



# Effects of student feedback as a method of self-evaluating the quality of teaching



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 8 November 2013  
Received in revised form 25 February 2014  
Accepted 18 April 2014  
Available online 9 May 2014

### Keywords:

Student feedback  
Formative assessment  
Instructional development  
Teachers  
Impact

## ABSTRACT

In many states, schools are now responsible for developing and ensuring the quality of their work. In many places, this process should be controlled by internal evaluation. Although the reliability and validity of student perceptions of teaching are regularly confirmed, the student perspective in the evaluation of teaching is still viewed with scepticism. This study examines the effects of student feedback. For this purpose, 305 teachers who are users of a web-based student feedback system that is available in the states of Berlin and Brandenburg (Germany) were surveyed using a self-designed questionnaire. Using multiple regressions, self-reported changes in teaching can be predicted from existing levels of motivation and the constructiveness of the discussion between students and the classroom teacher. Externally motivated student feedback appears to lead to changes in the classroom as well. The results argue for the integration of student feedback into a school-wide quality management system.

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*“Students are – with their specific perspective – competent judges of teaching and it makes sense, yet imposes itself, to use their assessments for the improvement of teaching.”*

Translated from [Ditton and Arnoldt \(2004\)](#), p. 168.

## Introduction

It appears strange that although student perceptions of teaching have been surveyed for over 100 years ([Kratz, 1896](#)), scepticism is pervasive with regard to using the student perspective as a professional source of information for the development and evaluation of teaching ([Ferguson, 2012](#)). In many countries, the concept of school self-evaluation for quality assurance and quality development and the participation of students in the development of schools have become quite relevant ([McNamara & O'Hara, 2008](#); [van Petegem, Deneire & Maeyer, 2008](#)).

In this article, the *self-evaluation portal* (SEP) is introduced as an innovative project that can be used by teachers to garner online

student feedback regarding students' perception of teachers' effectiveness. This formative feedback can be one component of school-based quality management. Based on a survey of SEP users, this study examines the effects of student feedback (SFB).

### The German context

In Germany, as in many other countries, the importance of school self-evaluation for quality assurance and quality development has increased ([Thiel & Thillmann, 2012](#)). New school laws were enacted that follow basic principles of new public management: On one hand, schools developed autonomy; conversely, this autonomy was accompanied by new forms of external control ([Altricher & Maag Merki, 2010](#)). Schools can now, e.g., design their own curriculum and adapt it to the requirements of their students, or they can decide on how to allocate a share of their financial budget. However, an increased number of centralised final examinations and standardised achievement tests are conducted, and school inspections as a form of external evaluation have been introduced ([Dederig & Mueller, 2011](#); [Klein & van Ackeren, 2011](#)). In particular, schools are held responsible by new laws for developing and ensuring the quality of their own work ([Thiel & Thillmann, 2012](#)). For this purpose, they conduct internal evaluations. Internal evaluation is understood comprehensively, synonymous with quality management as a systematic cyclical process of quality development consisting of (1) setting objectives,

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(2) planning activities, (3) evaluation and (4) derivation of new measures (Thiel & Thillmann, 2012). In a narrower sense, internal evaluation is understood as a self-determined measure of certain aspects of school quality as part of school development planning. This corresponds to Schildkamp and Visschers' (2010) definition of school self-evaluation as "a procedure involving systematic information gathering initiated by the school with the intention to assess the functioning of the school for supporting decision-making, organisational learning and for fostering school improvement" (p. 372). However, data from school inspections show that schools rarely evaluate their teaching quality systematically and regularly, e.g., by obtaining feedback from relevant groups such as students or parents (Gaertner, 2012).

### Conducting self-evaluations

This is consistent with international findings. Although the importance of school self-evaluation for school development is undisputed, the actual use of school self-evaluation in practice and its effects are nevertheless unclear (Janssens & van Amelsvoort, 2008). Lessons learned regarding school self-evaluation are sobering (Blok, Slegers, & Karsten, 2008), and the proportion of high quality school self-evaluations is low (Janssens and van Amelsvoort, 2008).

When schools are experienced in conducting school self-evaluations, problems arise in the following areas: (1) ensuring that relevant groups participate in the development or selection of instruments, (2) interpreting the results obtained, and (3) transforming this information into measures of school development (Blok et al., 2008; Schildkamp & Visscher, 2010; Vanhoof, de Maeyer, & van Petegem, 2011). These deficits may stem from a lack of on-site expertise and a lack of support for schools (Scheerens, 2002). Therefore, most schools and teachers are not at present able to conduct independent school self-evaluations and utilise self-evaluation as a continuous quality development process (Blok et al., 2008; McNamara & O'Hara, 2008; Schildkamp, Visscher, & Luyten, 2009).

To support this process, in some German states, the instrument SEIS (Self-Evaluation In Schools) is available to schools, originally developed by the Bertelsmann Foundation (Pröhl, Star, Sliwka, & Berne, 2003). With this instrument, different groups such as parents, students and teachers can be surveyed regarding their perceptions of various aspects of school quality. Fixed procedures and accompanying workshops appear to help schools navigate from analysis to the implementation of measures.

The requirement that schools should develop their own high-quality instruments for self-evaluation, however, exceeds available on-site competence (MET Project, 2010).<sup>1</sup> Well-designed instruments describe the relevance of the constructs operationalised and their influence on the learning processes of students. Well-designed instruments also present information regarding the reliability and validity of the constructs and describe the specific application of the instrument (Bundick, 2011; Follman, 1992, 1995; Kyriakides, 2005).

Conversely, the development of valid diagnostic instruments is one of the main objectives of empirical educational research. To support schools in the implementation of school self-evaluation, it is necessary to provide reliable and valid instruments that reflect relevant aspects of school and lesson reality and are simultaneously user-friendly (MacBeath, 2008).

### Using data to improve teaching

How schools and teachers can use different sources of information for school and instruction development is discussed within the field of *data-based decision making* (Coburn & Turner, 2012; Schildkamp, Ehren, & Lai, 2012). The lion's share of this research is devoted to the question of whether the analysis of performance data and deriving conclusions from this analysis for the development of teaching actually increases students' performance. Some research supports this assumption (Carlson, Borman, & Robinson, 2011; McNaughton, Lai, & Hsiao, 2012), at the same time, however, research indicates that sole data feedback is not sufficient to improve students' performance. Therefore, some interim steps are necessary (Coburn, Touré, & Yamashita, 2009; Little, 2012). Coburn et al. (2009), amongst others, show that, despite the fact that standardised test scores are relatively objective data, only the subjective interpretation of this data determines further action. This interpretation is in part influenced by strong social norms among schools' teaching staff, which shape the discourse among teachers about potential causes for the performance of their own students. Such norms might be beliefs that all teachers are equally effective or that causes for weak students' performance are located primarily outside the classroom (Timperley, 2008). Furthermore, research shows the influence of school leadership on data use. That is, school leaders can affect the depth of analysis of performance results, for example, by encouraging a combination of the analysis of student output data with processes in the classroom (Spillane, Parise, & Sherer, 2011).

Lai and Schildkamp (2013) argue that *data-based decision making* should not only be based on output data, but also on information about the *input* (e.g., characteristics of students attending a school), the *process* (e.g., teaching quality perceived by students/teachers/school leaders) and the *context* (e.g., school culture). Multiple sources of information may be relevant in order to derive conclusions for further instruction development. McNaughton et al. (2012), for example, show the positive effects of an intervention, in which not only performance data, but also classroom observations were jointly analysed with the goal to improve teaching. To our knowledge, however, there are no empirical studies that stress the inclusion of student feedback as a basis for such decision-making.

As Lai and Schildkamp (2013) argue, previous models that describe steps of data use have a high similarity, although certain steps of information processing are labelled differently (Carlson et al., 2011; Earl & Katz, 2006; Helmke & Hosenfeld, 2005; Schildkamp & Handelzalts, 2011; Brunner & Light, 2008). Lai and Schildkamp (2013) describe five typical phases of data use: (1) At the beginning, clarity is needed about the purpose/the question, the data are needed for. (2) Only when this purpose is evident, a decision can be made regarding which data should be considered or collected. (3) Afterwards, available data can be analysed and (4) interpreted that is, explanations for the existing results are found and possible consequences are drawn from this conclusion. (5) Finally, a decision about future actions is made and then implemented.

This model is very similar to the *model for data use for instructional development* (Helmke & Hosenfeld, 2005), which is used in this study. This model is often used in German-speaking countries as an analysis grid to describe the processing of achievement data by teachers (Kühle & Peek, 2007). However, the model itself is not limited to the analysis of achievement data, but generally refers to all kinds of information that relate to teaching. In addition, the model describes relevant individual and organisational context factors that affect data use. This model can be understood as a normative model that describes the ideal steps of processing feedback information.

<sup>1</sup> In several German states, schools are completely free to choose, which instruments they use to evaluate specific measures. Therefore, many schools develop their own instruments, as they assume that existing instruments do not represent their specific interests well.

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