Formative feedback as a tool for learning and growing in schools

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In this article, the importance of formative feedback for learning and self-growth will be examined. Principles of providing formative feedback will be delineated. Practical examples of elements of formative feedback, such as feedback for success and for challenges, will be presented. Finally, steps in providing feedback will be suggested and implemented in student-parent-teacher conferences.

The importance of formative feedback for learning and growth

In their seminal article about effective methods of raising achievement among students, "Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment", Black and Wiliam (1998) presented results of a meta-analysis of research in this area. They found that formative feedback which directs classroom teaching and learning **increases** achievement among all students and **decreases** the gap between strong and weak students. Thus, according to Black and Wiliam (1998), the role of formative feedback is threefold:

1. It increases student involvement in learning processes and in self evaluations.
2. It enhances student motivation and self-concept.
3. It leads to changes in teaching strategies.

In her book summarizing research about the power of beliefs and how to change them, "Mindset: The new psychology of success", Dweck (2006) discussed the differences between two mindsets or beliefs about one's intelligence and abilities: fixed and growth. These mindsets develop as a result of one's interaction with the environment. A person with a fixed mindset regards intelligence and abilities as static and unchanging in nature. In contrast, a person with a growth mindset relates to intelligence and abilities as ever-growing and developing. These mindsets lead to a process which may enhance or decrease achievement. A fixed mindset leads to a desire to look smart at all costs. Consequently, one avoids challenges, viewed as potential failures. One may give up easily on hard tasks, steers clear from hard effort, and ignores feedback for mistakes. This process may result, ultimately, in decreased

achievement. A growth mindset leads to a willingness to learn from challenges. Consequently, one persists in facing obstacles. One exerts effort, and learns from feedback, culminating in enhanced achievement. Thus, feedback is regarded as crucial in the process of learning from one's actions. Moreover, it also promotes beliefs shaping a world view about one's intelligence and abilities.

Specific elements of formative feedback

How can we provide formative feedback to enhance student motivation, self-concept and a growth mindset?

Based on their research and work with school systems in the United States and in England, Black et al. (2003) and Stiggins & Chappuis (2005) proposed several key components of an effective system of feedback in the classroom. These include:
- Establishing clear goals for assessing students and providing feedback to all relevant stakeholders.
- Selecting or developing assessments that can provide accurate feedback on student performance and behavior.
- Involving students in the assessment and feedback process in order to enhance their responsibility for learning.
- Designing instruction and assessment based on clear learning targets.
- Communicating summative and formative results effectively.

As a result of our extensive experience in working with teachers and schools in Israel, and in line with Dweck's (2006) suggestions, the following table provides examples of particular formative feedback for success, as well as for challenges. Several types of teacher and self- report feedback are presented, with specific illustrations for each of them.

Table 1 – Examples of specific types of feedback for success and for challenges

Type of Performance	Type of Feedback	Example
Success	Description of behavior relating to effort and its results	Teacher feedback: You put a lot of effort in this work, as shown by the in depth analysis of this phenomenon and by drawing well supported conclusions
Success	Reinforcing originality and persistence	Teacher feedback: You faced the challenge in an original and interesting manner, just as you did in previous times.
Success	Reinforcing the belief in the ability to grow	Student self- report: I improved significantly in stating the problem and in finding appropriate solutions to it
Challenge	The problem is specific to	Teacher feedback: Unlike other tasks, in

	this task, not a general problems	this task, you did not apply your knowledge about causality
Challenge	Focusing on improvement	Student self- report: I need to think of a better example that illustrates the causal relationship between the phenomena
Challenge	Providing normative information – you are not the only one with the problem	Teacher feedback: You chose a good example for the principle, but just like many students, it's hard to understand from the example the causal relationship between the phenomena

Steps in providing formative feedback

In line with our extensive field experience, we would like to present several steps in providing effective feedback, with the intent of empowering the person to continue the process of constant improvement.

1. Clarifying expectations – it is important to clarify initially that the goal is to improve, not to put down. Moreover, the focus will be on behaviors that can be improved.
2. Opening positive feedback – it is suggested to begin with positive feedback on success, no matter how small it is, in order to establish trust and willingness to continue the process.
3. Feedback relating to challenges – it is important to describe problems as challenges, not as weaknesses and failures, which have a fixed connotation of traits which cannot be changed. Moreover, it is advisable to begin to think together how to deal with them. This may enhance a 'can do' attitude of improvement.
4. Culminating positive feedback – it is recommended to end with positive feedback relating to some kind of success, of overcoming a challenge, and/or to the process that both parties experienced in discussing the feedback. This may boost the belief that one can continue to improve.

An example of formative feedback – Student-Parent –Teacher Conference

In their work with schools, Stiggins and Chappuis (2005), capitalized on student-parent-teacher conferences as one of the ways to enhance student involvement and performance. Thus, they implemented the key components of the effective system of feedback which was detailed above. This system was implemented successfully by Israeli teachers trained by the Henrietta Szold Institute staff.
One may view this system as a cycle with several phases that feed into one another, as presented in figure 1 below.

Figure 1 – The cycle of feedback in student-parent-teacher conference
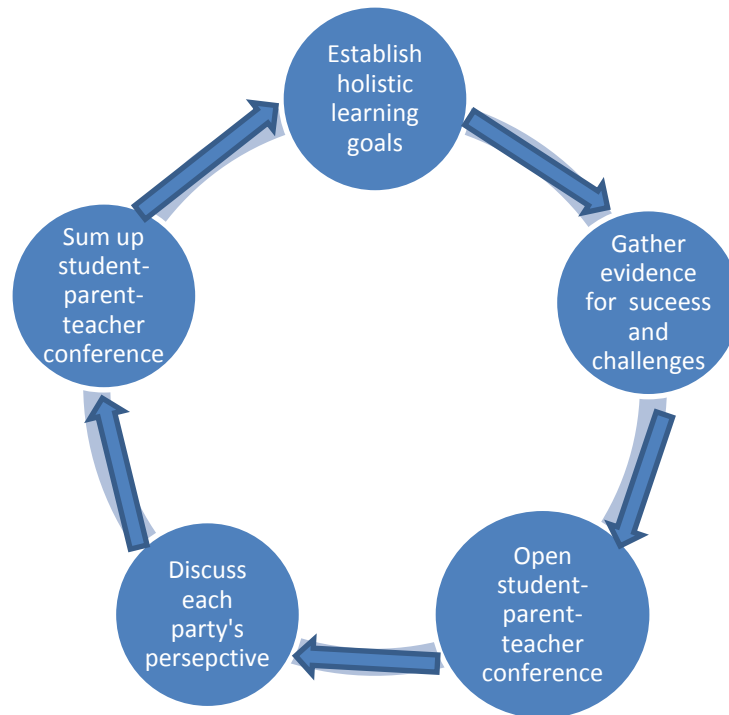
Each of the phases shown above contains the following elements:

- <u>Establishing holistic learning goals</u>
  Students establish their individual learning goals in various subject areas, as well as in social and emotional realms with the help and guidance of their teacher.

- <u>Gathering evidence for areas of strengths and improvement</u>
  Students prepare evidence for their strengths and areas needing improvement by gathering data from various formative and summative assessments, such as tests, projects, and essays which relate to their learning goals, detailing their success and challenges.

- <u>Opening student-parent-teacher conference</u>
  Students open the student-parent- teacher conference by presenting their self-assessment of their attitudes, knowledge and behavior from cognitive, social and emotional perspectives along with the relevant data which they gathered.

- <u>Discussion of each party's perspective</u>
  Teachers and parents provide their feedback relating to strengths and challenges, relating to the students' self- assessment and adding their perspectives.

- <u>Summing up student-parent-teacher conference</u>
  Students, teachers and parents choose learning goals in the cognitive, social and emotional realm for the students to work on, specifying what students may

do to improve and how parents and teachers may assist them to reach their goals and improve.

In conclusion, continuous systematic feedback focusing on success in overcoming challenges, provided and discussed by all parties relating to students may cultivate a growth mindset. This growth mindset, in turn, may promote enhanced achievement and fulfillment of potential.

References

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