REFEREED ARTICLE

What Makes Principals' Feedback Effective?

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Abstract

When it comes to generating better practices, feedback – a fair representation of professional performance – plays a crucial role due to its transformational power of enhancing skills, which helps ensure high-quality teaching in the classroom. However, principals' lack of time, lack of knowledge of curriculum content, and lack of training are the causal factors for ineffective feedback. This paper presents elements that make K-12 principals' feedback effective. Feedback must be given within a 24-hour period after each supervision or evaluation; it must also be descriptive, specific, understandable and dialogical while communicating through constructive dialogue.

The English word *feedback* has been spoken and used worldwide as a synonym for relevant information given to someone to improve performance. Feedback is largely accepted to be essential to all areas of modern society due to its transformational power of enhancing skills. In education, feedback has been positioned as helpful in improving professional practice because when "principals provide feedback to teachers they help them, illuminating their competencies and areas for improvement" (Papay, 2012, p. 125).

According to Sullivan (2005), the purpose and delivery of meaningful feedback are vital elements of the clinical supervision and evaluation process. In other words, feedback is a fair representation of professional performance and also a mechanism to improve it through support. Moreover, feedback is indispensable when the objective is to ensure high-quality teaching in every classroom.

However, proper feedback is not always given to teachers due to many reasons. For instance, school administrators may not give thorough feedback because of lack of time, lack of knowledge of curriculum content, and lack of evaluation training. Furthermore, some principals do not give teachers any sort of dialogical feedback:

> It saddens me that so few school leaders talk to teachers after classroom visits. Some principals don't give feedback at all, which drives teachers crazy. (What did he think?!). Some principals leave a post-it note on the teacher's desk on the way out with quick jottings. (Go Tiger! Great lesson!). Others prefer to fill out a checklist and put it in the teacher's mailbox. Others devise their own formats for written notes (a box for "Wow" and a box for "I wonder…"). And others email their comments. All these suffer from the lack of human contact – and the teacher not having a chance to explain the context.
> (Marshall, 2013, p. 65)

It is evident that when principals do not have sufficient time and comprehension of curriculum content, their feedback may not reflect what teachers do in their classrooms. Another aspect to consider is that most of them do not have any evaluation training or an insightful understanding of school policy. Hence, "providing instructional feedback is also complicated by local contexts, organizational constraints, and principals' knowledge of instruction, curriculum, and content-area pedagogy" (Wieczorek et al., 2019, p. 358).

For feedback to be effective, principals should give it within 24 hours, with specific considerations about teachers' practices through written and oral communication. Schut et al. (2022) strongly emphasized dialogue as an important asset to the learning process since it has to do with communicating information. Boehmer (2021) also emphasized that some analyses

have demonstrated that principals can undoubtedly impact teachers' sense of self-efficacy through appropriate feedback based on constructive dialogue.

As noted above, there is an intrinsic relationship between feedback and dialogue. The main purpose of this article is to demonstrate elements that make feedback truly effective. It must be properly given after every supervision or evaluation, and also be descriptive, specific, and understandable while communicating through dialogue. In this way, competency and professional growth, which are the objectives of the teacher evaluation system, will be enhanced.

Literature Review

The Importance of Principals' Feedback

Teachers need principals' feedback to boost their performances. Feedback is important because "evaluations must provide teachers with clear understanding not only of their current success or failure but also of the practices they need to develop to become more successful with their students" (Papay, 2012, p. 138). Additionally, principals should offer teachers opportunities to learn, and districts should build the ability of principals to support teachers through feedback.

In accordance with Boehmer (2021), teachers' level of self-efficacy increases when they receive proper feedback. The teacher evaluation process should measure professional practices, inform, and support ongoing development. Wieczorek et al. (2018) stated that when principals provide meaningful feedback through instructional supervision and evaluation, teachers' competencies and students' performances are improved.

As previously mentioned, providing relevant feedback is an instrument that empowers school leaders to positively impact teaching and learning achievements. Moreover, the proper use of feedback contributes to retaining high-quality teachers, which is a vital asset to any educational institution (Marshall, 2013). Marzano (2003) stated that when principals give significant feedback, teachers' self-efficacy leads to students' progress since feedback is an essential component to build teachers' and students' development. Further, he argued that feedback is a vital factor in a successful evaluation system; hence, without consistent feedback, teachers will not know what must be improved or how to do that. Consequently, they will not be able to meet students' real needs, which is a causal factor that can lead to the failure of the entire appraisal mechanism (Marzano, 2003).

Problems Related to Giving Feedback

There are problems related to giving feedback. In essence, the clinical supervision and evaluation process occurs to strengthen and prepare educators to be thoughtful collaborators in the field of promoting classroom instruction. Sullivan (2005) maintained that qualitative feedback plays a critical role in such a process because teachers want and need feedback about their work. However, they seldom receive the type of information that enables them to develop their practices. On that account, "the current evaluation system in place in many districts is ineffective" (Papay, 2012, p. 137).

The cornerstone of the problems regarding K-12 principals' ineffective feedback is mainly focused on three aspects: principals' lack of time, lack of knowledge of curriculum content, and lack of training. In other words, principals' feedback has demonstrated ineffective results because principals have a frequent busy schedule, they do not know the content areas, and they do not receive any proper training to observe and evaluate teachers (Boehmer, 2021). Hence, literature corroborates the relationship between principals' lack of time, lack of knowledge of curriculum content, and lack of training with the inefficiency of their feedback to

teachers, who do not have their professional performances improved (Marshall 2013). These three aspects that are the causes of principals' ineffective feedback are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Causes of Principals' Ineffective Feedback
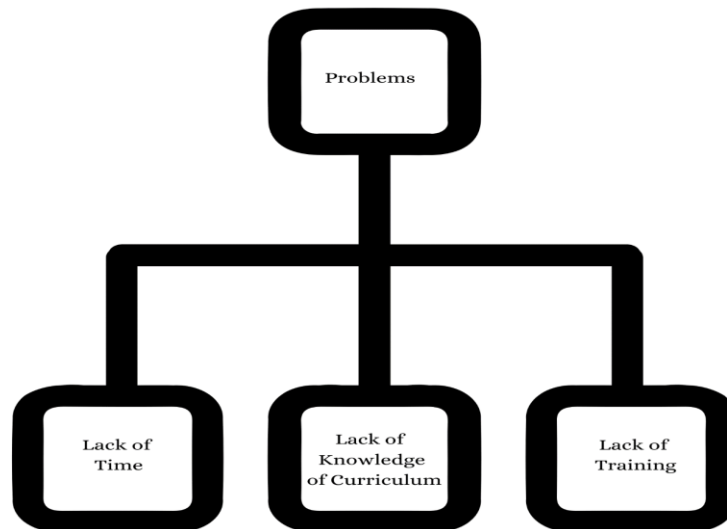
Lack of Time

Principals have many different responsibilities that go from managing school administration to building positive school cultures to recruiting and retaining high-quality staff. Marshall (2013) acknowledged that principals are preoccupied with meetings with parents, budgeting, and answering emails and phone calls that they rarely observe teachers enough to give them fair feedback. Each day has many interruptions and it is hard to prioritize evaluation visits and feedback time respectively. Boehmer (2021) affirmed that school administrators' commitments are abundant and their constant inflexible agenda leads them to superficial observations and evaluations. Their lack of time leads to vague and inaccurate feedback or, even worse, the absence of it.

Lack of Knowledge of Curriculum Content

Principals must have sufficient knowledge of curriculum content to deliver practical feedback. Wieczorek et al. (2018) confirmed that principals are pedagogical generalists challenged to improve curriculum content knowledge to observe and appraise teachers. In this way, observation and appraisal, contextualized within broader policy initiatives, are also required to contemplate teachers' departments. School administrators must acquire knowledge of curriculum content because "expert supervision requires a repertoire of knowledge and skills for engaging teachers in productive formal and informal conversations" (Lipton & Wellman, 2013, p. 17). For these reasons, efficient feedback could not be delivered without the principals' proper knowledge regarding the curriculum content.

Lack of Training

Principals must have professional development in providing efficient feedback to teachers. It can be accomplished if they receive appropriate training and support:

Effective evaluators must be willing to provide tough assessments and to make judgments about the practice, not the person. They must also be experts in providing rich, meaningful, and actionable feedback to the teachers they evaluate. Regardless of who serves in the role, all evaluators must be trained and supported.

(Papay, 2012, p. 135)

When school administrators are well-trained, they can deliver feedback in ways that build teacher self-efficacy. Boehmer (2021) agreed that principals who do not receive professional development are more likely to leave their schools than leaders who did receive training. Furthermore, she pointed out the impacts of this lack of training, citing an increase in angst, frustration, and disappointment more frequently felt by evaluators without relevant training.

In the words of Boehmer (2021), many districts currently lack professional development for feedback providers, resulting in feedback that is not descriptive, specific, and dialogical. This creates teacher confusion about the purpose of the received feedback since it is not able to represent the classroom reality. School administrators must have professional improvement to provide reasonable and actionable feedback to teachers. This means that K-12 principals need to have their professional practices developed to give efficient feedback to teachers and, consequently, enhance their performances.

Characteristics of K-12 Principals' Effective Feedback

After analyzing the three aspects that cause problems regarding feedback, the question remains: What makes principals' feedback effective? According to the literature, effective feedback must be given after every supervision or evaluation, and also be descriptive, specific, and understandable while communicating through dialogue. These solutions to make K-12 principals' feedback effective are demonstrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Solutions to Make Principals' Feedback Effective
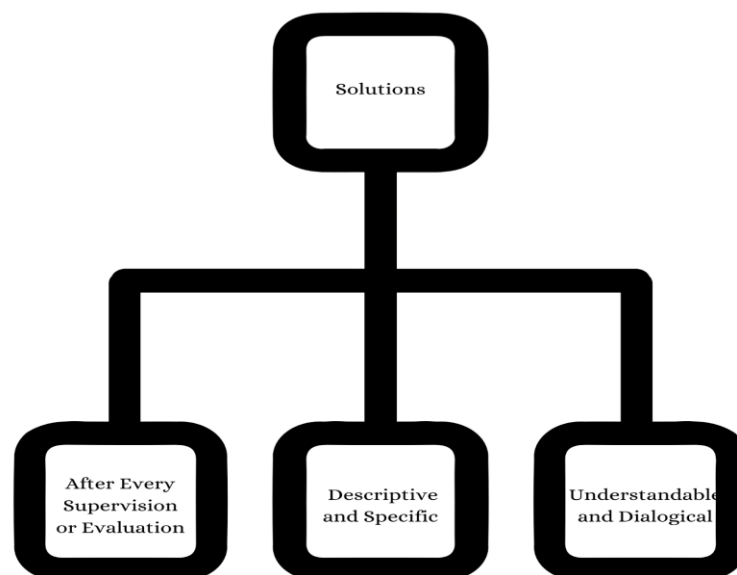
Feedback Given After Every Supervision or Evaluation

In alignment with Marshall (2013), principals must provide teachers with feedback, ideally within 24 hours, after every supervision or evaluation through informal conversations. This is

also sustained by Boehmer (2021), who argued that principals should provide feedback promptly because teachers should not wait for days or weeks to hear back about an observation or appraisal. Important details could be left behind and other urgencies could appear, which would be obstacles to resolving any problem previously detected by principals.

Descriptive and Specific Feedback

Teachers may and do improve with descriptive and specific feedback. Papay (2012) ratified that descriptive and specific feedback defines what the teacher is doing in the classroom, and directly impacts students' learning. Descriptive and specific feedback encourages reflection and confidence. Danielson (2009) reiterated that important suggestions and instructions for improving teachers' professional practices are based on descriptive and specific feedback since they are actionable and also effective. It is evident that only this sort of feedback grants helpful ideas for the future and focuses on solutions.

Understandable and Dialogical Feedback

Teachers must understand the suggestions and instructions given by principals after any observation and evaluation. This is successfully done through the power of communication because "solidarity requires true communication, and the concept by which such an educator is guided fears and proscribes communication. Yet only through communication can human life hold meaning" (Freire, 1970, p. 55). On that account, Danielson (2009) emphasized that for teachers to benefit from the supervision and evaluation process, they must be active, reflective participants. Teachers must comprehend the directions provided by school leaders' feedback, and desire constructive dialogue based on clear communication:

> Effective instructional leadership matters. Supervisors need to see themselves as learners and to believe in their capacity and the capacity of others to grow. For supervisors, the ability to structure and facilitate learning-focused conversations lies at the heart of both one-on-one and collective work with teachers.
>
> (Lipton & Wellman, 2013, p. 4)

Therefore, feedback must be understandable and dialogical to not only benefit the creative thinking process but also to promote competency and professional growth (Schut et al., 2020).

Discussion

Feedback is an equitable representation of professional practices and also an instrument to enhance them through pedagogical support. Nevertheless, proper feedback is not always provided to teachers due to three causal factors: principals' lack of time, lack of knowledge of curriculum content, and lack of evaluation training. This paper describes potential solutions to make K-12 principals' feedback effective. K-12 principals' feedback must be properly given after every supervision or evaluation, and also be descriptive, specific, and understandable while communicating through constructive dialogue to improve performances.

For K-12 principals' feedback to be effective, principals must give teachers feedback after every observation or appraisal because teachers want and need to know what principals noticed during the period they remained in the classroom (Marshall, 2013). When school administrators provide feedback within 24 hours after supervising or evaluating teachers' classes, school administrators can address the exact areas that demand enhancement and offer teachers more personalized and pedagogical support (Boehmer, 2021). Consequently, when teachers receive timely feedback many important details regarding classroom management are discussed, preventing further issues.

Also, K-12 principals' effective feedback must be descriptive and specific. Teachers are more likely to make significant changes to their practices when they receive clear written

recommendations (Papay, 2012). When principals give teachers written feedback with clarity, specifying what adjustments and improvements are required and why, teachers feel more comfortable and secure. Descriptive and specific feedback provides teachers with instructions about how to revise their performances through insightful pedagogical strategies to generate high-quality teaching and learning (Marshal, 2013). Hence, when principals give descriptive and specific feedback, teachers can adapt their professional practices to what is more suitable to meet students' needs.

K-12 principals' effective feedback must be understandable and dialogical because principals must provide feedback in a way that teachers can make sense of what needs to be adjusted. Principals must have informal conversations with them about how such modifications should be achieved (Schut et al., 2020). Through informal conversations with principals, teachers understand that developing their practice is vital to facilitate students' learning, and due to that, teachers are active participants in the supervision and evaluation process, which promote competency and professional growth (Danielson, 2009). Satisfactory communication between principals and teachers plays an indispensable role to corroborate and rectify any issues during classroom supervision (Lipton & Wellman, 2013). Therefore, I strongly agree with Freire (1970) that understandable and dialogical feedback is crucial when it comes to the effectiveness of teachers' implementing changes due to the feedback they receive.

Recommendations

What makes principals' feedback effective is that it is to be given after every supervision and evaluation, and be descriptive, specific, understandable, and dialogical. These research findings are highly recommended to not only K-12 principals and teachers but also to school districts or divisions due to their profound implications regarding the advancements of principals', teachers', and students' practices. When school districts or divisions offer principals proper training through professional development workshops and specialized courses about the procedures regarding the supervision and evaluation process, principals become confident feedback providers. As a result, teachers comprehend what, why, and how their professional practices require adjustments to meet students' needs, which is the core of the teaching-learning process. Some challenges encountered are lack of funds from school districts or divisions, prioritization of priorities from principals, and collaboration from teachers. However, such boundaries are mitigated when school districts or divisions, principals, and teachers cooperate to increase students' learning progress, the central aspect of the educational system.

Conclusion

With respect to the causes of principals' ineffective feedback – which are principals' lack of time, lack of knowledge of curriculum content, and lack of training – this article has suggested solutions to make K-12 principals' feedback truly effective. Principals' feedback must be provided after every supervision or evaluation and descriptive, specific, understandable, and dialogical. Effective feedback plays an important role when it comes to developing professional practices through pedagogical support. Thus, knowing what causes ineffective feedback is vital to understand how these potential solutions can resolve the problems concerning proper feedback.

It is easier for teachers to address and correct issues when they receive feedback within 24 hours after observation or appraisal. Teachers are better guided to professional growth if principals' feedback describes what teachers have to adjust in their performances and how to do that in a specific way. Feedback is understandable and dialogical when principals and teachers work together through efficient communication that leads them to improve their practices. Students' learning is also improved and the teaching-learning process flows its course with success and consistency. For these reasons, I believe that K-12 principals will benefit from

focusing on enhancing their feedback to be provided after every supervision or evaluation, and also to be descriptive, specific, understandable, and dialogical. Enhancement in these areas benefits entire school communities.

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Simone Miranda is an M.Ed. student in the educational administration stream who loves travelling and is passionate about cultural diversity. She worked as a teacher and vice-principal in Brazil at Maple Bear Global Schools. More recently, she has been volunteering in Brandon at Earl Oxford School and teaching online. She has also been a research assistant at the BU CARES Research Centre.