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Feedback for Learning:
Deconstructing Teachers’ Conceptions and Use of Feedback

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education

The University of Auckland
2008
ABSTRACT

Cognisant of the critical interplay between beliefs and practice, the current study investigated primary school teachers' beliefs and understandings about feedback, and the use of feedback to enhance student learning. Central to the investigation has been an exploration of teachers' beliefs about the nature and place of feedback in student learning and of their role and that of learners in the feedback process. Of equal importance has been an examination of the strategies and practices that teachers utilised and ascribed importance to within the feedback process, including the opportunities offered to students in relation to the development of evaluative and productive knowledge and expertise (Sadler, 1989). To facilitate this investigation, Sadler's (1989) theory of formative assessment and feedback was used as a framework to inform both the research design and subsequent analyses.

Utilising an interpretive, qualitative, case study methodology the current research was conducted in two sequential phases. Phase one consisted of semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of 20 experienced teachers. In phase two, three of these 20 participants were selected purposively for classroom observations of teachers' feedback practice during the teaching of a written language unit. These teachers also participated in a semi-structured interview following each series of observations. During both phases, additional data were generated through field notes and the collection of relevant artefacts. Together, the multiple forms of evidence provided complementary information and ensured a rich pool of data. Three recognised approaches to data analysis were utilised, namely thematic analysis, the constant comparison method and discourse analysis.

The use of Sadler's theoretical framework illuminated both similarities and differences among teachers in regard to the nature, place and role of feedback in learning and teaching. As teachers' feedback discourse was examined in more detail the influence of efficacy beliefs on the uptake and enactment of new ideas and practices associated with formative assessment and feedback
became apparent. Teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning were a further mediating influence, particularly in regard to how the feedback process was conceived and with respect to the norms of behaviour that teachers promoted within the feedback process. The complexity of the beliefs/practice nexus was highlighted in regard to the influence of teachers' tacit, at times outmoded beliefs, on practice.

Observations revealed that each of the three case study teachers had adopted many of the strategies associated with contemporary notions of good feedback practice. However, the ways in which these strategies were implemented in the classroom was a matter of considerable variation particularly in regard to the nature of student involvement and the amount of control maintained by the teacher. Findings from this phase of the research supported Fang's (1996) consistency/inconsistency thesis. In two of the three cases there was a high degree of consistency between teachers' stated intentions and their actions while in the third the opposite was apparent.

Overall, it was concluded that while all teachers had adopted elements of the contemporary feedback 'discourse' none had mastered the 'Discourse' (Gee, 1996). Looking to the future, it is argued that this Discourse cannot be enacted through the mere bolting on of strategies to existing classroom programmes. To enact the contemporary Discourse in the ways imagined three conditions must be met. Firstly, beliefs about teaching, learning and feedback must reflect those embedded in the Discourse. Secondly, there must be a close alignment between those beliefs and practice. Thirdly, teachers must acquire in-depth subject matter knowledge, which will enable them to create the dialogic forms of feedback necessary for students to become self-monitoring and self-regulatory.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with sincere thanks that I acknowledge the help and support of my supervisors, colleagues, friends and family. Without such support this thesis would never have reached fruition.

During the early stages of my doctoral study the help of Dr Vivienne Adair and Professor Trish Stoddart, the 2003 EdD cohort supervisors, was invaluable in getting me started, as was the feedback from Associate Professor Peter Roberts, Professor John Hattie and Associate Professor Michael Townsend. Thanks also to Dr Bryan Tuck who, in an informal capacity, helped me in a multitude of ways to crystallise my thinking.

It has been my extreme good fortune to have Associate Professor Judy Parr and Dr Eleanor Hawe as my supervisors. Judy and Eleanor, I am indebted to you both for the academic and emotional support you have so willingly provided. As a student who has focused on the topic of feedback for learning I can say your feedback exemplified everything written about 'good' practice. Each of you in your own way challenged and extended my thinking and sharpened my research skills. The ongoing support needed to maintain momentum during the highs and lows of doctoral study has been very much appreciated. Eleanor I know you have gone well beyond the call of duty, listening endlessly to my ramblings. Allowing me this indulgence helped me to develop my ideas and formulate my arguments.

To my colleagues and friends Isabel Browne, Lexie Grudnoff, Mavis Haigh, Ray Murray, Patricia O'Brien, Catherine Rawlinson, Sue Sutherland, Margaret Turnbull and Gillian Ward your continued interest and support has been greatly appreciated. A special thank you to Isabel for taking on the laborious task of proof reading thesis chapters. To my closest friend, fellow doctoral student and critical friend Ruth Williams what would I have done without you? Our escapes to Waiheke Island to write have been a highlight of the thesis journey.
Research of this nature is dependent on the goodwill of teachers so thanks must go to the teachers who participated in this study. To those who participated in the first phase of this study your honest and insightful commentary was appreciated. A special thanks goes to the three case study teachers, who so willingly allowed me entry into the real world setting of the classroom. I will always be in your debt.

Thanks also to the Auckland College of Education for a tertiary scholarship grant and to the Faculty of Education for an amalgamation scholarship. One contributed to the costs associated with undertaking this research while the other ensured there was some release time available for writing. A special thanks goes to Yvonne Thomassen for her administrative help, Jan Rhodes for the timely and accurate transcription of data, David Humpherson for technical support and Christine Whyte for assistance with the formatting and printing of the final thesis document.

Finally, the support from my family past and present must be acknowledged. In my youth, my parents, the late Jean and Jim Grieve instilled in me the importance of education as well as the belief that with hard work and persistence anything could be achieved. Such values enabled me not only to start on the thesis journey but most importantly to arrive at the final destination, thesis completion. Thank you Mum and Dad. To Brenda, Richard and Olivia, over this protracted period of study, your love, support and faith in my ability to complete this thesis has kept me going. I look forward to the forthcoming celebrations and spending more quality time with you all! After all the quality of one’s life or the success achieved cannot be simply measured by outputs and qualifications. While these are important accomplishments my proudest achievement is my close and loving family all of whom I am very proud.
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