Unlocking Formative Assessment
Practical strategies for enhancing students’ learning in the primary and intermediate classroom. (New Zealand Edition)

By Shirley Clarke, Helen Timperley and John Hattie

Book reviewed by Dan Murphy.

Unlocking Formative Assessment is a very easy to read guide for teachers and principals on current successful learning and assessment tools used in New Zealand schools. It has an exciting blend of research, practical tips, anecdotes from teachers and students, policy guides and professional development ideas in each chapter. The research makes important links to how formative assessment makes a significant difference to children’s progress, including their ability to be confident, critical learners, able to achieve more than before, and in raising their self-esteem.

It is the sort of book where, having had a quick read through, you could easily select one chapter of particular interest for development in your school and follow it through. It is presented in an easy to read format and gives very practical ideas that can easily be implemented in a classroom to improve learning for children. At the end of each chapter is a clear set of professional development suggestions that a principal could use with the staff.

The key chapters covered in the book include:

- planning so that learning intentions and success criteria are clear
- sharing learning intentions so that children are clear about the difference between what you want them to learn and what you want them to do
- training children in self-evaluation as an important learning tool
- giving children focussed feedback on their work
- target setting as required in the Education Standards Act (2001)
- questioning as a tool for effective teaching
- monitoring – what should be monitored and how it should be monitored.
- raising children’s self-esteem

The authors sensibly suggest a longer timeframe for developing these ideas rather than trying to introduce them all at once.

I think the most exciting feature of this book is that the researchers report on some of the excellent learning and assessment practices already happening in New Zealand schools. This is a ‘must read’ for any serious educator. The challenge is for us to examine our own schools and to see if we are using formative assessment to improve learning for our children and to make our teachers’ work as purposeful and successful as possible.

Reviewed by Dan Murphy, principal of Winchester School in Palmerston North. Dan is a member of the Editorial Committee of the New Zealand Principal