Student Voices about the Role Feedback Plays in the Enhancement of their Learning

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Abstract: If feedback is to be framed as purposeful dialogue then both students and teachers have significant roles to play. Students must be willing and able to provide feedback to teachers not only about their learning needs but also about the teaching they experience. In turn, teachers must create the conditions that support active student learning and disclosure. It is against this backdrop that the current interpretive, qualitative research was carried out. Set within the final year of secondary schooling in New Zealand (Year 13) this paper draws on data generated from two semi-structured, focus group interviews. It provides insights into 14 students' perspectives about the role feedback plays in the enhancement of their learning, the kinds of experiences and interactions needed to support their disclosure of learning needs and the dispositions teachers need to exhibit to create a trustful, mutually respectful environment.

Introduction

New Zealand's official policy on learning and teaching, The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) aims to *"set the direction for student learning"* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007, p. 8) including the approaches to teaching, learning and assessment which should be fostered and the conditions under which effective learning, teaching and assessment take place. In doing so the NZC challenges the status quo. The vision to develop *"young people who will be confident, connected, actively involved, life-long learners"* (MoE, 2007, p. 7) requires both teachers and students to reconceptualise their roles in teaching, learning and assessment and for both parties to re-think the nature of the teacher-student relationship. No longer can teachers expect to control the teaching and learning agenda. Nor can they expect students to be passive recipients in learning and assessment. Rather, teachers are now expected to foster learning focused partnerships with their students, at the same time developing the reflective habits of mind that will enable them to become independent, autonomous learners. By necessity, for students to participate fully in a productive, learning focused partnership with teachers, they must be both willing and able to take ownership of and responsibility for their learning. Students must also possess the confidence to articulate their learning needs to others and be assured that such disclosure is essential to the improvement of learning and teaching. The creation of a trustful, mutually supportive and respectful learning environment is therefore critical to student participation and disclosure (Cowie, 2005; Dixon, 2011).

Set within the final year of secondary schooling in New Zealand (Year 13) this paper will be of interest to teachers at all levels of schooling. Small scale in nature, it provides insights into students' perspectives about the role feedback plays in the enhancement of their learning, the kinds of experiences and interactions needed to support their disclosure of

learning needs and the dispositional qualities teachers need to exhibit to create a trustful, mutually respectful environment.

Feedback – The Link Between Learning and Teaching

Feedback is an essential component of assessment for learning, which if used appropriately can support and scaffold students' learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and lead to substantial learning gains. If as required, teachers and learners work in partnership to aid improvement, feedback can be conceptualized as the crucial link between teaching and learning. Embedded as it is in an intricate mix of directives, dialogue and discussion, feedback can be given in a planned or spontaneous manner (Assessment Reform Group, 1999). Within the context of the classroom, feedback exists in a multitude of forms: written comments, grades, marks, oral responses and non-verbal gestures. The notion of feedback as a one-way communicative activity, where the source of information is external to the learner, has been criticised due to its dependency-creating effect on learners (Sadler, 2010). Recognising the pivotal role that learners play in learning and assessment, the most valuable form of feedback is now commonly considered to be that which is constructed jointly by teachers and students and framed as a dialogue (Nicol & Mcfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Given the importance of feedback to learning, a number of studies have focused on teachers' conceptions and use of feedback to enhance student learning (Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2006; Tunstall & Gipps, 1996). Dixon (2008) for example, found that teachers had differing perceptions of their role and that of students in the feedback process. At one extreme, one group of teachers envisaged the feedback process to be controlled by teachers with students assigned the role of passive recipients and consumers of teachers' feedback. Conversely, at the other end of the spectrum, another, smaller group of teachers held more contemporary understandings related to the roles and responsibilities assigned to teachers and students. This group of teachers placed a greater emphasis on the students' role, viewing them as active participants, capable of generating feedback information about their own learning and that of others.

However, as noted elsewhere (e.g. Gamlem & Smith, 2013; Hargreaves, 2013), while it is important to gain insights into teachers' feedback-related understandings and practice, such insights provide an incomplete picture of the ways in which feedback is used to support and enhance learning and teaching. To date little attention has been paid to researching students' understandings of feedback, their role in the feedback process, or how they use feedback to improve learning or to modify the teaching they experience. As Hargreaves (2013) has argued, *"without the learner's perspective the crucially important affective and interactional aspects of learners' responses to feedback are likely to be missing"* (p. 230).

UK-based longitudinal research (Hargreaves, 2012, 2013), aimed at unraveling students' perspectives related to the usefulness of teachers' feedback for their learning, paints a complex and somewhat contradictory picture. Utilising video recordings of a range of literacy and numeracy lessons as an aide memoire, 27 Year 5 students were interviewed to gain insight into their understands of, and responses to, their teacher's feedback as well as "the contexts in which the feedback was used" (Hargreaves, 2013 p. 232). Findings underscore the fact that students' reactions and responses to feedback are emotional, idiosyncratic, variable and context dependent. In the main, feedback that was considered most useful was that framed as a dialogue between themselves and the teacher. As such the feedback was not overly burdensome in amount but contained sufficient detail in the form of prompts and reminder cues, which enabled them to progress in their learning. However, while this was the preferred means of generating feedback information it was context

dependent. In some instances, students wanted their teacher to 'take the lead' and provide feedback in the form of directives. Not unexpectedly, teachers' feedback evoked a range of responses in each student that covered the emotional spectrum from positive and motivating for learning to negative and inhibiting of learning.

Student willingness to reveal misunderstandings and misconceptions is dependent on the classroom culture that exists (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Mutual trust and respect are foundational to honest student disclosure. To counteract the potential negative effects of divulging misunderstandings or misconceptions when among peers, the reactions and responses of teachers and students needed to be both considerate and well-intentioned (Cowie, 2005). However, as Hargreaves (2013) discovered, well-intentioned teacher feedback is open to student interpretation. As she found in a number of cases, students interpreted well-intentioned detailed feedback from the teacher as a lack of confidence in their abilities as learners.

Eliciting formal and informal feedback from students presents challenges for teachers but to develop *"young people who will be confident, connected, actively involved, life-long learners"* (MoE, 2007, p. 7) demands that they are both willing and able to provide feedback to teachers not only about their learning needs but also about the teaching they experience. It is against this backdrop that the current research was carried out. As such the research aimed to investigate students' understandings of the role feedback plays in the enhancement of their learning and the factors which help or hinder them when wanting to disclose their learning needs to teachers.

Context and Background to the Study

A large, suburban, secondary state girls' school was the site of the study. The school was chosen because one of the authors, a teacher-researcher, taught at the school and therefore the school was accessible. There were approximately 400 Year 13 students available to be selected for the research. This year level was targeted as it was expected the students would have had experience of giving feedback, which was crucial to the study.

While the school selection was one of convenience (Punch, 2005) the participants were chosen purposively (Cronin, 2008; Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007). Two criteria were used. The participants had to be current Year 13 students and not been taught by, or been professionally associated with, the teacher-researcher who taught at the school. Year 13 tutor teachers in the school advertised the research project and distributed *expression of interest* forms to all students inviting them to take part in the research. The teacher-researcher also spoke to each of the tutor groups about the research. Those students who wanted to take part in the research gave their consent by placing their forms into a box in an area of the school where they would not be observed. Fourteen students who met the selection criteria comprised the research sample.

To give primacy to the views and experiences of the students, the research was situated within the interpretive paradigm (Neuman, 2003). A qualitative approach was used to collect the data that provided "intricate details … such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11). The study attempted to glean insight into the worlds of the Year 13 girls for whom it was anticipated different experiences of giving feedback might occur.

The strategy used to collect the data was semi-structured focus group interviews. Two focus groups were established: one group comprised six girls and the other eight girls. Focus groups have small numbers of participants in which the participants are encouraged to interact with each other (May, 2001) and are viewed as useful when there is a single topic for

discussion (Punch, 2005). They may yield a variety of ideas from different participants in a short time frame (May, 2001; Punch, 2005). In addition, the synergies of the group may give rise to a greater number of ideas emerging than in a one-on-one conversation (May, 2001; Punch, 2005). Focus group interviews are not without their limitations. The teacher-researcher needed to be aware that the pressure to conform to what is being said by most in the group might reduce the expression of divergent views held by participants (May, 2001; Punch, 2005).

The focus group interviews were semi-structured. The researcher had a set of questions devised in advance but was also able to use probes to draw out more information from the participants during the interview (May, 2001). To ensure the questions for the focus groups were suitable and that the length of the interviews was appropriate, pilot interviews were conducted (Merriam, 2009). The questions during the focus group interviews centred on students' perceptions of the purpose of feedback to their teacher and factors that affected the giving of feedback. In addition, students' perceptions about teacher dispositions, teacher actions and the class environment that Year 13 students perceive support their learning during the feedback process were gathered. The semi-structured focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

The transcriptions of two recorded focus group interviews formed the data for this research. The constant comparative method was used as the key analytical tool, in which *"different pieces of data [are compared] for similarities and differences"* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 65). One consideration associated specifically with focus group analysis is identifying the unit of analysis to be used; the individual, the group or the two groups (Morgan, 1997). All three units were used in the current study to ensure a thorough understanding of the data.

Ethics approval was sought and given by the University's Human Participants Ethics Committee prior to the study being carried out. The Year 13 girls gave their consent to take part in the research and, to maintain anonymity, pseudonyms are used in this article. As the teacher-researcher taught in the school it was recognised that issues of power may be prevalent. Such issues were mitigated by the purposive sampling in which only students who had not been taught be the teacher-researcher were chosen.

In this study credibility was established by two means: peer debriefing and member checking (Creswell, 2003). Peer-debriefing involved the transcripts of the interviews being provided to the other two authors and the teacher-researcher's analysis of the data subjected to rigorous scrutiny. The teacher-researcher's interpretations of the students' views were challenged, reviewed, and refined during discussion with the other two authors. Once the essence of the findings had been agreed, all the students were emailed a 10-point summary of the findings with an invitation to correct or amend the summary if summary-points were found to be incomplete or inaccurate. Feedback indicated that the students concurred with the findings.

Findings

Three key themes emerged from the data and are reported here. These are: feedback to improve learning and teaching, Classroom climate and teacher attributions conducive to the giving of feedback to teachers and classroom climate and teacher attributions that inhibit the giving of feedback to teachers. Each theme will be outlined in turn.

Feedback to improve learning and teaching

Students in the current study recognized the power of feedback to support learning and teaching. The reasons students wanted to give feedback to their teachers were two-fold. In the first instance students realized that if teachers were to support them in their learning then they had the responsibility to disclose misunderstandings, misconceptions or areas of confusion. As Grace explained: *"I was just like 'Oh I don't understand this. I'm completely confused' and then the teacher is more likely to come and help."*

Providing signals to teachers that learning was not progressing as expected was seen as a reference point for a continuing dialogue between teacher and student. Students hoped that such dialogue would result in the establishment of individual learning goals that could meet their needs as this helped "map out what you want to achieve" (Layla).

In-class informal, spontaneous, oral and individual feedback was the preferred way in which students could communicate their needs to teachers. Informal feedback given spontaneously when students realised they required individual assistance from their teachers was regarded as being of optimal benefit to their learning:

> Open continuous feedback from everyone would be more beneficial [if] the teachers almost just like accepted that different people were going to need different things. (Ruby)

Students realized the challenge teachers face in responding to students' learning needs. They recognized "it's so hard to cater for everyone and everyone is different" (Molly). They also recognized that their learning needs were not static and altered during the year. The changing nature of learning needs and the idiosyncratic nature of those needs highlighted for students the necessity for ongoing, multiple and authentic opportunities for them to disclose. Planned formal, substantial opportunities during class time to provide feedback not only about their understanding of content but also the delivery of that content were also appreciated. However, as Emily noted, if teachers were serious about providing opportunities where thoughtful and insightful feedback could be given, then these could not be *"squished into the last five minutes at the end of a lesson"*. There were benefits attached to providing teachers with written feedback if these opportunities occurred during a particular topic or unit. Formal written feedback opportunities which enabled students to maintain a level of anonymity and avoid the possible humiliation of disclosing misunderstandings and misconceptions in front of their peers were valued and signalled to students that teachers were interested in their learning. End of year surveys that students were often asked to complete were regarded by the students as of little value to their learning, as the main beneficiary was considered to be the teacher. Completing surveys was seen primarily as a compliance exercise, which did not allow students to directly engage with their teachers or to share their own, specific learning needs.

A second reason to provide feedback to teachers was to heighten teachers' awareness of the effectiveness of their pedagogy in relation to meeting learning needs. As students could learn from the provision of feedback, so too, could their teachers. In instances where they felt learning needs were being met students felt it was their responsibility to affirm their teachers' efforts. In instances where a teacher's pedagogical approach fell short of expectations, feedback was seen as a way in which their preferred ways of learning could be shared with teachers and if they were willing and able, *"teachers can adapt to everyone's needs"* (Shinikwa). The students appeared to feel affirmed by changes made as a result of their feedback:

>In term two she came up to class and she was like 'Okay, these are the improvements I have made. I have made the notes shorter and I won't speak while you write notes' …which was really good because we could see the change as well. (Zippora)

While students felt it important to provide feedback to their teachers in relation to the effectiveness of their pedagogy, they were also sensitive to their teachers' feelings and the potential risks to the teacher–student relationship. Recognizing that feedback evokes an emotional response from the recipients of feedback, students were at times faced with the dilemma of hurting their teachers' feelings and thus questioned whether they could "tell the complete truth" (Jane). To this end they resisted being overly critical, tempering their feedback to protect teachers' sensitivities: "they've put a lot of thought and effort into their job …. And you don't want to crush them" (Jane).

Classroom Climate and Teacher Attributes Conducive to the Giving of Feedback to Teachers

Students also spoke of factors within the control of teachers which influenced students' feedback to teachers. Teachers who accepted unsolicited feedback from students were perceived as having dispositions receptive to it. Such teachers created classroom environments in which the giving of informal feedback and meeting of individual needs seemed to evolve as a result of the ease in their interactions. Students spoke frequently of teachers who created a positive classroom environment and repeatedly used adjectives such as "comfortable" (Molly), and "carefree…relaxed" (Manduli). Seemingly, easy and respectful learning relationships helped students to feel positive about giving feedback, as Ali articulated:

>When you have a good relationship with them it's definitely way easier to give feedback if you can just say it to them whereas others you know that they'd kind of take offence immediately.

The capacity to create rapport was characterised by teachers who interacted with students and demonstrated an interest in the learning of all students in a class and were consequently "one-on-one with everyone" (Ruby) and "know all of us" (Jane). Such closeness between students and teachers was developed through their physical proximity with teachers moving "around every single desk in every single class" (Toni) and having "a two minute chat" (Grace). Informal and frequent checking of students' progress was greatly appreciated. Teachers' movement around the class offered students an opportunity to have a private dialogue with their teacher and helped militate against feeling stupid, losing face with peers or "feeling ostracised" (Zippora) because they were falling behind.

Teachers' reactions to students' feedback were critical to students' confidence, responsiveness, and willingness to disclose further learning needs. In the first instance teachers had to convey a genuine interest in supporting student understanding and/or learning. Secondly, they had to be seen to take action to address needs at an individualised level as Emily noted: "if we say we don't understand …. She'll like explain and then tailor it to different people which is really good" (Emilly).

Classroom Climate and Teacher Attributes that Hindered the Giving of Feedback to Teachers

The perceived reactions of teachers to student questions might prevent students from feeling comfortable to give feedback. On occasion, students suggested their teachers were unwilling to respond to questions which students asked. The absence of a tangible response made students less keen to seek assistance again:

> You ask her about a certain concept and she'll [reply] 'I don't know. It was in the textbook.' (Ruby).

In another instance, experience of a teacher's negative reaction to the asking of questions discouraged further help-seeking and invoked feelings of helplessness in students:

> She was just complaining that we all had these questions. …she made me feel really bad. So now I don't want to like go talk to her (Grace).

Teachers who made comparisons to other classes they taught or to other individuals was seen as demeaning and had a deleterious effect on the students' willingness to disclose. Assigning blame to a student for lack of progress or academic success also affected students' readiness to disclose. Teachers' non-verbal responses, body language and overall demeanor as well as their physical location within the classroom context sent strong messages regarding approachability and created a hesitancy to speak out:

> I have a teacher and she's not exactly strict but everyone is afraid of her. No one wants to ask her questions (Alice).

While the students perceived that some teachers were receptive to checking class understandings of progress in a general manner, they were unwilling to explore whether all students understood. The teachers were instead satisfied by the affirmation of a few. Students commented that teachers needed to look beyond the responses of those confident students, as there were other students who were hesitant to signal openly about their lack of understanding:

> They take it how the class is going by the front row. But the front row is usually the smart people ahead of a lot of people and so they assume that if the front row's okay with it then they assume that everyone's okay with it (Alice).

Issues of trust in the relationship between teacher and student seemed to affect the willingness of some students to give feedback. In environments where teacher reactions were not perceived as positive, students were aware of the inherent risks to themselves in asking questions of their teacher. They perceived that some teachers and students seemed to consider learning should progress *en masse* and so giving feedback which demonstrated a student was falling behind or striding ahead of others could lead to feelings of exclusion. Students spoke of being reticent to indicate publicly that their progress might not match that of their peers:

> There's always that expectation that everyone is at the same level and if you know one is not you feel kind of almost ostracised (Zippora).

The students were uncertain of the volition of some teachers to change if given feedback which was unfavourable or suggestive of improvement. Such doubt seemed to deter students from providing feedback:

> Three of my five teachers I know that they could change if I asked them to but with the other two I know that they wouldn't just for anyone and I know that people have had problems with them before (Toni).

They spoke of classes in which they were experiencing difficulties in learning but felt unable to give feedback as the teachers did not seek it:

> There was actually like no feedback in that class at all so I couldn't really get my point of view out and everything (Zippora).

Students suggested inaction might be because a few teachers lacked the skills to change their pedagogy:

> The reason feedback is often brushed off is because they don't know how to act on it…they might find it quite difficult to change their teaching style (Ruby).

In summary, the provision of feedback to teachers was considered beneficial in two respects. Firstly, to have their own learning needs addressed in class, and secondly to motivate their teachers to adapt their practice to suit the learning needs of their students. From students' perspectives the classroom conditions created by teachers were seen to be critical factors in students' willingness to provide feedback to their teachers.

Discussion

In 2007, Hattie and Timperley highlighted a paucity of studies that had *"systematically investigated the meaning of feedback in classrooms"* (p. 81). Since that time, while some attention has been paid to teachers' understandings and practice, far less attention has been paid to comprehending students' understandings of their role in the feedback process (Hargreaves, 2013). Albeit small-scale in nature, by capturing the students' voice the current study provides some insights into students' understandings of their role as well as the conditions that help or hinder them in regard to taking an active role in providing feedback to their teachers about their learning needs, including the appropriateness of teachers' pedagogy to fulfil these needs.

Students in the current study subscribed to the notion that they needed to work alongside their teachers to generate feedback about their own learning. They acknowledged that, if their learning was to be enhanced, they needed to be both willing and able to disclose their learning needs. Being able to give spontaneous feedback and to engage in a dialogue with teachers at the time a learning issue arose was seen as beneficial. Teachers' timely response to student feedback was regarded as essential for effective learning as it enabled students to "check out and correct misunderstandings and to get an immediate response to difficulties" (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 210). Single irregular opportunities for feedback to teachers were not considered to be as valuable as those which occurred in real time when help was needed. Seemingly, students understood that feedback is most effective during performance when feedback itself provides *"an episode of learning"* (Wiggins, 1993,

p. 183).

In the same way that students learn from the feedback their teachers give to them, students in the current study hoped that teachers could enhance their effectiveness by seeking and acting on the feedback provided by their students as "information to … help shape teaching" (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 205). By utilising feedback they received from students, they hoped that teachers could more quickly adapt their pedagogy to "improve the students' competence by short-circuiting the randomness and inefficiency of trial-and-error learning" (Sadler, 1989, p. 120).

Cook-Sather (2009) wrote that in-class occasions for giving feedback empowered students as the value of it was evident in the resultant tailoring of pedagogy to meet their needs. For this reason, it is advantageous if teachers signal to students changes they have made in their teaching as a consequence of student feedback (Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002). The students spoke in an approbatory manner of teachers who consulted with them on action plans they had formulated in response to formal feedback. Such acts affirm the usefulness for students of engaging with their teachers to meet their needs (Davies, Hirschberg, Lye, Johnson, & McDonald, 2005). Evidence of a willingness to act on feedback by their teachers encouraged the students in this study to give feedback more confidently and frequently.

Feedback which benefits students necessitates teachers capable of "understanding and addressing the individual needs of each student as these appear day-by-day, week-by-week" (Fullan, 2007, p. 36). Aware that reactions and responses to feedback can be emotional (Hargreaves, 2013), the students in the current study hoped their feedback would encourage in their teachers "positive motivational beliefs" (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 205). However, even though students' feedback was well-intentioned, teachers' responses to the feedback given did not always result in improvements to teaching or to their learning. As Cohen (1980) found, even though willing to act on feedback provided, some teachers find it difficult to make changes to their pedagogical approach.

Carnell (2000) observed that dialogic feedback occurs spontaneously and informally. Further, she wrote that students do not associate such behaviours with the classroom context and that these are rare. The students in this study also found occasions when they felt able to give feedback to be irregular and infrequent in their classes. They articulated clearly that there was a variety of factors that affected their sharing of information about their learning needs with their teachers. These factors lay within both the teachers' and the students' domains.

"Trust and personal interaction are always important elements" in the giving and receiving of feedback (Sadler, 1998, p. 79). The students in this and other studies have indicated that a relationship of trust with their teachers was essential if they were to give feedback (Cowie, 2005). Such relationships are built through personal interaction (Carnell, 2000). These students were hesitant to give feedback if they felt they did not know their teachers well; they needed "a sense of personal relatedness" (Newman & Schwager, 1993, p. 11). Anxiety about disclosing problems with their learning was mitigated if students and teachers had developed mutual trust through "simple interpersonal actions of teacher involvement such as expressions of personal warmth and interest" (Newman & Schwager, 1993, p. 13). The students in this study commented that, in those classes where they felt most comfortable giving feedback, teachers had personalised conversations with them which traversed each student's learning abilities and skills, as well as interests and this echoes other research findings (Askew & Lodge, 2000). Such behaviours were appreciated by these students as they acknowledged the temporal, personal and pedagogical difficulties for teachers of meeting the needs of so many individuals.

A preference for giving feedback personally to their teachers rather than to a class audience was strongly expressed by the students in this study. Students in particular felt

uncomfortable disclosing a lack of understanding in front of peers and perambulatory teachers ensured assistance did not have to be sought publicly. Such assistance could be personalised and specific to meet the needs of individuals. They observed dialogue took place when teachers and/or students circulated in classrooms. Cowie (2005) in her New Zealand-based study noted that students *"used the occasions when teachers 'came round' to ask for clarification of task instructions, confirmation their ideas were correct, and for help to complete tasks and make sense of ideas"* (p. 142). It was clear from the commentary of the students in this study that they believed teachers and students needed to have physical proximity in order to ensure communication was private and personal and in such circumstances feedback was more likely to be given. In practice, this entailed teachers creating opportunities for students to ask questions about the day's work, or informally checking students' progress.

Movement within secondary school classrooms by either teachers or students is dependent on the pedagogical approach of practitioners. The students in the current study expressed their frustration with teachers who maintained static positions isolated from most or all of their class. When teachers maintained their distance in this way, the students assumed interaction was unwanted. In addition to this, students considered teachers to abrogate interest in individuals when checking class progress or understandings only with those students, usually perceived as able and quick, who sat near to them. This might be termed the 'front row' syndrome.

An obstacle to the giving of feedback was a fear by students of a negative response to it from their teachers which might harm their relationship. Students spoke of being too frightened to ask questions, or of having instances when their help-seeking was rebuffed. Such experiences deterred further requests for assistance from those teachers. Comparisons of results with students from the teacher's previous classes were said to be off-putting, as was attribution of blame to students for poor progress or grades. Students were apprehensive about asking questions if teachers had not given tangible indications that they were receptive to them. Hattie and Timperley (2007) wrote that students appear to consider the costs of seeking help and balance these against the benefits of gaining it before giving feedback to teachers and this was true of the students in this study. If they felt giving feedback was not feasible, they sought other sources for assistance, usually peers and such alternative help-seeking strategies have been found in other studies (Cowie, 2005).

Conclusion

Students in the current study subscribed to a contemporary notion of feedback. Within the classroom context the most beneficial feedback was construed as "teacher and peer dialogue around learning*"* (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 205). In conceptualising feedback as dialogue about learning the participating students acknowledged that both students and teachers have significant roles to play if feedback is to improve both learning and teaching. They recognised the two-way exchange of feedback information as a "dynamic generative process" (Anderson, 1999, p. 65) whereby both students and teachers become co-constructors of each other's learning.

As required in a purposeful dialogue, students demonstrated a readiness to take charge of their learning through the contemplation and planning of how it is best effected (Anderson, 1999). However, while disclosure was seen as an important factor in the creation of dialogic opportunities, it was insufficient in itself. Potential threats to students' academic standing when disclosing needs had to be mediated by teachers' responses to such disclosure. Teachers themselves had to foster an environment that promoted "equality, sharing,

spontaneity, collaboration and reciprocity" (Carnell, 2000, p. 47) in order to support all students to become "actively involved ...learners" (MoE, 2007, p. 7).

The study highlights that when teachers were willing to rescind their traditional authority as pedagogical and subject experts and to distribute power between themselves and their students, feedback functioned as "a source of insight and help instead of an occasion for meting out rewards and punishment" (Shepard, 2005, p. 10) and was thus considered beneficial for both students and teachers. However, in students' experience such environments were not widespread.

Seemingly more work needs to be done to raise teachers' consciousness in regard to the creation of conditions that will support student disclosure of learning needs. Hence, as Feiman-Nemser (2001) has argued, from a professional development perspective considerable time needs to be spent engaging teachers in a cycle of inquiry, grounded in the particulars of teaching and learning and based on an analysis of relevant classroom evidence and interactions which will raise their awareness of the changing roles and responsibilities of teachers and students, the changing nature of the teacher-student relationship and the kind of actions and interactions needed to develop productive learning focused partnerships with students.

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