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What Teachers Really Want When It Comes to Feedback

Thomas R. Guskey & Laura J. Link



New research points to five characteristics for effective feedback on instruction.

Teachers today are bombarded with many different forms of feedback. School leaders offer suggestions based on classroom observations. Professional learning community colleagues provide guidance on how to improve instructional techniques and boost student engagement. Instructional coaches recommend ways to refine teaching practices and enhance relationships with students. And professional learning sessions present strategies to improve nearly every aspect of the teaching and learning process.

But among all these forms of feedback, what do teachers find most valuable to their efforts to improve their interactions with students and their impact on student learning? What information addresses their greatest concerns?

We asked these questions in a recent study to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' personal perspectives on feedback (Guskey & Link, 2021). Our study involved analyses of self-reported survey data from 92 K–12 teachers who were involved in a pilot mastery learning program in a medium-sized Midwest school district. What these teachers told us challenges the premises of many teacher feedback models, but also offers insights on how to ensure the feedback teachers receive improves their effectiveness in diverse classroom contexts.

The teachers we surveyed identified five characteristics of helpful feedback that offer clear direction in school improvement efforts.

1. Teachers want feedback on student learning.

Much of the feedback teachers receive, especially from formal observations by school leaders, focuses on teachers' actions and behaviors while teaching. In compliance with the district's evaluation procedures, leaders note such teacher actions as: Are the lesson objectives clearly communicated to students? Is there a reliance on students' background knowledge to introduce a new concept or skill? Is the teacher asking higher-order questions and soliciting student feedback during the lesson? Is the teacher using techniques designed to ensure all students participate in class discussions?

Although teachers generally acknowledge the importance of these actions and appreciate knowing when they do them well, most teachers see these behaviors as means to a far more important end: their impact on students. In particular, teachers want to know: Do my explanations make sense to students? Are even reluctant students engaged and catching on? Are all students feeling that they are part of the class and involved in something meaningful? School leaders occasionally talk with students during or after an observation and ask these questions, but rarely are they part of formal observation procedures.

Ironically, school leaders are typically well positioned to offer this kind of firsthand feedback on student learning because they know their teachers and understand their classroom situations. School leaders often know the students, their learning histories, and family backgrounds. In most cases, they also have some knowledge of the curriculum and learning expectations. But most formal classroom observations occur only a few times each year and are generally disconnected from students' work (Link, 2020). Teachers also point out that many school leaders' knowledge of teaching methods, lesson plans, instructional technologies, assessment strategies, and classroom discipline are not up to date because of their years removed from being a classroom teacher themselves. As a result, leaders' feedback often isn't focused on what teachers identify as most useful to their professional growth or improvement (Bayler & Ozcan, 2020).

Above all else, teachers want to know if they are making a difference for their students (Lam, 2016). How they view their effectiveness and what they regard as the greatest rewards of teaching come from feedback about their impact on the students they teach (Walk & Handy,

2018). Most important, teachers don't judge their effectiveness based on their teaching actions or behaviors, but rather from seeing how their students think, how they solve problems, and how they feel about themselves as learners (Kraft, 2019). None of the teachers we surveyed defined "having a good day" in terms of what they did or how they taught. Instead, they described seeing their students "get it," observing "lights go on," noticing "smiles of understanding," and realizing that what they did as teachers made that happen.

2. Teachers want feedback from their students in their classes.

Teaching is not a unidirectional, linear process in which teachers provide information and students respond. Rather, it is a reciprocal, contextually based, and ongoing exchange where teachers and students share information with one another. This information serves to monitor both the teachers' instructional success and the students' learning progress in a particular context (William, 2020). The feedback on student learning that teachers find most useful, according to our survey (and many other studies), is personalized for them and designed to help them succeed in *their* context. Teachers want ideas that will enhance interactions with the students they see daily in order to gain personal "mastery experiences" that show they make a difference (Bandura, 2001).

Unfortunately, nearly all teachers have gone through the process of being told something will work, only to try it and discover they were misled or deceived. Despite careful planning and implementation, the strategies they were told to use never yielded the promised improvements. As a result, most teachers have an honest skepticism of ideas for improving their effectiveness that come from outside their specific context. Hearing that an idea worked for another teacher, with different students, in a different school, or in a different state rarely convinces them. Eliminating that skepticism requires personal mastery experiences that provide teachers with tangible evidence that the ideas work with *their* students in *their* classrooms (Guskey, 2020).

3. Teachers want feedback they trust.

Sources of evidence on student learning vary widely. Measures of student achievement can range from nationally normed standardized tests to results from student projects, classroom quizzes, and formative assessments. Measures of student outcomes include surveys of students' attitudes, their confidence in learning situations, their self-efficacy, and social-emotional learning skills. Although debates rage about what evidence is most important, the one thing we know is that school leaders and teachers differ in their perspectives about what evidence is most valid (Guskey, 2007).

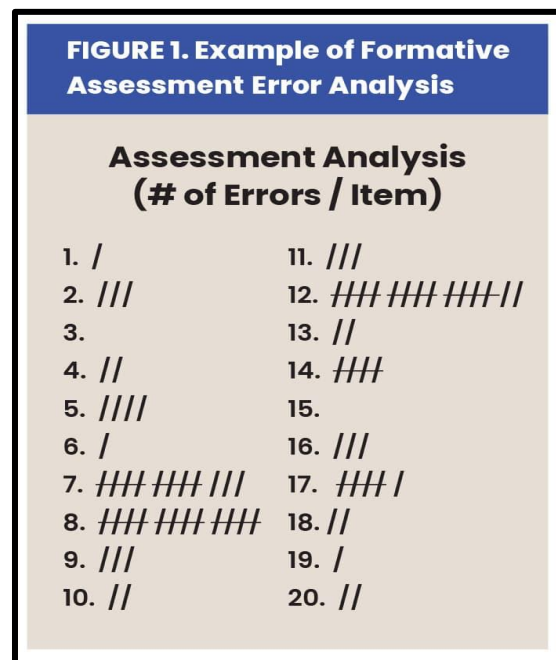
School leaders—as well as most school board members, policy makers, and legislators—trust large-scale assessments of student achievement. They like the seeming objectivity and reliability of standardized tests and state assessments developed by well-established assessment companies. Despite evidence showing that many of these assessments are "instructionally insensitive" (Popham, 2007) and poorly aligned with state curriculum standards (Polikoff, Porter, & Smithson, 2011), school leaders generally believe they provide trustworthy information about learning progress.

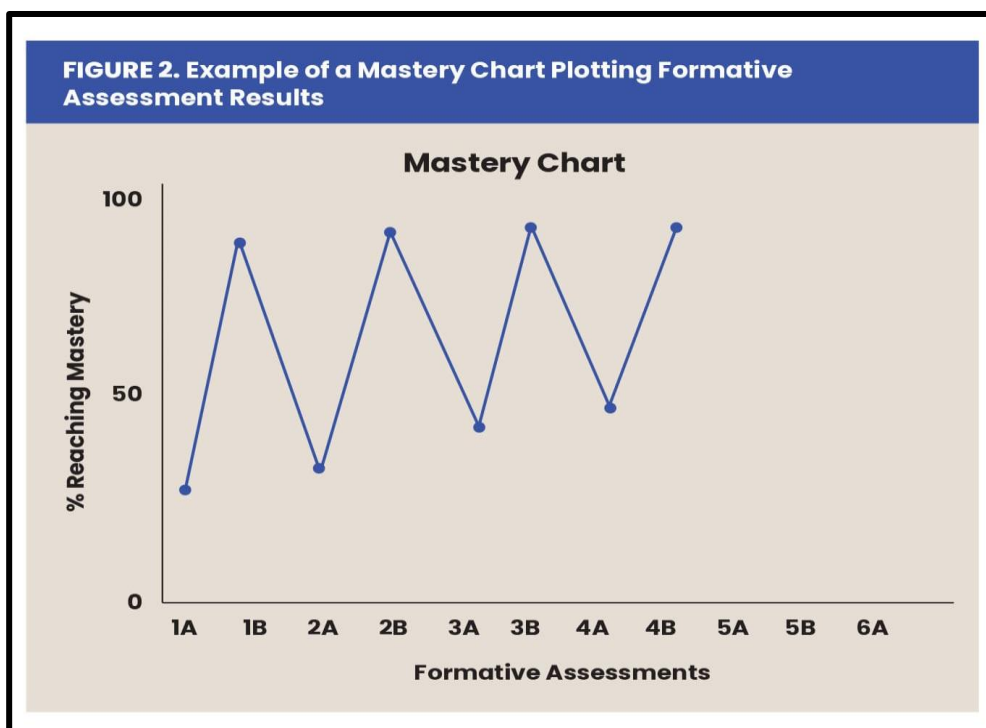
Teachers, however, tend to be more skeptical of large-scale assessment results. In our study, many stated that large-scale assessments "reduce kids to numbers" and "offer data that was misused to evaluate my teaching ability." Teachers also appear more aware of the frequent misalignment between these assessments' content and format and the knowledge and skills emphasized in the curriculum.

The teachers in our study further noted that because the results from large-scale assessments may not come back until weeks or months after administration, their feedback is seldom useful in revising instruction or planning remediation activities. Far more than school leaders, teachers trust the results from students' daily work, personal interactions and observations of students, student presentations and demonstrations, and classroom assessments in their classrooms (Guskey, 2007).

In our study, for example, teachers gathered three types of evidence on students' learning progress. The first was formative assessment error analyses, in which teachers tallied the number of incorrect answers on classroom formative assessments to find trouble spots, similar to Figure 1. On this particular assessment, these data show that most students did fairly well on items 1 through 6, but items 7 and 8, as well as item 12, were answered incorrectly by large numbers of students. It may be these poorly answered items are ambiguously worded or mis-keyed. But if examination reveals no obvious problems, then the instructional activities were clearly ineffective for most students and need to be revised or replaced.

The second type of evidence teachers used was mastery charts of class progress on formative assessments (fig. 2). This chart shows the percentage of students who achieved the mastery standard on each formative assessment across units that had retake opportunities. Ideally, the majority of students should achieve mastery on the second formative assessment in each unit, and more students should attain mastery on the first formative assessment as units progress. This demonstrates the effectiveness of the teachers' corrective activities. It also shows whether students are increasingly prepared to do well in new learning units.





Not having the majority of students attain the mastery standard on second formative assessments would be a sign of problems, indicating that teachers need to plan alternative strategies. Perhaps students didn't fully engage in the corrective process and need more structured guidance.

The third type of evidence teachers gathered involved comparing summative assessment results. After a series of instructional units, teachers administered cumulative, summative assessments to students, primarily to determine students' course grades. Teachers then compared the grade distributions of current students with those from previous years.

When asked to weigh the usefulness of these types of feedback, teachers at all grade levels consistently rated the tallies of students' errors on formative assessments (fig. 1) as the most meaningful because of its highly specific evidence on students' performance. Teachers used these data to determine which concepts and skills they had taught well and which required a different approach. Although the mastery charts and summative assessment comparisons were informative, teachers considered that evidence more useful in making summative judgments of effectiveness (Guskey & Link, 2021).

4. Teachers want feedback quickly.

In some systemic change efforts, improvements for students may not be immediately apparent. Sustained support for extended periods may be required to achieve potential benefits (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2013). But when it comes to classroom-level strategies or procedures, teachers want evidence of improvement quickly, typically within the first few weeks. If they don't readily see evidence of a positive difference for their students, most teachers will abandon a new innovation and revert to tried and trusted practices. This occurs not because teachers are afraid of change or

hesitant to try new ideas, but because continuing with an untested strategy holds the possibility that their students will learn less well. And most teachers are reluctant to risk the learning success of their students for the sake of innovation (Guskey, 2002).

This means the process of implementing a new practice or strategy must establish procedures for teachers to gain feedback on their efforts' results within weeks, not months or years. Our study showed that results from regular formative assessments provide an excellent source of such evidence. But feedback on improvement in students' daily work, better written assignments, enhanced engagement in class lessons, greater confidence in learning, or improved attendance might prove equally effective. To maintain the extra work involved in implementing a change, teachers need to know quickly that positive results are not only likely, but also within their reach.

5. Teachers want feedback offered in meaningful, non-threatening ways.

Leaders can offer teachers feedback through a variety of formats, including written comments, recorded notes and observations, group discussions, or individual conversations. Yet regardless of the format, *how* leaders communicate that feedback matters to teachers. Strong evidence shows that if teachers don't receive feedback in meaningful, helpful, and non-threatening ways, their practices will not change (Cherasaro et al., 2016)

Our surveys revealed the means of communicating feedback teachers found most useful closely parallel what we know about offering effective comments to students (see Guskey, 2019). Specifically, effective comments follow a four-step process:

1. Begin with something positive.
2. Describe what needs improvement.
3. Offer guidance on how to make the improvements.
4. Express confidence in success.

Similarly, teachers appreciate recognition of their successes with students, big and small. They want targeted but non-judgmental feedback on the areas for improvement or where a different approach may prove beneficial. Paired with that feedback, they want specific guidance and practical suggestions on how they might improve. But they want that advice in the form of ideas and strategies that communicate support, rather than as mandated practices they are told to use. Instead of relaying "Your instruction needs more student engagement or critical thinking," effective feedback would include: "I like the way you incorporated open-ended questions about the text in your lesson, yet some of your students seem more prepared than others to address them. Next time, you may want to employ a short formative assessment before the discussion to check students' individual comprehension levels."

Finally, teachers want to know that their leaders, colleagues, coaches, and advisors believe in them, understand their commitment to students, and have confidence in their success. Concluding the example feedback session with "You've got this!" or more specifically, something like "I know you'll have all students thinking about what they read in no time," provides the supportive affirmation teachers seek.

Teachers want to make a difference. The feedback they find most useful recognizes that commitment and, in collegial and supportive ways, helps them do just that.

Making a Difference

When it comes to providing helpful feedback to teachers, no impediments stand in our way. There are also no discrepancies between what teachers want and what they need in order to have the greatest impact on students' learning. Teachers want timely and trustworthy feedback that focuses on their students' learning and offers practical suggestions for classroom applications. When we offer teachers this type of feedback, they gain meaningful information for improvement and direct evidence that their work makes an important difference.

Reflect & Discuss

- Think about how you prefer to receive feedback from others, and how you prefer to give feedback to others. What similarities and differences do you notice?
- Is your or your school's current approach to giving feedback to teachers effective? Why or why not?
- Which of the five characteristics of helpful feedback can you see yourself working on immediately, and what's one way you plan to do so?

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