

THE LEADING Teacher

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Students talk back

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH
LIE IN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

By Valerie von Frank

Some states and districts now are finding new ways to ask, what do students know? Not just about reading, writing, and arithmetic, but what do students know about their teachers? Who are good teachers, and in what ways?

States and districts revamping their formal teacher evaluation systems in some cases are using student surveys as one of multiple measures of teacher effectiveness (Burniske & Meibaum, 2012). They generally use standardized student surveys, such as the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction, the Pupil Observation Survey, the Student Evaluation of Teaching, or Ronald Ferguson's student perception survey for the Measures of Effective Teaching project of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (MET, 2010).

Good teaching can be defined by common traits, according to Ferguson, senior lecturer in education and public policy at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, who categorizes these common traits into "seven C's" (see box on p. 4).

Researchers over many decades have suggested that students will engage more deeply and master their lessons more thoroughly when their teachers care about them, control the classroom well, clarify complex ideas, challenge



them to work hard and think hard, deliver lessons in ways that captivate, confer with them about their ideas and consolidate lessons to make learning coherent," Ferguson has written (2010, p. 7). Other research also concludes that students — who naturally spend hundreds of hours with their teachers — are capable from the early grades of identifying what teachers do well, and what they don't (Murphy, Delli & Edwards, 2004).

Students' perceptions of teachers are highly correlated to student performance on standardized tests — when students find teachers effective, achievement gains as measured on the exam are greater for all the students of that teacher (MET, 2010). Research finds students from different classes share similar responses to the same teacher, according to

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Coaches recognize learning is change

As I travel around the nation working with schools, school systems, and state education agencies, some of the most powerful discussions occur when we explore the research on change. We have thought-provoking conversations about practices that promote or inhibit long-term implementation of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors acquired during professional learning. Through these discussions, new ideas, actions, and practices emerge on ways to apply change research to professional learning.

These applications of change research are at the heart of the Implementation standard.

The standard encourages leaders of learning to know and use research on

change to lead, plan, design, facilitate, support, and sustain professional learning.

Interestingly, much of what we know about change is not new. For decades, researchers and experts have explored the impact of change on learning. From the work of Ambrose (1987), Bandura (1986), Fullan (2007), and others, we've learned about the assumptions, processes, behaviors, and practices that support learning during and as a result of change. This research informs how

we approach learning, build capacity, manage change, and overcome resistance.

Specifically, one influential piece of research provides coaches and teacher leaders with a conceptual framework for guiding implementation, the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (Hall & Hord, 2011). The model covers four components that explain how people experience change, including Stages of Concern. This component describes seven stages in which people express concerns about any new practice, initiative, or program through their questions and actions.

Research such as the Concerns-Based Adoption Model provides coaches valuable insight into ways adults learn and subsequently change, and possible interventions to use before, during, and following professional learning.

The following questions help coaches respond to adult learning needs, identify levers and barriers, and improve results for long-term implementation of professional learning.

- What will I do to deepen my understanding of change research?
- How will I demonstrate the value of change research to others?
- Which learning designs will I select to advance implementation?
- What will I use or develop to communicate and clarify change expectations?
- How will I adjust professional learning for differences in learning

preferences and rates?

- Which tools and strategies will I use and make available for giving and receiving ongoing feedback in a variety of formats (e.g. face-to-face, blended, and technology-enabled)?
- With whom and how will I analyze, share, and respond to feedback data?

When teacher leaders and coaches develop knowledge and skills to lead change, they elevate their role and can make timely decisions to address other factors affecting implementation, such as identifying approaches to ongoing support for long-term change and using frequent and constructive feedback.

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Little by little, classroom doors become revolving doors

As told to Valerie von Frank

When my colleague and I began four years ago, this was a newly created position. The first year, we tried to develop a rapport with as many people as we could in as low-risk a way as possible. We developed a cohort for teachers to voluntarily meet together to work to integrate our multiple district initiatives into a seamless, integrated effort. The cohort was a way for us to start working with people and facilitate conversations, to have everyone get to know us in our new role since we had been staff in the building, and to start to share some common language.

We embedded opportunities for peer coaching, pairing people within the cohort to go into each other's classrooms. That gave us an opportunity to get into teachers' classrooms so we could talk about things to focus on and data we could collect, and begin to build coaching relationships.

Going into the classrooms was risky since the teachers were used to having people in their classrooms only for evaluation. It wasn't part of the school culture to be in and out of each other's classrooms. The other coach and I were committed to making classroom doors in our school revolving doors instead of open and shut doors.

I'm a science teacher and still teach

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two classes, so we regularly invited people to come into our classes to collect data using a framework to get used to what to look for and listen to. We also felt we were taking a risk inviting people in, but asked people to come in with a purpose and were candid, saying, "This is something new I'm trying and it would be helpful if you could watch for this while I'm teaching because I can't do all of this at the same time."

Modeling that our classrooms were open was essential for us. We wanted to say, "You can come in and see how this works before I as a coach suggest that I come into your classroom."

We then have brief conversations to share what they saw or the data they collected, so that we can model that it's not me as the coach making judgment calls about what happened in their classrooms; instead, we collect unbiased information and the teachers make use of it in an appropriate way.

Being as present as possible has been a very effective strategy. We went to every staff development training in the district, whether we were involved or not, so people saw us and knew we were getting the same message.

Time has been important. We had big aspirations that first year. We read Jim Knight's coaching book and

thought, "This is what we should be doing right now." It wasn't like that the first year, and it wasn't like that the second year — and I still don't think we're there yet. But there were baby steps we've taken that couldn't have happened any faster. Perseverance was important, as was being flexible with our original goals. We didn't drop any goals, but the timeframe changed a little because we realized it was going to take more time.



Although it was challenging to make the leap to a totally different role when we had been viewed so long as classroom teachers, it was nice because we knew our colleagues so well, knew the overall school climate, knew what would be seen as comfortable, and knew what would be seen as risky. Knowing that helped us pace how we were going to get to the point where we start to look more like coaches than professional developers.

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Ferguson.

Asked the right way, students can offer any teacher feedback to use to immediately improve practice, Ferguson said. He offered teachers several tips to capture student input to improve practice.

DEFINE THE DESIRED OUTCOME

Ferguson notes that teaching has a range of goals, from how much students learn as measured by an exam to creating self-directed learners who love learning for its own sake. Teachers define what they care about in the learning

THE SEVEN C'S

Ronald Ferguson has categorized the characteristics of good teaching into seven areas based on surveys given to students in thousands of classrooms.

Care. Teachers help students feel emotionally safe and go out of their way to help.

EXAMPLE: My teacher really tries to understand how students feel about things.

Control. Teachers are able to maintain order and keep the classroom calm and students on-task.

EXAMPLE: Our class stays busy and doesn't waste time.

Clarify. Teachers are able to diagnose students' skills and knowledge, and then are able to explain ideas in multiple ways to help each student grasp new concepts and clear up confusion.

EXAMPLE: My teacher has several good ways to explain each topic that we cover in this class.

Challenge. Teachers press students to reason their way through challenging questions and confront students if their effort is unsatisfactory.

EXAMPLE: My teacher wants us to use our thinking skills, not just memorize things.

Captivate. Teachers make the material interesting and relevant to what students care about.

EXAMPLE: I often feel like this class has nothing to do with real life outside of school.

Confer. Teachers ask students for their views and provide positive reinforcement for their efforts. Teachers also encourage students to express themselves to one another.

EXAMPLE: My teacher gives us time to explain our ideas.

Consolidate. Teachers help students organize material to help them remember and reason. They help with reviewing and summarizing skills by showing students how to find relationships between ideas and identify patterns.

EXAMPLE: My teacher takes the time to summarize what we learn each day.

Source: Ferguson, R. F. (2010). *Student perceptions of teaching effectiveness: Discussion brief*. Cambridge, MA: National Center for Teacher Effectiveness and the Achievement Gap Initiative, Harvard University.

experiences they create for students, he said, and should be regularly monitoring how well they are meeting their goals. However, they also need to balance being engaging with being challenging.

Stressing students to the maximum by emphasizing achievement as measured by standardized exams may maximize short-term learning gains, Ferguson said, but not cultivate a love of learning. Focusing on entertaining and not challenging students at appropriate times, however, may not result in learning. Teachers should know the difference between academic support and academic press, and pay attention to how much of each they provide, he said.

ASK THE STUDENTS

Ferguson suggests that teachers can begin their own learning experience without using a formal survey. Ask students an open-ended question, he said, such as, "What is working well in our class?" or "What things do you think I could do better?"

"It is initially more helpful because it's totally authentic," he said. Teachers will learn more by reading through the responses and determining for themselves the common elements. "Reading those paragraphs one at a time will mean something," he said.

Follow up through discussing with the students how they are experiencing the classroom is a prime learning opportunity, Ferguson said. "The kids talking through their own experiences help the teacher to become more self-conscious about what experiences the teacher is producing through the way they are teaching," he said.

Ferguson suggested asking students one or two questions once a week, and even asking students to formulate the questions they respond to next. Teachers then might try developing a few questions on a rating scale and giving students that survey.

PREPARE FOR THE RESULTS

"The things students say will be more or less explicit," Ferguson said. "Students tell teachers, 'I like it when you call on several people before you tell us who got it right,' or 'I don't like it when you do that because then we have to try to come up with something different and maybe the first person gave the right answer already.'"

These responses can guide teacher practices. Ideally, student feedback leads to positive change, but the response to the results depends on the teacher's personality and skill level, Ferguson noted.

He said school leaders may help guide how the feedback is used, particularly to ensure that there are no repercussions for students, and also suggested that schools might want to make available counseling services as candid feedback might not match with teachers' self-perceptions.

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"Negative feedback might demoralize a teacher. They may feel like they are doing the best they know how to do and can't imagine another way to do it, but students are saying it's not good enough," he said. "That's not having a useful result to change practice."

USE THE INFORMATION

"There is a lot of validity and reliability to students' perspectives. The issue is to translate those perspectives into actual teaching moves in the classroom," Ferguson said.

Teachers who recognize the connection between their actions and student results can use the feedback to fine-tune what they are doing to get different results.

Teachers might start by using feedback in a collective learning experience within their learning teams, discussing the feedback with one another or with a coach, Ferguson suggested. By formalizing the activity through others within the school, using feedback then has "a social incentive," he noted, and may be more likely to be used for teacher professional learning.

A group of science teachers using student feedback for example, found its value "was in its capacity to provide teachers with a picture of their ideal teacher, how they see themselves, and how their students see them. These pictures became the focus for the teachers' discussions on one aspect of their teaching behaviours" (Fisher, Fraser & Cresswell, 1995, p. 15).

Formalizing student feedback as a school community also could be useful, Ferguson said, using explicit norms and values for how the feedback can contribute to teachers' learning and improve their practice and support to avoid consequences for students.

A HIGHER AWARENESS

"Student feedback can lead teachers to be more conscious of what they are trying to achieve and because they are more conscious of it, they work more purposefully toward achieving it," Ferguson said.

"One teacher told us just reading through the survey was in itself professional learning," he continued. "Just posing questions about classroom practice reminds you that that is a classroom practice and you might not be thinking about how you are doing it. It affects the mental process of preparing to teach and delivering instruction."

Ferguson said a teacher once wrote to him after he had been to the school to administer student surveys, "Congratulations on finding one more way to waste my time. You don't know the kind of students I'm teaching here."

"I can imagine how his students are responding to him," Ferguson said. "His characterization of his students is probably totally correct, but what he doesn't realize is the degree to which he is producing the behavior he is looking

at. He is disrespecting them, and they are disrespecting him in return."

"Anything a teacher asks students about the way they are experiencing teaching and learning in a class can be used by that teacher as something they can set out to change."

On the other hand, he said, teachers in Shaker Heights, Ohio, surveyed students about the amount of time they were spending on homework. They expected one result they found — students of color were not completing their homework as frequently as white students were. They also found, though, that all the students were spending approximately the same amount of time working on the homework.

That finding, Ferguson said, changed the teachers' views of the students of color, increased their empathy, and created a different school culture and climate where more teachers rededicated themselves to supporting students.

"Every one of us can get better," Ferguson said. "We think we just are the way we are. It doesn't have to be that way. None of us knows what we don't know. We need to be open to learning and we need to anticipate that if we make an effort to improve, we actually will improve. We need not give up on each other or ourselves, the same way we talk about not giving up on our students."

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Build student feedback on trust and respect

Consulting students about what they need to learn is a process of building mutual trust and respect, according to Alison Cook-Sather, professor of education and coordinator of the Teaching and Learning Initiative at Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pa.

When planning to engage student feedback, consider the principles on p. 7 that Cook-Sather offers to help build trust and respect. Answer the questions below each principle to begin applying them to your own context.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN ENGAGING STUDENT FEEDBACK

Be sure you are committed not only to listening but also to responding.

Educators should consult students only if they have a genuine desire to hear what students have to say and a firm commitment to use what students say to improve teaching and learning in classrooms.

How can you secure commitment to action from others on staff?

Be prepared to explain your purpose and focus.

Educators should explain clearly to students the purpose and focus of the consultation, making clear how, and why, if appropriate, they were selected for consultation and what will happen to what they say, including the educator's own willingness to be influenced by what students say as well as by other necessary considerations.

How will you articulate the purpose and intentions to students?

Create conditions for dialogue.

The conditions of dialogue — in which we listen to and learn from each other in new ways — make the consultation productive.

What can you do to create an environment where students are active participants in conversations?

Choose methods that focus on deepening understanding.

The methods of consultation used should be chosen to deepen educators' understanding of students' experiences of teaching and learning in classrooms and the school as a whole.

What types of questions can you ask to better understand the full range of student experiences with and perspectives of teaching practices?

Give students feedback.

After consultation, students need feedback on how what they have said has been understood and on how it will influence or has influenced educator planning and actions.

What method will you use to communicate your understanding and reactions to student feedback?

Be realistic.

Student consultation needs to be planned realistically from the beginning, with particular attention to the time and energy needed for all phases of it.

How can you ensure ongoing support for gathering feedback from students and from whom?

Adapted from: Cook-Sather, A. (2010, August). Through students' eyes. *JSD* (31)4, 44-45. Available online at www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd

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