Differentiated Feedback: Responding to Students’ Individual Needs

By

Jonathan Newman

A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements
For the degree of Master of Teaching
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

Copyright by Jonathan Newman, April 2015
Abstract

This research study examines how teachers differentiate their feedback to respond to the needs of their students. The purpose of this research is to help teachers find ways of effectively differentiating their feedback, which can help promote students’ autonomy, motivation, self-efficacy, and academic performance. Based on an analysis of two face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, findings of this study show frameworks and methods for how teachers can effectively differentiate their feedback. As well, successfully differentiated feedback led to increased academic performance, autonomy, critical thinking, character building, and improved behaviour. Finally, teachers expressed the potential difficulties of providing effective feedback to their students.

Key Words: Feedback, differentiation, autonomy, motivation, formative assessment, self-efficacy
Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge my supervisor and course instructor Rodney Handelsman. Thank you for always being so patient and understanding, and for being able to have a good laugh. I would also like to thank my course instructor last year Angela MacDonald-Vemic. They both worked tirelessly editing and helping myself and all their other students, and were a constant support for so many individuals.

I also wish to thank my family and friends, who supported me through this tireless two-year process into my transition from student into teacher-researcher. You were always willing to listen, support, and do whatever it took for me to stay on track and not be overcome with stress. To my parents, thank you helping me with my edits, making me food, and supporting me through the process.

Finally, thank you to the Fancy Cohort for making things fun, seeing the bright side of things, and pretending to laugh at my awful jokes. You’ve been a great group of classmates, and I have so much to learn from all of you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract........................................................................................................................................... 2  
Acknowledgements.............................................................................................................................. 3  

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................ 6  
  1.0 Introduction: Research Context and Problem ........................................................................... 6  
  1.1 Purpose of the Study ................................................................................................................. 6  
  1.2 Research Questions ................................................................................................................... 7  
  1.3 Background of the Researcher .................................................................................................. 7  
  1.4 Overview .................................................................................................................................. 11  

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................................................................... 12  
  2.0 Introduction to the Chapter ........................................................................................................ 12  
  2.1 Why Feedback Matters (Outcomes for Students) .................................................................. 12  
  2.2 Practices of Feedback ............................................................................................................... 14  
  2.3 Autonomous Learning as a Goal .............................................................................................. 17  
  2.4 Differentiated Feedback .......................................................................................................... 20  
  2.6 Conclusion of the Literature Review ....................................................................................... 22  

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ......................................................................................... 23  
  3.0 Introduction to the Chapter ...................................................................................................... 23  
  3.1 Research Approach and Procedures ....................................................................................... 23  
  3.2 Instruments of Data Collection ............................................................................................... 24  
  3.3 Participants ............................................................................................................................... 25  
  3.4 Sampling Procedures .............................................................................................................. 26  
  3.5 Data Analysis ........................................................................................................................... 26  
  3.6 Ethical Review Procedures ....................................................................................................... 27  
  3.7 Methodological Limitations and Strengths ............................................................................ 27
CHAPTER 4 – RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

4.1 Theme 1: Instructional Practices of Differentiated Feedback
   4.1.1: Seeing Students as Unique Individuals
   4.1.2: Intentionally Framing Feedback

4.2 Theme 2: Goals and Outcomes of Differentiating Feedback
   4.2.1: Academic Achievement
   4.2.2: Beyond Academics

4.3 Theme 3: Teachers’ Challenges in Differentiating Feedback
   4.3.1: Challenges of Using Grades and Reports Cards for Delivering Feedback
   4.3.2: Administrators and Parents as Support

4.4 Conclusion

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

5.2 Implications and Recommendations
   5.2.1: Broad: The Educational Research Community
   5.2.2: Narrow: My Professional Identity and Practice

5.3 Areas for Further Research

5.4 Conclusion

REFERENCES

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Appendix B: Interview Questions
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction: Research Context and Problem

Research has found that teacher feedback can enhance students’ intrinsic motivation, performance, autonomy, and achievement (Dweck and Mueller, 2008; Hargreaves, 2013; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Saeed, Lodhi, Sadiq, Hashmi, Sami, Dustgeer, Mahmood, & Ahmad, 2013). While feedback is a common characteristic of classroom interaction, its content and quality is contingent upon a range of factors, including the differentiated learning styles and needs of students (Hargreaves, 2013). While existing literature and research contribute guiding models and principles for how to give feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hargreaves, 2014; Shute, 2008), less is known about how to differentiate feedback to meet these diverse learning style preferences and needs. Research has found that teachers struggle in this area and may not be tailoring their feedback to the individual needs of students (Hargreaves, 2013). In the context of increased emphasis on the need and value of differentiating instruction for students and differentiating assessment, it is important that we now turn our attention here.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

In light of the lack of knowledge relating to differentiated approaches to feedback, the goal of my research is to learn from a sample of teachers who have demonstrated commitment to this practice. If we know that feedback can promote student autonomy and intrinsic motivation, and in turn have positive implications for academic achievement (Black & Deci, 2000; Saeed et al, 2013), then it is important that we focus more
purposefully on learning about the range of considerations and characteristics of teacher feedback. Through this research I thus hope to gain a further understanding of how teachers can differentiate their feedback to be responsive to the differentiated learning styles and needs of students.

1.2 Research Questions

The main question guiding this study is: How does a sample of teachers differentiate their feedback to be responsive to the needs of their students?

In an attempt to further explore this topic, there are subsidiary questions that need to be asked as well:

- What outcomes do these teachers observe when differentiating feedback for students?
- What challenges do these teachers experience and how do they respond to these challenges?
- What factors and resources support these teachers in this work?

1.3 Background of the Researcher

As a teacher candidate, I have learned a lot about the effects of positive or negative reinforcement in the classroom. These tools will help me motivate my students, promote their autonomy, and help them improve as learners. In order to get the most out of my students, I must learn how to give students effective feedback that guides them towards better understanding and learning, while reinforcing certain behaviours. I must also be aware of differences between effective and ineffective forms of feedback, and the consequences that follow.
Most of my experience working with children has come from working at summer camp in various roles. At my camp, there was a large emphasis on feedback for both campers and staff. Camper feedback would often come in the form of teaching “life skills”. These skills, in a broad sense, are what foster growth in children: skills such as empathy, independence, courage, perseverance, social skills, and dedication. The camp experience facilitated the development of these skills, but as a counselor I was required to help teach these skills directly. I did so through methods such as targeted validations, which meant targeting a specific desired behaviour, and positively reinforcing that behaviour. The system we used was “Describe, Label, Praise”, which is a term coined by Michael Brandwein, a well-known educator and camp guru. With this system, we would describe the behaviour, label the “life skill”, and praise the behaviour: for example, “Daniel, you just finished your timed swim, even though you didn’t finish it the first time. You pushed through and accomplished your goal. That shows perseverance. Great job.” This type of feedback is aligned with praise that is considered to be effective from teachers to students: praise that validates a student’s effort, rather than their ability (Dweck & Mueller, 1998).

I also worked as an LIT (Leader-in-Training) Director for 15 and 16 year olds. The LIT’s had the option of taking a grade 11 course entitled PAD30, Outdoor Leadership Education. My co-director and I were the teachers of this course for 17 of the LIT’s. My role was as both supervisor and counselor for the kids as they went through a staff-training program. The program was competitive, and it was my role to evaluate the LIT’s performances while they acted as cabin counselors and activity instructors. I supported them individually, and figured out various ways to help facilitate their growth.
as leaders. Throughout their training, I had to give them specific feedback relating to their performance. Often this feedback was negative, and part of my job was to figure out ways of delivering constructive feedback in a way that helped the LIT’s improve their performance, and also motivate them.

An important insight that I gained from being LIT director was that providing kids with regular, effective feedback and individual attention allowed them to learn at a higher level. Through this experience, I learned that feedback could be used both ineffectively and effectively. Some LIT’s were demotivated by my feedback, while others used my feedback to improve. Therefore, the same type of feedback did not work for every LIT, and as an example, many were discouraged or demotivated by negative feedback. Giving feedback to staff also yielded the same results. However, I was taught to give feedback the same way for every staff or LIT, and this universal method of providing feedback worked differently for different people.

In the context of the classroom, I always appreciated getting feedback from my teachers, especially when the feedback was concrete and specific. I enjoyed this type of feedback because I thought it demonstrated that the teacher cared about my learning, and was not trying to embarrass me or make me feel bad if I had an incorrect approach. Furthermore, I disliked feedback that was either too vague (for example, a teacher writing “good”, on my paper) because I could not learn from it, or feedback that was overly directive, because it frustrated me when I thought a teacher was solving a problem for me. As a camp staff member, I always enjoyed getting feedback because it motivated me and gave me the information I needed to do a better job, which would eventually lead to promotions.
Based on my experiences, teachers often carefully monitor the feedback they give their students, and ineffective teachers will tend to provide ineffective feedback. My research will hopefully provide further insight into how to effectively give feedback, when to give it, and different methods that work for the promotion of autonomy depending on the students and their context. A greater promotion of autonomy through feedback would naturally equate to higher levels of intrinsically motivated students (Black & Deci, 2000, p. 741), and therefore better academic performance (Saeed et. al, 2013, p. 1385).

For my own personal reasons, I hope to develop a greater understanding of feedback in order for me to encourage autonomous learners in my classroom, which would make my life easier as a teacher, encourage favourable student behaviour, increase my own professional development, and increase the effectiveness of student learning.

As someone who has had primarily positive experiences with feedback both in a professional and academic setting, I am eager to find out why feedback was beneficial to me (and not some of my peers), what the circumstances were that made feedback effective for me, and how I can transfer the successes I had with feedback to my students in the future.

As I begin my career as a teacher, I find myself a little bit apprehensive, yet excited by the amount of influence I will have on the lives of my students through the individual interactions and connections I make with them. In response to this immense responsibility, I have a desire to be highly self-aware of my interactions, and shape them in the most positive way possible. Learning how to effectively give feedback is important to me because it will shape the relationships I have with my students, and have a
significant impact on their learning. It is for these reasons that I am interested in the topic of feedback.

1.4 Overview

Chapter 1 includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature, providing definitions of feedback and autonomy, reviewing how feedback plays an integral role in education, how it can have positive or detrimental effects, models for providing effective feedback, and students’ responses to feedback. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedure used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. Chapter 4 identifies the participants in the study and describes the data as it addresses the research question. Chapter 5 includes limitations of the study, conclusions, recommendations for practice, and further reading and study. References and a list of appendices follow at the end.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In this chapter, I present a literature review of what the research shows relating to teacher-student feedback. It is important to define what I mean by “feedback”. In a broad sense, feedback can be conceptualized as a tool for scaffolding students’ learning, after a task has already been described. Hattie and Timperley (2007) describe feedback as “information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one’s performance or understanding…feedback thus is a ‘consequence’ of performance” (p. 81). They go on to explain that feedback and instruction should be seen as distinct from one another, and also falling on a continuum. Eventually, the two become intertwined until the process itself takes on a new form instruction (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This definition of feedback is what I will be using in my research paper.

This literature review is broken down into various sections. First, I outline what the research says about why feedback is important for students, in order to justify researching feedback in general. Second, I discuss some commonly accepted models and practices of feedback to demonstrate where the research stands relating to general models of what does and does not work. Third, I explore why autonomous learning is seen as a main goal for feedback, as well as the relationship between autonomy and motivation. Finally, I discuss where the research stands on differentiated feedback, and where my own research fits within the puzzle. I conclude by summarizing the literature review.

2.1 Why Feedback Matters (Outcomes for Students)
There are many different positive outcomes that derive from teachers giving their students effective feedback. Researchers have generally agreed that feedback can be “good”, but the goals that they outline for feedback frequently differ amongst them. For example, Hattie and Timperley (2007) focus on student completion of a task or goal, which inevitably enhances self-regulation and self-efficacy as a consequence of this completion. In their famous study, Dweck and Mueller discover that specific types of praise promote or demote students’ motivation. Praise that was focused on student intelligence as opposed to effort demoted student motivation, while praise that was focused on student effort promoted student motivation (1998). Academic achievement has also been a very big focus for researchers, with many authors focusing on this as one of the goals of feedback (Dweck & Mueller, 1998; Hargreaves, 2013; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Saeed, et. al 2013). Shute (2008) argues that feedback is a tool for acquiring knowledge and skills, as well as motivating learning. Autonomous learning has been the new focus for the goal of feedback, as Hargreaves (2013, 2014), and Jooneghani and Masouleh (2012) have shifted their focus towards autonomy.

There is disagreement about what the outcomes should be from feedback. For example, Hargreaves (2013) argues that feedback has focused too much on achievement rather than autonomy. The goals of these authors are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but too much of a focus on one goal take attention away from feedback that focuses on another goal. Clearly, the focus on feedback is a tool used by teachers to develop the student to their fullest potential in any form, and should be an integral part of every teacher’s pedagogical approach.
2.2 Practices of Feedback

An overall model explained for providing feedback is explained by Hattie and Timperley (2007). First, teachers and students need to outline a desired goal, and reduce the discrepancy between current performance and that goal. They can do so by providing appropriate goals, and effective strategies depending on those goals. Second, “effective feedback must answer three major questions asked by a teacher and/or by a student: Where am I going (What are the goals?), How am I getting there?, and Where to next? These questions correspond to notions of feed up, feed back, and feed forward” (p. 86). Finally, feedback works at four levels: task (how well tasks are understood), process, self-regulation of students, and self (personal evaluations and positive affect about the learner) (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 87). This model of feedback can be seen as fairly straightforward, and potentially even common sense for teachers, but it is the “process” of feedback that my research focuses on.

There are specific commonly accepted types of feedback to benefit students. For example, as I mentioned previously, Dweck and Mueller (1998) report that praise (a form of feedback) for students’ intelligence rather than their effort undermines their motivation and performance. This type of feedback also promotes a “growth” rather than “fixed” mindset of intelligence in students. Hattie and Timperley agree, explaining that “this latter type of praise can assist in enhancing self-efficacy and thus can be converted by students back into impact on the task, and hence the effects are much greater” (p. 96, 2007).

As mentioned previously in this literature review, Eleanore Hargreaves has done significant research in the area of feedback and its relationship to autonomy. She noted
that most studies did not focus on the children’s perspective, and were instead focused on the perspective of the teacher. In 2013, she studied this relationship, through a longitudinal study of nine children, ages 9 and 10, in the UK (Hargreaves, 2013). She observed and interviewed them during literacy and numeracy lessons, and the children commented on specific feedback incidents. Her findings suggested that children felt that their learning was frustrated by overly directive feedback, and they thought the learning improved when the teacher gave feedback that was adequate, yet not overly detailed. They also thought that their learning was supported by reminder cues, and noticed that negative/positive feedback provoked emotions that could either interfere with or support learning (Hargreaves, 2013).

Looking more specifically at positive and negative feedback, Hattie and Timperley argue that both types can be beneficial to students depending on what level the feedback is aimed towards. Specifically, negative feedback is more powerful when the feedback is aimed towards the student as a person, and both types of feedback can be effective when feedback is related to the task. However, when the feedback is aimed towards self-regulation (addressing students’ own abilities to direct themselves towards a learning goal), things become more complex. Positive feedback relating to self-regulation increases motivation already feels like they “want to do” a task but decreases motivation for a task they “have to do” (2007).

When citing Deci et. al (1999), Hattie and Timperley explain that positive feedback “can increase the likelihood that students will return to or persist in an activity and self-report higher interest in the activity” (2007, p. 99). Furthermore, students who have higher levels of self-efficacy generally respond better to both types of feedback, and
negative feedback can have a negative impact on students with low self-efficacy. In general, “disconfirmation with corrective information can be effective, but disconfirmation without this information is of little use because it provides no information regarding what to do or how to respond next time” (2007, p.100).

In another study, Hargreaves (2014) video and audio recorded literacy or mathematics lessons, and interviewed 9 and 10 year old children, gauging their responses to determine how the teacher best promoted autonomy through feedback. She found that non-autonomy promoting feedback could be divided up into different categories, promoting the student’s: continuation or cessation of a particular activity (e.g. expressing approval or disapproval), correct answer (e.g. disguising a closed question as an open one), feelings of shame or pride (e.g. telling a student “you’re a bright lad, but you mustn’t rush”), certainty about correctness (e.g. saying “you’re absolutely right”), increased understanding (e.g. teacher repeating or explaining answer), grasp of the correct answer (e.g. teacher providing or pre-empting an answer), and action (e.g. instructing a student to “move on”, or redirecting a student’s attention) (Hargreaves, 2014).

On the other hand, autonomy-promoting feedback promoted the student’s: independence (e.g. child having a view that differed from the general view), proactivity in learning (e.g. child’s unsolicited engagement with a topic), metasocial critical inquiry (e.g. relating what the children were studying to real life, or linking their school work to life beyond school with questioning or asking for elaboration), and critical inquiry into learning processes (e.g. talking about what might help the children’s learning) (Hargreaves, 2014).
2.3 Autonomous Learning as a Goal

As cited in Masouleh and Jooneghani, Benson (1997), distinguished three broad types of learner autonomy: “1) technical perspective, emphasizing skills or strategies for unsupervised learning... 2) psychological perspective, emphasizing broader attitudes and cognitive abilities, which enable the learner to take responsibility for his/her own learning, [and] 3), a political perspective, emphasizing empowerment or emancipation of learners by giving them control over their learning” (Masouleh & Jooneghani, 2012, p. 836). From a teacher-candidate’s perspective, all of these types of learner autonomy seem desirable as a goal for teachers and students. In their literature review it is clear, however, that there are many other differing conceptions of learner autonomy such as autonomy as a human right, autonomy through the lens of either positivism, constructivism, or critical theory, academic vs. liberatory autonomy, a narrow view of learning to learn, or a broad view to learn to liberate (2012, p. 837).

Hargreaves cited Ecclestone (2002) for a definition of autonomy, by “suggest[ing] that a full definition of autonomy includes children’s independence, proactivity and critical inquiry in the classroom – which by their nature centre around the individual’s capacity for self-directed learning and meta-learning in their lives” (2014, p. 295). These competing variations of autonomy are not necessarily mutually exclusive, nor are some necessarily more or less correct than others. As a researcher, I will broadly refer to autonomy through Hargreaves’ conception of the word due to this definition’s direct and clear application to teaching, although other variations of autonomy may come to be reflected in my work. I also sympathize with Hargreaves because her research area is focused primarily on autonomy and feedback, which is the most applicable to my own
research. She is a central author for research in this field, and will be referred to many times throughout my research project.

Within their study, “autonomy” does not imply a lack or absence of a teacher in students’ learning. As Masouleh and Jooneghani wrote:

It is important that teachers help them to become aware of and identify the strategies that they already use or could potentially use. In other words, autonomous learning is by no means teacher-less learning. The study shows that students do not perceive themselves as sufficiently autonomous, that they are unwilling to take responsibility and that they continue to see the teacher as a dominant figure who is the decision maker in the classroom. Thus, this study highlights the need to integrate learner independence into the language curriculum, with a well-structured focus, delivery, and content. (2012, p. 841).

Clearly, teachers play a very significant role in the promotion of autonomy, and feedback is simply a means to an end. Without a justification for teacher scaffolding and autonomy support, my study would be directed towards students or parents, rather than teachers themselves.

Hargreaves identified an overall trend in the literature on feedback, which is a lack of research into supporting autonomy through feedback. Instead, research has focused on students’ academic results (2013). However, Marshall and Drummond also found that successful teachers see student autonomy as a key goal for their teaching (2006). This begs the question: why is autonomy important as an end-result for feedback?

The theoretical framework that emphasizes the importance for autonomy is Self-Determination Theory. While citing Deci and Ryan (1991), Black and Deci describe how
Self-Determination Theory distinguishes between autonomous behaviours and controlled behaviours. These types of behaviours differ in that autonomous behaviours have what they call an “internal perceived locus of causality”, which volitional, and performed out of personal interest. Controlled behaviours have an “external perceived locus of causality”, which are experienced as being pressured by external demands or rewards (Black & Deci, 2000, p. 741). Therefore, “intrinsically-motivated behaviours are the prototype of autonomy” (2000, p. 741), which is significant for my research, because these studies outline the inherent link between intrinsic motivation and autonomy, which can both be produced as a result of feedback.

Self-Determination Theory draws a strong distinction between internal and external locuses of causality or control. However external demands or rewards (such as external feedback) can be turned into internal or intrinsically motivated behaviour. In a study of 150 university students, Saeed et. al (2013) used a questionnaire focused on the relationship between perceived teacher feedback and intrinsic motivation. They found there was a positive relationship between perceived teacher feedback, intrinsic motivation, and academic performance. They concluded that giving students necessary feedback can develop intrinsic motivation in students, which can in turn lead to higher grades.

In 1989, Ryan and Connell developed what they call a “model of perceived locus of causality”, by gauging children’s levels of autonomy relative to certain behaviours through a questionnaire. Their study shows that a higher level of autonomy is highly correlated with elementary school children’s long-term memory, perceived competence beliefs, and good behaviour (1989, p. 760). Black and Deci describe higher scores of
autonomy positively affecting “students’ school engagement, positive affect, conceptual learning, teacher-rated competence, enjoyment of school, and ability to cope effectively with failure…and high-school and junior-college students’ not dropping out of school” (2000, p. 742). Hargreaves (2014) also discussed the importance of an individual sense of autonomy in a society that no longer guarantees work, work no longer promises security, and where changes happen fast, autonomous learning is even more important today than in years past. It is clear that autonomous learning is a valuable goal for educators regarding students’ long-term success in school and general well-being.

2.4 Differentiated Feedback

Despite guiding frameworks of feedback, it is clear that different children responded differently to feedback. In Hargreaves (2013), some children were more willing to invest effort into seeking and dealing with feedback, and the children who were more confident that they were doing well responded more to feedback. Feedback also depended on children’s different states, such as desiring self-regulation opportunities on some occasions, or craving directive. This was affected by shifting emotions, and the children’s feedback on teacher’s feedback was very context related (Hargreaves, 2013). It is important to note then, that while children’s responses to feedback differed not only on the individual student, their mood and social contexts also determined the feedback required by their teacher.

Shute (2008) discussed variables that affect feedback. First, students at a low learner level may benefit from immediate, “correct response” feedback, while high-achieving students may prefer delayed, “try again” feedback. Second, students who were more certain that they had the wrong answer required more elaborate feedback than
students who thought they were correct. Third, highly specific feedback was better for students who were low in learning orientation and high in performance orientation. Finally, low-achieving students should receive self-referenced feedback (focusing on their own progress) rather than norm-referenced (comparing their progress to others). It is important to note that the variables that Shute discussed were all related to performance of students, rather than other variables.

However, Shute (2008) also argued that research is limited due to individual differences in students among motivational prerequisites, such as intrinsic motivation, beliefs, self-efficacy, and metacognitive skills. Furthermore, he argued that we need to “continue taking a multidimensional view of feedback where situational and individual characteristics of the instructional context and learner are considered along with the nature and quality of a feedback message” (Shute, 2008, p. 176). There are many other variables that have been under-researched, but they should be accounted for when discussing the effectiveness of different kinds of feedback.

This general “differentiation” of required feedback is what my research aims to explore: it seeks to provide answers for how teachers can differentiate their feedback based on different circumstances. The variables that Shute (2008) describes in his research do a small part in answering my research question as they address feedback differentiation according to primarily high or low level achieving students. However, the small subsection in this article that addresses the need of differentiated feedback does not provide sufficient information about other variables such different moods, student personality, social contexts (such as socioeconomic status or type of school), or relationships between teacher and student.
2.6 Conclusion of the Literature Review

In conclusion, my literature review briefly outlines the general themes in research regarding teacher student feedback, its relationship to autonomy, and the necessity for more research to be conducted in differentiated feedback for different circumstances and students. I outlined the research about why feedback is important, good practices of feedback, the focus on autonomy, and differentiated feedback. This next chapter discusses my methodology for my own research.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In this chapter I describe my research methodology by first reviewing the general approach I have taken, specific procedures, and data collection instruments, before elaborating more specifically on participant sampling and recruitment. I explain data analysis procedures and review the ethical considerations pertinent to my study. Regarding these procedures, I identify a range of methodological limitations, but I also speak to the strengths of my methodology.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This research study was conducted using a qualitative research approach involving a literature review and semi-structured interviews with teachers. Creswell writes about the value of a qualitative study. He explains that a qualitative study has certain benefits such as being able to conduct research in a natural setting (face-to-face interaction), and in the case of my research, being able to uncover certain information about teachers and their feedback to students with complex reasoning through semi-structured interviews, and collaborating with my participants interactively (2007, p. 45). Interactively involving myself in the research project allows me to delve deeper and find different meaning from what I might find in a quantitative research project. My research question is too broad to be quantified with data. Specifically, the questions I am seeking to research need a lot more attention from research to be fully answered, but through my research I am attempting to at least open this discussion and make meaningful analysis.
Another important aspect to qualitative research is reflexivity. I positioned myself within my research in order to convey how my own background and experience as a teacher and research inform my interpretation of research. Without any kind of reflexivity, I would not be giving a holistic account (another tenet of qualitative research), of my research because I would not be including my own perspective. A holistic account also refers to the notion that “researchers are not bound by tight cause-and-effect relationships among factors, but rather identifying the complex interactions of factors in any situation” (2007, p. 47). My research is exploratory in nature, and looking at the interactions of various factors relating to feedback. For these reasons, my research approach is through a qualitative study.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

Given the parameters of the structure of the MTRP, my only instrument of data collection is a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity to hear about participants’ own experiences with feedback (Creswell, 2007). The semi-structured format allows for the interviewer to design an interview that maintains the focus of the research question, while also giving room for elaboration, and being able to redirect the attention to unforeseen important points.

To elaborate, Denscombe explains that interviews provide a more in-depth insight into a particular topic. Specifically, a semi-structured interview “lets the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher. The answers are more open-ended, and there is more emphasis on the interviewee elaborating points of interest” (1998, 167).
3.3 Participants

My participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Teachers believe that different students require differentiated instruction.
- Teachers have a focus on differentiated feedback and have had positive and/or negative experiences with feedback.
- Teachers have a commitment to differentiated assessment and/or leadership in the area of differentiated assessment.
- Teachers needed to have experience with differentiated instruction in general, and specifically differentiated assessment because my research focuses on *how* teachers differentiate their feedback, rather than *why*.

My two participants, under the pseudonyms “Darryl” and “Ashley” came from different teaching backgrounds. Darryl taught at an independent school, and had taught there for about 7 years, with 10 years prior teaching experience in Toronto District School Board schools, and through other educational organizations. The school he taught in was unique because the class sizes were very small, and the school the school had a focus on global education, along with social justice, environmentalism, and the arts. His largest class consisted of 12 students, and he had experience teaching grades 1-8. He had many opportunities to provide feedback, particularly because of the small class sizes.

Ashley worked as an arts educator in a higher education institution, and had 25 years of teaching experience between teaching grades K-8 as an arts specialist and teacher education. She also worked for a catholic board, a public board as a visiting artist, and had experience with environmental education as well as research methodology. Her vast range of experiences with feedback made her an excellent candidate for my research.
3.4 Sampling Procedures

Fortunately, through my various placements I have made connections and been in contact with many teachers who are interested in professional development and participating in research. I contacted these teacher organizations, individual school boards, and teachers and provided them with an overview of my research study. I asked potential participants to see if they filled the criteria, and then asked them if they would participate.

3.5 Data Analysis

After I completed my interviews, I transferred my files from my iPhone to my laptop. I transcribed my interviews using VLC, a free transcription software that allowed me to easily increase volume, pause and play, as well as slow down or speed up my recording. With VLC, I typed out my transcriptions while listening to my interviews. After transcribing, I listened to the interviews again while proofreading the transcriptions. While coding my data, I started by trying to organize the data on a more basic level without making any interpretive leaps. I was eventually able to organize my data into coherent codes that made sense to me. A second round of coding allowed me to conceptualize the data into much broader categories, and from these categories I synthesized my findings into general themes.

Overall, my goal was to look at what my participants had said in the interviews in ways that diverged or intersected with each other and with the existing literature regarding feedback. I also sought to discover “null” data, which were potentially
significant ideas that did not arise in my interviews. These ideas would be significant because they helped me recommend areas of further research.

In sum, using my transcribed recordings, I coded what my findings were using graphic organizers, organized my findings into categories. I ended by reviewing each theme and my findings so I could make a meaningful analysis in my final chapter.

3.6 Ethical Review Procedures

For my research study, I followed the ethical review approval procedures for the Master of Teaching program. All participants remain anonymous, and I used pseudonyms in my work in order to keep all names mentioned confidential. All participants were given a consent letter (see Appendix B) explaining the purpose of the study and were given the option to withdraw from the study at any point. As well, all recordings of the interviews will be deleted upon the completion of my research.

3.7 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

First, a major limitation of my methodology was that I interviewed two participants, which is a small sample. This type of qualitative research limits my ability to make generalizations how all teachers differentiate their feedback. However, the conversations that I had with these participants allowed me to gain insight into how they understood feedback. The detailed descriptions of teachers’ own practices are of value to me as a beginning teacher and I believe the broader educational community as well. Also, participants recognized feedback that worked well or did not work well through their own perspectives. A student-centered perspective about feedback would offer further insight into the perceived impacts of participants’ feedback on their students.
The wide scope of this topic is another limitation. By using such a broad definition of feedback, without limiting the goals of the feedback to any specific desired outcome, my research could be interpreted differently to different people. While a strength of this kind of research was my own presence in the research study, such as the ability to find different types of meaning from the interviews, it should be considered that the type of conclusions I made from participants would potentially be different if I was not interviewing these participants myself.
CHAPTER 4 – RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In this chapter I present my findings about how teachers differentiate their feedback to be responsive to the range of learning style preferences and needs of their students. The findings are organized into three main themes and their associated subthemes. The findings are discussed in light of the research literature. Through my two semi-structured interviews with my participants “Darryl” and “Alison”, the three themes I identified were: 1) instructional practices of differentiated feedback, 2) goals and outcomes of differentiating feedback, and 3) teachers’ challenges in differentiating feedback. Within each main theme were associated subthemes: seeing students as individuals, intentionally framing feedback, academic achievement, beyond academics, challenges of using grades and report cards for delivering feedback, and administrators and parents as support.

4.1 Theme 1: Instructional Practices of Differentiated Feedback

My main research question asks how a sample of teachers differentiate their feedback to be responsive to the needs of their students. Participants described a wide variety of ways in which they integrate differentiated feedback into their classrooms. My two participants were mindful of their experiences with feedback, and each was reflective on their own practice of how they differentiated their feedback. Both participants described instructional practices that they found had worked best for them throughout their years of teaching.
4.1.1: Seeing Students as Unique Individuals

Both participants held the belief that students were individuals with distinct needs, and that teachers need to have this notion in order to deliver feedback of good quality.

Darryl spoke about seeing his students as individuals who have different needs.

“If I see them as who they are as people, then I can judge how I respond to them. But if I see them all as just students, then they’re all gonna get the same feedback (laughs), right? [I will] have the same approach to my feedback.” Darryl explained that if he saw his students as individuals with different personalities and different work habits he could figure out how to best support them. Darryl’s holistic approach to how he viewed his students contributed to his ability to tailor his feedback to their individual needs.

Alison also indicated that seeing the individuality in students was significant for how teachers differentiate their feedback. She explained that because children have different needs and personalities, teachers must differentiate their approach. She said “…it’s really important that we provide feedback in a way that will be heard by [students]…that will be reflected on by them, and also that will be internalized in such a way that [positively] influences them moving forward.” As an example of differentiating for age, she said she would often frame feedback in humourous ways to grade 7 and 8 students, but a more straightforward way to grade 4 students. For Alison, there was a clear emphasis on the feedback being meaningful for the individual student, and not all feedback will be relevant for each student. There are many factors that make feedback more or less relevant to individual students, and age is among one of those factors.

She also added that, based on her own experience, “If you show a student that you see them as a person and provide feedback as a person, they will respond by going off
and beyond your wildest expectations.” Effectively differentiating by seeing students as individuals was quite rewarding for Alison, as she saw positive results from her students, which impressed her.

Hargreaves’ (2014) findings were relevant to this research, specifically regarding how autonomy-promoting feedback focuses on the student’s independence and difference from the group. If children feel valued as having individual ideas or opinions, as opposed to being lumped in with the rest of their classmates, feedback can be successful in promoting autonomy. The notion of teachers considering the individuality and difference of their students seems to be a necessary, but perhaps insufficient condition of providing successful differentiated feedback.

4.1.2 Intentionally Framing Feedback

The way in which feedback is framed came up as a theme in both interviews. Each teacher expressed slightly different views on how to approach feedback as either positive or negative, and how this might impact students.

Darryl stated that it was essential to have a mixture of positively and negatively-framed feedback that depends on the situation, the student, and the context. He also expressed that a clear goal is very important for students, and should be what teachers use feedback to achieve. When discussing the main purposes of providing feedback, he said, “To motivate kids…to keep them on task, to make sure they’re moving towards to the goal, sometimes to put a little bit of fear into them…to give them a marker for where they’re at….it gives them a path to go on.” Darryl’s emphasis on a clear goal is consistent with Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) research, which outlined the importance of a desired
goal as part of the first step in their model in giving feedback. Therefore, having a clear goal for feedback, as well as framing feedback as negative was effective.

For Darryl, negative feedback was an important, and necessary part of delivering feedback to students. When asked to elaborate on what he meant by “put a little bit of fear into them”, Darryl said, “In order to [reach the goal] sometimes that can be like, oh, whoa, I really gotta pull my socks up.” Darryl’s honest approach to giving feedback sometimes meant the emotional state of the student was not the first priority. However, he explained that negative feedback given incorrectly could be damaging to a students’ self-esteem, and that quality feedback needed to be descriptive, even if it started off as negative initially. “If they already think they’re a bad student and they keep getting low levels, and you’re not providing them with the quality [feedback] then it could be negative”. Darryl also said that while some students could handle the “shock factor” of negative feedback, certain students who were more sensitive were given feedback that was more positively delivered. Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) research aligned with this finding, as they explained that students with low self-efficacy can react very negatively to negative feedback, while it might have the opposite effect for students with high self-efficacy (2007). For Daryl, both positive and negative feedback could be effective, depending on the student. Negative feedback especially needed to be descriptive, as well as delivered more softly if the student had low self-efficacy.

When asked to discuss how he made his feedback descriptive, he elaborated on how he implemented feedback as detailed but not overly directive. He found that he was able to balance this detailed feedback while at the same time maintaining autonomy for his students:
You’re saying, ‘You can do this. Here’s how.’ But you’re not doing it for them… That gives them autonomy because they’re just still doing it all themselves, and it empowers them because you’ve given them the tools to do it, then they can succeed, right? And when you succeed, you feel good, then [they] can succeed more and more and more, going down the road.

Hargreaves’ (2014) findings were consistent with Darryl’s experience, as she categorizes overly-directive feedback is a type of “non-autonomy promoting feedback”. Darryl’s descriptive feedback was motivating, detailed and specific, but also gave the students the responsibility and autonomy to implement the necessary changes themselves. Hattie and Timperley (2007) also argued that without giving corrective information after giving negative feedback, the information is of little use. However, they argued that feedback relating to self-regulation increases motivation only if the students already feel like they want to complete the task. Therefore, it is a possibility that Darryl’s approach to supporting students with descriptive feedback might have been successful because his students were already motivated to begin with.

Alison emphasized the importance of framing feedback as positive, while suspending her own judgment:

As an educator, I’ve always tried to couch things in as positive a way as I possibly can. So an example might be of a child who makes a work of art… Really what my internal voice might be telling me is, ‘Ooh, that really isn’t turning out the way I thought it was gonna turn out’. I still try to find a positive way of saying something, like, ‘Wow, I love that you took the process as far as you could take it’.
An example she gave of using positive feedback in a difficult situation was with the hypothetical situation of a student handing in an offensive piece of work. She said that if a student handed in work that she would consider offensive, she could react emotionally. “But so often what can be so much more interesting and I think valuable for the student is not lacing into them with negative criticism, but having a conversation about ‘Why did you write the piece? What is it about this what you firmly believe in?’” She explained that questioning students, instead of providing an immediate negative reaction would force students to articulate their position and dig deeper about the motives behind their actions. Alison’s approach in aiming to make feedback positive also corresponds to the findings of Hattie and Timperley (2007), who argued that when feedback relates to the task that the students are completing, rather than to the students themselves or to the students’ self-regulation, both positive and negative feedback can be effective.

When asking about how Alison used questions with her students, it became clear that delivering feedback through critical questions was also a main technique for how Alison differentiated her feedback. She explained that asking questions “get [students] to think a little deeper…so often if you can frame feedback as a question to students, and it gives them a chance to reflect on what they’ve just done.” She went on to say that this questioning enabled students to create a pattern of critical self-reflection over time. The type of critical inquiry brought up by questioning is what Hargreaves (2014) referred to as a type of autonomy-promoting feedback.

Both of these teachers took different approaches to how they delivered feedback, yet in the context of positive or negative feedback both teachers took time to sit down and
chat with students in order to get them towards specific goals. This conferencing required a level of trust between teacher and student, and the student would be have to be honest for change to happen. Also, student-teacher connections were important for differentiating feedback. Finally, participants’ experiences indicated that positively-framed feedback could be effective, and negatively-framed feedback could be effective if the feedback was related to the learner themselves, and if the learner had high self-efficacy.

4.2 Theme 2: Goals and Outcomes of Differentiating Feedback

In order to answer my research question about the outcomes teachers observe when differentiating feedback to their students, both participants described certain goals and outcomes that they had observed from experience. They discussed academic achievement as a result of feedback, and then the importance of going beyond academic achievement.

4.2.1 Academic Achievement

Both teachers first mentioned the importance of students’ academic achievement, and how it could be improved by effectively differentiating feedback. When asked for an example of a student who responded in a positive way to his feedback, Darryl described a high-performing student who had a bad test, and how he met with the student to identify the problem. “Okay, let’s check in. What happened here?”…she just didn’t study…So then my feedback becomes about that. ‘Why didn’t you study?’ ‘Oh I forgot I didn’t write in my agenda’, ‘Okay, this is what the agenda’s for, right?’ Darryl explained that the student went back to achieving higher marks consistently. Darryl was able to
differentiate his feedback to a high-achieving student who performed more poorly than usual by using questioning in a similar way that Alison did. However, it is important to note that his feedback was not framed in a positive manner. He framed his feedback negatively, focusing on the students themselves by discussing their behaviour (not studying). As mentioned previously through Hattie and Timperley (2007), negatively-framed feedback could be more effective than positively-framed feedback when it was about the learners themselves. He saw academic success through his approach – the student performed well on future tests and knew that she was being held accountable.

Alison also found that successfully differentiated feedback could positively impact a student’s academic performance. In the context of a grade 1 or 2 art class, Alison discussed how a student was able to re-draw a piece of art that was discussed in class after she had a one-to-one conversation with that student about the piece of work. “The child provided feedback to me, which I took as evidence that our conversational type of feedback had been positive, by drawing from memory that same very detailed work of art.” Alison mentioned that the success of this feedback, again, came from seeing the student as an individual, and tailoring her feedback to the interests of the child. It is clear that this conversational approach worked for a student who was already very motivated, and exploring the piece more deeply and critically in that conversation brought the student to a higher level.

These anecdotes provide evidence to teachers providing effective feedback to students to support their academic achievement. Participants’ observations of improved academic performance in response to feedback are consistent with research on the topic
(Dweck & Mueller, 1998; Hargreaves, 2013; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Saeed, et. al 2013; Shute 2008). Successfully differentiated feedback required the teachers to use deeper conversations, critical questions, and see their students as individuals.

**4.2.2: Beyond Academics**

While both teachers discussed academic achievement, they mentioned how the effects of successfully differentiated feedback can extend beyond academics as well. Darryl discussed how one of his students, for an assignment, mentioned that some of his role models were violent video game characters. “[While] this is not academic…it’s just so important as a teacher to deal with stuff like this when it comes up. I do think it influences them as students.” Darryl withheld his judgment and asked about what the student liked about the characters. Darryl asked the student to find another role model that he liked, but who did not kill people and avoided violence. He said the student came back with another video game character, but this character was more peaceful. Darryl continued onto say about the student: “…getting a 70 percent or a 65 percent – he thinks that’s OK. But the emotional stuff that’s going on with him is I feel what’s most important right now. So that’s where I go.” While Hargreaves (2013, 2014), and Jooneghani and Masouleh argued that autonomy should be the focus of feedback (2012), Darryl was focused on what he called building the students’ character, through discussions of what a good role model might look like. Darryl made his own judgments about what the student needed, and differentiated his feedback accordingly. His main goals for his student diverged from what much of the literature focuses on, and could change depending on the student. The top priority for Darryl’s students was not always directly academic.
Alison stated that feedback has a large role to play in supporting students to become self-directed learners:

If they get used to teacher always giving them ‘the answer’, or a very specific targeted ‘that’s a level 3’ in terms of a reaction to a piece of work, then what they learn is that the teacher’s answer or response or feedback is what is most important, rather than their own. And ultimately I believe what we should be doing is getting students to the place where they rely more heavily on their own responses…because the reality is that all of us are gonna direct our own lives…and what we really want students to do is to think, stop, and internally give themselves feedback before they act. We want them to do that reflective piece and make a conscious choice to move forward.

Teaching students to support themselves on their own and rely on themselves was a fundamental part in Alison’s practice, because she believed students needed to rely on themselves, critically reflect, to be more successful in their lives. When asked about what tangible results she may have noticed from giving effective feedback, Alison replied, “Improved grades are one thing…a student who…became a fully engaged learner, decrease in behavioural issues…I think there’s a whole wide range of things that we can use as assessments on our feedback.” To Alison, feedback could yield a much wider range of results. Alison’s feedback aimed at promoting autonomy was consistent with Hargreaves’ findings, that autonomy-promoting feedback promoted independence, proactivity, and critical inquiry into learning processes. Furthermore, Black and Deci (2000) showed that higher autonomy has many positive outcomes such as school engagement, conceptual learning, and coping with failure. Alison found results in her
students that extended beyond academic results, and becoming self-directed learners, was an extremely important result of feedback to her, as well as increasing good behaviour, and engaging students.

Both teachers saw feedback as a means of achieving different positive outcomes. Alison often focused on autonomy-related tasks and Darryl’s conversations were often focused on building “character” in the student, but both teachers found results that extended beyond solely academics.

4.3 Theme 3: Teachers’ Challenges in Differentiating Feedback

This theme addresses my research question about what challenges teachers experience when differentiating their feedback, and how they respond to these challenges. Both participants were asked about the challenges of differentiating their feedback effectively. Each expressed difficulty and frustration with two key elements in the process of delivering effective feedback. These two difficulties were grading and report cards, and difficulty with parents.

4.3.1 Challenges of Using Grades and Reports Cards for Delivering Feedback

Each teacher expressed that giving feedback via grades and report cards was a difficult task, but each had slightly different issues with grades getting in the way of feedback. When discussing the challenge of assigning grades, Darryl explained that in order to give effective feedback about the whole student, it is challenging to give grades for only academics. He discussed how he used other ways of assessing students’ learning skills or life skills by recording these assessments and conversations on paper. “If you do it regularly…then you’re getting a better range of…the whole student sort of mark rather
than [only] the academic mark.” Darryl emphasized the importance of recording the feedback or conversations that one gives on paper in order to show parents, and using these written recordings as evidence for a final assessment for learning skills.

Grading is often the only mechanism that parents see, and that it does not give them a holistic picture of the feedback process. “In elementary in particular you’re working within a very limited feedback mechanism formally in terms of that report card.” Alison explained that these constraints make communication with parents about differentiated feedback very difficult: “In terms of what parents see, your hands are tied in what you can put on [report cards].” Based on Alison’s experience, there are limitations regarding feedback that restrict teachers, specifically with grading, and teachers need to work within the parameters of what they are given (e.g. report cards).

Both teachers identified a disconnection between feedback and the marks students received. Parents are often left out of the feedback process other than through marking; this can result in poor reactions and a lack of support, which I will discuss below.

4.3.2 Administrators and Parents as Support

A common challenge that both teachers discussed came from a lack parental support, which addresses my research question regarding what factors and resources support teachers to differentiate feedback. Darryl described a situation when he delivered difficult feedback to a student. The student had an initial negative reaction, and the parents did as well. “He didn’t like it, and his parents didn’t like it, which is another issue. And so that kind of reaction is supported at home, which makes it hard for the teacher to get the student to absorb their part and what they have to do moving forward.” Darryl expressed that the positive long-term effects of negative feedback would be
limited if the parents did not support the teacher, because of the tendency to make excuses for the child. If the parents of the students were defensive about the feedback that the student was receiving, it limited the effectiveness of the feedback.

Alison explained that it was important for administrators to support teachers in differentiating feedback. “You hope you have a supportive administrator, who knows if you’re trying to do a range of things, and you’re trying to be progressive and you’re trying to be sensitive to the learner.” If the teacher were trying to differentiate feedback through holistic assessment where a student might bring home a work of art for self and parent assessment, Alison explained that trying different types of feedback could create parent backlash. “A parent could arrive back on the principal’s doorstep and ask, ‘Why are you making me do the teacher’s work of assessing?’…you hope at that point that you have a supportive administrator…who will be there to cover your back.” Without this supportive administrator, or an administrator who sides with parents too quickly, the teacher’s hands could be tied when trying to implement differentiated feedback.

Each teacher emphasized the requirement to be supported when differentiating feedback. Parental support was brought up as a major factor in both interviews, and administrative support was brought up as well by Alison. These interviews confirmed teachers’ strong opinions that in order for teachers to effectively differentiate their feedback, they need external support.

4.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter explained my findings, which were 1) instructional practices of differentiated feedback, 2) goals and outcomes of differentiated feedback, and 3) challenges that teachers face.
My first theme looked at instructional practices. In my first subtheme, I found that according to participants, seeing students as unique individuals with different needs was very important to differentiating feedback. In my second subtheme, the way in which feedback was framed varied among my participants, but both positively or negatively-framed feedback could lead to positive results. Negatively-framed feedback could be effective if the feedback was about the learner or the task, but required the learner to have high self-efficacy, or it could be harmful to students. Teachers withholding their own personal judgment, and using open-ended questions were able to differentiate their feedback more successfully. Finally, making time to sit and talk to students was an essential part of delivering effective feedback to promote.

My second theme related to goals and outcomes. My first subtheme successfully differentiated feedback, which led to academic achievement. My second subtheme looked at how students could have results that extended beyond academics such as autonomy, behaviour, and character-building.

My final theme was about the challenges that teachers face differentiating feedback, and the support required to overcome these challenges. My first subtheme related to the challenge marking and report cards as a form of feedback, and how they provided a small picture of student progress to parents. My second subtheme focused on the need for administrators and parents to support teachers in differentiating feedback.

Participants interviewed for this study shared many of the same concerns and provided similar recommendations in terms of differentiating feedback. A noteworthy divergence between the participants, was the instance of one participant regarding the effectiveness of negative feedback in some cases, while the other teacher tended to focus
on keeping feedback positive. These findings add new insight to the topic of feedback, and have implications for teachers and other educational stakeholders, as I discuss in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

There are existing practices of what constitutes “good” feedback for students, but there is a lack of knowledge for how teachers adapt their feedback to suit their individual students by differentiating feedback. This research study was conducted to find out how teachers differentiate their feedback for their students. In this chapter, I discuss the key findings and their significance, their implications for the educational community as well as for my own professional identity and practice. I then make recommendations for educational stakeholders, areas for further research, and concluding comments.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

My first theme was about the instructional practices of differentiating feedback. Both of my participants demonstrated that the way they viewed their students had a significant impact on how they differentiated their feedback. Specifically, viewing their students as individuals helped teachers identify the different needs of their students, whether those needs were social, emotional, academic, or behavioural. Teachers found that their students were also more successful if they felt that their individuality was recognized and emphasized, in accordance with Hargreaves’ (2014) findings. Different goals were also set depending on the student, and these goals required different methods of feedback to achieve them.

Each teacher had a different approach to delivering feedback by framing feedback as positive or negative. Similar to Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) research, positively-framed feedback was often successful if it related to the task of learning. Negatively-
framed feedback could be successful if the feedback was task-related as well (such as the students’ work), or if the feedback was about the learner themselves. However, the student needed to have high self-efficacy for negative feedback to be effective.

Framing feedback as questions instead of statements demanded critical inquiry and was helpful for promoting autonomy (Hargreaves, 2014). This process of asking questions and having meaningful conversations took time and required teachers to meet with their students individually. Building relationships of trust and connecting with students were a prerequisite of promoting favourable outcomes from these meetings.

My second theme focused on the results of successfully differentiated feedback. From my participants’ perspectives, a wide variety of results were produced. When feedback was differentiated appropriately, students performed better on tests, became more motivated and self-directed in their learning, and improved their critical thinking. Teachers also found that successful feedback helped with character-building, autonomy, and decreased behavioural issues.

My final theme related to the challenges that each teacher faced when trying to deliver effective feedback. Most of these challenges revolved around formal and summative assessment, as well as communicating the student feedback to parents. Grades were not an all-encompassing indicator of students’ progress due to their focus on academics, yet often grades were the only part of the feedback process that parents were seeing. Therefore, there is a disconnect between feedback and grades.

Furthermore, my participants indicated that a lack of parental support for the teacher limited the effectiveness of feedback, because it enabled excuse-making and limited change in the student. Trying differentiated and more holistic types of assessment,
such as bringing parents into the feedback process could also yield negative results if they were not in agreement with what the teacher was doing. Both teachers expressed a need for supportive school administrators, and Alison said that principals needed to be supportive of the teachers when dealing with oppositional parents.

5.2 Implications and Recommendations

My study has implications for different stakeholders of the educational community, such as students, teachers, parents and administrators. There are also implications for my own personal practice as I begin my career. Along with these implications I will provide my own recommendations for what action each stakeholder should take to improve feedback.

5.2.1 Broad: The Educational Research Community

My research indicates that teachers should focus on getting to know their students well as individuals in order to tailor their feedback appropriately, which will enable more meaningful forms of feedback as well as better long-term results. By building relationships of trust with their students, teachers are able to have honest conversations about what the students needs to do differently in order to reach a specific goal. Teachers need to make time for these meetings with their students, and should figure out ways of incorporating student-teacher meetings as a regular part of their class.

Communication is essential between educational stakeholders in terms of defining what feedback is, how it is given, and how students are progressing. Teachers should strive to be in constant communication about the feedback they are giving students with parents and administrators. Three things should be outlined for students’ specific learning
goals: clearly identifying the goal, a plan for getting the students to the desired goal, and a progress report. Incorporating explicit discussion of feedback should also be part of parent-teacher interviews.

Administrators and parents must be supportive of teachers differentiating feedback in order to achieve positive results, and should also express their concerns via an open line of communication with teachers.

Finally, professional development is required for teachers to effectively differentiate feedback. Many teachers learn on the job, and are able to “feel out” what feedback different students require, but there is a need for explicit discussion and teacher education in this area. There needs to be more clarity and agreement in terms of the goals of feedback, and I will discuss this in detail below.

5.2.2 Narrow: My Professional Identity and Practice

My findings suggest that there are links between positive results from feedback and embracing a philosophy of education which focuses on how students can grow and develop as individuals. I believe that the implications of this research further emphasize the importance of having a holistic view of education, which promotes more than just academics.

In my future practice, I need to build strong connections with my students, and help develop the whole student with goals that include but are not limited to academics, extracurriculars, arts education, empathy-building, character-development, social skills training, and social justice education. I will do this by differentiating my instruction and assessment, using community-building to ensure everyone has a voice and place in the
class, and seeking to make students feel comfortable in having honest conversations about their goals, their concerns, and their feelings about their own learning.

I will also discuss my ideas of differentiated feedback and assessment with my school administrators and parents, to make sure they are in agreement supportive of this approach.

However, in order to move this concept of individual and self-development to its next step, I will seek to help students develop into active citizens who take onus of their own communities, and promote the accountability and cohesiveness of the group. While students should be able to recognize their individual needs, progress, and goals, they should also be aware of the needs, progression, and goals of their peers.

5.3 Areas for Further Research

Further research is required for teachers to be able to differentiate their feedback effectively. First, nothing was mentioned in my interviews or findings regarding student background: specifically relating to race, gender, and class. The context of differentiated instruction would surely change with members of marginalized groups, or school communities that are comprised of students with low socioeconomic status. Further research is required relating to differentiated feedback for these students.

Second, there is a lack of clarity among educators and the research about the goals that teachers should have for students. This fundamental disagreement begs the question: what is the role of a teacher in determining appropriate goals and feedback mechanisms for their students? Research should be done to clarify what teachers’ own philosophies of education are for their students, the goals surrounding them, and whether or not they align with what is outlined in official policy documents.
Third, my research is limited due to the wide scope of how I have classified feedback. Research should be done more specifically relating to different mechanisms of feedback, such as the effect of teacher-student conferences on student success, how teachers build trust with their students, how teachers specifically gauge and assess what different learners need, and how teachers build communities with their administrators and parents.

Fourth, research is needed to assess the negative impacts of incorrectly given differentiated feedback. While my interviewees described potential negative experiences, they did not go into detail about a traumatic or extremely negative event regarding feedback. Assessing ineffectively differentiated feedback would be just as useful as assessing effective feedback.

Finally, a limitation within my research was that interviewees often focused on students who seemed to already have a high self-efficacy and motivation. More research should focus on students with special needs, low self-efficacy, motivation, and autonomy.

5.4 Conclusion

These findings are significant for any teacher trying to improve their practice, parents trying to understand how teachers can give feedback, and administrators who seek to support their teachers giving feedback. It is also useful for incoming teachers who seek to understand their role in giving feedback to their students.

It is of the utmost importance that roles for teachers are clearly defined relating to feedback. A lack of agreement and understanding amongst different stakeholders can lead to ineffective feedback, and even detrimental results. Tension amongst these stakeholders must be remedied through a clear line of communication as well as a clearly defined role
given to teachers about how they should implement feedback, and what the goals of their feedback will be.

Regardless of the specific goals that teachers have for their students, student well-being and success should be the emphasis for every educator, and for this to be achieved teachers must see their students as individuals with different needs and preferences. These differences require us as educators to think about differentiation, not only in terms of instruction, but also in terms of how we provide students feedback in order to best support them, academically and otherwise.
References


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date:

Dear ________,

My Name is Jonathan Newman and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on how teachers differentiate their feedback to be responsive to the range of learning style preferences and needs of their students. I am interested in interviewing teachers who focus on differentiated assessment, and who have experience with differentiated feedback. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Rodney Handelsman. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,
Jonathan Newman

Phone #: _______________
Email: _______________
Course Instructor’s Name: Rodney Handelsman
Contact Info: _______________

Consent Form
I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Jonathan Newman and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: __________________________________________

Name: (printed) __________________________________________

Date: __________________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Background Information

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What grades have you taught?
3. What educational settings have you taught in, and what is the context of where you teach now?

Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs

4. In your view, what is the purpose of feedback as a form of assessment?

What does differentiated feedback mean to you? What are some ways that teachers can differentiate their feedback?
5. What does differentiated feedback mean to you?
6. What does quality feedback mean to you and why?

What role, if any, do you believe feedback plays in motivating students?
7. In what other ways do you believe quality feedback can impact students?

Probe: anything specific that you want to learn more about like autonomy, accountability for learning, engagement, academic achievement
8. In your view, why is it important to differentiate feedback?

Teaching Practices

9. What strategies you use to enact feedback?
Probe: How do you give feedback? What kinds of considerations do you make when giving feedback?

10. What are the range of ways that you provide feedback to your students?

11. For which students do you provide which kind of feedback and why?

12. Can you share an experience of a time when you differentiated your feedback for a student, and tell me how they responded?

13. Is there an anecdote you can share about a student who did not respond well to your feedback? Why do you think they did not respond well?

14. How do you assess the effectiveness of the feedback that you provide?

Probe: What indicators of learning from your feedback have you observed?

Supports and Challenges

15. What challenges do you face differentiating your feedback to meet the individual needs of students?

16. What are some ways that you have responded to these challenges?

17. What supports or resources facilitate your capacity to provide differentiated feedback?

Next Steps

19. Based on your experiences, what advice, if any, do you have for beginning teachers on the topic of giving feedback?

20. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Thank you very much for your time.