

Teachers' classroom feedback: still trying to get it right

Abstract

This paper examines feedback traditionally given by teachers in schools. Such feedback tends to focus on children's acquisition and retrieval of externally prescribed knowledge which is then assessed against mandated tests. It suggests that, from a socio-cultural learning perspective, feedback directed towards such objectives may limit children's social development. In this paper, I draw on observation and interview data gathered from a group of 27 nine-to-ten year olds in a UK primary school. These data illustrate the children's perceived need to conform to, rather than negotiate, the teacher's feedback comments. They highlight the children's sense that the teacher's feedback relates to school learning but not to their own interests. The paper also includes alternative examples of feedback which draw on children's own inquiries and which relate to the social contexts within which, and for whom, they act. It concludes by suggesting that instead of looking for the right answer to the question of what makes teachers' feedback effective in our current classrooms, a more productive question might be how a negotiation can be opened up among teachers and learners themselves, about how teachers' feedback could support children's learning most appropriately.

Introduction

Feedback and the value of the learning it supports

Within the world-wide movement called 'Assessment for Learning' (AfL), classroom feedback is assumed to have a key beneficial influence on learning (Black & Wiliam, 2006).

In this paper, I explore the value of the teacher's feedback to a class of children in a state primary school, in England UK. Drawing on this example, my paper asks the question to policy makers, 'Which learning outcomes does feedback benefit?' International research into the effectiveness of feedback has tended to concentrate on how feedback supports children's acquisition or retrieval of prescribed skills and information (see, for example, Shute, 2008). In this paper I question the value of this goal in light of the needs and aspirations of children and adults in the 21st century.

In previous generations, children's retention of information was considered a worthwhile aim for schools, given that valued knowledge of this sort was embodied in books to which teachers were the gatekeepers. Back in 2000, Shepard blamed standardised testing in the USA for the continued emphasis in schools on memorisation and factual retention, even though these outcomes were no longer sufficient at the start of the 21st century. Ten years into this century, the so-called 'state theory of learning' in England similarly continues to emphasise memorisation and recall of prescribed information as objectives, underplaying children's inquiry and participation (Alexander, 2010, p.514; p493). Watkins (2003) has indicated how even the physical layout of today's classrooms across the globe is anachronistic, still resembling that of 5000 years ago, reflecting the deeply embedded view of learning as individual and decontextualised. The influence of traditional tests and the outmoded learning goals on which these focus has led to teachers from many different countries finding themselves endorsing, either explicitly or indirectly, limited or outmoded theories of learning. Their deeply ingrained nature may make them, in Alexander's words, 'invisible to a policy mindset' in which 'discussion has been blocked by derision' (Alexander, 2010, p.514; p.510).

Current educational policy in England, UK

In England, in the second decade of the 21st Century, an increased deprofessionalisation of teachers (Beck, 2008) accompanied the new Secretary of Education's claim that teaching is work best described as a craft rather than a profession. This potentially reduces teachers' sense that they act autonomously, drawing on a specialised knowledge-base (Times Educational Supplement, UK, 19th Nov 2010). Writing in 2003, Villegas-Reimers depicted the UK, the USA and France as countries whose teachers enjoy more practical autonomy than others. This finding might surprise teachers in England whose autonomy to make decisions about both curriculum and pedagogy has been severely limited since the Education Reform Act of 1988 which introduced a National Curriculum. All schools had to teach this curriculum, regardless of how relevant teachers regarded it to be for their pupils. The Act also enforced national assessments on all children, and later led to prescriptions about how subject matter should be taught. The Act ushered in a radical change to government policy which had previously been explicit about leaving decisions about classroom processes to teachers.

The new national assessments focused teachers' attention on subject matter which would be tested, reinforced by demanding government targets that encouraged extra-curricular cramming in the core subjects of numeracy and literacy. National 'league tables' of schools' results, plus increasingly stringent school inspections, added pressure on schools to do what they were required by government rather than as previously, what they negotiated with local education authorities. Practices based on AfL were introduced by government to schools, but the emphasis in AfL was on performance rather than on learning, and it was

soon followed by an initiative called 'Assessing Pupils' Progress' which laid out in detail sets of discrete learning objectives for the new National Curriculum. Government inspectors (OFSTED) expected children to know what level they were working at, and how they could proceed to the next one. These developments, not surprisingly, led to a school culture of fear (Jackson, 2010), whereby many teachers were afraid to take initiatives in terms of curriculum or pedagogy because conformity to prescribed and challenging government expectations was continuously assessed through pupil tests and school inspections. Didactic teaching of prescribed content to pupils, working individually or even competitively, was encouraged; and children's cognitive rather than social achievements were emphasised (Alexander, 2010). It was against this backdrop that the research described in this paper was carried out. It is one that undoubtedly educators in other countries, including the USA, will recognise.

Learning objectives from a socio-cultural perspective

Learning goals which emphasise teachers transmitting prescribed information are outdated now for two reasons. Firstly, there is compelling evidence indicating that, even when the goal of teaching is achieving specific outcomes, pupils are more likely to achieve these outcomes when they are actively involved in the learning process, and when they can relate outcomes to their historical and social contexts (McDonald and Klein, 2003). Secondly, and relatedly, the purpose of schooling as the means to make young minds accept, rather than challenge traditionally prioritised knowledge, chimes awkwardly with a general culture that celebrates creativity and criticality. However, Jackson (2010, p. 46) citing Harber (2004, p. 59) reminds us of this persistent tension. She writes: '[T]here has always "been a conflict between education for control in order to produce citizens and workers who were

conformist, passive and politically docile on the one hand and those who wanted to educate for critical consciousness, individual liberation and participatory democracy on the other.”

This paper suggests that more work needs to be done to support learning outcomes consistent with a socio-cultural perspective on learning which emphasises children’s agency within their socio-cultural contexts. In particular, it highlights the need for such work by illustrating how one class of Year 5 pupils (aged 9 to 10) described their responses to one aspect of the traditional classroom: feedback directed towards traditional learning goals in a traditional way.

Outcomes that have been valued traditionally tend to be measurable, observable pieces of evidence of cognitive acquisition or retrieval, but socio-cultural perspectives consider valuable learning outcomes to be dynamic and socially situated (Cobb, 1999; Elwood, 2006; James, 2006; Rogoff, 1995). Differences between valued outcomes stem from discordant understandings of how mind is perceived, whether as fixed within the individual or as moving to the nexus of interaction.

From the socio-cultural perspective which this paper promotes, learning occurs through appropriation (Rogoff, 1995) or shared meanings, as it is negotiated in the social context of interaction, and is then further understood through the existing histories and knowledge constructs of each individual. In James’ (2006) words, ‘The focus here is on how well people exercise ‘agency’ in their use of the resources or tools... available to them to formulate problems, work productively, and evaluate their efforts’ (p.58). From this perspective, objectives are reached if teachers mediate successfully between children’s own interpretations and culturally established meanings of the wider society (Cobb, 1999), and if teachers and children constantly co-opt or use *each others’* contributions as knowledge is

produced (Newman et al, 1989). Children learn as opportunities for engagement in practice occur (Lave and Wenger, 1991), since teaching is located within the wider activity system. In Elwood's (2006) terms, learning is a cultural rather than individual activity. While some traditional tests are designed specifically to promote higher order thinking skills, test-takers have traditionally been viewed in isolation from their cultural contexts and lacking in agency (Elwood, 2006). From a socio-cultural perspective, therefore, to make sense of children's experiences of feedback, we need to take account of the function of schooling as a social institution as well as consider the micro-interactions between teacher and pupil (Cobb, 1999).

Most existing studies of feedback tell us little about attempting to make classroom feedback valuable from a socio-cultural perspective. Studies are now required that are applicable to an alternative vision of school learning. In this paper, I illustrate why the definition of teachers' feedback itself needs to be revisited. My comments are, however, based on the observation that the alternative conception could be entertained alongside and within a traditional classroom given that the political emphasis on accountability in many countries is likely to maintain the traditional system for the foreseeable future.

Research design

The research questions guiding this research asked how some primary-aged children described their experience of feedback from their teacher, what sense they said they made of different feedback, and what use, if any, they said they made of it and why. Its purpose was to engage with the perceptions of children themselves, as receivers of teachers' feedback, and as participants who also exercise agency, a perspective much under-examined in the feedback literature. While the research was carried out only in one

classroom, a range of class members described in depth a variety of responses to feedback across a mix of settings. Therefore, although no generalisations can be made from my data, the study can provoke in the minds of teachers and policy makers further scrutiny of existing traditions of feedback. Funding for an extended study of this kind, from which generalisations will be made, has already been sought.

The principle methods for this research were classroom observation and group or individual interview (see Table I below). Initially, I interviewed, in groups of five or six, twenty-seven pupils in a Year 5 class (called here Class 5X) taught by 'Mrs. K' at a state primary school in Surrey, England. Each group interview lasted about half an hour and took place in the most private place we could find, usually the school library. Finding a quiet place was problematic and, on some occasions, the children had to talk against some background noise from other classrooms, but there were no evident negative effects of this situation. These interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently fully transcribed.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

I began by interviewing all children in Mrs K.'s class, since they all wanted to participate in the research. Three children were absent, which meant a total of 27 were included. The parents of the children were sent a letter outlining the aims and planned processes of the project, inviting them to opt out if they were not comfortable about their child taking part. The research began in October 2009 with these small group interviews. Analysis of these interviews provoked thoughts about the limitations of the traditional feedback paradigm as discussed in this paper. It was written while the main research processes were being carried out up until May 2010. As the research progressed, I additionally drew on a few examples from observations and individual interviews which illustrated some concepts which

represented views expressed repeatedly by children. However, a detailed and comprehensive analysis and categorisation of feedback content and response in the research classroom does not appear in this paper, but will follow in a subsequent one. My comments here therefore focus primarily on children's initial accounts of experiencing feedback.

On the basis of the initial interviews, in December 2009, I selected nine profile children. Five girls and four boys were selected in consultation with Mrs K., because in the initial small group interviews these children seemed enthusiastic and had a range of insights. They spanned the ability range in terms of National Curriculum attainment levels, with three attaining lower levels, four attaining higher ones and two who were considered average. All nine children were pleased to have been selected and told me near the end of the project how much they valued being encouraged to say what they thought and felt. I spoke to their parents to confirm that they knew what was expected and parents were positive about their children's participation. At the start of January 2010, each profile child was interviewed at length individually about his/her general experiences of and views about school and learning, whether they liked coming to school, and if so what they enjoyed about it; and what they wanted to be when they were grown up. These interviews inform this article, together with data from the group interviews. Both sets of data were analysed through progressive focusing and identifying new themes (Miles & Huberman, 1995). I started by looking for themes already highlighted in the feedback literature (Black & Wiliam, 2006; Butler & Winne, 1995; Dann, 2002; Hargreaves, McCallum & Gipps, 2000; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hattie, 2009; Henderlong & Lepper, 2002; Torrance & Pryor, 1998; Tunstall & Gipps, 1996a, 1996b; Sadler, 1989; Shute, 2008; Stobart, 2008; Torrance, 2007), focusing

particularly on previous research studies carried out in classrooms with primary children (Dann, 2002; Hargreaves et al, 2000; Henderlong & Lepper, 2002; Torrance & Pryor, 1998; Tunstall & Gipps, 1996a, 1996b). New themes were then identified until none further could be found. For example, initially the theme of convergent feedback was identified, and its tendency to close off, rather than provoke inquiry. A new theme, that of feedback often being irrelevant to the individual pupil's wider life experiences, became associated with the initial focus of convergent feedback. All themes were then categorised into related clusters.

From January until July, I then observed and video-recorded two of the nine children each week of term, during either a literacy or a numeracy lesson. Later the same day, I then showed the two selected children the video-recording and interviewed them to learn about their responses to the teacher's feedback. I played the video to them, pausing at each feedback episode and asking the children to tell me what was going on. Sometimes during individual interview, based on the video footage, I used questions such as, 'What did the teacher mean then?', 'Why is she saying that?' and 'What did you think [or feel] about that?' The observations and individual interviews used as illustrations in this paper focus particularly on two profile children, given the pseudonyms here Vijay and Mia. Ellis and Nina, also profile children, are cited too, and among these four children, a range of ability and diverse views about feedback are represented. I have focused on these children's observations and interviews simply because I believed they illustrated in a vivid way a conceptual point made repeatedly by most of the children. A few children who were not profile children are also given pseudonyms and quoted in this paper.

Each individual interview lasted about one hour or an hour and a half, and most were held in the privacy of the music studio, which was a freestanding and sound-proofed out-house

next to the children's classroom. Interviews following video-recorded observation were used to help the children remember each feedback episode and describe the meanings they attached to it. This method yielded complex data which gave me insights not only into their responses to feedback but also the contexts within which the feedback was experienced. Methodologically this study had an interpretive framework, in that the social phenomenon of teachers feeding back to children in the classroom was given meaning by those who defined and made it explicit. I expected different children to have different subjective understandings of the phenomenon of feedback (Everitt et al., 1992). My own influence in describing children's experience of feedback, as manifested in this writing, was also significant. My critical stance towards the English policy of detailed teaching prescriptions, and the value I place on socio-cultural perspectives of learning guided the sense I made from the data.

This school was selected because it was known in the area to be a thriving one with a head teacher who himself was open to academic research and willing to learn through it. It had a history of good OFSTED reports and a reputation as a thriving community. The head teacher suggested that I work in Year 5 with Mrs K. because she was a confident teacher whose classes achieved well and who was good at taking advice. She had been teaching at the school since first qualifying as a teacher, seven years previously. While willing to take part in the research, Mrs K. was a little anxious about being video-recorded. Once the research began, she seemed more comfortable and confident about this and became very co-operative. Mrs K. advised me of good sessions to observe and appropriate times for interviewing the children. She usually spent some time sitting with the group containing the two children I was observing, so that I was sure to record some feedback interactions

with them. The children were much less forthcoming when I questioned them about Mrs K.'s feedback to the whole class because often they felt it was not directed to them; so I tended to focus on these small group interactions.

Ethical issues need to be addressed carefully when working with children as research participants. A few parents were worried that the children were being used for purposes of which they were unclear and expressed concern over disruptions that the video camera might cause. A special letter was therefore sent out, explaining the purposes of the project more fully than the initial information one, reassuring parents that interviewing children about their learning processes was often educationally beneficial. A guarantee was given that the video camera would not be used if disruption of class became obvious, which it never did. The children were assured that their comments would be anonymised if they were fed back to any teacher, and for this reason pseudonyms have been given each of them in this paper. The children gave their informed consent to be observed and interviewed every time and they were always free to withdraw. However, no child declined being observed or interviewed, although on two occasions a child chose to leave the interview a few minutes early.

The teacher's feedback: trying to help children get it right

Mrs K. was not unusual except that she was regarded as highly successful. The head teacher recommended her as one of the most effective teachers in this primary school. She fulfilled and exceeded school and national expectations: the children in her class frequently attained well those objectives prescribed for her by the school and ultimately by the government. She also had very good relationships with her pupils and discipline was not a problem: as

the children commented to me, she never had to shout at them and indeed, to myself as an observer, her classroom seemed a well-ordered place.

In the following transcript we see an example of how Mrs K. focused her feedback on particular learning objectives, in accordance with National Curriculum expectations for children in Year 5. Other UK primary teachers who read the transcript below were able to recognise the scenario as normal good practice. As prescribed in the National Curriculum and assessed in Year 6 national tests, Mrs K. was helping the children in Year 5 to learn about metaphors, similes, personification, alliteration and rhyme. Her feedback kept reminding the children of these key concepts, as she taught the poem *From a railway carriage*. I had observed Mrs K. teaching the specified literary features for several weeks and I noted that she was using the poem as a text upon which to base her revision. The extract that follows illustrates how Mrs K. focused her feedback on the learning intentions which she had clearly listed on the white board in front of the children. She was working with the group of children who were struggling most with the concepts, including two of the profile children, Mia and Vijay. Like many teachers, Mrs K. was feeling under time pressure for covering the prescribed curriculum, seeing the need to get through these concepts as efficiently as she could, thus limiting her to providing noticeably directive feedback.

Mrs K.: You're right to say that all the words at the end of the line rhyme with the words above. Okay, so "witches" and "ditches," "battle" and "cattle." But, like Vijay said, the "gazes" and "daisies," you have to sort of say it so it rhymes. Is there another two words that don't quite, they're not an exact rhyme, that we haven't said yet?

David: "Fairies" and "witches?"

Mrs K.: But is "fairies" at the end of the line?

David: Oh. No.

Mrs K.: No. Looking right towards the end. Mia?

Mia: “River” and “forever.”

Mrs K.: Yeah. “River” and “forever,” okay? They’ve got the same sound, ish. “River, forever.” But you have to make it *sound* like a rhyme, don’t you? Otherwise they’re not quite rhyming words. Vijay, right? So, there’s your first thing that you’ve told me, that the pattern is, every word, mostly, ending the lines, rhyme. What about alliteration? Is there any alliteration in there? What’s alliteration, again, Vijay?

Vijay: Ah, you know. “I’m like a letterbox,” something like that?

Mrs K.: *Alliteration*. Look on the board, see if you can get a clue. “Alliteration.” It’s number three.

Vijay: “An angry avocado.”

Mrs K.: ... Can you find some words in the same sentence that have the same letter? Yep, “faster?”

David: “Faster,” and...

Mrs K.: What are those little things, little girl things with wings, that fly around?

David: Fairies?

Mrs K. (laughs): Fairies, absolutely, yes. And there’s your first bit, so, if you haven’t, highlight those two now. “Faster than fairies,” and write the number three, a little three next to them, so we know that’s alliteration.

Notice how Mrs K.’s feedback tended to take the form of providing leading *reminders* to steer David and Vijay towards *giving right answers*. In interview afterwards, it became clear that Mia was indeed now confident with the target concepts, even though Vijay continued to think that rhyming was about how words were spelled and that alliterations were similes. Mrs K. wanted to know whether or not the children in her class had grasped these concepts,

in order that she could record them as attained on her Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP) recording sheet and thus be confident that when tested later on, they would succeed. That was why her feedback often focused on leading the children towards the correct statements.

For this reason she did not initially ask the children, for example, to consider their own sense of the poem, to talk about images it conjured up in their minds or to think about the culture of poets. Traditionally, as illustrated by this transcript extract, much of classroom talk is dominated by the IRF sequence: the teacher initiates, the pupils respond and the teacher then gives feedback based on an evaluation of the student response (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Nassaji & Wells, 2000). Lin (2007, p. 88) describes how the IRF sequence helps teachers in their role as classroom managers and as primary knowers by embracing two functions: the *converging function* and the *certifying function*. The converging function of IRF helps the teacher to '... maintain tight control and minimise digression'; while the certifying function '... work[s] students' input into acceptable answers to exam-type questions; that is, to certify it as correct and model answers.' Within this process, certifying information takes priority over personal information, such as a child's opinion, and the teacher may not trust the class to reach the required information through pupil-led dialogue (Nassaji and Wells, 2000). The pace of the IRF classroom, as in the case of Class 5X, tends to be fast, allowing little time for pupils or their teacher to pause and reflect, sometimes resulting in talk moving from one focus to another non-sequentially. Lin (2007) comments that both convergence and certification function primarily through the teacher's feedback, the 'F' in the IRF sequence. Sometimes the teacher's feedback takes the form of a question,

but often a question to which s/he already knows the answer, as in the case of the ‘fairies’ question mentioned above (Mehan, 1979).

Whilst the IRF sequence is useful in maintaining order in the classroom, its convergent and certifying functions can foster a culture of compliance and dependence on the teacher as well as an unthinking acceptance of the legitimacy of the knowledge s/he represents.

Rather than dismiss IRF as otherwise destructive, a fruitful focus for development may be the feedback part of the triadic system. If feedback is based on the teacher’s evaluation of a response in relation to certifying information, then such evaluative feedback may well lead to a compliant rather than a divergent classroom culture. On the other hand, if feedback springs from the teacher’s desire to provoke the learner to come to his/her own negotiated conclusions, including critical conclusions, then this *provocative* feedback could contribute to the development of an inquiry in the classroom.

The children’s response to classroom feedback: trying to do the right thing

For Vijay, like thousands of struggling learners across English primary schools, the learning objectives written on the white board held little meaning or interest. Vijay told me that he loved history. When, subsequently, Mrs K. asked the question, ‘When might the poem have been written?’ he gave some well-informed and insightful answers, even though these did not converge with the teacher’s. The children were overheard to negotiate her question as follows:

David: 19th century time?

Teacher: Have a talk with each other.

David: Victorian time.

Vijay: I’d say 1979.

Kurt: In Victoria's reign, more like.

Mia: I don't think it was. I think it was written in, like, 2000.

Vijay: Yeah. Because remember the cha-goo, cha-goo, cha-goo. Remember you need those things on the wheels? Those things? Yeah. Victorian ones didn't have them. They just had the big tank made of steam. So it's after Victorian times.

...

Kurt: Victorian trains had, like, cogs that worked. They were basic cogs.

Mia: Yeah, but in Victorian [times] it was very rare to go on a train, because you had to be really rich. So anyone could have written this.

Vijay: They had basic pistons which, you turned the wheels...

David: No, no. You said, remember they usually had those giant tanks? All the water in, then it gets the steam going?

Vijay: Yeah, then the pistons work...

At this point, Mrs. K had directed the children to draw on their agency, using resources available to them to formulate and solve questions about historical signals within the poem. Vijay started working productively, evaluating his efforts by bouncing ideas off peers. A thoughtful and constructive dialogue emerged among his group, in which each child's contribution built in some way on the contribution of the previous speaker. Evidence suggests that this internally driven engagement is associated with positive outcomes such as creativity, persistence, and life-long learning (Henderlong and Lepper, 2002, p.775). Had Mrs K. built on their comments with some supporting ideas of her own, the children might have had the chance both to negotiate new meanings and make new connections, as well as to reach the correct answer.

Generally the children in Class 5X seemed very respectful and fond of their teacher and sought to act on her advice whenever possible, even when it inspired no internally driven engagement. The children frequently mentioned their delight and surprise when they discovered that Mrs K. was pleased with them for something they had done. One aspect of their desire to do as they were told by Mrs K. manifested itself in children telling me that feedback had helped them even when there was no evidence that it had. The following exchange with Bettina illustrates this point:

Bettina: I thought it was helpful when Mrs K. told me that I needed to improve my handwriting, and join it up.

EH: And did that make it improve?

Bettina: Well, (laughter), I haven't really done much yet, but it should do.

EH: ... What will you actually do?

Bettina: Try and do it neatly, and join it up.

Bettina knew what she needed to do. In fact, she already knew it before Mrs K. reminded her. She also knew that she ought to do what Mrs K. said. Yet she had not acted on it. In contrast, Fay told me how she accepted Mrs K.'s feedback and was spurred into action when she found out that Mrs K. thought she was doing well in handwriting. Because Fay wanted to please the teacher and do the right thing, the teacher's feedback had the effect of encouraging her to practise her handwriting:

When I am working in my handwriting book, I never think my handwriting's very good.

But when [Mrs K.] put "Well done" in there, I thought maybe I can do better. So now

I'm getting better at my handwriting. I think I still need to practise a bit, but I'm getting better than I used to.

And yet, the learner here belies a lack of trust in her own judgements and her own goals. She started to work hard because the teacher had praised her, but not because she saw any other convincing purpose for it. Action based on a desire for such praise may undermine a child's intrinsic motivation by superceding her internal standards and it may encourage dependency on the teacher (Henderlong and Lepper, 2002, p.57). Although Fay succeeded in this case, it is often hard to act on feedback when the object of learning holds little meaning or interest to the learner, even when s/he wants to do the right thing. Sometimes, the children simply could not remember to do it. Although they were creative in suggesting ways to help themselves remember what they should do, including writing a message on their hands or in the front of their books, they concluded that even these strategies might not make them remember. A few children commented that it was helpful when the teacher told them *why* a piece of work was good, and ideally gave them an example, such as writing 'the *fluffy* cat' to embellish the pupil's 'the cat'. In general, however, it was rare that the children interviewed could tell me the purpose for acquiring the skills they were trying to learn. One of the profile children, Ellis explained, '... the reason I can't remember to use-full stops is because I don't know *where* to put full stops!'

Some children therefore did not act on the teacher's feedback because, when it made no sense in itself, it was hard to remember and therefore difficult to follow through. Vijay described the tension between trying his utmost *not* to reject the teacher's feedback and yet failing to make the teacher's advice part of his day to day thinking:

EH: You said every day for a year she's been telling you "Don't forget your full-stops," something like that?

Vijay: Pretty much.

EH: It feels like that, anyway? What happens to you when she says that? What do you think or feel?

Vijay: I always feel like (*sound of a plane plummeting*).

EH: Oops. Yes.

Vijay: I always think, "Maybe I can do it that way tomorrow," and I always forget overnight.

EH: You forget overnight?...

Vijay: Yeah, my memory's gone a bit bad, but it's getting better. It's coming back.

Vijay never mentioned that full-stops signalled taking a breath. His words suggest that the amount he had to remember, without understanding why, meant that even with the support of the teacher's reminders he could not manage it.

The children seemed to perceive the purpose of feedback directives as unrelated to aspects of learning that they themselves valued in their lives. They followed directives as a means to achieving 'performance goals' rather than their own 'learning goals' (Pryor and Torrance, 1998: 154-5). They had a sense that what they learnt in school was not really to do with their values and aspirations and therefore Mrs K.'s feedback was not very relevant to their lives. Ellis described how he felt like a 'postman', whereby the teacher wrote the post-cards and he just delivered them: he had no involvement in authoring the text. And, further, he said he knew his writing work would actually end up in the recycling bin in a couple of days

because it had no real purpose. Although eight of the nine profile children said they enjoyed coming to school, none of them gave interest in classroom learning as the reason for enjoying it. Learning, they explained, is normally unpleasant, needs to be completed as quickly as possible, and is counterpoised to 'play' which is what children really want to do. Most children liked coming to school because they enjoyed playing with their friends. Nina said she would '... look forward to the breaks, because we do get quite a lot of time outside as well.' She saw staying in the classroom to complete a learning task as '... kind of wasting our time,' rather than as an opportunity to grapple with valuable challenges. Ben explained that it was natural for children to '... just want to get [classroom learning] over and done with'. All the children thought they came to school so that they could get a good job later, such as becoming a child-minder, a policewoman, a gymnastics coach, a teacher, an insurance broker or a footballer. But not one of them mentioned gaining qualifications, and they all struggled to explain the link between what they were learning now and the good job later – except for the one pupil who wanted to become a teacher. Although the children were still young and might not understand the role of schooling in adult life, they were clearly old enough to have dissociated school learning from learning elsewhere in their lives, possibly to the detriment of both.

The children's overriding reason for acting on feedback was therefore to conform to the teacher's wishes, as they understood them, so winning her approval; and avoiding parents' ultimate sanctions for poor performance. They often found difficulty in attaining these 'performance goals' fully because they lacked meaning for them, although interim rewards such as stars were an incentive to try hard. But once achieved, there was often no incentive to engage further. They had little sense of learning as people exercising agency in social contexts, formulating meaningful problems, making interesting inquiries or evaluating their

own impact on the world, even though they were likely to have been doing these in life outside school since their toddler days.

Discussion: feedback to support alternative learning outcomes

The research described in this paper illustrates that when a narrow conception of learning objectives is held by teachers and pupils, then a limited practice of feedback will prevail, which in turn frustrates the value of children's learning achievements. Crucially, it also reminds us that children learn through the feedback they are given, whether that learning is intended or not. While learning objectives are prescribed objectives measurable on tests, then feedback as 'helping children to get it right' will continue to be one obvious, though imperfect, means for feeding back to children. There will be successes in helping children to attain traditional objectives and these may be '... the pedestal on which the processing and self-regulation is effectively built' (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p.91).

However, according to the children in this study, convergent feedback may also promote learning which is undesirable, unless the children's experience of feedback is the subject of dialogue among pupils and teachers. Convergent feedback delivered by the teacher to the learner in the traditional paradigm may help children to accept rather than to challenge the power differentials between those who determine the desired standard and children, who have no involvement in this. They may learn to accept rather than question that some people are allowed to exercise agency but that they are not. Convergent feedback may suggest to them that classroom learning is unrelated to their identities and lives outside school. Indeed, they may develop identities more as conformers than as people who grapple with socially relevant inquiries. They may come to understand that knowledge is

'out there' to be acquired rather than to be dynamically constructed through social contexts.

James (2006) describes how socio-cultural theories of learning and their objectives '... are not yet well worked out in terms of their implications for teaching and assessment' (p.57).

She none the less makes one extrapolation from socio-cultural theory in these terms:

[T]he teacher needs to create an environment in which people can be stimulated to think and act in authentic tasks (like apprentices) beyond their current level of competence... Tasks need to be collaborative and students must be involved both in the generation of problems and of solutions. Teachers and students jointly solve problems and all develop their skill and understanding (p.57).

Within this paradigm, she proposes that feedback will often be generated to the self through self-assessment; or it may come from the recipients of a task given, for example, the audience for which a piece of writing is done. It might be given by peers within a group who develop appropriate criteria, although there is no predetermined '...concept of a single specific goal to be achieved or a performance "gap" to be closed but rather a "horizon of possibilities" to be reached' (p.50). This horizon will be influenced by objectives set in the world beyond the classroom by people engaged in relevant activity as well as by the individual children in the classroom. This focus on the social communities to which learning and assessment tasks are related helps to highlight the absence of recognisable purpose in the tasks described by children in the case study school. The teacher in the socio-cultural model, rather than prescribing goals and assessing students against them as in the traditional model, remains as 'more expert other' or 'guide on the side' (p.52), mediating

between children's own interpretations and culturally established meanings of the wider society, drawing on her own and the children's contributions.

These suggestions for how feedback could assist learning objectives within a socio-cultural perspective accord with observations of how children seek out feedback on learning tasks outside school. For example, Williams (2002) cites the feedback sought and acted on by a young boy:

[To learn to skateboard] I kept doing small things again and again, until I really got them, and just looking at other people doing stuff and seeing what worked for them made me choose the next trick that I wanted to learn. There wasn't anyone telling me I should do this or that next, I just did what I thought was cool, and talked about my difficulties to friends, asking them what they thought about moves and things. I think that is really important to my learning – choosing the time to do something and choosing the way to do it, and being interested in the whole thing, I guess (p.53).

Eckert, Goldman and Wenger (1996) suggest that young people's core incentives for learning, even more so than adults' incentives, entail issues of identity and participation in activities which promote their sense of belonging. They suggest that '... the key to enhancement and motivation in learning lies in the intimate connection between the desire for participation and the role of new knowledge in enabling that' (2006, p.5). The quotation above illustrates the child's use of repeated self-assessment, how he draws on peers' feedback and evaluates all his actions against the self-appointed social goal of being 'cool' which he values highly. Feedback from self and peers is sought out and acted on with speed and enthusiasm because the learner sees feedback as the route to achieving a much valued social goal. Feedback from peers in the community of skate-boarders is seen as crucial

knowledge to be negotiated, which supports the child in grappling with ideas until his inquiry is satisfied and the goal achieved. This child uses social and physical resources skilfully to attract feedback, critically evaluating it and using the knowledge wisely in his future actions.

Some of the children in the research described in the main body of this paper talked about a similar process of actively seeking out feedback from parents, in relation to understanding concepts introduced at school. The parent responded to the child in conversation by giving on-demand feedback so that the child could pursue insistently what interested or bothered them. When the child really wanted to understand certain concepts, they needed on-demand responses to their inquiries. Profile child Nina described how with her mother she frequently wanted to keep getting answers to her own questions until she was sure she understood. Within this interaction, the child described evaluating each morsel of feedback, in order to decide what to seek out next to achieve the self-appointed goal: and all this could be achieved without fear of losing the parent-teacher's approval.

These examples are reinforced by Green's (2001) studies of how popular musicians learn. The musicians she interviewed were all self-appointed musicians who became expert by seeking out feedback from peers in bands or other performing groups as well, sometimes, as from teachers in formal music lessons. Green has tried to import the messages about how popular musicians learn into classroom settings through her Musical Futures project (Green, 2008). In this project, friendship groups of students in music lessons were allowed to set their own performance targets and seek feedback from peers or the teacher. Green describes the passion with which secondary students, sometimes those who were otherwise

disaffected, sought out feedback in deciding what to perform and how to use a musical instrument.

Pryor and Crossouard (2008) observed that the vast majority of feedback in primary schools is of a convergent nature. Convergent feedback simply reinforced correct answers as did much of the feedback commented on in this paper. Pryor and Crossouard note, however, that even in infant classrooms, divergent feedback might also be provided.

... [O]ccasionally we observed another type of formative assessment which we called divergent. ... This involved a much more explicitly dialogic form of language and often moved away from the tripartite IRF structure of language to one which more nearly approximated conversation. The questions teachers posed were different in that often they did not know the answer. These were characterized by children as “helping questions” rather than “testing questions” asking about what had been done and asking them to reconstruct their reasoning. Feedback was exploratory, provisional or provocative prompting further engagement rather than correcting mistakes. Indeed errors were treated more as miscues, valued for insights they gave into how learners were thinking instead of being dismissed.

Concluding comments

Pryor and Crossouard believe that divergent feedback is important for its role in problematising and clarifying the ‘... social rules which governed the learning context’ (p.5). In these instances, the expectation is that children exercise some critical agency in social contexts, formulating meaningful problems, making interesting inquiries or evaluating their own and others’ impact on the world.

To this extent, children themselves can be key contributors to classroom learning if their own experiences become a topic for dialogue within classrooms and schools and if diversity rather than conformity is sought.

Even though policy prescriptions may not shift, an open conversation among pupils and teachers about the prescription itself can encourage the very skills of criticality that prescription, and the convergent feedback that often accompanies it, threaten to undermine. When teachers make explicit connections between children's experiences of feedback, education policy and pupils' present and future lives outside school, learners themselves can take responsibility for their learning. Children can become responsible both for meeting and for challenging policy objectives, as well as for developing and evaluating their own roles in their social systems (see some examples of this in schools following the 'Foxfire' approach: McDonald and Klein, 2003).

However, such models of feedback can seem inconceivable in a system influenced historically and politically by measurement-dominated learning objectives (Alexander, 2010). The children in the present study would be likely to take time to respond fruitfully to divergent feedback in the classroom, given the evidence from this study that they were not used to being asked for their opinion and nor did they always trust themselves to make judgements independently from the teacher. In addition, Mrs K. belongs to a teaching community which, since before her career began, has been told that knowledge is given and then transmitted by teachers whose actions are validated by the judgements made on them by central government and its agents. She has been directed to see feedback as a means of helping children to achieve prescribed targets. Although the ordered situation in her classroom might make it a key site for her to negotiate meanings in the alternative ways

suggested above, the conception of knowledge into which she has been socialised professionally, mitigates against her pursuit of a socio-cultural learning perspective and the outcomes that accompany that. The analysis in this paper serves to highlight the children's experience of these wider pressures on her as a teacher rather than to her autonomously chosen feedback practices.

Existing policy in England as elsewhere encourages teachers' and learners' convergence within one right set of objectives. However, instead of looking for the right answer to the question of what makes teachers' feedback effective in our current classrooms, a more productive question might be how a negotiation can be opened among teachers and learners. This negotiation could fruitfully focus on the teacher's role in feeding back to children about their personal interpretations and how these relate to meanings made in the wider social context.

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