Interviews with secondary school students: Perceptions of feedback

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Students are a key part of the learning and teaching feedback process. Hence their understandings, experiences and perceptions can provide valuable contributions in the identification of effective feedback practices. This paper reports on a study conducted within a larger research project which examined secondary school students' perceptions of the feedback they receive and provide. Focus group interviews were conducted with 42 students, across the school years 7 to 12, at a public senior high school in Western Australia. Students reported clear and articulated feedback preferences that they perceived would assist their learning. In particular, they nominated the importance of feedback that was individual and directional. This research contributes to a growing body of research which recognises the importance of student voice in learning and teaching approaches.

Introduction

Feedback is central to student learning and quality teaching (Hattie, 2009). Feedback is defined in the context of this study as the information provided to a person in regards to their understanding or performances with an intention to support and progress this (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The aim of feedback is to reduce the gap in a person's current understandings and make clear what is desired in terms of learning (Sadler, 1989). Feedback is not limited to the teacher providing the feedback to the student, it can also involve students providing feedback to the teacher and interactions between teachers, students, parents, and peers, and feedback provided by oneself and computer-based programs.

Research investigating feedback and its links to learning has received substantial attention. This has included meta-analyses (e.g. Wisniewski, Zierer & Hattie, 2020), historical literature reviews (e.g. Mory, 2004), and exploring feedback in higher education learning environments (e.g. Jonsson, 2012), school environments (e.g. Peterson & Irving, 2008), laboratory environments (e.g. Iwashita, 2003), computer-based learning environments (e.g. Corbalan, Paas & Cuypers, 2010) and intelligent learning environments with computer generated feedback (e.g. Timms, DeVelle & Lay, 2016). In general, the consensus of findings is that feedback is an influential factor in student learning and achievement, in both positive and negative ways (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). What has received lesser, but growing attention, is how feedback is experienced and perceived by its key stakeholder, the student. Further, whilst feedback from the student to the teacher is acknowledged as being powerful for student learning (Hattie, 2009), limited understandings about this currently exist. This research aims to contribute to this body of research by gaining insights into student experiences and perceptions of the feedback they receive and give teachers.

Background

Feedback is often situated within and related to the assessment process. Assessment can occur prior to learning (diagnostic), during learning (formative) and following learning (summative) and can be an assessment of oneself. Feedback may then align to these different stages of assessment. Feedback can include diagnostic feedback (Jang & Wagner, 2013), corrective feedback (Ellis, 2009), formative feedback (Shute, 2008), instructional feedback (King, Schrodt & Weisel, 2009), evaluative feedback (Chan & Lam, 2010), peer feedback (Patchan & Schunn, 2015) and self-feedback (Earl, 2003). The feedback can be either informal or formal and delivered in a variety of modes, such as in verbal and written form (Elliott et al., 2016). There are also varying mechanisms for delivering feedback such as face to face discussion (e.g. Chalmers, Mowat & Chapman, 2017), teacher written feedback (e.g. Prawiro & Kholisna, 2020) digital conferencing (e.g. Henry, Hinshaw, Al-Bataineh, A. & Bataineh, 2020) and computer generated feedback (e.g. Timms et al., 2016). Although there is a multitude of feedback options for both teachers and students, these may only be effective if used at opportune times and in situations that meet the needs of the receiver.

Effective feedback has the power to impact student engagement, learning and achievement (Hattie, 2009; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Feedback can assist and motivate students in their learning and address student misconceptions (Sadler, 2010). Formative feedback has been linked to students establishing goals that focus on themselves and on improving their learning (Chan & Lam, 2010). Process level feedback can increase student achievement and interest in learning (Harks, Rakoczy, Hattie, Besser & Klieme, 2014). Effective feedback meets student needs (Kulhavy & Stock, 1989), is accurate, focuses on the task and process level (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), is provided in a timely manner (Poulos & Mahony, 2008), and is clear and understandable (Shute, 2008).

Conversely, poor quality feedback can negatively influence students' learning, motivation and achievement (Hargreaves, 2013; Poulos & Mahony, 2008). Feedback that is provided to students which compares them to the norm can lead to decreased student motivation (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). This type of feedback can also contribute to students developing learning goals that are based on success and outperforming their peers (Chan & Lam, 2010). Motivation can also decline when students are not provided with an opportunity to act on the feedback (Carless, 2007). When teacher-centred feedback is given, students can become dependent on the teacher and passive in their learning (Lee, 2008). Poor quality feedback also includes illegible feedback (Lee, 2008) and teacher feedback that is difficult for students to understand and process (Brookhart, 2008).

It is not only the feedback interaction itself that can impact student learning, it is also the environment in which it is delivered (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and the relationship between the teacher and student (Willis, 2008). The timing of when the feedback is received can also determine whether or not, and how students use feedback (Gamlem & Smith, 2013). The teacher's ability within the classroom may influence students' views on the credibility of the feedback (Poulos & Mahony, 2008). The student's emotional

maturity and self-efficacy can also contribute to how they react and processes feedback (Pitt & Nortin, 2017). However, group differences, such as academic ability (Brookhart, 2008), personality (Black & Wiliam, 1998), gender (Carvalho, Santos, Conboy & Martins, 2014), and interest in their learning (Katz, Assor, Kanat-Maymon & Bereby-Meyer, 2006), can influence students' overall responses to feedback.

Feedback that is provided by the student to the teacher can have a considerable impact on student achievement (Hattie, 2009). Students appreciate a learning environment where they are actively and interactively involved in their learning, and supported and helped by peers and the teacher (Waldrip, Fisher & Dorman, 2009). Involving students in the feedback process can increase their engagement in learning (O'Donovan, Rust & Price, 2016). Students' communication of their learning needs to the teacher can be increased by providing them with a framework in which to do so and teaching them how to use this (Rodgers, 2018). However, whilst some students seek out the teacher to meet their learning needs, other students are reluctant to do so (Pitt & Nortin, 2017). Given this and the impact of poor quality feedback on students' learning, more needs to be understood about what is occurring for them in the feedback process and their perceptions of feedback that would support their learning.

According to the literature the uptake of feedback can be affected by the quality of the learning environment and by the student-teacher relationship. Students may not always respond to feedback in the way the teacher desired (Goh & Walker, 2017). They may decide whether or not to respond to the feedback by comparing it to their own self-assessment (Jang, 2009). Furthermore, a student's emotional response to feedback can also contribute to how they respond to the feedback (Voerman, Meijer, Korthagen & Simons, 2012). Additionally, prior knowledge, experiences and beliefs may influence how the feedback is received and responded to (Butler & Winne, 1995). This includes their understandings about feedback and its links to improving their learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009) and their willingness to put the effort into responding to it (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

Clearly understanding student perceptions about how they provide and receive feedback is a key component in continuing to identify effective feedback processes (Gamlem & Smith, 2013). Their perceptions about how useful they find the feedback can impact their achievement and interest (Harks et al., 2014). Gaining further insight into their experiences and views of feedback is important especially as differences can exist between teacher and student perceptions of feedback (Carless, 2006). For example, teachers can provide feedback using short words and phrases that are intended as praise for the students, but the students can view the feedback negatively (Gamlem & Smith, 2013). Further, the teacher may provide feedback they believe is helpful, but the student receives it in a negative emotional manner, experiencing anger or sadness (Marrs, Zumbrunn, McBride & Stringer, 2016). These differences in student-teacher perceptions of feedback warrant greater exploration (Gamlem & Smith, 2013; Marrs et al., 2016).

In order to gain further insights into effective feedback it is crucial that students' understandings, perceptions and experiences of feedback continue to be investigated. The

research presented in this paper aims to explore secondary students' perceptions of feedback through addressing the questions:

- What are students' perceptions of the feedback they receive from teachers?
- What are students' perceptions of providing feedback to the teacher?
- What are students' feedback preferences?

Method

Research design and participants

This paper reports on the focus group interviews that were conducted as part of a larger research project examining secondary school students perceptions of feedback at a public senior secondary school in Western Australia. Given the setting and research questions, a single case study research design was utilised (Yin, 2014). Focus groups were chosen as they support qualitative data collection from experienced individuals and "provide rich insights about of well-defined topic" (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015, p.10).

The participating senior secondary school initiated this research in order to explore feedback practices. As such, the research was purposefully designed to meet the school's data needs. The school is a Year 7 to 12 independent public senior secondary school located in a metropolitan area. The school *Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage* (ICSEA) is rated in the middle-quarter band (ACARA*,* 2020), meaning that most of the students at the school have educationally advantaged backgrounds (ACARA, 2015).

Six focus groups were conducted, one for each of the school years, that is Year 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 (N=42). The focus groups were comprised of participants who were purposefully and conveniently sampled from the corresponding school year by the school. This sampling method was utilised to represent a cross-section of the school population with consideration to female/male genders, differing student academic abilities, and English as an additional language or dialect speaker background status. Table 1 details the participants school year and gender (male and female only).

Table 1: Participants year and gender

School Year	Male	Female	Total
7	3	3	6
8	4	4	8
9	3	6	9
10	6	3	9
11	3	2	5
12	2	3	5
Total	21 (50%)	21 (50%)	42

The research was approved by Curtin University's human research ethics committee and the Department of Education in Western Australia. The school's Principal provided written consent for the research to be conducted at the school. In order for the students to participate in the focus groups, both the parent/carer and the student provided written consent. Information provided to students and their parent/carer included what they would be asked at the interview (e.g. what kinds of feedback do you receive at school), and information about all contributions being anonymous, choice in participating, and withdrawing without consequence.

Data collection

The qualitative data were collected by conducting six focus group interviews. The participating school organised the focus groups time and location. The location was a classroom at the school and the focus groups were conducted during lesson times. The structure of the interviews and the environment was considered in order to facilitate open and honest discussion from the participants. The chairs in the classroom were arranged around a large desk with personal space between. The two moderating project investigators also sat at the table, but apart from each other. The environment lighting and air was also considered to ensure that participants were comfortable (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015).

The duration of the focus groups interviews was approximately 30 minutes each and they were all audio-recorded. The researchers followed the interview schedule, inclusive of the research questions, as outlined in the Appendix. One project investigator led the discussion with the other taking interview notes. The focus group questions were designed to stimulate discussion and address the research questions. These questions were not provided prior to the focus group interview.

Data analysis

The audio-recordings were transcribed by the project investigators. All responses were de-identified. The recordings and notes were analysed using a three-step thematic approach to identify patterns in the qualitative data (Lapadat, 2010). This analysis involved careful scrutiny of the transcripts and notes, firstly to determine codes, then categories and finally into overarching themes. The coding of the data involved multiple reviews of both data sets to identify meaningful units of data that conveyed a single idea. These were in the form of part of a sentence, a whole sentence or several connected sentences. Codes that conveyed similar ideas were grouped into categories. The categories were then grouped into clusters to establish themes. These identified categories and themes were compared to the feedback literature. These three levels of analysis were then cross-checked by the researchers (Merriam, 2009). This was done in an iterative manner so that emerging ideas were constantly re-examined to ensure consensus in the categorisation of each researcher and between the researchers. The analysis was represented in a table which detailed the themes, and corresponding categories and codes with example quotes and alignment to literature.

Results

The coding of the student perceptions of feedback revealed eight categories of responses which was then subsumed into two main themes, namely: (1) feedback students receive; and (2) feedback students give to teachers. The results are reported according to these themes and the categories within these, with student quotes provided to capture the voices of the participants (Oliver & Exell, 2019). The student quotes have been selected to represent the participants' stage of schooling, that is lower secondary (Years 7, 8, 9) or senior secondary (Years 10, 11, 12). This distinction is made firstly to ensure that the participating students cannot be identified and because at times there were some notable differences in perspectives between these groups.

Theme 1: Feedback students receive

The first theme that emerged from the analysis related to the feedback the teacher, peers or parents provide to the students. It also included the feedback students provide to themselves. Six categories contributed to this theme including feedback mode; content of feedback; positive experiences of feedback; negative experiences of feedback; feedback strategy use; and feedback preferences.

Feedback mode

The first category, feedback mode, refers to the students' perceptions about the types of feedback they have received from teachers or at the instigation of a teacher, and peer, parent and self-feedback. Ideas in this category included the different types of feedback that they had experienced or had not experienced. Examples of these ideas included written individual feedback; whole class verbal feedback; peer feedback and rubrics or marking key feedback. Interestingly, students' experiences with individual verbal feedback differed across all of the focus groups. A lower secondary student commented "Not much verbally, just comment and grades". Whereas another reported "Usually one on one, usually during class, sometimes in the break time – get advice or asking questions". A senior secondary student suggested that most of the feedback they receive is individual stating "Main feedback provided is verbal – most of the time ask during or after class". Within this category, a student described receiving individual verbal feedback as a video recording via email, and thought that the teacher was "Really cool to go to all that effort". However, there were also participants in different focus groups who indicated that they did not receive feedback from some of their teachers. In response to this, another student offered "All classes have feedback, but some classes have more feedback".

The participants also considered that feedback did not have to come only from the teacher. It could also include feedback from peers, parents and even themselves. A senior secondary student described self-feedback as "Self-reflection – how well you feel you have gone". A student provided this example of peer feedback "Read to the other person what you are going to say, peers help you". Several students discussed parental involvement in feedback. There was a range of experiences in this regard with one student stating that they sought more feedback from their parents than the teacher, "Most talk to parents

about this, some teachers". Another student disagreed stating "Parents can find the negative" and only want to know "... why I did it wrong".

School reports were discussed as a mode of feedback, mostly by senior school students. They relayed that the positive comments were reinforcing, however, felt that this form of feedback was aimed at parents. Several students "only looked at the grade and not the comments" as reports were "all about the grade". They expanded that the comments were "cut and pasted" from curriculum documents and that these comments were too broad and didn't provide information on how they could improve. Further, as they were provided at the end of a term and year, the comments about how to improve were difficult to apply because the unit of work had generally finished.

Content of feedback

The second category is defined as the students' perceptions about the content of the feedback that they receive. The student commentary on this only related to the feedback from teachers. Examples of ideas that related to this category were written corrections concerning right/wrong answers, advice, directions, constructive criticism and short words such as "good work". A lower secondary student described this as "What you did right, what you did wrong, how you could do things differently". A student then added "What you can do to improve". In another focus group a student suggested "A guide to help you do the best you can, where you are and moving it along". These sentiments of directional feedback were extended to involve constructive criticism. One student defined this as "Criticis[ing] in a good way to help you improve, if mistakes how you can change it". A student noted that it may include tips for how to improve, "Give you tips, strategies for future".

Whilst students reported receiving feedback that was just "Lots of comments", other perceptions were that they were provided with feedback that were just "short words" or a grade without comment. Examples of these include "fail", "good score", "check this", "well done", "write more" and "do better". A student described how they had received feedback indicating they needed to "Take an educated guess" which they then did.

Positive experiences of feedback

The third category within this theme concerns the positive experiences students have with feedback. This category represents the students' often emotive and positive responses to the feedback. The ideas within this category included that feedback could be aspirational, encouraging and of a kind that helps build relationships. Students relayed that the teacher feedback was a sign they cared about them and the feedback gave them a feeling of confidence. One student stated "Teacher is really enthusiastic, committed, cares about students is generally when you get good feedback".

The students reported that feedback can be helpful and this results in understanding what they should continue to do and do differently. One student relayed "Yes it is helpful, it reminds me what to do next time". Another student added "... it encourages you. Good

feedback equals uses all the tools, encourages, explicitly indicates what you did right". A different student conveyed that they had more positive experiences with peer feedback than teacher feedback. This student indicated that "Peers are often better at explaining". In general, students reported to being satisfied with the education they were receiving at the school. However, the positive experiences with feedback were overshadowed by the negative and their preferences for how feedback should be provided.

Negative experiences of feedback

The negative experiences of feedback include the students' often emotive and negative responses to the feedback. This category was the second most discussed with feedback preferences being first. Ideas in this category related to students conveying their feelings of being humiliated, embarrassed, angry, scared, sad, degraded, and simply bored by what they received. Some described how they experienced teachers' feedback that was not directed at them, was too vague or too soft, unfair, inconsistent, condescending, only negative or only favoured certain students. The students also reported experiencing teachers being angry, mean, and impatient or delivering feedback as a reprimand. This then caused negative reactions in some students, such as disregarding the feedback, not wanting to ask any questions, being confused and not wanting to get feedback at all.

Some of the participants discussed how feedback could be embarrassing, especially when delivered in class. An example of a comment provided was "This embarrassment particularly when teachers speak too loudly ... then they stare at you." A student added that they "Don't like it when they call you out in front of everyone". General and whole class verbal feedback generated feelings of disengagement. A student described how when provided with general feedback to the whole class, "... I get bored and zone out".

Students continued to express negative responses to feedback that they perceived was "not about them" in situations where "All teachers write the same comment for all students", and "Teachers give feedback about the average or level". In pursuing individual feedback, a student reported being "... a bit scared to ask". The participants also revealed feelings of being angry and judged when their feedback was delivered in comparison to another class and each other. A student reported that this type of feedback "…is condescending and makes you not want to try". Another student commented that it is "Degrading when they tell us that the other class is better".

Students described how the teachers' manner and delivery of the feedback had negatively impacted upon them and their learning. A student described her feeling when teachers give back assessments in order of achievement "from best to worst". Another student revealed that a teacher presented a graph of test results for the class and described the worst as "road kill". A senior secondary student told the group of a situation where feedback had impacted their learning and, as a consequence, how they now felt badly about the subject. The student stated that the teacher had written on their assessment "no more of that wishy washy crap". The student revealed that they were "Pretty angry ... with unresolved feelings ... on tippy toes for the rest of year". The student added that the teacher didn't provide any direction on what could be done "...wasn't like this is how to

improve, so we didn't know how to improve" and it impacted their motivation and achievement in this class. This sentiment of negatively responding when feedback was not directional was expressed in other focus groups and on a number of occasions within the interviews. One student described their emotional response as "Sometimes it can make you angry, don't tell you how to get to better. Another stated "This is wrong, this is wrong, what can you do with that?".

Within this category, students also revealed how positive feedback could also have negative consequences. One student noted "If it is good then it's like I'm showing off". Students also discussed the negative experiences with self and peer feedback. When self-reflecting, a student commented "Sometimes I get mad at myself". A student stated about experiencing peer feedback, "I feel they are judging me". Finally, within this category the change in perceptions of feedback as they moved from primary school to high school was raised, particularly by lower secondary students. As one student stated in high school "It is hard to ask teachers, they might think I'm a weak person".

Feedback strategy use

The fifth category within this theme concerns feedback strategy use, which refers to those strategies students use in response to the feedback they receive. Ideas that were identified in this category included seeking further information from the teacher, seeing the teacher at another time, discussing the feedback with parents or a tutor, reviewing the information provided outside of the class, asking questions in class and, also, not doing anything. Students also described such strategies as understanding the feedback and addressing areas for improvement. As one student stated "If you don't understand you can always ask and the teachers will help you". Another student commented "Why I get it wrong, I'll ask one-on-one at another time". This included contacting the teacher via email, securing an appointment and seeing the teacher at break times and before/after school. Interestingly, some students reported that they did not use any of these strategies. One student provided an explanation for this as follows "If you have a question you only have one option, in front of the whole class". On occasion when a student sought further explanation about the feedback the teacher was providing verbally to the class, they described how the teacher said "You should have been listening". Not surprisingly the student said she did not then pursue their question.

Other strategies that were discussed included the students seeking support outside of school. This included parents and private tutors. A student indicated "Talking to someone about it, like my parents, helps you how to deal with it". Of interest was that several students reported that the teacher did not provide further explanation about their feedback or what they could do to improve, as they assumed their private tutors would be able to support them. At the same time, there were other students who reported not acting on the feedback. One student offered "In one ear and out the other, don't act on it". Another student explained "Sometimes you take it on board, sometimes not, especially if you feel it's unfair". In responding to the feedback, some students set learning goals and utilised a goal setting framework. This was undertaken following a discussion with the

teacher, a review of the feedback and sometimes based on self-reflection. For example, one student used the "glow, grow, goals" approach which a teacher had previously taught.

Feedback preferences

The last category in this theme is feedback preferences. This is defined as the modes and forms of feedback received from teachers that the students prefer, and how helpful to their learning and achievement they deem them to be. The ideas students conveyed were presented both as what teachers should do and what not to do. For example, students perceive that one-on-one teacher verbal feedback improves their learning, but that feedback where they are judged by an average and not at their own individual level does not help their learning. This category generated the largest amount of discussion by the participants.

As described in other categories within this theme, students' preference is for feedback to include directions on how to improve. One student commented that when they received the feedback "good start, but write more" the teacher should have suggested "... what was good and not so good. Expand on your explanations is better feedback". A student added that the feedback should be "explicit" and "immediate" so they could work on improving. A student suggested that feedback content should consider how it could generally assist students in their learning. They offered "It needs to be generalised, 'read questions carefully' so helps across all of the subject". Another student preferred feedback to include "Examples or methods or 'try that'. Feedback should be seeing what works and new ways of doing things". Students also expressed preferences for the feedback to be a "fair balance" as both "positives and negatives is helpful". Another student added that the feedback should "... play to your strengths, not weaknesses".

The preference for student feedback is for it to be individual so that it meets their learning needs, which was discussed in juxtaposition to a "one size doesn't fit all" described by a participant. Another student stated "Individual is more helpful. Personalised feedback, easy to understand found one-on-one really helpful for improvement". Another student provided more specifics on how the individual feedback could occur. She explained "Hand back the test, then give some time, then one-on-one how to improve and specific feedback. Near teacher's desk not at student's desk. Or can use email". None of the participants expressed a preference for whole class feedback and instead provided explicit statements about how not to do it. For example, one recommended "... good class versus bad class, don't do that".

The participants also discussed their preferences for the mode of feedback. Interestingly, male students tended to prefer one-on-one verbal feedback whereas the female students indicated preference for individual written feedback. A female student explained that with individual written feedback, she "feels less embarrassed". A male student explained their preference "I don't pay attention when they write it down, but if they do it verbally one-on-one even in class I do". Another male student explained a preference for verbal feedback, "I struggle with reading and writing, so prefer it done verbally, it's clear and concise". Preferences for how feedback was conveyed to students included consideration

for how students would receive it. One student conveyed "Verbal only if quiet because [if not] I feel like I'm a little kid". A student added that when giving back results, it should be "confidential".

In some subject areas, students explained that they had minimal time to review their marked assessments as they were not permitted to take them home. Their preference was to have time to review and reflect on the completed assessments in order to be able to improve. One student explained "Don't get to keep your tests, can't take it home. You see your score but don't know what you do badly don't even know what you did right, so can't study in areas you need to".

Theme 2: Feedback students give to teachers

The second theme identified in the focus group discussion was the feedback students provide to teachers on their learning and their experiences. Ideas within this theme included asking the teacher questions, providing feedback through structured mechanisms such as surveys, students being reluctant to provide teachers with feedback due to perceived consequences, and parents providing the feedback on behalf of the students. Students offered examples of when they had been given an opportunity and provided feedback to the teacher. One student stated "Teacher gave a survey, we gave response and teacher responded to this". When the teachers responded to the feedback, students reported that the "learning was more oriented to us", that they tended "to do better in that class" and it was "good for the relationship".

Although some students conveyed their positive perceptions with providing feedback, other students spoke of the teacher not responding, yelling at them, "holding a grudge" and "being treated differently" when they did offer feedback. One student told of a time when the teacher did respond to the feedback they provided but then said to them "are you happy now?" Other students expressed reluctance to provide feedback due to "not being comfortable" to do so and concerns the teacher would retaliate by giving them "detention", being angry or that it would "blow up into the worse scenario". One student stated "Those that don't ask, we don't give feedback as they will be angry". Another student explained his thinking about not providing feedback "In lower school don't necessarily give you the best teachers, less likely to give and teachers to take feedback". In contradiction to this, a student said "All teachers very approachable, so comfortable to give them feedback".

The students provided examples of feedback they provided to teachers in front of the class. This included "correcting teachers spelling", requesting that the concept be "explained in a different way" and the overuse of videos to teach students. This theme also encompassed the feedback that parents gave to teachers about their child's learning needs. A student explained that their parent provided the feedback for them "Not exactly but the parent-teacher Maths teacher got feedback about talking too quickly".

The focus group discussions provided one student with the opportunity to reflect on providing the teacher with feedback. She explained "The teacher gave a self-evaluation

sheet, no one really put in effort it. We thought at the time it was a waste of time but now on reflection…". It is notable in this discussion that there were some lower secondary students who appeared surprised at the concept of providing teacher feedback. They understood the concept, but reported that they had never considered it.

Discussion

The students in this study discussed their perceptions of feedback within two identified central themes. These were the feedback they received and the feedback they provided to teachers. The discussion in the focus groups was predominantly about the feedback they received from teachers, negative experiences with feedback and their preferences for teacher feedback practices. Students discussed their experiences and perceptions in relation to the types of feedback they had received, the feedback content, their positive and negative experiences and responses to feedback, the strategies they did or did not use to respond to feedback and their preferences for how feedback should and should not be provided to them by teachers.

In general, students reported that they were satisfied with their education and school. Students understood what feedback was, had clear preferences for the feedback and acknowledged that it could be helpful to their learning (Peterson & Irving, 2008). Throughout all of the focus groups and permeating through each of the established themes was students' overwhelming preference for the feedback to be directional (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and individual (Kulhavy & Stock, 1989), in order to best support their learning. Directional feedback was requested to be both related to the current task and to their learning more generally (Matsumura, Patthey-Chavez, Valdes & Garnier, 2002) and include learning goals (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). If feedback was provided without information to the students on how to improve, often in the form of short words or a numerical result, they felt it did not assist them in their learning (Gamlem & Smith, 2013; Kluger & DeNisi, 1998).

Students' responses to feedback and reasons for not seeking or providing feedback were at times impacted by their emotions. Their emotional response could influence how students interacted with the feedback provider (i.e., the teacher), and their enjoyment and achievement of the subject (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Negative emotional responses from students additionally arose when they found the feedback to be unfair and aimed specifically at them (Shute, 2008). This then led to some students being reluctant to interact with the teacher and pursue feedback in the future. Thus, this aligns with research that reports that students' prior knowledge and past experiences relate to how they process and respond to feedback (Butler & Winne, 1995; Timms et al., 2016). However, there were some students who did recognise that a negative emotional response may be how the individual has interpreted it. One student offered a view within this discussion "People can take it in different ways". Another student suggested that it could be the result of "miscommunication". This may be a consideration as students also reported that they had difficulty understanding the teacher's "tone".

Students indicated preferences for feedback that was fair, comprising both positive and negative feedback, but especially commencing with the positive. This aligns with the research of Kluger and DeNisi (1996) who found that both positive and negative feedback can have beneficial effects on learning. However, the student participants in this research asked for negative feedback that did not include "harsh" or "mean" feedback, particularly that it not be delivered as reprimands. Such feedback was reported to impact on students' motivation, engagement and learning (Hargreaves, 2013; Poulos & Mahony, 2008) with examples being cited and experiences discussed by all participating students. Rather, the negative feedback students were requesting was of a constructive type where errors were identified and misconceptions corrected (Sadler, 2010).

In some curriculum learning (subject) areas, there was a feedback practice where students could only review their marked assessment for a short period of time in class. The reasoning for this was so that assessment questions could be used again. Students reported that this practice was problematic for them and they preferred being given time to review their results so that they could identify areas for improvement (Gamlem & Smith, 2013). Other feedback practices included only giving a mark or grade with no comments. Participants described how this did not assist them in their learning (Gamlem & Smith, 2013) and impacted their motivation (Koenka, Linnenbrink-Garcia, Moshontz, Atkinson, Sanchez & Cooper, 2019). School reports were raised within this discussion with students revealing that these were written for their parents. They also conveyed that reports were not helpful to their learning because they were received at the end of learning and, as such, they did not know what to do with the feedback (Gamlem & Smith, 2013), or did not have an opportunity to respond to the feedback (Carless, 2007). Further, some students commented that they looked only at the grade on the report and did not read the comment (Gielen, Peeters, Dochy, Onghena & Struyven, 2010). The student perceptions of school reports are that this type of feedback is not specific, non-directional, not timely and in many cases not individual to their learning. This is at odds with effective feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and may contribute to a loss of student agency in their learning.

Whilst the main focus was on the feedback they received from teachers, the participants also reported their use of peer, parental and self-feedback. This type of feedback occurred in a variety of ways, such as structured peer and self-feedback practices in class. At other times, these kinds of feedback were driven by the student as a result of receiving limited or unclear teacher feedback. Students reported seeking assistance in understanding the feedback or gaining feedback from parents, peers or their private tutor. Although peer feedback was described as being helpful, there were cautionary notes made about this strategy. In alignment with the literature, the content of the feedback may be incorrect (Nutell, 2007) and the quality of the feedback may be varied (Patchan & Schunn, 2015), and can be influenced by the relationship between the students (Gamlem & Smith, 2013).

The provision of feedback to teachers by students revealed differing experiences. Some students explained their involvement in this and how it had positively impacted their learning and achievement (Hattie, 2009), whilst others described how it had negatively impacted their relationship with the teacher and especially their classroom interactions.

Students also reported being reluctant to provide this feedback (Pitt & Nortin, 2017) and some were even surprised by the idea of it. In scenarios where students wanted to provide feedback to the teacher, but did not want to do it themselves, they enlisted their parents. This usually occurred at parent-teacher meetings. The student feedback to peers and their teachers' commentary suggests that students may not have been guided in providing effective feedback. This guidance is crucial if the feedback is to contribute to improving student learning (Li, Liu & Steckelberg, 2010).

Conclusion

The key findings from this study can be summarised succinctly: students perceive individual and directional feedback as most helpful to their learning; teachers' feedback practices impact student learning enjoyment and achievement; and students had clear and articulated ideas on the types of feedback practices that would support their learning. The findings from this research has implications not only for the participating school site, but for also for feedback practices in schools in general. In terms of further research, it should be noted that this work is situated in a larger research project and contributed to the development of a questionnaire which was piloted at this same school site. Clearly there is still much more work to be done in the area of feedback within the process of assessment.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix: Focus group interview schedule

Before the interview

☐ Check dates/times/rooms with deputy principal
☐ Check consent with deputy principal

On the day of the interview, before

☐ Chairs, room arrangement, room environment, do not disturb sign
☐ Recording device - test run
☐ Notebook, pen

At the start of the interview

☐ Decide where to sit to talk - sit at student's level, comfortable?
☐ Introduction: first names, interested in education, whatever is said is confidential, can stop at any time you do not feel comfortable.
☐ Set students at ease - ask general questions such as how their day has been.
☐ Reminders – confidential (anonymous, no names being recorded), won't affect school marks/relationships, appreciate honesty, focus on the questions, can withdraw at any time.
☐ Plan - questions/lots of listening, okay to take time to think, can change/correct something, if don't understand - ask, think of it as conversation/talk, can stop at any time.
☐ Purpose - want to know what students think and how they feel about feedback that they get from teachers.
☐ Closure – Thank students for their involvement. Any additional comments? A reminder that of not being identified and can withdraw at any time.

Interview questions

1. We are interested in feedback and here to ask you about your ideas of feedback, do you know what we mean by feedback? What do you think feedback means?
   (Prompt: Can you define this in your own words)
2. What types of feedback do you receive from your teachers? (Extensive)
3. How do you feel about the feedback you receive?
4. Do different subject areas give different feedback?
   (Prompt: Please give an example)
5. Do you ever give the teacher feedback about how you are learning? (important)
   (Prompt: Please give an example)
6. How does the teacher respond to your feedback?
7. What type of feedback helps you to learn and achieve?
8. Any further comments?

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