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**The LEARN Project
Phase 2
Guidance for Schools on
Assessment for Learning
Project Report
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THE LEARN PROJECT

LEARNERS' EXPECTATIONS of ASSESSMENT REQUIREMENTS NATIONALLY

'Could try harder'

A summary of students' perceptions of assessment in schools

The role of assessment in raising standards

In recent years the major focus of policy makers has been to use external mechanisms such as summative end of key stage standard tests, the publication of comparative school 'league tables' and target setting for schools and LEAs to improve standards. Black and Wiliam undertook a major review of the research literature on assessment and learning in 1998 and suggested that the emphasis on external mechanisms has neglected the processes operating within classrooms and the relationship between teacher and learner. Their review provided powerful evidence of the capacity of **formative assessment** to raise standards where students have a **clear sense of themselves as learners**, the **goals they are trying to achieve** and **how to reach them**.

"Learning is driven by what teachers and pupils do in classrooms. Here, teachers have to manage complicated and demanding situations, ... in order to help youngsters learn now and to become better learners in the future. Standards can only be raised if teachers can tackle this task more effectively – what is missing from the policies is any direct help with this task."
(Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.1)

The results of the LEARN project

The LEARN project interviewed over 200 students of different ages (year 3 to year 13) to gain insights into their perceptions of assessments they undertake and how assessment is used to help them improve their work and learning. The findings in this report reflect the students' voices and are illustrated by typical comments. The main findings were that:

1. *students' motivation was strategic and dependent on external and internal factors, such as age, peer and family expectations and perceived relevance of the course;*
2. *students attributed success to effort, ability and opportunity to learn;*
3. *students reported different attitudes to learning: some were keen to understand, some were concerned about their performance without necessarily understanding, while a few demonstrated 'learned helplessness'. Individual students' attitudes were not fixed and varied with age and context;*
4. *students usually had a good understanding of what to do for individual tasks but were less clear as to how these tasks fitted into the 'big picture' of the course. There was evidence they were not always receiving the 'signposting' they needed;*
5. *students were often unsure how work was assessed and many reported that only some teachers explicitly shared assessment criteria with them;*
6. *students of all ages were dependent on teacher set standards when assessing the quality of their work; many were able to refer to past work to define quality;*
7. *there was little evidence of systematic self-assessment and few students reported having the opportunity to develop their knowledge and understanding of this skill;*
8. *the quality of feedback was commented on critically by many students;*
9. *students were confused by grades for effort and achievement;*
10. *feedback that was prompt and delivered orally was preferred;*
11. *students felt that feedback that was constructively critical helped improve their performance by giving them pointers on how to improve;*

Students' views of themselves as Learners

Attitudes to learning were context specific. Students identified three factors for successful learning: effort, ability and opportunity to learn. Some students of all ages and attainment responded well to their teacher and were successful learners. Others protected themselves from failure by reducing their effort or blaming their lack of success on other factors. A few appeared to have an attitude of 'learned helplessness'.

Primary (Y3/6) and Secondary (year 9)	14-19 (GCSE, A-level and GNVQ)
<p>In years 3 and 6 there was a strong message that learning was fun and that teachers worked hard to create a positive atmosphere of achievement.</p> <p>By year 9 there were more comments about some subjects being 'boring'.</p> <p>Lower attainers' effort was strongly affected by their views of both the subject and the teacher.</p>	<p>At GCSE English, Mathematics and Science were recognised as being the most important subjects because <i>'they are useful and employers will want qualifications in them'</i>.</p> <p>Students worked harder in subjects they liked or where they liked the teacher. Post-16 the opportunity to specialise in subjects of their own choosing and the greater individual responsibility placed on students for the learning was welcomed.</p>
<p>Short-term goals were important in motivating many students. At year 3 this might have been to do with keeping up with friends or not staying in at lunch-time. In year 6 the KS2 tests were a factor for many students. Lower attainers in year 9 had few goals – affective factors were very important here – 'moods' and teachers making work interesting.</p> <p>Long-term goals were generally too remote to be of much significance.</p>	<p>Motivation depended on students' goals and self-beliefs. A majority of students acknowledged that they needed short-term goals such as module exams or coursework to help motivate them.</p> <p>All students had some vision of long-term goals and had made choices that reflected their interests. However less than 20% of students had a clear idea of future work, with most seeing qualifications as a passport to Higher Education or jobs.</p>

Understanding of tasks and criteria for good work

A clear dependence on teachers emerged. Students had good understanding of individual tasks but not the 'big picture' of a course. Students' perception of assessment criteria was that they focused on and rewarded aspects of work such as effort, presentation and accuracy.

Primary (Y3/6) and Secondary (year 9)	14-19 (GCSE, A-level and GNVQ)
<p>Teachers controlled and directed class activity. Lower attainers were more reliant on teachers and more likely to be confused.</p> <p>Students had a good surface knowledge of the 'what' and 'how' of individual tasks, but less sense of the purpose ('why') of the task.</p> <p>There was a progression of understanding of criteria through the year groups; the most frequently mentioned throughout were effort, presentation and accuracy.</p> <p>Students were aware that there were different criteria for different subjects and there was clear evidence of teachers emphasising certain aspects such as spelling, metaphors, adjectives and structure.</p>	<p>Teachers set the structure of work and students viewed success as being dependent on the quality of the guidance given.</p> <p>Purposes were usually shared with GCSE, A-level and GNVQ students.</p> <p>Some teachers provided information about syllabus content and assessment criteria but many GCSE and A-level students were not aware of the criteria their work was to be assessed on. It was important for the language of criteria to be understandable.</p> <p>Student performance was felt to be dependent on effort, ability and time management in juggling the pressures of paid work, socialising and other interests.</p>

Self-assessment

There was little evidence of self-assessment being used as a strategy to support learning or of it being widely used before GCSE. The types of self-assessment reported were usually little more than a mechanical marking process.

Primary (Y3/6) and Secondary (year 9)

In years 3, 6 and 9 students referred to marking their own and peers' work: *In my head. Once in maths I ticked my own work. It's not good to mark your own work because you don't know if it's right or wrong (Y3).*

There were rare mentions of some peer- and self-assessment, in English: *Sometimes we think about how we could have done better and how we could have improved it. (Y9)*

Students did, despite this, show some degree of skill at self-assessment at all levels. Year 3 and 6 students were able to evaluate their own work, often by comparison with previous pieces of work and always with reference to teacher validation of their views: *We don't know what we've got until she shows us (Y9).*

14-19 (GCSE, A-level and GNVQ)

Less than 25% of GCSE, A-level and GNVQ students had opportunities to assess their own work *'Sometimes I feel I've done a really good piece of work and I'd like to say so'*

Types of self-assessment reported were limited in scope (using Maths answers at back of books, marking tests). Exceptions included peer assessment of drafts of work in A-level English with the comments being used to rework the essay.

Male students were more confident that they knew the quality of their work. Over 90% of students compared their performance with others with typical comments being *'All the time – competitive between friends'* (male) and *'All the time – make myself feel bad'* (female).

Feedback

Different types of feedback were used. Both teachers and students preferred oral feedback and discussion but opportunities for this type of feedback were limited. Throughout the age groups there was evidence of confusion between feedback on effort and achievement. Higher achievers of all ages wanted to know how their work was assessed and be told more than 'well done'. Constructive criticism was helpful where it told students how to improve work. 'Criticism without guidance' was not helpful.

Primary (Y3/6) and Secondary (year 9)

If it's a tick I'm quite happy because it means its good work, but if it's 2 sentences at the bottom it means it's quite bad. (Y6).

Grades were rarely used in years 3 and 6.

Younger students often only had positive comments that they liked because they signified approval but were no help in improving work.

Students didn't always use written comments, either because they couldn't be read (years 3 up to year 9), weren't understood or because the students chose not to use them.

Comments on effort were sometimes demoralising if they didn't match the pupil's own perception of their effort and comments such as *'try harder'* or *'always stay focused'* were not felt to be helpful.

14-19 (GCSE, A-level and GNVQ)

The commonest forms of feedback are grades or marks and detailed written formative comments both general and specific, often linked to assessment criteria. Students did not necessarily know what grades meant or whether they were for effort or attainment.

Good feedback was *'positive and encouraging. Told what's wrong – written down or said individually. Never embarrassing'*.

Negative comments reflected students' concerns that teachers comments were inaccurate or unfair. *'Sometimes can be offending – The comment says – Not thinking about it enough – But I did!'*

Feedback was helpful where it gave constructive criticism and told the student how to improve their work.

Questions for schools to consider

How can learners' strategic motivation be utilised?

Many students reported being motivated to learn but there was clear evidence that for some, years of relative failure, labelling or a desire to conform with their peers was blocking learning. This attitude to learning was context specific and changed with appropriate support or motivational input.

- Teachers' beliefs about students' potential for learning can have a profound effect. Research suggests that where formative assessment is linked to a view of students as having 'untapped potential' rather than a 'fixed IQ', gains in standards are higher. Teachers can help their students if they encourage them to believe that success results from effort rather than ability or teacher esteem.

How can teachers help students see the 'big picture' of the course?

Students were dependent on their teachers to guide them in their learning and reported needed constant signposting to help them on their journey of learning. There was evidence that many students were not receiving this information appropriately.

- Sharing goals and expectations with students so that they gradually develop a **clear sense of themselves as learners, the goals they are trying to achieve and how to reach them** can have a profound effect. An important starting point is for teachers to know where the work is going and ensure that this is shared regularly with students.

Why do students largely equate assessment with grading and recording?

Most students experienced assessment as marking and grading. It was done to and for them, not as something they could be engaged in to improve their learning. There was confusion about the use of grades for effort and attainment.

- The process of grading tends to lower self-esteem and doesn't give students advice for improving work. Research evidence suggests that greater improvement can be achieved where comments only are used. Teachers could review their marking policies and the use of effort and attainment grades.

How can students be helped to have a clearer understanding of the quality of their work?

Students lacked confidence in judging their performance and were given few opportunities to practise self-assessment skills. Higher attainers appeared to know what was required, and adapted better to varying assessment practice.

- Black and Wiliam showed that large improvements in performance, particularly for low-attainers, can be achieved where self-assessment is used to promote learning. "For formative assessment to be productive, students should be trained in self-assessment so that they can understand the main purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to do to achieve." (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.10)

How can the quality of feedback to students be improved?

Feedback on performance was seen as valuable, particularly oral feedback. However much feedback was of limited use. Students' feelings sometimes blocked learning. Positive feedback made them 'feel good' without necessarily improving work while negative feedback could de-motivate.

- Feedback should be focused on improving the quality of the work and try not to involve the student's self-concept and self-esteem. 'Feedback to any pupil should be about the particular qualities of his or her work, with advice on what he or she can do to improve, and should avoid comparisons with other pupils.' (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.9)

Further reading

Black, P. And Wiliam, D. (1998) *Inside the Black Box* London: Kings College

THE LEARN PROJECT

LEARNERS' EXPECTATIONS of ASSESSMENT REQUIREMENTS NATIONALLY

'Not very good work' doesn't help me know how to do it better **How students perceive and respond to feedback**

The role of feedback in raising standards

The quality of feedback to students has long been recognised as important in raising performance. Black and Wiliam's 1998 review of research literature provided powerful evidence of the capacity of **formative assessment** to raise standards where students have a **clear sense of themselves as learners**, the **goals they are trying to achieve** and **how to reach them**. Feedback is a vital tool in this process but it became clear from talking to students that teachers were often not using feedback effectively to help student learning.

Black and Wiliam suggest:

"Feedback to any pupil should be about the particular qualities of his or her work, with advice on what he or she can do to improve, and should avoid comparisons with other pupils."

The results of the LEARN project

The LEARN project interviewed over 200 students of different ages (year 3 to year 13) to gain insights into their perceptions of assessments they undertake and how assessment is used to help them improve their work and learning. Students of all abilities and ages were dependent on their teachers for guidance on both their performance and how to achieve their goals. Students saw quality feedback as a crucial element in helping them improve their work. The main findings were:

1. *Students were aware of the range of different types of feedback used.*
2. *Simple comments, ticks, smiley faces and 'good work', signified approval but didn't help students 'bridge the gap' between present performance and future goals.*
3. *Most primary school children received only positive comments about their work (schools reported this approach as a policy). Students of all ages felt that positive comments boosted their confidence.*
4. *There was evidence that some younger students (up to year 9) could not read or understand teachers' comments on their work. Sometimes comments were ignored.*
5. *Both teachers and students preferred prompt oral feedback and discussion and felt that this improved performance.*
6. *Students of all ages reported using feedback to improve their performance.*
7. *Constructive criticism was helpful where it helped students understand what the task required, engaged them in thinking about their current performance and how to improve their work.*
8. *Critical comments that damaged self-esteem and self-concept were unhelpful and demotivating.*
9. *Criticism of effort was demoralising and tended to be ignored or treated with hostility, especially if the student's own perception of their effort didn't match the teacher's.*
10. *Effort and attainment grades confused students. Students did not necessarily know what grades meant or were for (even at A-level). There was variation in application between different subjects and teachers. Grades were rarely used in years 3 and 6.*

Students' sense of themselves as learners: their feelings about different types of feedback	
<p><i>Different types of feedback were used. Most primary school children received only positive comments about their work (schools reported this approach as a policy). Both teachers and students preferred oral feedback and discussion but in primary schools opportunities have been reduced by government priorities (NC, numeracy, literacy). Critical comments were only helpful if they helped the pupil understand what was required and weren't interpreted as personal attacks. Comments on effort were demoralising if they didn't match the pupil's own perception of their effort.</i></p>	
Primary (Y3/6) and Secondary (year 9)	14-19 (GCSE, A-level and GNVQ)
<p>Students had feedback in the form of ticks, smiley faces, written and oral comments. Primary students were not usually given grades.</p> <p>Students liked positive feedback <i>'I feel great. I've done a wicked piece of work.'</i> (6B) <i>Excellent verb work means you've done a lot of really good work.</i> (Y6) <i>'Good or excellent gives you confidence in what you're doing.'</i> (Y6) <i>If they give you tips on how you could improve and say what you did well it's a lot nicer.</i> (Y9)</p> <p>Students preferred oral comments. <i>'What teacher says is most important because its one on one so they can tell you what they really think.'</i> (Y9)</p> <p>Criticism without guidance was not helpful. <i>'it makes you feel sad and doesn't help improve work.'</i></p>	<p>Students had feedback in the form of grades, ticks, written and oral comments. <i>'If they correct spelling I can sort it out. If they left them I wouldn't know how to spell the word.'</i> (Y10)</p> <p>Students reported a range of feedback strategies <i>'We get a mark, comments all the way through, spelling, key words I've missed out and then a comment at the end on how to improve the work.'</i> (A level) <i>'We get post mortems from the teacher after tests. And after essays.'</i> (A level)</p> <p>One to one discussion was liked. <i>'If we don't understand things they get explained to us. If it's just written you can't ask a question directly. If you talk you can say how can I improve it.'</i> (Y10)</p> <p>Comments were often interpreted as personal criticism <i>'sometimes can be offending – not thinking about it enough – but I did!'</i> (Y12)</p>

Students' understanding of comments: do they provide clear information about current performance?	
<p><i>There was evidence that some younger students (up to year 9) could not read or understand teachers' comments on their work. Many students reported that comments that identified strengths and weaknesses were helpful. Helpful comments also identified ways forward.</i></p>	
Primary (Y3/6) and Secondary (year 9)	14-19 (GCSE, A-level and GNVQ)
<p>Students constructed meaning for the comments – sometimes as their teachers intended. <i>'If there's a star in pen that miss wrote, then you have to write it three times – that's the boringest part.'</i>(Y3) <i>'Good doesn't help much - he's just saying that it's not really very good. I like it if he just told the truth.'</i> (Y3) <i>'If it's a tick I'm quite happy because it means it's good work, but if it's 2 sentences at the bottom it means it's quite bad.'</i> (Y6)</p> <p>Comments on the quality of work were useful in establishing current performance. <i>'They usually say how well you researched.'</i>(Y9)</p> <p>Students with good grades wanted reasons <i>'One time I did an essay and I didn't think I did it very well but he gave me A1. I didn't think I'd written enough but he just said "very good"'</i> (Y9)</p> <p>Some students chose to ignore comments: <i>'Sometimes he says it could be better, but if I think I've done it well I just forget it'</i> (Y9)</p>	<p>Comments were felt to be helpful in providing information about performance if they identified mistakes: <i>'Point out gaps in knowledge and where done badly'</i> (Y12)</p> <p>Going through mock exam papers was helpful because students could use <i>'Marks and corrections – tell you what you missed out or did wrong'</i> (Y12);</p> <p>Comments highlighted areas for further work. <i>'Comments make you think about things you've got to put in next time to get a better grade'</i> (Y10) <i>'Telling you what to put, the corrections, where to put extra bits – they're most helpful'</i> (Y10)</p> <p>Comments that were critical but didn't identify the problems weren't helpful: <i>'Go away, do it again, without telling why, need explanation.'</i> (Y12)</p>

Students' understanding of grades

Throughout the age groups there was evidence of confusion between feedback on effort and achievement. Students did not necessarily know what grades meant or were for (even at A-level) and there was variation in application between different subjects and teachers, particularly in secondary schools. Grades were rarely used in years 3 and 6.

Primary (Y3/6) and Secondary (year 9)

There was confusion about the meaning of attainment and effort grades *'Usually she puts comments and put the spellings right and puts A1 or B2. A is very good... I can't remember what the number means.'* (Y9)

Students had their own interpretations of grades: *'If its like a C or D you know to work harder and revise more. (Y9) 'Sometimes in English I get a B – it means good. She writes "good work" or "well done".'* (Y9)

Some students were able to use grades to confirm their own understanding of the quality of their work: *Got a B+, merit. Thought it was OK. Didn't think I had explained it clearly enough.*

14-19 (GCSE, A-level and GNVQ)

There was confusion about the meaning of attainment and effort grades *'I got B4 - I think it's B for how much effort you've put in and 4 for what you actually put in.'* (Y10); *'They use 1 to 4, that's the effort and A to E, that's attainment. Or it might be the other way round.'* (Y10); *'Mostly its a grade like A,B,C,D and a comment next to it suggesting improvement. The grade's usually about effort. If you put in a great amount of effort you usually get an A - at least it was lower down the school.'* (A level)

Grades were an end in themselves and blocked improvement *'Sometimes if she just puts B at the bottom and doesn't put corrections - you think, well, what have I got to do to put it right?'* (Y10)

Students' use of feedback to improve performance

Students of all ages used feedback to improve performance. Constructive criticism was helpful where it told students how to improve work. Simple comments, ticks, smiley faces and 'good work', signified approval but didn't help students 'bridge the gap' between present performance and future goals..

Primary (Y3/6) and Secondary (year 9)

Suggestions for improvement were seen as helpful. *'It was just like someone had shot a bullet saying 'be neater' through my ear and it went up to my brain and I was, like, neat.'* (Y3); *'They give you tips on how you could improve.'* (Y9)

Target setting was helpful for some. *'Sometimes we decide I will try to get 5/5 for the next test. That helps me try harder.'* (Y3)

Written comments while appreciated weren't always used. Some younger students couldn't read them and some students chose not to use them. *'Sometimes he says it could be better but if I think I've done it well I just forget about it.'* (Y9);

Unhelpful comments: told students things they already know, *'They put things like 'not enough effort', 'could be neater', 'copied'.* (Y9); didn't tell them how to improve *'Not very good work doesn't help me to know how to do it better.'* (Y3); or 'put them down'. *'Could do better' - cos it really puts you down.*(Y9)

14-19 (GCSE, A-level and GNVQ)

Suggestions that helped improve performance included: *'Sometimes they'll say you need to put more facts in, sometimes they'll put 'see me' so you can go and talk to them. (Y10); 'Comments are useful because you get to know how to improve. Like it says there - one too many rhetorical questions.'* (A level)

Comments were often ignored. Do you read what the teacher writes? – *'No, I just keep on writing.'* (Y10);

Some GCSE students felt that teachers didn't pay enough attention to their work.

Unhelpful comments: told students things they already know, *Once she said, 'You're not very good at spelling'. I don't really want to hear that because I already know that. (Y10)*

Class feedback was less useful where students had already done their best and got good comments or grades.

Questions for schools to consider

How can feedback promote learning and improve students' performance?

Feedback that helped students understand the quality of their work and what they needed to do to improve were seen as helpful. Students reported that comments that merely praised or criticised didn't help them. Students preferred oral feedback because it allowed them to enter into a dialogue with their teachers.

Mary James (1998) p.98 suggests 'feedback is most effective if it encourages students to think about the task, rather than about themselves,' and suggests some practical advice that can be derived from Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam's review of research.

1. Feedback is most effective when it stimulates *correction* of errors through a *thoughtful* approach
2. Feedback should concentrate on *specific* errors and poor strategy and make *suggestions* about how to improve.
3. Suggestions for improvement should act as '*scaffolding*', i.e. students should be given as much help as they need to use their knowledge but they should not be given a complete solution as soon as they get stuck or they will not think things through for themselves.
4. Students should be helped to find *alternative* solutions, if simply repeating an explanation continues to lead to failure.
5. A focus on *process* goals is often more effective than a focus on product goals and feedback on *progress* over a number of attempts is more effective than feedback on performance treated as isolated events.
6. The quality of the dialogue in feedback is important and some research indicates that oral feedback is more effective than written feedback.

Schools might consider how to:

1. provide prompt and regular feedback to students that encourages students' to think about the task, rather than about themselves;
2. use both oral and written feedback that scaffolds learning and engages students in a dialogue about their performance;
3. focus the feedback on the learning objectives and criteria for success.

Why does the use of comments rather than grades improve students' performance?

There was clear evidence that students were often confused by the use of grades and found it difficult to recognise the difference between effort and attainment grades. They also found that simple praise (ticks, good or excellent) was unhelpful. Other research clearly demonstrates that in most circumstances teachers should give narrative comments not grades or marks because narrative feedback encourages students to engage with the quality of the work while grades or marks encourage pupils to look for ways to get the best marks rather than what they need to do to improve their learning. This may result in avoidance of difficult tasks, a loss of self-esteem and increased occurrence of underachievement.

Schools might want to consider the implications of these findings for their marking and recording policies. Does the current marking policy encourage teachers to:

1. use grades and marks with caution because they are confusing and 'label' students;
2. target marking, so that they don't mark everything just to check that it has been completed;
3. ensure that comments focus on the task pointing out gaps between the students' performance and the expected standard, and give ideas about how to close the gap.

Further reading

Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (1998) *Inside the Black Box* London: Kings College

James, M. (1998) *Using assessment for School Improvement* London: Heinemann

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'Don't know what would be a good bit of work, really'

'Low-achievers' perceptions of Assessment

How can Assessment help raise the performance of low-achievers?

There is considerable research evidence to suggest that the performance of (so-called) low-achievers can be improved more than other students by formative assessment. Black and Wiliam in their major review of the research literature on assessment and learning suggest that formative assessment helps low-achievers more if it concentrates on specific problems with their work, gives them a clear understanding of what is wrong and achievable targets for putting it right. They go on to say that in a classroom culture which focuses on rewards:

“Pupils who encounter difficulties and poor results are led to believe they lack ability, and this belief leads them to attribute their difficulties to a defect in themselves about which they cannot do a great deal. So they ‘retire hurt’, avoid investing effort in learning which could only lead to disappointment, and try to build up their self-esteem in other ways. Whilst the high-achievers can do well in such a culture, the overall result is to enhance the frequency and the extent of underachievement.” (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.9)

The results of the LEARN project

The LEARN project interviewed over 200 students of different ages (year 3 to year 13) in a range of schools to gain insights into their perceptions of assessments they undertake and how assessment is used to help them improve their work and learning. 56 of these students were identified as low-achievers within their class or set. The students' responses give a partial view of their motivation, their problems and successes with learning and assessment and what types of feedback helped them improve their work. The main findings were:

Low-achieving students':

- 1. motivation was highly dependent on context, liking the teacher and subject;*
- 2. tended to be more concerned with 'performance' rather than 'understanding' and a few had an attitude of 'learned helplessness';*
- 3. demonstrated poorer understanding of assessment requirements than their peers;*
- 4. understanding of what to do for individual tasks was inconsistent – sometimes they could explain tasks clearly, with others they struggled;*
- 5. had little understanding of how tasks fitted into the 'big picture' of the course;*
- 6. were very dependent on teacher-set standards when judging the quality of their work;*
- 7. rarely reported having opportunities to develop self-assessment skills;*
- 8. were often confused by effort and attainment grades;*
- 9. sometimes felt that their effort was not recognised by teachers;*
- 10. preferred feedback that was prompt and delivered orally;*
- 11. were often unable to use feedback effectively;*
- 12. felt that feedback that was constructively critical helped improve their performance;*

Low-achieving students' views of themselves as Learners

Attitudes to learning were context specific. Students recognised the importance of hard work but found it difficult to achieve consistently. Others protected themselves from failure by reducing their effort or blaming their lack of success on other factors. A few appeared to have an attitude of 'learned helplessness'.

Primary (Y3/6)	Secondary (Y9, GCSE, A-level and GNVQ)
<p>In year 3 and 6 students reported enjoying school but there were reservations <i>'I like school but... some bits are hard (big sigh) (Y6).</i></p> <p>Most felt they learnt best when the teacher told them things and when work was pitched at the right level.</p> <p>Lower achievers' effort was strongly affected by their views of both the subject and the teacher. Commonly students reported they work <i>'quite hard'</i> or <i>'as hard as I can'</i> (Y6).</p> <p>Effort and ability were identified as reasons for differences in performance. Better achievers <i>'listen and know more (3B)'</i>, <i>'think and learn more, they try hard (3G)</i>, <i>'writing is neater - you can understand it (Y6).</i></p>	<p>Lower achievers in year 9 had few goals. Affective factors were very important here, 'moods' and teachers making work interesting. <i>'I don't try hard if I don't like the teachers or if they're boring lessons (Y9)</i></p> <p>Aspirations affected motivation: <i>'If I want to be a model none of it will be important' (Y9)</i></p> <p>Effort was recognised as important: <i>'Some people mess around and don't bother to do the work' (GNVQ)</i></p> <p>Low-achievers were the most likely to mention ability as a factor in success: <i>'Cos they're brainier and work harder' (Y9)</i>; <i>'Some people are naturally better at English and things than others' (Y10)</i></p>

Understanding of tasks and criteria for good work

A clear dependence on teachers emerged. There was evidence of understanding of individual tasks, but less certainty about their purpose or the criteria used to assess them. Students often did not 'see' the 'big picture' of a course. Students' perception of assessment criteria was that they rewarded aspects of work such as effort, presentation and accuracy.

Primary (Y3/6)	Secondary (Y9, GCSE, A-level and GNVQ)
<p>Students were often unclear about the requirements of tasks and had little understanding of quality <i>'Don't know what would be a good piece of work, really' (Y6).</i> Attempted definitions of quality included terms such as <i>'Neat, looks good, all spellings might not be right.'</i> (Y6)</p> <p>Many would go to the teacher first for help, but parents and friends were also used.</p> <p>Common problems identified were basic literacy and numeracy: <i>'Some English and some maths I find hard' (Y3)</i>; <i>'Writing is hard and English.'</i>(Y3)</p> <p>Students' understanding of assessment criteria was limited and mechanistic <i>'neat, looks good, all spellings might not be right. It looks good.'</i> (Y3)</p> <p>Students were worried by tests such as times tables and were relieved when they were over.</p> <p>They could define people who were better or worse than them <i>'by the way they work - fast or slow (Y6).</i></p> <p>There were glimpses of learned helplessness <i>'If their's looks better than mine, I think I'm going to get it all wrong. Not a good thing to do because I lose confidence. Can be good if it helps.'</i> (Y6)</p>	<p>Students felt they understood the requirements of individual tasks but were less sure about how it fitted into the whole course.</p> <p>Most felt they were doing well or quite well. <i>'I do excellent ... teacher says well done'</i>. 50% didn't admit to having any problems and 25% didn't know if they had problems. Problems admitted to were: <i>reading and writing (9G), handwriting not very good (9G).</i></p> <p>Low-achieving students reported not knowing what the assessment criteria were: <i>'She'd give us a booklet which tells us what we'll do. It's got marks for each bit. (Y9)</i>; <i>We don't know how it will be assessed, but we know what to do; they give us sheets and stuff.'</i> (Y10)</p> <p>Reported criteria emphasised presentation: <i>'Most of my teachers say I could improve on my presentation. It's not very helpful because they've said it so many times.'</i> (Y9)</p>

Self-assessment

There was little evidence of self-assessment being used as a strategy to support learning or of it being widely used before GCSE. The types of self-assessment reported were usually little more than a mechanical marking process. They rarely reported being given the opportunity to engage the quality of their work in order to reflect on how to improve it.

Primary (Y3/6)

Self-assessment if done at all was usually a mechanical process of marking: *'Once, swap with friend.'* (Y3); *'Yes, sometimes but can't remember, might be spellings.'* (Y3)

Students sometimes had a concept of how good their work was *'Usually I know inside of me if the work I have done is good.'* (Y3) but more commonly had little idea: *'don't know how good it is until it's been marked.'* (Y6)

There was evidence that if asked to review their own work students could assess the quality: *'When I handed this in I thought it was quite good, but on re-reading it again it's not as good as I thought it was.'* (Y6)

Occasionally students reported having the opportunity to look at their progress: *'I do a piece of work and compare it some time later with work I'm doing now and see the improvement.'* (Y6)

Secondary (Y9, GCSE, A-level and GNVQ)

Students reported that self-assessment was limited to classwork such as maths questions. Few reported opportunities to engage with the quality of work.

There were differing views on being able to judge how good work was. Some felt they could while others had no idea. *'Sometimes I think I've done really rubbish, but sometimes I've done better than I think.'* (Y10)

The highly structured feedback system at GNVQ provides students with an exact view of their progress. Many students could estimate their likely result.

Feedback

Different types of feedback were used. Both teachers and students preferred oral feedback and discussion but opportunities for this type of feedback were limited. Throughout the age groups there was evidence of confusion between feedback on effort and achievement. Higher achievers of all ages wanted to know how their work was assessed and be told more than 'well done'. Constructive criticism was helpful where it told students how to improve work. 'Criticism without guidance' was not helpful.

Primary (Y3/6)

Most primary school children only received positive comments about their work (schools reported this approach as a policy).

Students liked this approach *'I feel great. I've done a wicked piece of work.'* (6B) *Excellent verb work means you've done a lot of really good work.'* (Y6)

There was a tendency to see feedback as being about self-esteem rather than the quality of the work: *'If it's bad I take it out on the teacher and I'm naughty. If it's good it makes me feel good.'* (Y6)

Comments that helped focus on the task included ideas about present performance: *'You forgot these things...'* (Y6)

Secondary (Y9, GCSE, A-level and GNVQ)

Helpful feedback indicated errors and showed how students could improve in ways they could understand: *'English get sheets with comments and pointers as to how to do better'* (Y11); *'Comments which tell me where I went wrong'* (Y10)

Unhelpful feedback damaged self-esteem: *'Bad ones, you can be put down a bit. Had a go about a piece of work even though you'd tried hard.'* (Y9)

or didn't indicate how improvements could be made: *'Could do better doesn't help.'* (Y10) *'Good comments encourage but don't help to improve. Rather have where I'm going wrong.'* (Y11)

Feedback that was received quickly was preferred as was feedback that was a one to one dialogue because queries could be clarified.

Questions for schools to consider

How can learners' strategic motivation be utilised?

For many low-achievers, learning appeared to be blocked by years of relative failure, labelling or a desire to conform with their peers.

Schools might consider:

- Are teachers' beliefs about students' potential for learning making underachievement worse? Research suggests that where formative assessment is linked to a view of students as having 'untapped potential' rather than a 'fixed IQ' gains in standards are higher.
- Are teachers encouraging their students to believe that success results from effort rather than ability or teacher esteem?

How can teachers help students see the 'big picture' of the course?

Low-achieving students were highly dependent on their teachers to guide them in their learning and needed constant signposting to help them on their journey of learning. There was evidence that many low-achieving students were not receiving this information appropriately.

Schools might consider:

- Are teachers sharing goals and expectations with students so that they gradually develop a **clear sense of themselves as learners, the goals they are trying to achieve and how to reach them?**
- Are teachers clearly identifying, for themselves where the work is going and ensuring that this information is shared regularly with students and that students understand the information?

Why do students largely equate assessment with grading and recording what has been learned?

For most students their experience in the classroom highlighted assessment as marking and grading. It was seen as a process that was done to and for them, not as something they could be engaged in to improve their learning. There was confusion about the use of grades for effort and attainment. The process of grading tends to lower self-esteem and doesn't give students advice for improving work. Research evidence suggests that greater improvement can be achieved where comments only are used.

Schools might consider:

- reviewing their marking policies and the use of effort and attainment grades as rewards and motivators.

How can students be helped to have a clearer understanding of the quality of their work?

Low-achieving students lacked confidence in their own ability to judge their performance and were given few opportunities to practise self-assessment skills. While higher-achievers appeared to know what was required, and were able to adapt better to varying assessment practice, lower-achievers found it much more difficult to know what was expected, or what to do next.

Schools might consider:

- Using student self-assessment to engage them in their own learning. Black and Wiliam showed that large improvements in performance, particularly for low-achievers can be achieved where assessment in the classroom is used to promote learning. This should be more than mechanical processing of tests or practice questions. Students need to be helped to engage meaningfully with their own learning and given the tools to assess their progress for themselves.

How can the quality of feedback to students be improved?

Feedback was valued by low-achieving students, particularly oral feedback where confusions could be clarified, but there was evidence that much feedback was either unfocused or of little use in improving work. Focused and specific comments on how to improve work were welcomed. Students didn't like comments that were simply critical of their effort and achievement.

Schools might consider:

- how teachers can feedback more effectively to low-achieving students.

Further Reading

Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (1998) *Inside the Black Box* Kings College School of Education: London