointments. Some of them say, you know, honestly, I just need to focus

more. You know?...Um, but that's how I get them to use their formative feedback. So they set their own goals: "I'm going to work on this."

These teachers, then, view feedback as something that is intended to be used so that students can make improvements, both in their current work and in their future efforts. Their descriptions provide insight into how their students make use of such feedback, namely by highlighting their work or the feedback, making corrections based on the feedback, reviewing their work to identify patterns, and setting goals for their continued learning.

### **Formative Assessment as Well-Suited to the English Classroom**

Most of this study's participants consider formative assessment well-suited to the English classroom. Half of the teachers noted that this natural fit arises because of the spiral nature of the English curriculum, which calls for teaching multiple standards multiple times over multiple units and years. Additionally, nine of the teachers stressed that formative assessment is strongly linked to and intersects with the writing process and writing instruction, with teachers emphasizing writing conferences, peer assessment, and self-assessment.

### **Formative Assessment and English's Spiral Curriculum**

Six of the study participants experience formative assessment as a natural fit for secondary English, an idea Julie captured succinctly in her statement that "formative assessment fits so much better with English." As Claire explained, "You're always skill building throughout the whole year. You start at the very beginning and you continue to add and add and add and add. I think that it [formative assessment] does work really well in an English classroom."

These six participants attribute the natural fit of formative assessment with English to the cyclical nature of the English curriculum. As Margaret noted, "with English, everything's cyclical. So even if you look at our standards, the only thing new at 11th grade is the colon."

Rich highlighted the repetitive nature of English, too, saying “we just do the same unit, like eight times over. Like the same like structure of a unit, you know. That's kind of the joy of English...It's like Ground Hog Day a little bit.” This spiraling nature of the English curriculum, explained Claire, means that

You're building toward mastery of a lot of things all the time, all at once. And that's the beauty and the complexity of English, right? That they [the things we teach] are all so interwoven. You're not, you know, like, “Right now we're building this particular skill and we're learning this content...and then we're going to learn about this content and then we're going to learn...” In English, it's just, it's all cyclical, all feeds into each other... Formative assessment, I think...has to be some part of that kind of journey, right? Like it needs to be on the journey to like accomplishing a skill, a task or I don't know, mastery of some content.

These teachers, then, identify English curriculum and instruction as being cyclical and experience formative assessment as well-suited to such instruction.

Four teachers explicitly attributed the formative potential of summative assessments to the spiral nature of the English curriculum. As Stacy remarked, “English spirals, so it's, so there's no real such thing as summative cause we continue on and on and on with all of those objectives all year long.” Later, she added, “Almost everything I do is formative because we always come back. Like I can't summatively assess anything because we always come back.” Jackie noted this, too, observing that even though an essay may have received a final grade, the students will nonetheless be expected to demonstrate their ability on those same skills in the next essay. She commented:



I remind them to use that strategy in their next essay because the rubric doesn't change. The prompts will change, but I'm still going to be grading you on the same skill, so it's an attempt to keep working with it... So they do carry it onto the next writing prompts.

Claire expressed a similar idea:

Because, because like we said, right, like the English is cyclical. Like it's, even though it's technically the summative for that particular unit or that particular skill, it shouldn't just like go away and shrivel up, right? Like it should still be used. So I think even that is formative. I don't know. I think most of what we end up doing is, formative.

Thus, these teachers believe that because the English curriculum spirals and the same ILOs are taught multiple times over the course of a school year, summative assessments can be used formatively. Six other participants voiced a similar view about the formative use of summative assessments but did not expressly attribute this potential to the cyclical nature of the English curriculum.

### **The Writing Process as Formative Assessment**

The natural fit of formative assessment in the English classroom is particularly evident in the participants' experiences of the writing process. Nine of the participants in this study shared their experiences of how formative assessment intersects with the writing process. These nine teachers see multiple opportunities for formative assessment as they engage in writing instruction with their students. As Charity explained, formative assessment is "an integral part of the writing process, mostly in the drafting and revising stage," and Stacy, too, asserted that "revising and editing are the very nature of...formative assessment." Claire observed that "the writing process is full of opportunities for formative assessment...The whole writing process is bits and pieces of

formative assessment.” Ginger elaborated on this idea, noting the multiple places in which formative assessment might occur:

I will say, “Okay, here's the writing prompt (enter SOL prompt here). You are going to write me an introductory paragraph and highlight your thesis statement.” So that is a formative. And then I go through that night and go, “Oh, okay. We have to remind Johnny what a thesis is,” and I can write those notes right there on what they've turned in. So it's, it's, it's a little bit, a little bit longer than the, you know, immediate pivots, but it's still very fast turnaround. Um, and then the next step goes, “Okay, great. You've written your thesis statement.” We're going to use the same – so the next day – the same prompt. So we've broken it out in our mind, and [now] “we're going to write a body paragraph, but you're going to highlight your two pieces of evidence. Okay? That's all I want you to do is highlight the two pieces.” And then I'd go in, and I can go, “That's not evidence; that's an explanation.” And then I can redirect there. And if everyone gets something wrong, then I can do a, an intervention lesson.

For Julie, these multiple opportunities for formative assessment allow her to scaffold the writing work by

hav[ing] a lot of checkpoints and check-ins during the writing process, because if I just say, write an essay, their brains will explode. And so I need to have check ins throughout to get them to the end product because it is such a big task to handle.

Thus, for these teachers, the writing process involves formative assessment at multiple points.

Other participants made an even stronger link between the writing process and formative assessment by stating the necessity of formative assessment for writing instruction. Stacy contended that “You can *assign* writing without formative assessment. I don't think you can

*teach* writing without formative assessment.” Nick expressed a similar sentiment, stating “for a writing teacher like me, who does everything through writing, like, . . . I cannot teach without giving formative assessment.” He explained further:

The writing process is especially, um, is especially dependent upon formative assessment. . . . Formative assessment is important because you literally have, um, if you're teaching your kids right, you're teaching them the process, which is you write your rough draft, you then take a break and you come back and you look at it and you say, “What's actually good in this?” [That's] formative assessment. “What's actually good in this, in this piece of shit that I just wrote? Okay. So that's good. I'm going to go ahead and use that. I'm going to write another draft. Okay. Now I'm going to assess it again. How do I like it? Is it feeling good? Am I reading?” And you might read it aloud to yourself. You, you get to the end where you're actually proofreading. . . . So that's a process. Then getting feedback from other peers like what's working, what's not working until ultimately you are forced to turn it in because you have a deadline. Right? But the bottom line is, it depends on how you want to define formative assessment, but I would think therefore formative assessment is just a really important part of the process.

Similarly, when asked if writing instruction can happen without formative assessment, Charity responded, “It does. It *shouldn't*, but it does. Yeah, I, I don't think it can [happen] successfully. . . . The writing process, um, even in the simplistic form, um, there's usually some type of formative assessment, but I think there needs to be a lot more.” For these teachers, effective writing instruction cannot happen without formative assessment.

Still others drew an explicit comparison between the writing process and the formative assessment process. Stacy remarked:

Writing and formative assessment are super similar... It [writing] is recursive and, um, it's iterative. Like you need to be able to go back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. And if you have to, you have to stop. Like if things are not... You have to stop dead in your tracks, reverse position, and go backwards sometimes... Formative assessment's that way, too.

Similarly, when asked if the writing process *is* formative assessment, Rich said, "I'd say a hundred percent. It is." These two teachers, then, see writing and formative assessment as tantamount processes focused on iterative, recursive practices that allow for revision and improvement.

### **Peer and Self-Assessment During the Writing Process**

Seven teachers affiliated self-assessment and peer assessment as part of the writing process, sharing in their interviews and LEDs that they intentionally plan for these as their students engage in the writing process. Claire commented that during the writing process, formative assessment might involve "students doing a little self-assessment and then reporting back to you and saying like, 'Here's what I learned, and here's what I'm doing after'...or having some peer evaluation." Charity, too, cited the role of both self-assessment and peer assessment as part of the writing process:

[There is] an opportunity certainly for peer feedback where students can do formative assessment of each other. Uh, it [the writing process] allows for students to do self-assessment of their writing, you know, to look over their writing, um, to assess, you know, whether or not they're meeting their writing goals. So yeah, I think that the writing process lends itself to lots of different opportunities.

Of the two, Charity noted that “the self-assessment is probably the more important formative assessment, I think, in the writing process, more so than, um, relying on the teacher.” Steve explained that self-assessment is key during the writing process because “the goal is ultimately for the kids to be, you know...able to do the formative assess[ing].” Rich added that self-assessment during writing allows students to refine their thinking:

If you go back and read it again, you have to look at what you thought an hour ago.

Again, you might feel differently. Like, so what, what, what it really could be is this...a way to expose yourself to what you think, and then ask you to interrogate it. Right. You know, and then, so that's really what I want the writing to do.

Several participants experience formative peer assessment as valuable to the writing process because it provides diverse audiences for students’ writing. As Charity explained, peer assessment “gives a perspective of a different audience in terms of what is valued.” Rich, too, pointed to this value of formative assessment:

Peer editing will be often. They'll read each other's paper, and then I'll have like a set of questions. Like, do you think if it's, you know, like, has the person you've read written something that you think is convincing or interesting, uh, you know, or clear and they're answering questions kind of like that. And the reason that is a form of assessment is because that is often, you know, they, their first window into how someone else their age thinks of what they've written.

For these teachers, then, both peer and self-assessment play a role as their students undertake the writing process, emphasizing self-assessment as potentially the more valuable of the two because students must ultimately rely only on their own self-assessment of their work. Its value also lies

in helping students revisit their own ideas and thinking. Peer assessment, they explained, is beneficial because it provides students with the responses of varied audiences.

### **Writing Conferences**

In addition to peer and self-assessment, five teachers also experience writing conferences as a type of formative assessment they intentionally engage in during the writing process. Despite initially vacillating a bit on whether to classify writing conferences as a type of formative assessment, Jackie ultimately concluded that they *are*, saying “I could consider it [formative assessment]...because I am meeting with each individual student and then I do have a better idea of who grasps the revising part of the writing process, [and] it would help guide my next lesson.” When asked to write about a time he experienced formative assessment, Rich explained in detail a time he engaged students in writing conferences:

For each individual student, my first check is their highlighted material from the do now. I check for presence, then I check their thesis more closely, engaging them in conversation as I do (we both have their essay open on our computers simultaneously, so we can both type on it or make comments or highlight relevant passages). The conversation is centered on whether or not they’ve identified a theme (we sometimes have to talk through the difference between “universal themes” “themes” and “morals). If they do not yet have one, most of our conversation (which is limited to 3-5 minutes) is me asking probing questions aimed at getting them to finding their own theme. When the discussion is centered around this, I typically will try to point students toward passages that might be helpful to find examples from.

Rich’s focus on these formative conferences as conversation is an idea Julie expressed also, explaining that she thinks of the “one-on-one writing conferences as formative assessment”

because they are “the best way to talk to them and to give them feedback and to see where they're at.” Through such conversation, both students and teachers have the opportunity to assess student work. As Steve said:

We'll take a look at their chart, you know, like, “Hey, look at what you've done in the first assignment. You know, you've got all these comma mistakes, you've got all these run-on sentences, all these capitalization errors. Um so let's take a look at what you did in the second paper. Now you're working on the third paper... Do you notice any comma mistakes or any capitalization?...So it's a way for the kids to look at what they've done.

Several participants also pointed out that although they have planned things for which they check as they conference with students, they are also open and attentive to the individual needs students present. For instance, after Rich described what he checks for in writing conferences, he then noted that “other students, who have already identified themes, might be having trouble finding quotes to fit them... Other students might need help building commentary.” Julie, too, pointed to the importance of being receptive to addressing their questions and concerns, commenting, “How I like to, you know, work my one-on-one conferences is like, ‘Alright, what questions do you have? Where are you stuck?’ Like, I ask some questions, but I let them drive the conversation.” Thus, although writing conferences are planned, the content of those conferences may well vary depending on the individual student.

The teachers in this study, then, experience formative assessment as a natural fit in the English classroom, in part, because of the spiral nature of the English curriculum. They see formative assessment as particularly linked with the writing process and view peer assessment, self-assessment, and writing conferences as means of engaging in formative assessment during that process.

## **Formative Assessment and Class Culture**

Teachers in this study experience a clear connection between a positive class culture and effective formative assessment. Ten teachers talked about the importance of a positive class culture in undertaking formative assessment, sharing that strong relationships that engender trust and a sense of safety and comfort are necessary for formative assessment to be effective. As Claire asserted, “For me, [formative assessment] is...about the relationship I have with the student. It’s about trust building.” Rich, too, highlighted the importance of relationships with his students, saying, “I’ve come to think of my job as more [about] helping them build the skill set by respecting who they are as thinkers.” Ginger echoed this view of formative assessment:

I just think that that relationship aspect just makes formative assessments that much more because if...they'll trust you enough to give you honest answers or trust you enough to give you their best or their worst, then you can teach them more authentically.

Mason also addressed the importance of class culture. He stated:

If students aren't afraid to be wrong, um, and to try new things, I think class culture has a great deal to do with that. If they feel safe with each other, they'll try more, they'll go out on a limb and try new things that they wouldn't have tried otherwise. And I like to see that, so I try to encourage that and build that classroom culture so that they're, they're safe in doing so.

Stacy presented a similar position in her LED:

The ultimate goal is definitely the student outcome and, you know, producing a situation and an environment where the student feels safe to make errors. Like it's okay to fail on this. It's okay to make a mistake here because this is just one step in the path. And the



more formative you have, the more steps in the path, the more competent they become with each step.

Additionally, Stacy noted that not only does formative assessment *require* a positive culture, it also helps to *create* a positive class culture. She stated, “I think that when you do more formative, they feel safe.” Several teachers expressed a similar view about the power of formative assessment to demonstrate the teachers’ care for their students. As Jackie shared, with formative assessment “I am genuinely trying to help them...It’s like they can see that I do want for them to get better.” Charity, too, made this point. After sharing an example of engaging in formative assessment with her students, she summarized that “from that formative assessment, they know that I at least care and that I’m at least listening, and I at least have some interest in how they feel.” Claire repeated this position, declaring:

I don't know how you would teach effectively without all the time assessing student mastery...I think, I think if you don't, you leave students behind. And maybe just don't, don't really show that you care about them maybe, you know, like about their understanding. You just kind of move ahead. Kind of like a train. Leaving them.

For these teachers, then, a classroom culture that emphasizes relationships, trust, and a sense of safety is essential for undertaking formative assessment effectively. In addition to formative assessment *requiring* such a class culture, they also noted that it helps build stronger relationships, thereby creating conditions that *contribute to* a positive class culture.

### **Sources of Confusion About Formative Assessment**

As these teachers shared their experiences of formative assessment, they pointed to several aspects of formative assessment that create conflicts and confusion for them. In describing their experiences of formative assessment, they touched on the role of grades, offering

their perspective that formative assessment is better achieved without grading. They also communicated their frustration with district-mandated formative assessments such as quarterly tests and benchmarks that they are required to give throughout the school year. Finally, they also shared that the term formative assessment itself can create confusion for them, particularly as it is presented in professional development and understood by instructional leaders.

### **Formative Assessment and Grading**

Nine of the teachers in this study consider formative assessment to be best accomplished without weighted grades, largely because they feel that the high stakes pressure and punitive nature of graded work thwarts formative's assessment's focus on continued student learning. As Charity noted, "formative assessment is something that does not result in a, in a grade. You know what I mean? That's not going to be some type of grade book thing." She continued:

We need to make sure we understand, um, without it being punitive. Um, cause things like, say a quiz, for example, you know, a quiz goes in the grade book. So there's, there's a punitive nature to that. Um, while you are assessing, you know, what the kids do or do not know...there is going to be a degree of passing and getting a good grade versus do I understand these things.

Jackie repeated this idea:

I don't know if the grade itself helps [me] determine, like, this student's ability. It does show where they are weak when I'm able to tell this was right, this is wrong. But the overall grade, I just, it doesn't, it doesn't really take into account the work that they've put in to that point.

Claire, too, echoed the view that grading works at odds with the purpose of formative assessment:

Yeah, I think, well, I, I do think that a lot of classrooms where formative assessment is graded and put in the grade book and used punitively really detracts from ability to grow because students feel like they have to be perfect right away. Um, so I think, I don't think that that's actually formative assessment because it's not helping them to form their understanding. They feel like they have to understand right away. And that can be detrimental, I think. I mean, it helps, but I don't think it's fair.

While eight of these nine teachers asserted that formative assessment should not be graded, Julie was the only teacher who stated that formative assessment *could* not, by definition, be graded. She asserted, “the second it becomes graded, it's not formative.” Yes, I may learn things about my students' learning from it, but it just becomes a different category for me.” For these teachers, the pressure created by grades works against formative assessment’s intention of advancing student learning rather than measuring it.

A number of these teachers reported experiencing a tension between grading and formative assessment. As Claire observed:

I struggle with this all the time. Grading is a struggle for me. I think that I, I, I have some cognitive dissonance related to grading. I know that creating and assigning a number to a skill doesn't build the skill and, but I also struggle with, but then how do you get students to do work and how do you convince them that it matters? And so I have this you know, like this really kind of old school understanding of grading, and then this like more contemporary and probably factual understanding of grading. And so I'm always kind of battling that in my own practice and in my own like understanding of grading. But I think that I think the best formative assessment isn't graded, honestly.

District policies and expectations heighten this tension for some of the teachers in this study. As Stacy explained, she has “to have something for the grade book.” Rich also commented:

I just wish you could divorce it [formative assessment] from all the other things like a grade book, for example. I wish you didn't have to go into that. I guess I wish you could have like a grade book that was just private for class...I think it should almost be like a year, like a year file at the doctor's office, right? It's for kids, for a kid and for a parent to know, and then that's it.

Charity elaborated:

Formative assessment is not to be graded; it's, you know, to inform, but in the same breath, we're expected to have, say two or three grades in the grade book each week. So if we're doing more formative assessment then I'm either going to have to grade your exit ticket or not do the formative assessment. So it becomes a bigger, you know, part of a bigger, systematic issue.

In recalling discussions she and others had with their school leadership, Claire emphasized this tension between not grading formative assessment and her school's expectation that they would.

She shared:

We had to like, have these conversations about like, I can't grade that. Like, I, I can't put that in the gradebook. Like, I know you say that I need this many grades, but like, that's not going in, you know? So like, cause that's not the point, that's not the purpose.

To manage this tension, some of the teachers give students completion grades for attempting the work associated with the formative assessment. As part of her LED, Stacy explained:

What I tell them is if you do everything, if you make the honest attempt, I'm giving you full credit for your draft. So let's get that part out of the way. Let's just get that grade out of the way. Okay. So that we can focus on the material, and they generally really appreciate that. You know, I was like, because this is a draft, you know, this is the one I'm grading, this is free feedback.

As Nick noted, “I am simply giving completion grades because I don't want the grade to be attached to the formative, to, to the assessment.” Steve, too, adheres to this sort of grading, stating “there's not a weighted grade necessarily with it.” Mason drew this comparison:

Since their score doesn't count towards their GPA, um, it becomes kind of like a, a trophy grade. Um, and they want the highest, like, the highest ranked trophy. Um, I suppose it's, it's not too different from those...like traffic signs...[that] flash your speed that you're actually going and tell you to slow down or if you're going too fast. There's no enforcement there, but I think people are compelled to, to like match the speed limit...And I think it's a similar effect to, uh, to the spiderweb discussion grade. I think it's just, just an inherent, uh, desire to do well.

These teachers, then, experience formative assessment as something that is best accomplished without grading, yet they acknowledge the reality of grading in their lives as teachers. In an attempt to work around the tension between grading students' efforts and formative assessment's goal of helping students learn, these teachers sometimes provide students with unweighted grades.

### **District-Mandated Formative Assessment**

District-mandated formative assessments—alternatively referred to as benchmarks, quarterly tests, district-wide formal assessments, and midterms by the participants—sparked

particular frustration. Six teachers, all of whom identified these district assessments as formative rather than summative, shared their concerns about the assessments that are required by their districts at regular intervals throughout the school year. For some, their frustration arose from concern for their students. Charity empathized with her students who may take multiple quarterly formative assessments in a week. She observed:

They don't see it as really a formative assessment. They don't see it...as a way to inform how you understand these concepts. They don't see it that way at all. And I understand that because when we do these quarterly assessments, they might have to take five, six, or seven of them in a week. So depending on where you land in the, in the place, in line, like if English is at the bottom of the line, by the time they get to the English, [they're thinking], "I've already taken about 10 of these. So I'm just clicking through apps, just trying to get it done."

Ruth, too, worried about the effect of these formative assessments on her students. She shared:

The kids see this score straight away on the screen. And if they have to do a second one—because these are all two parts, two different passages to read—some of them just don't want to do it. Some of them just say, "Well, I'm not, I'm not going on any further. That's it. I'm stupid. I'm dumb. I can't go anymore. What's the point? I made a 25; I made a 30." So that is where, [for] a lot of them, the frustration comes in.

Others articulated their concern about the construction and content of these district-mandated formative assessments. When discussing the required quarterly benchmarks, Charity observed:

The students receive a low score, and that may not be on the part of the teacher. That might be on the part of the test; that might be on the part of the contents of the test. And those outside forces, though, may not necessarily agree with that or buy into that.

Rich echoed her concerns, stating:

It's multiple choice, and there are weird passages and there are weird questions, and...there could be a million reasons why kids got...any one of those right. Or wrong. And then, so I don't think they are, uh—what are we talking about?—uh, their validity, if we're talking about a test. I don't, I don't find them particularly valid.

Ruth, who wrote about administering a district-mandated formative assessment in her LED, also voiced her frustration, saying:

What happens is we're halfway through the test, and I'm reading it, and none of those are the correct answer, so we quickly text somebody else or text the supervisor. So the supervisor says, "Oh yeah, we just realized that. Throw out Questions 2 and 10."...It's not being quote "proofread" correctly.

In addition to her concerns about the formative assessment's construction, Ruth also noted that the district-mandated formative assessment does not align with the curriculum, stating, "If you look at the questions and you look at our curriculum, sometimes there is absolutely no connection whatsoever." Claire echoed Ruth's concern about alignment, remarking, "I really struggle with formative assessment that feels, like, removed from what we do in the class." Jackie also shared her worry about what the district-mandated formative assessments cover. She remarked, "If you get to test day, um, and you have one class that's been working only on these two strands and another class that has like five, how is that equal? How is that fair?"

These teachers, then, expressed their frustration with both the content and construction of these district mandated formative assessments. In particular, they shared concerns about the negative impact on students, the number of errors in such assessments, and the lack of alignment to the curriculum and to what is happening in the classroom,

### **The Term *Formative Assessment***

As teachers shared what is embodied in the term *formative assessment*, seven of them discussed the challenges associated with the term itself, noting in particular the roles of professional development and instructional leadership in shaping their understanding of formative assessment. Speaking broadly about educational terminology, Steve observed, “We get so weighed down with syntax that a lot of times it ends up just totally, for some...overshadow[ing] like what actually is effective in the classroom.” Charity, too, felt that the term itself can be a stumbling block:

I think, um, we don't necessarily have to always call it formative assessment. . . . We can sometimes call it what it is. You know what I mean? I just, I want to know what you're thinking right now, or I want to see whether you understand how to craft a thesis statement.

### ***Professional Development and the Term Formative Assessment***

A number of teachers talked about the role professional development has played in their confusion over the term. For instance, Ginger shared that the first time she heard about formative assessment was at a professional development session where she had this reaction:

I was very confused what they were talking about because it was very, it was some, you know, person with a doctor in front of their name coming in, throwing these terms out.



And I'm like, I'm a master teacher. I have no clue what he's talking [about]. He's talking about checking for understanding.

Ginger, then, recounted that the professional development session she attended presented a new term (formative assessment) to refer to something she did in her classroom (checking for understanding). Referring to it by a different name, she shared, ultimately created uncertainty for her. As Claire observed, “We started naming it, and so people started seeing it differently.”

Rich remarked that the focus on terminology in professional development sessions sometimes ignores teachers' need for a deeper conceptual understanding. He explained:

I think that's what happens in a lot of PDs [professional development] that we do... We get so wrapped up in giving, in having an arsenal of words that we can use that we think that that means that we understand what we're doing. Like we confuse having an arsenal of words to describe what's happening with “we understand what's happening.”

Rich, then, wished that professional development focused on ensuring that teachers understood the concept behind the term rather than on the label itself. Steve also discussed feeling “jaded with all of the...terminology” but offered a different explanation:

I have sat through so many pointless seminars and training where people go on and on and they focus so much on like, just throwing out [terms]. I mean, you know, it became a great drinking game when we'd go to these seminars, like every time they say formative assessment, you know, go... I think I became jaded with that because... we would have seminars where everybody would go into theory about everything rather than just say, okay, here's a great example of formative assessment that's, that's relevant, that you can do in, in, in any classroom.

From Steve's perspective, professional development should focus not on the conceptual undergirding of the concept being discussed but rather on the techniques that have practical application. Even though both Rich and Steve shared their frustration about professional development that focuses on terminology, their preferences for what should be addressed instead varied, with one advocating a focus on the conceptual, and the other valuing a focus on the practical.

Unlike Steve who wished for practical techniques, Margaret expressed frustration with receiving a "non-exhaustive list of formative assessments" during professional development sessions. She explained:

These education programs would say, "Look, formative assessment is great, and it teaches us about our kids, and it teaches us about, you know, where our kids are, and here's how you're going to do it: You're going to pick one to implement [in] your classroom from this list this week." Well, that wasn't really in my plans, but okay...But then their [the students'] main question was, "Why can't we just do like the ball thing where we throw around the ball at each other and say whatever." I'm like, "Because we can't, we can't anymore. We have to do this." As a new to four-year teacher, it was very much like, how do I follow the rules?...But then I also learned that I don't have to do the deck of cards. I don't have to confuse my kids by pulling something out. The ball was formative assessment, but since he didn't mention the ball, I thought it was wrong.

For Margaret, the list she received created an impediment to identifying as effective formative assessment anything not on the list, in effect narrowing what could be considered formative assessment.

Like Margaret, Ginger talked about how an educational term such as formative assessment can narrow a teacher's understanding of what the term refers to. She shared:

Language is ever evolving. Um, I think when you're dealing with something, as longitudinal as teaching, some of the problem comes with jargon, with edu-speak. And you know, when you first put out this thing, who wants to do it, I'm like I'm going to screw her dissertation up. I'm a really good teacher. I can teach...I can teach someone to pass any test. I get concrete thinkers to think in the abstract. I do cross-curricular content to nobody's business, but I'm a bad teacher 'cause I can't define that right off the bat. Um, and I think that's the danger in jargon, um, is that there, there is so much out there and [making air quotes] this is the only way to think of it.

Claire, too, observed that educational labels and terms can narrow how teachers think of the concept they represent. For instance, Claire discussed formative assessment as something that was initially understood quite narrowly. She explained:

I think when we name things in education, just in general, I think it gives policy makers or publishers or speakers an opportunity to capitalize on some facet of education and to kind of like narrow it down and maybe make it smaller...I feel like for a while, formative assessment felt really small, right? Like identifying and naming it early, like early in my teaching career, formative assessment felt like it needed to be like a multiple-choice test to see before they got to the end.

For these teachers, focus on the term *formative assessment* during professional development sometimes creates more confusion than it alleviates. They noted the problem of swapping new terms (e.g., *formative assessment*) for older ones (e.g., *checking for understanding*) without acknowledging them as similar, and they shared concerns that

professional development sometimes presents formative assessment more narrowly than what they experience it to be in practice. They also remarked that the term *formative assessment* is sometimes discussed too conceptually during professional development, with no focus on its practical application, yet at other times, it is discussed only in terms of how to enact it without any appreciation for the conceptual ideas that underpin it.

### ***Instructional Leadership and the Term Formative Assessment***

Several teachers attributed some of the confusion over formative assessment to instructional leaders from their school or district. As Claire stated:

So I feel like the naming of it maybe made it smaller in the perception of people who weren't in the classroom...I think initially it was...Administration made it really small.

Their understanding of it was really small because *they* didn't know what to look for. And so this is what they need to look for when they come in, they look in your grade book, or they look in your classroom or whatever.

For Claire, the introduction of the term *formative assessment* constrained how administrators understood the concept behind the term, limiting formative assessment to being, for instance, “a multiple-choice test’ rather than “an integral part of good teaching.”

Margaret pointed out that that her confusion over formative assessment as only the things on the list might have been rectified if an instructional leader had observed her and said:

“You really hit formative assessment well in this lesson and while it doesn’t look like what we just had our meeting on, it *is* [formative assessment], and that’s okay.” And I wish that somebody had said that. And that’s what the conversation would have looked like with teachers rather than, “Are you done with your [things from the list] now?”

Margaret, then, expressed her wish for an instructional leader who had helped her identify her practices as formative assessment.

Two other teachers also longed for instructional leadership to provide more guidance on implementing formative assessment effectively. When talking about her earlier experiences of formative assessment, Margaret shared:

I wish that somebody, when they were coming to observe me or coming to give me feedback or whatever would have said, “Oh, hey, did you know you were doing formative assessment?” Now what? I did a good thing? Like I wish that somebody when doing that or when coming, didn’t say to me, “So what would you consider your formative assessment? Because I noticed you didn’t do what that education program policy says.”

Similarly, when talking about providing in-the-moment feedback to his students, Mason said:

I kind of long for, for more leadership on that. I’ve, I’ve heard a lot of administrators say, you now, you got to know in the moment whether they get it or not, and I’ve, I’ve seldom got advice on how to do that.

These teachers asserted, therefore, that instructional leadership might have helped them develop a more solid understanding of formative assessment. By having greater clarity about what they themselves were looking for in the name of formative assessment, these leaders might then have been able to help teachers identify and affirm their practices as formative assessment, and they might have been able to offer guidance on how to implement it.

Both Margaret and Mason went on to express their suspicion that perhaps the administrators themselves did not know much about formative assessment. Margaret noted that at some point she “kind of just accept[ed], like, maybe they don’t know.” Mason observed this,

too, saying, “I think this falls under the, falls in the world of maybe the administrator doesn’t know all that much better than I how to do this, and that’s why I’m not getting an answer.”

Claire made a similar point:

Some of the administrators who maybe don’t have a strong classroom experience perhaps...misinterpret or distill some of those [district] directives into the most streamlined, I guess maybe would be the nice way to say it...so that gets small because there's a lack of understanding maybe of, like, best practice really in the classroom.

In light of such uninformed instructional leadership, teachers sometimes feel the need to push back. Claire made this observation:

Some administrators...are always going to be bigger picture people and be able to see and understand kind of, you know, like this is a definition that applies to a lot of things, whatever that new thing is. But I do think...that sometimes it's incumbent upon the teachers to push back a bit, say that's not actually how it's working in my classroom.

Here's how it's working and I guess that can get some of us in trouble, but you know, I'd rather do what's best for my students.

Margaret echoed this need to push back:

In this kind of time period where I grew and started to ask me, “How do you check in with your kids? How do you know what your kids are doing? How do you know what they know?” Um, it started to develop into, “No, you *do* do this. You don’t have to do the widgets and the gambles and the big, flashy colors and whatever. This is what it looks like in your classroom.”

Jackie, however, reported making the decision to adhere to what the district expected of her. She said:

I kind of just do what the district says. Yeah. So I would just have to because there's the rules, and my department is very big on just follow the rules...I'm sure there's, there's places where I can voice my opinion and then we can give them feedback, but at that time, if it conflicts with my interests, I have to do with what the district policy calls for.

Claire, Margaret, and Jackie presented different reactions to their district's expectations regarding formative assessment, sometimes pushing back and sometimes adhering to what is expected of them.

For these teachers, using educational terms such as *formative assessment* can sometimes overshadow or confuse the actual practice they represent. These teachers generally expressed a desire for improved professional development on formative assessment though they shared differing views about what would lead to those improvements. They also discussed their desire for effective instructional leadership to help them clarify what formative assessment is and what it looks like in practice. These concerns that arise from the use of the term itself, coupled with participants' concerns about grading and district-mandated formative assessments represent potential impediments for these teachers as they strive to undertake effective formative assessment in their classrooms.

### **So, What's in a Name? The Essence of Formative Assessment**

Collectively, then, these teachers experience formative assessment as serving multiple purposes, namely to determine where students are and what they know, to inform their instruction, and to advance student learning. As they undertake formative assessment in their classrooms, they experience it as involving a series of actions which may be formal or informal. For these teachers, formative assessment is an integral part of their daily teaching, something that is essential to their work, embedded in instruction, and an ongoing, continuous part of their

instruction. In particular, they consider formative assessment to be an ongoing conversation with their students which allows them to gather and analyze information about their students' progress and then provide feedback and additional instruction as warranted. In their English classrooms, they think of formative assessment as mirroring the writing process and value both peer and self-assessment as a means of undertaking formative assessment during the writing process.

Formative assessment, they feel, is particularly well-suited to teaching English because of the cyclical nature of the English curriculum. This spiraling curriculum, they believe, also allows them to make formative use of summative assessment as well. These teachers consider positive classroom culture essential for effectively undertaking formative assessment and express concern that grading and district-mandated formative assessment tests may lead to less effective formative assessment. Furthermore, they experience the term *formative assessment* itself as sometimes creating confusion, a situation which they believe can sometimes be exacerbated by professional development or by their district or school leadership.



## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Teachers are the lever for effectively integrating formative assessment into classrooms (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; NCTE, 2013). Because teachers are responsible for integrating formative assessment, how they conceive of it and how they practice it matters (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Brown, 2004; Panadero & Brown, 2017). Given that teachers' conceptual and practical perspectives regarding formative assessment arise from the "situated context of their classroom teaching" (Coombs et al., 2018, p. 134), it is imperative to study what teachers' experiences of formative assessment in those situated contexts are. To explore this issue, this research question guided the study: What are selected secondary English teachers' lived experiences of engaging in formative assessment? Ultimately, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to elicit "a grasp of the very nature of the thing" (van Manen, 2001, p. 177) called formative assessment, according to these selected participants.

The goals of this chapter are to (a) consider how the findings presented in Chapter 4 are in conversation with each other and with extant literature and (b) offer suggestions for policy, leadership, practice, and future research. The conceptual framework presented in Chapter 1 provides an organizational structure for most of the discussion though two of the findings fall outside of this framework and are therefore discussed subsequently.

### **Discussion**

This section of Chapter 5 discusses this study's findings relative to the conceptual framework described in Chapter 1. The conceptual framework for this study provides an overview of formative assessment scholars' understanding of key definitional components of

formative assessment. The common view is that formative assessment is a process (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Clark, 2010; FAST SCASS, 2018; Heritage, 2007; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008) comprised of multiple phases, namely eliciting information, interpreting that information, and then using that information (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Wiliam, 2011). The use of such information is commonly understood as twofold: to inform teachers and their instruction and to inform students and their learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Bloom, 1971; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008; Sadler, 1989). Feedback to students is a critical aspect of this phase of formative assessment (Brookhart, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 1989), and the two-fold use of formative assessment highlights the widely accepted view that formative assessment emphasizes both teachers and students in the process (FAST SCASS, 2018; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Sadler, 1989). Multiple definitions stress the proximal relationship of formative assessment to instruction, underscoring formative assessment as a pedagogical practice embedded in instruction (Boom, 1971; Heritage, 2007; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008; Wiliam, 2011). The ultimate purpose of formative assessment is to advance student learning (Burke, 2010; Heritage, 2010; McMillan, 2014; Stiggins, 2005).

### **Process**

The conceptual framework stresses formative assessment as a process (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Clark, 2010; Heritage, 2007; Moss & Brookhart, 2019) that relies on three phases: eliciting information about student learning and thinking, interpreting that elicited information to make inferences about the nature and degree of student learning (Gareis & Grant, 2008), and then using the interpreted information to make adjustments to teaching and learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Wiliam, 2011). Several findings of this study suggest that when these teachers undertake formative assessment, they engage in such a multi-step process (Lyon et al., 2019). In both the

interviews and the LEDs, teachers described multiple examples of engaging in formative assessment. Throughout these examples, whether they were undertaking formal, planned formative assessments or informal, unplanned formative assessments, the teachers' enactment of formative assessment in their classrooms involved a series of actions. For instance, Nick provided an example in which he (a) had his students identify the parts of speech in a sentence, (b) reviewed their work to identify an "interesting mistake," and (c) shared the mistakes with his students in order to generate whole-class discussion about the nature of the mistake and the thinking process students could engage in to answer correctly. In this example, Nick first elicited information from his students (identify the parts of speech), then interpreted their answers (review their work for mistakes), and finally used the information he elicited and interpreted as the next phase of instruction (discussion of the mistake).

It bears noting, however, that Nick did not provide these labels for the steps he undertook. In fact, with one exception, none of the teachers in this study explicitly identified the series of actions they undertook as a process, nor did they explicitly identify or label any of the three steps involved in that process. Yet, their descriptions of engaging in formative assessment seem to imply that even if they do not name the steps they undertake, they nonetheless *practice* formative assessment as a multi-phase process.

Participants' understanding of formative assessment as a process is further suggested by their view that there is a need to make use of the information that is gathered. Again, although they did not label formative assessment as a process or identify its component phases, three teachers did allude to formative assessment as requiring more than just engaging students in an activity. As Charity contended, formative assessment is "more than just doing the thing," echoing the view that formative assessment is not a thing but a process (Heritage, 2010; Moss &

Brookhart, 2019; NCTE, 2013). When talking about feedback, three additional teachers (for a total of six) expressed their view that students should make use of the feedback they receive. As these participants noted, in order for an activity to fully recognize its formative potential, teachers and or students must make use of the information they gather from the activity (Heritage, 2010; Shepard, 2005). Their perspective that information gathered during an activity must be used implies that they understand and practice formative assessment as a process even if they do not explicitly identify it as such.

Engaging in formative assessment as a practiced process was particularly evident as participants discussed the role of conversation in formative assessment. Participants ascribed a good deal of importance to conversation as they undertake formative assessment, noting that they rely heavily on the daily, ongoing conversations they have with their students as they check in with and drift among them as they work. As Claire asserted, formative assessment is “all about conversation.” This focus on the importance of conversation highlights the social nature of formative assessment in which knowledge is co-created and mediated by language (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Scott & Palincsar, 2014) and supports the view that formative assessment relies on quality interactions between teachers and their students (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Clark, 2010). English teachers and their students should engage in this sort of “classroom talk,” a type of formative assessment in which teachers and their students listen attentively to each other and then respond in ways that offer feedback or that ask students to build on their own or others’ initial responses (Hodgen & Marshall, 2005). In fact, by engaging in conversations with their students, these teachers shared that they are able to (a) listen attentively to determine what students know and where they are in their learning, (b) use the information to respond appropriately to students, and (c) engage their students in further thinking by posing additional

questions and suggestions. Thus, these teachers equated conversation to formative assessment, and they talked about listening, responding, and urging others to respond. However, they still did not explicitly discuss these tasks as steps in the formative assessment process, nor, in fact, did they name formative assessment itself a process. Rather, as with their other descriptions of engaging in formative assessment, they imply their use and understanding of formative assessment as a practiced process rather than an explicitly stated one.

Similarly, participants' enactment of formative assessment as a process was also underscored by their experiences of formative assessment as an essential part of the writing process (Marshall, 2007). As Stacy remarked, the writing process "is recursive, and it's iterative. You need to be able to go back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. . . . Formative assessment's that way, too." This recognition of the similarities between the writing process and formative assessment suggests that teachers may well think of formative assessment as a process even if they do not name it as such. This seems particularly likely for those teachers who, like Stacy, directly equated formative assessment with the writing process.

These teachers, then, describe engaging in formative assessment as a multi-step process that involves eliciting, interpreting, and using information about the nature and degree of student learning, yet they do not name it as such or identify its component parts. Other findings from this study suggest two possible reasons for this. The first explanation may lie in the finding that these teachers view formative assessment as integral to their instruction. In other words, they experience formative assessment as embedded in their instruction wherein it unfolds naturally as part of their teaching, often in the form of day-to-day conversations with their students, again highlighting the sociocultural view of formative assessment (Clark, 2010; Filsecker & Kerres, 2012). Furthermore, these teachers assert that it is somewhat instinctual to think formatively as

they pose questions, listen to responses, and make instructional adjustments, suggesting that the formative assessment process is not something they necessarily have to consciously think about. This may explain why they do not consciously or explicitly identify formative assessment as a process nor identify or label its component phases, for if they are not thinking consciously of assessing even as they do it, they certainly are not likely to be mindful of parsing out the steps in that process or, indeed, of labeling it as a process at all.

Another possible explanation is related to this study's findings that there are challenges surrounding the term *formative assessment* itself. These participants shared their frustration with educational terminology, observing that terms sometimes narrow the practice they name, consequently overshadowing what is actually effective in the classroom (Folly, 2015). Thus, these teachers may simply avoid terms and labels, preferring instead to concentrate on enacting effective practices in their classrooms.

Ultimately, I found that although these teachers do not identify formative assessment as a process or identify the steps in that process that are typically noted by formative assessment scholars, they nonetheless do practice formative assessment as a series of actions which parallel the scholar-suggested steps of eliciting, interpreting, and using assessment information. These findings about teachers' practicing formative assessment as a process are supported by other findings from this study that stress formative assessment as conversation and that recognize formative assessment as part of the writing process. Furthermore, findings about formative assessment as a term that causes some confusion and about formative assessment as an integral part of teaching may help to explain why teachers do not label formative assessment as a process even though they practice it as one.

## Purpose

The purpose of formative assessment is also highlighted in this study's conceptual framework. Formative assessment scholars emphasize that formative assessment's ultimate purpose is to advance student learning (Burke, 2010; Heritage, 2010; McMillan, 2014; Stiggins, 2005). As Moss and Brookhart (2019) observe, formative assessment "holds the express goal of improving student achievement" (p. 6). Teachers in this study touched on this purpose of formative assessment but did not resoundingly support it. Just five of the study's participants discussed advancing student learning as a purpose of formative assessment, with two other teachers mentioning it only briefly and in passing. The remaining teachers, despite directly describing their perspectives on the purpose of formative assessment, did not point to this ultimate goal. Rather, they stressed two other purposes of formative assessment: (a) to determine where students are (the degree of student learning) and what they know (the nature of student learning) and (b) to make informed instructional decisions. Hence, there is a difference in emphasis between the findings of this study and the existing literature: Whereas scholars stress the purpose of formative assessment as being to advance student learning, teachers in this study emphasized the purposes as being primarily to help *them* glean information about their students' progress and learning and to help *them* make informed decisions and adjustments. Their emphasis on these two purposes may suggest that these teachers consider themselves, rather than their students, as the primary beneficiaries of formative assessment. Furthermore, even though scholars overwhelmingly call for the inclusion of students as agents who undertake formative assessment on their own behalf (Burke, 2010; Heritage, 2010; McMillan, 2014; Stiggins, 2005), these teachers talked little about students themselves conducting formative assessment to

determine where they are in their own learning, a point that may further corroborate the possibility that they understand formative assessment as serving primarily teachers.

The findings also indicate that these teachers experience a link between the two purposes they most often discussed. That is, they understand one purpose (to determine where students are and what they know) as connected to another purpose (to inform their instruction). More specifically, they see the first of these purposes as necessary for fulfilling the latter. That is, formative assessment's purpose is to let them find out where their students are and what they know *so that* they can adjust their instruction accordingly. One teacher made a link among all three stated purposes, suggesting that determining where students are allows her to adjust her instruction in order to help students make gains. Determining students' current level of understanding and performance is a foundational consideration of formative assessment (Ramaprasad, 1983; Sadler, 1989; Stiggins et al., 2004) with parallels to Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development. Similarly, making informed instructional decisions and adjustments is also heavily featured by scholars (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; McMillan, 2014; Popham, 2008). And, like the participants in this study, scholars make similar connections between these two tasks. For instance, Popham (2008) observes that formative assessment occurs when "assessment-elicited evidence of students' status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures" (p. 6). However, Popham and others typically address these two participant-identified purposes as steps in the formative assessment process rather than as its aim (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Greenstein, 2010; Heritage; 2010; Wiliam, 2011). For these teachers, though, these two ideas of gathering information about student learning and using it to adjust their instruction were squarely identified as purposes of formative assessment rather than as specific steps in enacting formative assessment.



This poses the question of why teachers are more likely to consider these points to be matters of purpose whereas scholars are more likely to consider them to be steps in the process. The reason for this difference in perspective about purpose may lie, in part, in the finding that participants did not explicitly discuss formative assessment as a process whereas scholars consider an understanding of formative assessment as a process to be definitionally foundational. As discussed earlier, participants were less process-focused in their conceptualization of formative assessment, implying process in their practice but generally not referring to formative assessment a process or identifying phases in that process. Instead, they address gathering information about student learning and adjusting instruction as purposes of formative assessment, even linking them in a somewhat sequential order that implies process (e.g., I undertake purpose one in order to do purpose two so that we may achieve purpose three). Thus, participants appear to see formative assessment as having three linked purposes which they achieve through one formative assessment whereas scholars see formative assessment as having one major purpose which is achieved by a three-step process.

This study finds that these teachers consider the primary purposes of formative assessment to be determining where students are and what they know and adjusting instruction accordingly but do not emphasize advancing student learning as a purpose of formative assessment. These findings thus indicate that these teachers may consider themselves to be the primary agents and beneficiaries of formative assessment. Furthermore, this finding about the purposes of formative assessment intersects with earlier discussion about formative assessment as a process. While scholars stress formative assessment as being a multi-step process serving one purpose, these teachers are more likely to see a multi-step purpose accomplished by one formative assessment.

## Feedback

The study's conceptual framework highlights formative assessment as a three-step process—eliciting, interpreting, and using—and calls particular attention to the role of feedback in formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Frey & Fisher, 2011; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Heritage, 2010). Formative feedback communicates information to students about aspects of their demonstrated understanding or performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008). The framework situates feedback as a part of *using* interpreted information, noting that feedback is necessary if students are to make use of formative assessment (Bloom, 1971; Brookhart, 2007; FAST SCASS, 2018; Sadler, 1989). Participants' experiences of formative feedback align strongly with the views of formative assessment scholars. They unanimously identified feedback as a notable part of formative assessment, and half of them consider its value to lie in the opportunities it creates for students to use the information themselves.

This study's finding that these participants understand both oral and written feedback as an unfolding conversation with their students is clearly connected to their understanding of formative assessment as a conversation. For them, good feedback, both written and oral, creates an ongoing, back-and-forth dialogue between them and their students (Burke, 2010; Vatterott, 2009). They highlight the role of posing questions as part of their feedback so that students are encouraged to respond, thereby opening a running dialogue with them. They find that the conversational nature of feedback creates a feedback loop in which students are invited to respond and react to the feedback they have been given as they move forward. This highlights their focus on formative assessment as conversation, a position that echoes the view of formative assessment scholars (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Ruiz-Primo, 2011) and that supports a sociocultural

view that learning is mediated, in part, by symbolic tools such as language (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

Additionally, this finding about the importance and use of feedback also lends additional support to the earlier discussion that participants understand and practice formative assessment as a process even if they do not articulate it as such. Providing feedback suggests that information has been elicited, interpreted, and is now being returned to students for their continued learning (Frey & Fisher, 2011; Heritage, 2010), so participants' perspective that feedback plays a prominent part in enacting effective formative assessment implies their understanding that a process is unfolding. Furthermore, six teachers expressed their view that students should make use of the feedback they receive. As these participants noted, for an activity to fully recognize its formative potential, teachers and or students must make use of the information they gather from the activity (Heritage, 2010; Shepard, 2005). Their perspective that information gathered during an activity must then be used implies that they practice formative assessment as a process even if they do not explicitly identify it as such. Indeed, the participants' emphasis on feedback in general indicates their understanding of formative assessment as requiring multiple steps.

Participants' emphasis on the importance and use of formative feedback may be related to their understanding of the spiral nature of the secondary English curriculum. Given that the secondary English curriculum stresses a cyclical return to content and skills over time (Bruner, 1977), these secondary English teachers may potentially value formative feedback as a means of allowing their students to make improvements as they cycle through similar content and skills later in their course. This is reflected in their assertion that because of the iterative nature of their curricula, very few assessments are ever truly summative. As Stacy pointed out, "I can't

summatively assess anything because we always come back.” Indeed, formative assessment, which allows teachers to know where their students are in their learning, helps them more effectively implement that curriculum by offering their students feedback for future use.

Thus, this study finds that teachers value the role of feedback in formative assessment and emphasize the importance of its use. This finding intersects with several other study findings. First, for these teachers, their view that feedback should be used lends further support to the study’s findings that they practice and understand formative assessment as a process even if they do not explicitly name it as such. It also supports the finding that formative assessment is often enacted as conversation between teachers and their students. Their understanding of the importance of feedback may be related to their understanding of the secondary English curriculum as a spiral curriculum which allows teachers and students to return to previously taught material.

### **Timing**

The conceptual framework also highlights the integral nature of formative assessment. Formative assessment, which provides a bridge between teaching and learning (Wiliam, 2011), may be one of the clearest examples of how assessment is integrated with instruction (McMillan, 2014). There is collective agreement that formative assessment is embedded in instruction (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Filsecker & Kerres, 2012; Heritage, 2010; Wiliam, 2011) and is therefore an integral part of the teaching and learning process (Burke, 2010; McMillan, 2014; Moss & Brookhart, 2019). As Black and Wiliam (1998b) claim, “formative assessment is at the heart of effective teaching” (p. 2). The participants in this study agree, sharing that for them, truly effective formative assessment is not only part of teaching; it is an *essential* part of teaching.

This aligns with findings from DeLuca et al.'s (2016) study which found that teachers overwhelmingly prioritized formative assessment over summative assessment.

As they described their experiences of formative assessment, participants noted that not only was it essential and embedded, but it was also ongoing, often referring to formative assessment as something that they do “constantly” as they listen to and observe their students’ responses, reactions, and ideas. Greenstein (2010) observes that “with formative assessment, teaching and assessing become a cyclical process for continuous improvement” (p. 7). When formative assessment is seamlessly integrated into instruction, the result is a continuous loop of teaching, assessing, reteaching, and reassessing (Bloom, 1971; Burke, 2010). These teachers, then, experience formative assessment as this sort of continuous loop in which one formative assessment gives way to the next as instruction unfolds. Participants’ experiences of formative assessment as an ongoing, continuous loop may be connected to their understanding of the secondary English curriculum as cyclical and iterative (Bruner, 1977), a perspective they shared multiple times. Because the curriculum itself emphasizes the repetition of content and skills over time, these teachers may see their engagement in formative assessment as something that mirrors that spiral, creating a means by which they can return, multiple times if needed, to the skills and content students need to continue to develop as they work toward mastery.

These embedded, ongoing formative interactions described by participants are also linked with this study’s finding about the varying degrees of formality of formative assessment. For these participants, formative assessment may fall along a continuum of formal to informal with participants understanding formal formative assessment as planned, written, and often longer in duration and informal formative assessment as unplanned, oral or kinesthetic, and shorter in duration (Shavelson et al., 2008). In their interviews and LEDs, the participants described

examples of both types of formative assessment, suggesting that they comfortably engage in both formal and informal formative assessment. This view is in keeping with existing literature which stresses the merits of both planned and unplanned formative assessment (Brown, 2004; Burke, 2010; FAST SCASS, 2018; Heritage, 2010; Leahy et al., 2005; Ruiz-Primo, 2011; Wiliam, 2011; Wiliam & Black, 1996). The interviews and the LEDs offer multiple examples of teachers undertaking planned formative assessments that spanned several days of instruction; writing conferences, student-created tests, and spiderweb discussions are just some of the examples they shared of this sort of formal formative assessment. They also shared many instances of undertaking unplanned formative assessments that lasted no longer than a matter of seconds, choosing perhaps to spontaneously check in with students by asking them to give a quick thumbs up or thumbs down or overhearing a comment as students worked together and stopping to extend their thinking with an unplanned question.

When the teachers in this study discussed formative assessment as ongoing, they were often referencing the informal, unplanned formative assessment that occurs organically in their classrooms, suggesting a relationship between formative assessment as integral and formative assessment as informal. Embracing informal formative assessment acknowledges the role of the teachable moment and invites teachers to capitalize on unplanned opportunities as they arise (Heritage, 2010; McMillan, 2014; William & Black, 1996). Claire pointed to this link between formative assessment as integral and formative assessment as informal, observing, “Then there's the less formal formative assessment that's happening all the time.”

The ongoing, informal formative assessment described by participants are also related to another of this study's findings that teachers consider formative assessment to be conversation. Indeed, assessment conversations are understood as being embedded in the activities that are

already occurring during instruction (Black & Wiliam, 2017; Ruiz-Primo, 2011). Specifically, participants noted that these ongoing, informal formative assessment opportunities often rely heavily on conversation with their students. Brindley and Marshall (2015) observe that when English teachers utilize class talk formatively, they “exchange ideas with pupils in a spontaneous, unplanned manner” (p. 122). Because the paths students follow as they engage in learning and assessment tasks may take unanticipated turns, teachers must be willing to be flexible and spontaneous in terms of their formative assessment of students (Brindley & Marshall, 2015). Charity summarized this point well, saying that conversation is beneficial as formative assessment because “it’s spontaneous, it’s a bit random, it’s more organic.” Even planned formative assessments such as writing conferences rely on the questions and ideas that arise spontaneously. In fact, these teachers noted that even when they have planned things to check for, they are also open to wherever the conversation with their students may lead. This formative use of dialogue is strongly endorsed for use in the secondary English classroom (Brindley & Marshall, 2015; Hodgen & Marshall, 2005; Marshall, 2007; NCTE, 2013; Roskos & Neuman, 2012). Thus, it may be that participants’ understanding of formative assessment as informal, dialogic interactions with their students is informed by their understanding of recommended pedagogy for secondary English. This may, in turn, explain why they see formative assessment as particularly well-suited to English.

Furthermore, teachers’ experiences of formative assessment as integral to their instruction suggest that their views of formative assessment are socially oriented. Recommended assessment practice for secondary English education stresses literacy and writing assessment as a social process (NCTE, 2014, 2018), and teachers’ emphasis on conversation especially highlights the socially mediated nature of formative assessment (Crossouard & Pryor, 2012; John-Steiner &

Mahn, 1996; Scott & Palincsar, 2014; Shepard & Penuel, 2018). Similarly, their understanding of formative assessment as embedded in instruction as well as their frustration with externally imposed assessments also indicate their understanding that formative assessment is social, occurring in the classroom as teachers and students engage in formative interactions, both planned and unplanned.

This study finds, then, that these teachers understand formative assessment as integral to their teaching; it is embedded in their work as teachers and is an ongoing part of their daily interactions with students. Furthermore, the ongoing daily interactions they have with their students are typically informal and unplanned and rely heavily on the conversations they engage in with their students. Thus, there seems to be a clear connection across several of this study's findings about the integral nature of formative assessment, the degree of formality of formative assessments, and conversation as formative assessment: Formative assessment is an integral part of teaching that sometimes makes use of formal formative assessment but often relies on informal classroom interactions, namely conversation with their students. As such, it is fundamentally a social endeavor.

### **Agents**

This study's conceptual framework also emphasizes that both teachers and students should function as agents in the formative assessment process (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; FAST SCASS, 2018; Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Stiggins et al., 2004) with broad agreement that formative assessment is strengthened by involving students as assessors at some stage (ARG, 1999; Clarke, 2005; Leahy et al., 2005; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; NCTE, 2013; Wiliam, 2011). Both self-assessment and peer assessment are valued as types of formative



assessment that activate students as agents of their own learning (Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008), a view that highlights learning as co-created (Scott & Palincsar, 2014).

The findings of this study indicate that these teachers experience self-assessment and peer assessment primarily as part of the writing process. This is in keeping with recommendations for best writing assessment practices which urge students to engage in both self- and peer assessment (Graham et al., 2015; Graham & Perin, 2007; NCTE, 2014). Participants mostly used these terms when discussing students reviewing their own writing and that of their peers, using the terms peer editing and peer feedback interchangeably with peer assessment when talking about the writing process. They also considered peer feedback valuable during small-group and whole-class discussions.

Though formative assessment scholars stress the importance of peer and self-assessment, a number of studies find that teachers struggle to implement them (DeLuca et al., 2016; Hunter et al., 2006; Panadero & Brown, 2017; Volante & Beckett, 2011). The teachers in this study do report using peer and self-assessment, particularly for writing instruction, but the degree to which they incorporate these practices was not clear. Indeed, discussion of self-assessment and peer assessment was not frequent or consistent throughout the interviews and LEDs, and even when participants did discuss self and peer assessment, they rarely identified them as formative assessment. This lack of emphasis on the role of students as assessors was also evident as participants discussed the purpose of formative assessment. Even though all 12 participants discussed using formative assessment to determine where students are in their learning and what they know, none of them talked about students making these determinations for themselves. Even their discussion of formative assessment serving the ultimate purpose of student learning was limited to fewer than half of the participants, suggesting their lack of emphasis on the

student as an active formative assessor. Indeed, as discussed earlier, participants' experiences of the purposes of formative assessment stress that teachers may see themselves as the primary beneficiary of formative assessment. Thus, the findings of this study suggest that although teachers value peer feedback and use peer assessment and self-assessment, particularly during the writing process, they do not necessarily stress students as active agents in the formative assessment process or identify peer and self-assessment as formative assessment, a view which is at odds with the perspective of formative assessment scholars.

This study's finding about educational terminology may offer some explanation for why these teachers do not identify peer assessment and self-assessment as types of formative assessment. As noted earlier, teachers expressed concerns that educational terminology may muddy rather than clarify the practices they label. For formative assessment scholars, the terms *self-assessment* and *peer assessment* are typically subsumed under formative assessment, but such terminological distinctions may muddy rather than clarify their actual use in the classroom. Teachers, therefore, may choose to focus on using peer and self-assessment in their practice rather than on the terms themselves. Also, these teachers tended to use the terms peer assessment, peer feedback, and peer editing interchangeably, further indicating that terms themselves may be less important to them than the actual practice they label.

Another possible explanation may be related to participants' work as secondary English teachers. Their focus on peer editing and peer feedback rather than on peer assessment may suggest that, as English teachers, they see these two things as pedagogical strategies suitable for English instruction rather than recognizing their potential for assessment. Indeed, Marshall (2004) asserts that both self-assessment and peer assessment are key English instructional practices. This possible explanation could also be linked to the study finding that formative

assessment is integral to teaching, wherein they understand formative assessment as such an inherent part of instruction that the lines between the two are often blurred (Leahy et al., 2005; Moss & Brookhart, 2019).

Thus, although these teachers may include peer and self-assessment, particularly as part of their writing instruction, they do not necessarily think of it as formative assessment. Furthermore, their focus on gathering information about student learning and adjusting their instruction as the purposes of formative assessment implies that they may see themselves as the primary beneficiaries of formative assessment rather than their students. The findings, then, suggest that these teachers do not emphasize having their students serve as assessors.

### **Alignment with the Conceptual Framework**

The findings from this study offer strong support for some elements of the conceptual framework and less for others, as indicated in Figure 8. In terms of process, this study's findings suggest that teachers do practice formative assessment as a process of eliciting, interpreting, and using, even if they do not expressly identify it as one. Thus, the findings about process lend support for this conceptual framework. However, they do not align as well in terms of purpose. Whereas the conceptual framework identifies the purpose of formative assessment to be advancing student learning, teachers held that the purposes of formative assessment were to determine where students are and what they know and to make informed instructional adjustments. The findings resoundingly uphold the conceptual framework's position that feedback is a necessary part of formative assessment. Similarly, the findings also align strongly with the conceptual framework's focus on formative assessment as integral to instruction, though teachers elaborated on what this means for them, noting that it is not only embedded in instruction, but also essential to and an ongoing part of instruction. Unlike the conceptual

framework’s focus on both teachers and students as assessors in formative assessment, the findings for this study indicate that teachers are not as likely to emphasize students as active agents in formative assessment. As noted in earlier discussion, teachers’ tendency not to stress students as active formative assessment agents may be related to their views of purpose, the other element of the conceptual framework where teachers’ perspectives diverged from that of scholars.

**Figure 8**

*Comparison of Study Findings to Conceptual Framework*

	<b>Conceptual Framework</b>	<b>Study Findings</b>
<b>Process</b>	A process of eliciting, interpreting, and using	Practiced, but not identified as a multi-step process
<b>Purpose</b>	To advance student learning	To determine where students are/what they know  To make informed instructional decisions
<b>Feedback</b>	Necessary part of process	Necessary part of formative assessment
<b>Timing</b>	Embedded in instruction	Embedded in, essential to, and an ongoing part of instruction
<b>Agents</b>	Teachers and/or students	Primarily teachers

**Additional Discussion**

In addition to addressing elements of this study’s conceptual framework, this study’s findings also include participants’ views about class culture and impediments to their practice. This section reviews each of these findings.

## **Class Culture**

The findings of this study strongly support the important role positive class culture plays in undertaking meaningful formative assessment. Positive class culture and relationships among students and teachers are foundational for sound instruction (Fisher et al., 2012; Lemov, 2010), and research indicates that students are more successful when their classrooms are healthy learning environments (MacNeil et al., 2009). As Stronge (2013) notes, “effective teachers care for students first as people and second as students” (p. 24). Participants, too, consider relationships and trust to be essential for effective formative assessment to take place. As Frey and Fisher (2011) observe, “interleaved between instruction and attainment are the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate students and propel them forward” (p. 17). Key among these is a class culture that establishes and nurtures trust (Popham, 2008). The teachers in this study agree, noting that students’ willingness to venture authentic, potentially incorrect responses and their receptiveness to feedback are tied to factors such as trust, safety, and relationships. Trust, which hinges upon a person’s willingness to be vulnerable (Tschannen-Moran, 2014), is necessary if students are to offer honest responses, accept feedback, and make meaningful use of that feedback (FAST SCASS, 2019; Heritage, 2010; Shepard, 2005; William & Leahy, 2007). This perspective about the importance of positive class culture suggests a link with this study’s findings about the integral nature of formative assessment. If formative assessment is embedded in instruction and relies on informal, conversational interactions between teachers and students, then a class culture that bolsters trust and a sense of safety can only enhance those interactions, helping to make them more authentic and thus more useful for assessment purposes.

Participants consider class culture to be not only a condition for formative assessment but also a result of engaging in effective formative assessment. They contend that undertaking

formative assessment helps to foster positive relationships and to establish a sense of safety in their classrooms. This view aligns with the scholars who urge that using formative assessment supports the shift to a more positive class culture (FAST SCASS, 2018; McMillan, 2014; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008; Stiggins, 2007). Thus, the relationship between class culture and formative assessment is circular: Positive class culture allows for meaningful formative assessment, and meaningful formative assessment creates positive class culture.

Although there is mutual agreement between participants and the scholars about positive class culture and its role in formative assessment, this aspect of formative assessment does not appear as part of this study's conceptual framework. The conceptual framework, which stresses purpose, process, feedback, agents, and the integral nature of formative assessment, is based on scholars' definitions of formative assessment. Rather than including class culture as definitionally necessary, scholars and professional organizations instead point to establishing positive class culture as a key practice for formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; FAST SCASS, 2018; Wiliam, 2011). Because these definitions do not include an emphasis on class culture, the conceptual framework reflects this omission.

### **Sources of Frustration and Confusion About Formative Assessment**

This study's findings also focus on some of the sources of confusion teachers experience as they engage in formative assessment, namely grading and district-mandated formative assessments, and the term *formative assessment* itself. Grading, participants contend, works against formative assessment efforts, a position supported by numerous others (ARG, 1999; Brookhart, 2010; Crooks, 1988; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008). They expressed concern about the punitive nature of grades and also noted that grades often do not acknowledge student effort. As a result, grades can inhibit opportunities for students to learn from their

mistakes (Hope, 2020; Jung, 2020). District grading policies, therefore, create tension for teachers who understand that the effective practice of formative assessment involves providing feedback rather than a weighted grade that is essentially summative (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Stiggins et al., 2004). Volante and Beckett (2011) reached similar conclusions, noting that teachers struggle with the tension created between focusing on grading and focusing on learning. This detracting view of grading may be linked to the value teachers place on establishing a positive class culture, implying their understanding that grades can erode a trust and negatively impact students' growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). Furthermore, participants' belief that students are often more receptive to critique and feedback from their peers may well be associated with this threat of grades, given that it is teachers, rather than their peers, who typically hold grading authority.

Another source of frustration for participants are the formative assessments which their division requires them to give throughout the year, a finding that situates external testing as a curricular detriment (Brimi, 2012; McMillan, 2005). Bancroft (2010) found that secondary English teachers viewed benchmarks as an instructional interruption and an inadequate measure of student learning and progress. Other researchers have indicated that although teachers do see value in the use of benchmarks, they nonetheless have concerns about the validity and reliability of those tests (Abrams et al., 2015; Abrams et al., 2016). Participants in this study expressed concern for these externally created and imposed formative assessments, voicing concerns about the validity and reliability of such tests. They also worried that these more formal formative assessments create anxiety and frustration for students, leading to negative consequences for students' well-being (von der Embse & Witmer, 2014). As with grading, teachers' frustration with district-mandated formative assessments may well be linked to their concerns for

establishing and maintaining a positive class culture. If district-mandated formative assessments lead to student anxiety, then they are quite likely to detract from a positive class culture in which students feel safe. If effective formative assessment both stems from and contributes to positive class culture, then the district-mandated formative assessments may be a particular affront to these teachers who see them as working against the aims of effective formative assessment.

This study's finding that teachers consider formative assessment integral to instruction may provide another explanation for why teachers expressed frustration about formative assessments that are externally imposed. At the classroom level, assessment should be fully integrated with the curriculum, not something external to that curriculum and its attendant instruction (Shepard et al., 2017). Given that those assessments originate outside of the class and are generally created without teacher input, they are, by their very nature, disconnected from what is happening on a daily basis in their classrooms. It stands to reason, then, that teachers who understand formative assessment as embedded in daily instruction might not be enthusiastic about externally imposed assessments that are not integral to daily classroom instruction. Furthermore, because best assessment practices for secondary English call for assessment to be grounded in the classroom (NCTE, 2014), these teachers' frustration may also be a function of their discipline's recommended pedagogical practices.

A third impediment mentioned by participants focuses their confusion over the term itself. Confusion over educational terms such as *formative assessment* undermines teachers' confidence in how they enact assessment practices (Scott et al., 2011; Taras, 2010). Given that how teachers conceptualize and ascribe meaning to terms impacts their ability to effectively implement assessment practices (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Brown, 2004; Panadero & Brown, 2017; Remesal, 2007), consistency in how the term is shared, advanced, and operationalized



matters. Rather than contributing to this consistency, professional development sometimes can lead to greater misconceptions and confusion (Scott et al., 2011), particularly when presenters use terminology with which teachers are not familiar (Bennion, 2002). Participants in this study similarly asserted that their understanding of formative assessment is clouded by an evolving terminology and by narrowed perspectives of what formative assessment entails, particularly as formative assessment is presented during professional development. They also shared that instructional leadership sometimes contributes to their confusion, again by using and understanding terms differently from them. Moreover, they wished for more guidance from instructional leadership in terms of how to better engage in effective formative assessment. Indeed, it is incumbent upon school leaders to assume an instructional role and to foster building level coherence about high-yield instructional strategies (DiPaola & Hoy, 2013; Fullan & Quinn, 2015) rather than further clouding the issue. For these teachers, then, confusion about the term stems, at least in part, from two sources that should be sources of greater clarity. As discussed earlier, participants' wariness about terminology may explain why they do not explicitly identify formative assessment as a process, why they do not identify steps in the formative assessment process, and why they do not readily highlight peer and self-assessment as formative assessment.

Thus, this study finds that these three areas—grading, district-mandated formative assessments, and the term formative assessment itself—are sometimes sources of concern and frustration for these teachers. Their concerns about grading and district-mandated formative assessments may arise from their belief that a positive class culture is central to effective formative assessment, another of this study's findings. Teachers' concerns about the term formative assessment and, indeed, about educational terminology more broadly, may explain why they do not explicitly identify or label certain elements of formative assessment. This

finding about what raises teachers' concern and frustration around formative assessment has particular implications for policy, leadership, and practice.

### **Implications**

This study's findings have implications for how teachers practice formative assessment, how school leaders guide and evaluate those teachers, and how policy makers formulate policies and recognize the impact of policies on formative assessment. Attention to supporting teachers' assessment literacy has increased (DeLuca et al., 2016), but those who work in all three areas – practice, leadership, and policy, must have clarity about formative assessment and the concepts and practices that underpin its effective implementation in classrooms. Armed with such knowledge, teachers, school leaders, and policy makers will be better situated to undertake their tasks from a more fully informed position.

It is important to me to state that these implications have not been developed on the premise of problematic practice. Indeed, according to the rich experiences shared by these participants, these teachers appear to currently implement many key practices that make formative assessment such a powerful tool for learning. Rather, they are offered with an eye to affirming many of those practices and ensuring that teachers, instructional leaders, and policy makers have access to information about formative assessment that will allow them to unleash its full potential.

### **Policy Implications**

Implications for several policies arise from the findings of this study. Grades are central to students' educational experiences but are often an inadequate representation of students' genuine ability (Guskey, 2020). Furthermore, they can have negative consequences for students, both short-term and long-term (Brookhart et al., 2016). As Feldman (2020) observes, phrases

such as “‘doing well in school,’ ‘schoolwork,’ and ‘assessments’ all signal grades as a source of stress for students” (p. 16). Participants in this study agreed. They decried school and district grading policies that infringe on the effective implementation of formative assessment (ARG, 1999; McMillan, 2014; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2014), asserting that policies that establish expectations about the number of grades teachers must give each week are detrimental to effective formative assessment practices in their classroom. Teachers noted that the threat of a grade often creates anxiety for students (Feldman, 2020) and that such anxiety, in turn, undercuts students’ growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and a class culture that encourages learning from errors and misunderstandings (Popham, 2008). The findings of this study suggest, therefore, that policy makers at the school and division levels should moderate policies that call for a set number of grades or that require teachers to grade all student work. On an even more far-reaching scale, policy makers may need to consider the grading policies and practices employed in their schools and districts and how they may be at odds with the effective implementation of formative assessment (Chappuis et al., 2017). This may necessitate broader conversations about grading, assessment, and evaluation, with an understanding of how formative assessment is related to each of those topics. Clarity about the purposes of grading and specification of those behaviors that need to change should underscore those conversations (Guskey, 2015; Reeves, 2011).

Another implication for district policy makers centers on the formative assessments, often called benchmarks or quarterly assessments, that are mandated by the districts. Participants from this study expressed frustration with these district-mandated assessments on several fronts, particularly calling into question their validity and reliability (Abrams et al., 2016; Bancroft, 2010). Policy makers, therefore, must be attentive to how such assessments are constructed, ensuring that they are error-free, unbiased, and aligned with the full curriculum, not just with

those standards that are easiest to test via a multiple-choice assessment instrument (Chappuis et al., 2017). The study's findings also suggest issues of consequential validity for these district-mandated tests, particularly in terms of the emotional toll they take on students (von der Embse & Witmer, 2014). While teachers may well support the more radical approach of eliminating these formative assessments altogether, district leaders and policy makers should at the very least engage in an ongoing and honest conversation about the worth and value of these mandated assessments, seeking alternatives or modifications to their current assessment practices as they seek a properly balanced system of assessment (Burke, 2010; Chappuis et al., 2017). Attention to teachers' understanding of formative assessment as embedded in instruction may provide insight into why teachers are less inclined to value externally imposed formative assessments which may or may not give them the information truly needed to make informed decisions. As emphasis on teachers' classroom integration continues to expand (DeLuca et al., 2016), policy makers' awareness of the integral nature of formative assessment should inform not only their decisions but also their efforts to frame those policies. An attentive understanding of the values and beliefs of those who must implement those policies should underscore those framing efforts (Fowler, 2013; Levinson et al., 2009). Given that teachers' conceptions of assessment function as filters through which they understand policy (Brown, 2004), policy makers must recognize that the policies they formulate and ask teachers to implement may be at odds with teachers' (and scholars') conception of the effective implementation of formative assessment (Tan, 2009).

### **Leadership Implications**

This study's findings also have implications for school leaders, particularly in their roles as instructional leaders and teacher evaluators. If school leaders are to formatively assess, coach, and summatively evaluate teachers, then they themselves must have clarity about the

instructional practices they are evaluating (Chappuis et al., 2017; DiPaola & Hoy, 2013). This study's findings indicate that some of the confusion teachers have about formative assessment may be created by instructional leaders who have a narrow understanding of formative assessment themselves and who have therefore failed to help them accurately identify formative assessment practices in the classroom. Thus, there are implications for school leaders as they observe and evaluate teachers. First, they themselves must have a solid conceptual understanding of formative assessment as well as clarity about what that looks like in practice (Chappuis et al., 2017). Without greater clarity about formative assessment and its best practices, these leaders, when observing and evaluating teachers, may struggle to accurately identify what may be truly excellent formative assessment. They also need to recognize that teachers may well be practicing formative assessment, perhaps quite effectively, without referring to it by that term (Chappuis et al., 2017). Furthermore, they should recognize that teachers do not feel tied to the formative assessments listed on their lesson plans but rather feel free to make ongoing, in-the-moment moves that capitalize on potential formative interactions as they unfold. Broadly, then, school leaders should be open to what teachers identify as formative assessment rather than operating from a constrained, narrow view of what formative assessment is. These efforts should be undergirded by a desire to achieve building-level clarity (Chappuis et al., 2017; Popham, 2008) about what formative assessment is and looks like.

Another implication for school leaders is the importance of providing professional learning about formative assessment specifically and about assessment and grading more broadly. In short, school leaders should offer professional learning that builds teachers' assessment literacy. Assessment literacy "consists of an individual's understanding of the fundamental assessment concepts and procedures deemed likely to influence educational

decisions” (Popham, 2008, p. 7). Professional development that builds teachers’ assessment literacy requires attention not only to the requisite knowledge for implementing effective assessment but also to teachers’ conceptions and the contextual forces at play (Xu & Brown, 2016). Findings from this study suggest that leaders who provide professional learning around the issue of formative assessment should be aware that some teachers may value practical information about formative assessment while others may value a conceptual grounding for it. Either way, the findings of this study imply that professional learning providers must be thoughtful about and attentive to the term *formative assessment* itself, recognizing that teachers arrive with preconceived notions, and sometimes years of practice, that needs to be recognized, tapped, and explored. In this way, teachers can begin to align what they do in their classrooms with research-based professional learning and thereby affirm those practices that truly promote formative assessment and question those practices that do not.

In terms of content, professional development should emphasize the intentional process that lies at the heart of formative assessment. Exposing teachers to this process conceptually will help them to identify their own practices as parts of this process, creating a means by which they can (a) affirm what they already do that is formative assessment and/or (b) determine how they might adapt their practice to better match this conceptual understanding. Highlighting the role of conversation in formative assessment may also help teachers conceptualize formative assessment as a back-and-forth process that depends upon listening attentively and responding with feedback that prompts continued learning. Professional development should also highlight both teachers and students as active agents in formative assessment, stressing that activating students as both peer and self-assessors more fully realizes the potential of formative assessment in the classroom. Attention should also be given to the two-way relationship between effective

formative assessment and a positive class culture so that teachers have opportunities to determine how to operationalize this in their practice. More broadly, those providing professional development may find it helpful to situate formative assessment within a discussion of balanced systems of assessment. Doing so would create opportunities to affirm classroom formative assessment, both formal and informal as appropriate and necessary. Assuming that district-mandated formative assessments continue to be included, it would also allow for an explanation of why they are needed and how they are formatively used.

### **Practice Implications**

One implication suggested by this study's findings is for teachers to more intentionally activate students as agents in the formative assessment process (Stiggins et al., 2004). Self-assessment in particular results in increased learning and has positive effects on motivation and self-efficacy (Panadero, 2016; Panadero et al., 2017). Teachers should recognize that while formative assessment involves determining where students are so that teachers can make appropriate instructional decisions, these two initial purposes are ultimately in service to the ultimate purpose of advancing student learning (FAST SCASS, 2018; McMillan, 2014; Moss & Brookhart, 2019). Although teachers can advance this purpose, students, too, should be engaged as active agents in their own learning (Moss & Brookhart, 2019). More purposely activating students as assessors is not only a matter of undertaking peer and self-assessment more often (Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Popham, 2008); it is also a matter of more intentionally recognizing those tasks as *assessment* (William, 2011). This intentional recognition may help teachers (and their students) capitalize more fully on the benefits of student assessment. In part, this might involve guiding students to become more adept at assessing the work of others and providing feedback to them as well as orienting them to what quality student

work entails (Heritage, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2019). Teachers should also attend to self-assessment strategies in which students monitor their own learning and make decisions about which strategies will help them make progress (Heritage, 2010). To facilitate these efforts at activating students as assessors, teachers must be attentive to establishing and nurturing a trust-affirming class culture (Heritage, 2010; Wiliam & Leahy, 2007), and they should be mindful that effectively implementing formative assessment can itself further foster such a culture.

Another implication for teacher practice involves teachers capitalizing on the full range of formative assessment opportunities, which run the gamut from formal, planned, and somewhat lengthy formative assessments to those that are informal, unplanned, and happen spontaneously and quickly during instruction (Burke, 2010; McMillan, 2014; Ruiz-Primo & Furtak, 2007). This study's findings highlight teachers' understanding of formative assessment as integral to instruction and stress their daily, informal conversations and interactions with students as an important part of their formative assessment practice. Teachers, therefore, should extend their understanding and their repertoire by acknowledging and tapping the potential not only of planned formative assessment that gets listed on a lesson plan but also of the more organic, in-the-moment formative assessment that arises as a lesson unfolds (McMillan, 2014).

Underscoring this implication and the one discussed previously is the need for professional development aligned to these goals. In order to acquire and build upon current trends in formative assessment, teachers must be supported through professional learning (DeLuca et al., 2016) that aligns with these goals.

Another implication for practice involves teachers giving voice to what constrains them from practicing formative assessment in a manner they know is effective. Teachers are often caught in conflict between their own values and the external policies they are asked to support



(Black & Wiliam, 1998b; McMillan, 2005; Xu & Brown, 2016). As a result, they are forced to make compromises, sometimes making assessment decisions which do not align with their understanding of best practices (Xu & Brown, 2016). Teachers should be respectfully vocal about calling attention to what they perceive as impediments to the proper practice of formative assessment, and attentive policy makers and instructional leaders should be receptive to these voices. Indeed, distributed leadership, which acknowledges that most schools have multiple leaders, both formal and informal, recognizes the value of listening to those informal leaders and creates circumstances where teachers have agency to share their concerns (Harris, 2003; Northouse, 2016). Attention to these perspectives would offer leaders and policy makers a means of ensuring that the policies they make, interpret, and implement do not somehow engender, or worse, necessitate poor practice on the part of teachers who have a solid grasp on how to engage effectively in formative assessment.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Research studies answer questions, but they also raise them. This section discusses some of the genuine questions that arise from this study as potential topics for future research. First, this study raises questions about how certain formative assessment practices may be related to specific academic disciplines. Specifically, future research might explore more fully the connection between formative assessment and writing instruction, paying particular attention to how this relationship supports the view of formative assessment as integral to instruction. Given participants' assertions that formative assessment is particularly well-suited to secondary English because of English's spiral curriculum, future research might also take up the question of the extent to which discipline-specific curricula encourage or favor formative assessment practices.

This study also raises questions about teacher intentionality as they engage in formative assessment in their classrooms. Given participants' enthusiasm for informal, unplanned formative assessment that relies on the daily, ongoing formative interactions they have with their students, it would be valuable to further study the degree of intentionality they bring to those informal interactions with regard to their potential for genuine assessment.

Related to this question of intentionality, another potential area for future study might focus on teachers' practices of peer and self-assessment and the degree to which they understand them assessment strategies. Findings in this study suggest that teachers may use both peer and self-assessment but are much less likely to identify them as types of formative assessment, implying that they may see them as something apart from formative assessment. Research that delves into this question may offer insight into how teachers understand the role of students in formative assessment, which might, in turn, suggest how to expand teachers' efforts to activate students as agents in the formative assessment process.

My own continued research in this area will involve pursuing a study in which I develop and validate a survey for teachers and instructional leaders to use to self-report their conceptions and practices of formative assessment. The goal would be for those who take the survey to use the results formatively as a means of refining and deepening their own understanding and practice of formative assessment. To undertake this, I envision designing a quantitative study that would use structural equation modeling to explore the validity of the instrument. The findings of this study may be useful in designing such an instrument.

Another extension of this study that is of particular interest to me would be to delve into the question of how teachers arrive at their understanding of formative assessment. Sampling criteria for this study required participants to report that they had had some form professional

learning on formative assessment, whether single-session PD, multi-session PD, or involvement in a PLC focused on formative assessment. However, the study did not explore the impact of these professional learning experiences on how participants conceptualize and practice formative assessment. Similarly, the study did not consider the nature and impact of their teacher education preparation and the degree to which those curricula emphasized formative assessment.

Therefore, inquiry into what learning experiences teachers have had regarding formative assessment and the impact of those experiences on their understanding and practice of it may be fruitful. An interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenological study that explores why teachers conceptualize and practice formative assessment as they do may offer insight into what experiences have shaped those views and would complement some of the quantitative studies that have been conducted in this area (Brown, 2004; DeLuca et al., 2016). The study would likely have significance for initial and continuing teacher education.

### **Conclusion**

Scholars have much to say about formative assessment, but so do teachers, and their perspectives need to be heard and attended to. This study's goal was to gain insight into how selected teachers experience engaging in formative assessment. By exploring their experiences, this study sought to discover what meaning selected teachers ascribe to formative assessment and to elevate their teacher voices in the formative assessment conversation.

Twelve teachers joined me in this inquiry, generously sharing their experiences, practices, understandings, and frustrations around this complex subject of formative assessment. Through their rich descriptions and stories, these teachers revealed that:

- they understand formative assessment as serving primarily two, connected purposes: to determine where students are in their learning and what they know *in order to* inform their instruction,
- they practice formative assessment as a process of eliciting, interpreting, and using information about the nature and degree of their student learning though they do not explicitly label these actions as process,
- they consider feedback to be an important part of formative assessment,
- they believe that formative assessment is integral to their teaching,
- they highly value the informal formative interactions with students that are embedded in daily instruction,
- they consider conversation central to engaging in formative assessment,
- they consider positive class culture to be essential in these endeavors, and
- they have concerns that grading and assessment policies along with use of the term formative assessment itself may create impediments to implementing formative assessment effectively.

Many of their perspectives suggest support for this study's conceptual framework, an important conclusion given that teachers' conceptualization of assessment drives their practice (Brown, 2004). Also important is the contribution this study makes to the ongoing study of formative assessment. There is a true paucity of research in the area of teachers' conceptions and understandings of formative assessment, particularly from a qualitative perspective, and virtually no research available on secondary English teachers' perceptions and experiences of formative assessment, so this study offers at least one brick in a wall that needs more attention. Most importantly, though, this study provides a window into teachers' experiences of engaging in

formative assessment. These lived experiences of formative assessment offer policy makers, instructional leaders, and educational researchers insight into how these teachers understand and practice formative assessment. My hope is that their voices will be heard and that their shared experiences will be a valuable contribution to the conversations about assessment and grading that are sorely needed as educational professionals strive to maximize the full potential of formative assessment for teachers and students.

## Appendix A

### List of Possible Formative Assessment Techniques with Operational Definitions

**ABC Brainstorming** – Students generate ideas about a topic, one for each letter of the alphabet (or group of letters).

**Agree/Disagree Statements** – Given a statement that draws a relationship between two numbers, equations, or concepts, students decide if they agree or disagree with the statement and then explain how they can find out if their reasoning is correct.

**Analogies** – Students complete analogy prompts.

**Bunny Ears** – Placing their hands on their heads like bunny ears, students use their fingers to display two addends used to create a given sum.

**Calendar Play** – Students color in different boxes on a calendar in response to teacher prompts (e.g., “Use pink to color in the space that is two days from the 13<sup>th</sup>,” or “Use yellow to color in the space that is the third Monday.”).

**Carousel Brainstorm** – Working in groups, students respond to a statement posted in the room. When time is called, they rotate to the next posted statement, review the comments already there, and post additional comments. Rotation continues until statements are reviewed by all groups. Variations: Students initial &/or use different colors to mark their contributions. Students work on smaller sheets of paper that can be passed rather than having the students move.

**Charades** – Students act out concepts, topics, vocabulary terms, etc. and have their classmates guess.

**Checklists** – Students use checklists (class- or teacher-generated) to assess their level of preparation or understanding.

**Choral Response** – Students respond in unison to a teacher prompt.

**Cloze Procedure** – As they read, students fill in blanks intentionally created by the teacher.

**Commit & Toss** – Students write their answers on a sheet of paper, ball them up, and at the teacher’s signal, throw them around the room until the teacher calls time. Students then share the answer on the sheet of paper they are holding when time is called.

**Concept Maps** – Using boxes, circles, lines, arrows, etc., students create diagrams to show how various ideas are related.

**Conferences** – Students meet with the teacher or with peers to plan, create, revise, or assess.

**Confidence Indicator** – Students indicate their degree of confidence in a response by placing a sticky note in the appropriate column on a bar graph.

**Counting Choir** – Students are placed in four groups: counting by ones, by twos, by fives, and by tens. The teacher begins counting a number sequence (e.g., 22, 23, 24, ...?) and then points to a student in one of the groups. That student provides the next number in the sequence that is appropriate for their group.

**\*Create the Problem** – Given a solution, students work backwards to generate a plausible problem that will result in the given solution.

**Demonstration Stations** – Students complete activities at various stations, explaining their thinking and methods to others or recording them in some written form. Students might determine which stations should be established based on their understanding of the material.

**Discussions** – Students engage in paired, small group, or whole class discussions on various topics (see specific variations: Fishbowl, Inside/Outside, Socratic Seminar).

**Double Entry Journals** – Students create two-column charts in which they record factual information (evidence) on the left and their personal responses, thoughts, and questions (commentary) to those on the right.

**Drawings** – Students create drawings of ideas, questions, words, relationships, etc.

**Effort Meter** – Using a meter template, students assess their level of effort, the amount of time, and the degree of care they brought to a task.

**Every Graph Tells a Story** – Given a graph, students choose or generate the statement that best tells the story of the graph.

**Examples/Non-Examples** – Students generate or select both good examples and unfit examples of a topic, criterion, or concept.

**Exit Slips (License to Leave)** – Students write brief responses to 2-3 questions about the day's learning. Variation: Students can submit their exit slips in appropriate folders ("totally have it," "feeling okay," "still need help").

**Fact Storming** – Students brainstorm as many ideas, examples, etc. as possible on a given topic.

**Feedback Request** – Students list three or four topics or areas on which they would like feedback for a given assignment.

**Find Someone Who...** – Working from a teacher generated grid or checklist of tasks and information, students move around the classroom to find and obtain the signatures of peers who know/can do what is listed on the grid/checklist.

**Fishbowl** – Students divide into two groups. One group assembles in the middle of the others and engages in discussion about a given topic with the others making written observations of the discussion. After a determined amount of time, the groups switch roles.

**Fist to Five** – Students respond to questions using up to five fingers. The fingers can represent any manner of constructs (yes/no, numbers, degree of confidence, corresponding letters of the alphabet, etc.).

**Four Corners** – Students respond to questions by moving to one of the four corners of the room which are labeled as needed (see specific variation: Vote with Your Feet).

**Give One/Get One** – After generating a list of ideas, students work with a partner, sharing their list until they get a new idea from their partner and give a new idea to their partner.

**Graffiti Wall (Collage)** – Working to capture many ideas about one topic or unit, students add drawings, captions, doodles, quotes, lyrics, etc. to a long stretch of butcher paper. Variation: Students create smaller versions using regular sized paper.

**Graphic Organizers** – Students use or create charts, tables, or webs to organize information or ideas.

**Human Place Value** – Students hold a placard with a given digit and are told to arrange themselves as a given number (e.g., 7,349). Students are then asked which place they are standing in.

**Human Scatter Graph** – One side of the room is labeled as the X-axis (selected answer) and another as the Y-axis (degree of confidence). Based on their answer and degree of confidence, students position themselves in the appropriate place on the graph.

**Idea Wave** – After listing their ideas/responses to a prompt, students offer one of their ideas when the wave reaches them, collecting ideas they did not consider as the wave moves around the classroom.

**Inside/Outside** – Students count off by 1's and 2's. "Ones" form an outer circle and "twos" form an inner circle. A one faces a two and discusses the question being posed. For the next question, the outside circle moves to the right, creating new discussion pairs.

**Is It Fair?** – Given a scenario in which decisions are made using proportions, probability, ratio, division, percentages, etc., students determine if the decision made in the scenario is mathematically fair or not and explain their reasoning.

**Know/Want to Know/Learned (KWL)** – Students use a graphic organizer or journal to list what they already know, what they want to know, and later, what they have learned.



**Learning Logs & Charts** – Students maintain logs of their learning goals and progress; teachers monitor these periodically.

**Mad Minute** – Students complete as many math facts as possible in a minute, predicting how well they will do before and charting how well they did afterwards.

**Matching Cards** – Students look for pairs of cards which are equivalent but expressed differently (e.g.,  $\frac{3}{4}$  and 75%).

**Mathematician’s Ideas Comparison** – Students are presented with a problem and asked to decide how they would solve it and what they think the answer would be, providing their reasoning in writing. They then compare their response with how a mathematician would respond to determine similarities and differences.

**My Textbook Page** – Students create a textbook page for some given topic during the course of a unit.

**Non-Verbal Signals** – Students use hand signals or manipulatives to indicate understanding, confusion, agreement, etc. (see specific variations: Fist of Five, Response Cards, Thumbs-Up/Thumbs-Down, Traffic Light, White Boards).

**Numbered Heads** – Students numbered 1 to 4 work in a group to discuss, problem solve, etc.; the teacher selects a number from 1 to 4 and has that student share the team’s discussion/answer.

**Numbers on the Line** – Students draw a number card and then take turns pinning it to a clothesline in the proper sequence.

**Observations** – Teachers observe students engaged in various behaviors and record their findings.

**Odd One Out** – Given a set of multiple options, students select the one that is different from the others and offer an explanation for their choice.

**One-Minute Essays** – Students write single or multiple sentence responses for one minute.

**One-Minute Fluency** – Students read the same passage out loud for a week, one minute each day, recording their level of fluency each time.

**One-Sentence Summaries** – Students summarize what they learned (read, heard, saw) in one sentence.

**Open-Ended Questions** – Students create or respond to open-ended questions (how/why).

**Pass the Problem** – Working individually or with partners, students begin working to respond to a problem. When time is called, students pass the partially completed problem to another student

or pair of students who then complete the problem, modifying, adding, or changing the initial work as they deem necessary.

**Pictionary** – Students illustrate concepts, topics, vocabulary terms and have their classmates guess.

**Picture Notetaking** – Students take notes by illustrating and labeling the information.

**Placemats** – Students work in groups of four to illustrate a key topic (in the middle of the placemat), each working within their quadrant along the outside (similar to Frayer Model).

**Pop-Up Indicator** – Students stand when the answer they chose is called by the teacher.

**Portfolio** – Students save or assemble school work to demonstrate growth and excellence.

**Problem Solving** – Students solve teacher-generated problems.

**Process/Product Exemplars I** – Students review an exemplary model of a process or product, noting reasons for its success and using it to evaluate their own process or product. Variation: Students review models of varying levels of success and rank them.

**Process/Product Exemplars II** – Students create a process or product exemplar and explain how/why their product is effective.

**Progress Map** – Students keep a running record of assignments, dates, grades, and feedback. This is essentially a personal gradebook for each student to maintain.

**Questionnaires** – Students respond to questionnaires or surveys on a given topic.

**Questioning** – Students respond to and ask questions.

**Reflection Journals** – Students keep journals and reflect on their learning and the meaning it has for their lives. Alternatively, students keep journals in which they reflect on their progress and growth.

**Repeat Pre-Assessment** – Students re-take a pre-assessment during the unit, discussing answers until they compile a correct “key.”

**Repeated Directions** – Students repeat teacher directions to confirm their understanding of what they are to do.

**Response Cards** – Students use cards to answer teacher questions in a whole group setting (Ex: yes/no cards).

**Rubric Application** – Students use a rubric to assess their own or a peer’s work, writing comments about what they think is good or needs improving.

**Rubric Translation** – Students review a rubric and discuss/re-write expectations in their own words.

**Self-Marking Quizzes** – Students score and review quiz answers, writing explanations of the correct answers for those they got wrong.

**Sentence Prompts** – Students complete prompts such as “I still need to know....,” “I understand...,” “I was surprised that...,” “I became more aware of...,” etc.

**Sniglets** – Students create made-up words to capture the essence of an idea.

**Socratic Seminar** – Students engage in a whole-class, student-run discussion of given topics while the teacher observes.

**Sorts (Open & Closed)** – Students (or teachers) generate a list of ideas. Students sort these into categories of their choosing (open sort) or of the teacher’s choosing (closed sort). Putting ideas on index cards or sticky notes encourages students to try a variety of sorts.

**SOS (Statement, Opinion, Support) Summary** – Students respond to a teacher’s statement by offering their opinion and support for that opinion.

**Spinner** – Students use a spinner to determine what they must do with a given question or piece of information (explain, give an example, think of an opposite, predict, etc.).

**Sticky Bars** – Students write their answer to a select-response question on a sticky note and then place the sticky note in the appropriate place on a bar graph.

**Strategy Probe** – Students complete a problem-solving task and then review written examples of how other students solved the same problem correctly but differently. They decide which of the example strategies is closest to how they approached solving the problem.

**Student-Generated Test Questions** – Students generate questions they think would be appropriate for a summative assessment. Similarly, students generate their own study questions or study guide.

**Take a Stand** – Students must confirm or oppose another student’s response (as opposed to the teacher confirming or opposing).

**Teach a Friend** – Students work in pairs to teach an idea or concept to a peer.

**Think-Pair-Share** – Students answer a question independently, pair with a partner to discuss the answers, and then share their thinking with the whole class.

**3D** – Working with a limited amount of time and using only found materials, students create three dimensional objects that are symbolic or representative of the information they have been learning. Students present their objects to the class, offering an explanation of their intention and thinking. Variation: Students stage the setting of an event and/or create costumes for characters or people.

**Three Facts and a Fib** – Students generate three facts and one fib about a given topic and then share them in groups, attempting to detect all of the fibs. Alternatively, the teacher could generate fibs or misconceptions for students to grapple with.

**3,2,1** – Students generate a list of three things they have learned, two connections they have made, and one question they still have.

**Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down** – Students demonstrate agreement or understanding in a whole class setting by putting their thumb up or down.

**Traffic Light** – Students hold up red, yellow, or green circles to demonstrate their level of understanding or agreement. Variation: Students display a red, yellow, or green cup on their desk.

**Turn & Talk** – Students turn to a peer and briefly discuss a given question, problem, or idea.

**Twelve-Word Summary (Tweet It)** – Students work to distill what they have learned in a class period into a twelve-word summary.

**Vote with Your Feet** – Students line up and then step forward or backward to agree/disagree with a statement.

**What I Know/Don't Know** – Students reflect on their own learning and generate lists of what they know and don't know. Students elaborate on where they are getting stuck.

**What Not to Do** – Students generate a list of pitfalls for other students to avoid. Conversely, they can offer advice about what to do.

**Whip Around** – Students brainstorm ideas in response to a teacher prompt. The teacher repeats the prompt and then has each student offer one of his/her ideas in quick succession.

**Whiteboards** – Students use individual dry erase boards to respond quickly to ideas, questions, problems in class.

**Why Boxes** – Students solve a problem on the left and explain each step on the right.

**Writing Continuums** – Students compare their writing to samples written at various levels to determine their current level of writing development.

## **Appendix B**

### **First Email to Teachers – Notice of Upcoming Opportunity**

Dear (Teacher),

My name is Sarah Hylton, and I'm writing to apprise you of an upcoming opportunity to participate in a study that I will be undertaking as part of my doctoral work at the School of Education at William & Mary. As a former high school English teacher, I am interested in learning more about the experiences that other secondary English teachers have had with regard to engaging formative assessment. In the next few days, you will be receiving an email officially inviting you to participate and letting you know what your participation would entail. When you receive it, I hope you will take a few minutes to learn more about the study and how you could contribute to this important work.

## Appendix C

### Second Email to Teachers – Invitation to Participate

Dear (Teacher),

My name is Sarah Hylton, and I'm writing to invite you to participate in a study that I will be undertaking as part of my doctoral work at the School of Education at William & Mary. As a former high school English teacher, I am interested in learning more about other teachers' experiences of formative assessment. With the approval of William & Mary's Internal Review Board and the guidance of my faculty sponsor, Dr. Chris Gareis, I am conducting dissertation research on secondary English teachers' experiences of engaging in formative assessment, and I am reaching out to you as a potential participant.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the experiences secondary English teachers have had with regard to engaging in formative assessment in order to better understand their experiences, perspectives and beliefs about engaging in formative assessment. The findings for this study will contribute to the existing body of scholarship on formative assessment and will provide a means of elevating teachers' voices in this ongoing conversation.

Selected participants will be asked to (a) participate in a single interview and (b) write a brief description. The interview, conducted one-on-one via Zoom, will last about 90 minutes and will be conversational in tone. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed by an outside agency, and a summary of the interview will be provided to each participant via email for their review and feedback. The written description will invite participants to describe a specific time they engaged in formative assessment, and participants will be asked to share their written description prior to the interview. Responses, both oral and written, will not be used for any purpose beyond this study, and participants' anonymity will be protected throughout the project, including the use pseudonyms for all participants, schools, and school districts.

To undertake this study, I am seeking participants who are secondary English teachers (defined as teaching English in grades 9-12) who are currently employed and who have at least three years of teaching experience as well as knowledge of and experience in engaging in formative assessment. If you feel that this is a noteworthy study and are interested in participating, please [complete this brief survey](#), and I will follow up promptly. Completing the survey does not mean that you consent to participate in the study; rather, it simply gives me an indication of your willingness to learn more.

If you have questions or concerns, I invite you to contact me ([sphylton@email.wm.edu](mailto:sphylton@email.wm.edu) or 757-654-4994) or my chair, Dr. Chris Gareis ([ergare@wm.edu](mailto:ergare@wm.edu) or 757-221-2319). If you have additional concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, Dr. Tom Ward ([tjward@wm.edu](mailto:tjward@wm.edu) or 757-221-2358), chair of William & Mary's School of Education committee that supervises the treatment of study participants.

I would be most grateful to have an opportunity to learn about your experiences and perspectives as I explore this topic. I know how valuable your time is and greatly appreciate your considering joining me in this conversation!

**Appendix D**  
**Sampling Survey**

1. Please provide your name:
2. Please provide your preferred email address:
3. Please confirm that you are a secondary teacher (grades 9-12).
  - Yes, I am a secondary teacher.
  - No, I am not a secondary teacher.
4. Please confirm that you are an English teacher.
  - Yes, I am an English teacher.
  - No, I am not an English teacher.
5. Please confirm that you have taught school for at least three years.
  - Yes, I have taught school for at least three years.
  - No, I have not taught school for at least three years.
6. To what extent are you familiar with formative assessment?
  - Quite familiar
  - Somewhat familiar
  - A little familiar
  - Not familiar at all
7. To what extent do you practice formative assessment in your classroom?
  - Often
  - Occasionally
  - Rarely
  - Not at all
8. Since becoming a teacher, have you participated in professional development focused on formative assessment. Answer all that apply.
  - Yes, I have participated in a multi-session, ongoing professional development program focused on formative assessment.
  - Yes, I have participated in a single-session professional development program focused on formative assessment.
  - Yes, I have participated in a professional learning community focused on formative assessment.
  - Other, please specify.
  - No, I have not participated in any professional development focused on formative assessment.



## **Appendix E**

### **Consent Form**

#### **Purpose of the Study**

This study, entitled “What’s in a Name?” Selected Secondary English Teachers’ Experiences of Engaging in Formative Assessment,” is designed to explore your experiences of engaging in formative assessment as a secondary English teacher.

#### **Importance of Your Participation**

Investigating your experiences of engaging in formative assessment will contribute to the existing body of scholarship on formative assessment and will elevate teachers’ voices in this ongoing conversation. Your responses, in conjunction with the responses of other secondary English teachers, will contribute to a more robust understanding of teachers’ experiences of engaging in formative assessment, providing a means by which to more fully inform the decisions of those responsible for teacher preparation, professional development, assessment policy, and teacher evaluation.

#### **How You Were Selected**

You were selected because you are currently employed as a secondary English teacher with at least three years of teaching experience and because you have reported that you have had experiences with engaging in formative assessment. For the purposes of this study, “secondary” is defined as grades nine through 12.

#### **What Is Requested of You**

- You will be asked to participate individually in one audio-recorded interview about your experiences of engaging in formative assessment. The interview will be conducted via Zoom and audio-recorded. The interview will last approximately 90 minutes.
- You will also be asked to write a brief description of a time you engaged in formative assessment. You will be asked to limit your response to two pages and will receive some guidelines for crafting your response.
- You will be asked to complete the written description prior to the interview.
- Following the interview, you will receive an email that summarizes key points from your responses. You will be asked to make any clarifications, qualifications, changes, or extensions that you feel would make the summary an accurate representation of your experiences.

#### **Additional Information**

- Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.
- The confidentiality of your personally identifiable information will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.
- Your name and other personally identifiable information will be known only to the researcher through the information that you provide.
- Neither your name nor any other personally identifiable information will be used in any presentation or published work without prior written consent.

- The audio recording of the interview will be erased, and the LED deleted after the study is complete.
- You may refuse to answer any questions during the interview if you so choose.
- You may terminate your participation in the study at any time. To do so, simply inform the interviewer of your intention.
- Any actions of refusal or termination will not incur a penalty of any type with William & Mary.
- There is no compensation for participating in this study.
- There are no foreseeable risks in study participation.

**Contact Information**

If you have questions or concerns about this study, please contact either the researcher, Sarah Hylton ([sphylton@email.wm.edu](mailto:sphylton@email.wm.edu)) at 804-654-4994, or her supervising professor, Dr. Chris Gareis ([crgareis@wm.edu](mailto:crgareis@wm.edu)) at 757-221-2334. If you have additional questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, Dr. Tom Ward ([tjward@wm.edu](mailto:tjward@wm.edu)) at 757-221-2358 or Dr. Jennifer Stevens ([jastev@wm.edu](mailto:jastev@wm.edu)) at 757-221-3862, chairs of the two William & Mary committees that supervise the treatment of research study participants.

By signing below, you are stating your agreement to voluntary participation in this study and are confirming that you are at least 18 years of age.

A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix F

### Interview Guide

#### Research Question:

- What are selected secondary English teachers' lived experiences of engaging in formative assessment?

#### Opening Question:

- What comes to mind when you think about your experience of engaging in formative assessment?

#### Alternative Questions:

- Please tell me about your experiences of engaging in formative assessment as a teacher.
- What is it like for you when you are engaging in formative assessment?
- If you were sharing your experience of engaging in formative assessment with another teacher, what would you be likely to say?
- What is happening when you're engaging in formative assessment?
- How do you engage in formative assessment?
- Please tell me a story about your experience of engaging in formative assessment.
- Please describe a time when you experienced engaging in formative assessment. What were you thinking? What were you doing? What were your students doing? What were you feeling?
- What do your experiences tell you about engaging in formative assessment?

## Appendix G

### Lived Experience Description Protocol

The purpose of this protocol is for you to write a direct account of an experience you have had as a teacher of engaging in formative assessment. The time you choose to describe can be about an everyday experience of engaging in formative assessment, or it can be an experience of engaging in formative assessment that stands out to you as particularly noteworthy. That is, you do not have to describe a remarkable experience of engaging in formative assessment though you can certainly write about such an experience if you choose. Once you have chosen an experience to describe, please write your response to this prompt: *Describe a specific time when you, as a teacher, engaged in formative assessment.*

The following suggestions are offered as helpful tips. They are not intended to be prescriptive or restrictive in any way. This is your experience –describe it as you experienced it!

- Think about the event chronologically.
- Describe the experience as you lived through it.
- Try to stay in a descriptive mode, describing what was said or done, what you heard, what you were thinking, and how you felt. It may help to think about how you would describe the experience as if you were watching it on film.
- If it is helpful, you can write in present tense rather than in past tense.
- Write in whatever style feels right to you. There is no need to beautify or elevate your language unless that is what feels comfortable to you.
- If you use others' names, please use pseudonyms.
- Try to avoid
  - explaining causes (This happened because...),
  - generalizing about other times or people (This typically happens every day..., All teachers..., I always...), or
  - interpreting beyond the experience (I wonder if...).
- If possible, limit your response to two pages.

Adapted from van Manen (2001) and Vagle (2018)

## Appendix H

### Member Checking Email to Participants

Dear (Teacher),

Attached you'll find a document that represents my best effort to accurately portray your comments during our interview last week. It's longer than I had hoped, but you had lots of great stuff to say! When you read the statements, you'll see that I've abbreviated formative assessment as FA throughout the document. Please take a little time to review these statements and to make *any* changes, deletions, comments, additions, edits, etc. that you think are needed to ensure that they accurately represent your thinking about and understanding of formative assessment. In other words, they should sound like what you believe or would say about formative assessment. Also, you will notice that I've used comments in the review tab to pose questions about particular statements in order to help me understand more clearly, so anything you can add there would be much appreciated. If you've thought of something you didn't include during the interview but would like to add now, please feel free to do that as well.

I know that your attention is focused on starting the school year and all of the many demands that that brings with it, so I'm really grateful to you for sharing your time with me and letting me learn from you!

Looking forward to hearing from you,

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Christopher Newport University, Newport News, Virginia
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Walsingham Academy, Williamsburg, Virginia
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