Specific Feedback:

How Does It Impact Student Writing In A 6th Grade Classroom?

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Description of Teaching Context

This year I have had the incredible opportunity of becoming a PDS intern in a sixth grade classroom at Mount Nittany Middle School. This has been a truly unique experience for me as a student teacher because I actually attended MNMS as a student. At Mount Nittany, all the sixth grade classrooms are contained in one hallway. There are ten teachers altogether, but they are split among two teams, the Yellow Team, and the Blue Team. Lockers line the hallways because students switch classes throughout the day for Math, Social Studies/Science, Foreign Language, Life Arts/Tech Ed, and Physical Education. As students progress through the sixth grade, responsibility and accountability are two behaviors that are encouraged and enforced, as students become more independent and more capable of fostering their own learning.

Naturally, there is a wide range of academic levels in my classroom. In terms of reading, six students were scored above grade level. As a result, these two boys and four girls attend Learning Enrichment during our class’ regular reading time. The rest of the 17 students (eight girls, nine boys) were deemed proficient in reading. However, in our classroom we split up into three groups for reading. The children are placed in different groups depending on the amount of support they need in understanding what they are reading. There are five students in the group that requires the most teacher support (two
girls, three boys), six students in the middle level support group (two girls, four boys), and six students (four girls, two boys) that have proved to be quite independent in understanding their reading. In terms of writing, two students (two girls) were determined to be above grade level and one student (a boy) was scored as below basic. This student attends a Learning Support class one day a week to receive extra help in his writing. The other ten girls and ten boys in the class were scored as proficient and were determined to be right on target for their grade level.

Our classroom has a relaxed and fun atmosphere. Both my mentor teacher and I encourage students to work collaboratively on daily work and projects; therefore, on any given day our classroom is buzzing with activity. Teachers on the Yellow Team also collaborate on a day-to-day basis. Each teacher on the Yellow Team has a partner teacher and in our case, our partner teacher teaches Social Studies and my mentor teacher and I conduct Science class. Since my teacher so highly values teacher cooperation and respect, these are two attributes we encourage in our students as well. We try to make our classroom as interactive as possible, encouraging students to develop close relationships with their classmates, and to build understanding by working and solving problems together in a respectful manner. *(Full Inquiry Brief can be found in Appendix A)*

**Wonderings and Questions**

**Main Wondering**

My question for inquiry stemmed from an interesting experience that I had in the classroom. Since my first day as an intern, I took it upon myself to grade my students’ weekly spelling assignments. Each week I would be sure to record their grade on their paper, along with a sentence or two about their spelling progress or future goals that they should work on. One week, I simply recorded the grade and slapped a sticker on their papers. When I handed the spelling sheets back, one student said “Miss Roe, where are my
comments? How am I supposed to understand this grade?” With this one comment, my main wondering was born. My inquiry focuses on specific feedback and how it impacted my students’ writing throughout the course of this year.

*How does specific feedback influence my student’s writing in a 6th grade classroom?*

**Sub-Questions**

- What does specific feedback look/sound like?
- How does specific feedback affect student’s writing development differently than just generic feedback? (i.e. “Good Job!”)
- How do different students interpret and use the comments that are given to them? Do they read all of these comments, or do they simply want to know their grade?
- How do different students react to the comments they read from their work? How does this affect their development as writers?
- Do students look back or recall previous feedback and take this information into consideration in their other work? If so, how does this affect them as writers?
- How does specific feedback affect students differently?
- How does specific feedback make various students feel about the work they have done?
- Do 6th grade teachers at MNMS use specific feedback? If so, what does it look like and how is it used in their classrooms?

**Data Collection**

**Clear Description of Data Collection**

To truly understand how specific feedback was affecting my students, I needed to collect several types of data at various times throughout the inquiry process. I was able to collect and compile data before, during, and after my interventions were complete.

**Before**

To begin collecting data, I constructed a student survey. The main point of this survey was to call student’s attention to the types of feedback they usually receive on writing assignments and their feelings toward that feedback. The open-ended questions on the survey were also meant to focus students’ attention upon what format or type of
feedback would be most helpful for them. I was very interested to have a student’s point of view about what sort of comments would be beneficial in helping them to improve their writing. Finally, I asked the students about their typical behaviors upon receiving a graded writing assignment in order to gauge how much value student’s place on teacher comments.

In addition to my student survey, I also created a teacher survey, which I handed out to all of the sixth grade teachers as well as the English teachers in our building. This survey asked the teachers to tell me about what their feedback on writing assignments generally looks like. I also asked these teachers to take a look at their commenting practices and note any trends between the types of feedback they gave and the affects it may have had on their student’s writing. The goal of this survey was for me to gain a greater understanding of how the various teachers in my building were using feedback, how it seemed to affect their students over the years, and how they discovered techniques for feedback that work in their individual classrooms. (See Appendix B-C for Student/Teacher Surveys) Yes!

During

The bulk of my data collection was done during the inquiry process because my wondering relied so heavily on student work samples. I conducted research on specific feedback and applied what I learned and applied it in my classroom. I began to write more specific comments on student writing across all subject areas, including Science and Social Studies. In our classroom we did a science-writing piece on Google Docs. Google Docs is an online, interactive word processing program that allows multiple authors to work on one piece simultaneously. In my classroom, the students worked in teams of three to compile an essay using this online feature. To measure how much value students place on teacher comments, I wrote my specific feedback on Google Docs, but handed the students a slip of paper with their grade on it and a note telling them where to find their comments. I wrote on each assignment that if the student had read through their comments, they were to come
and see me. After I handed out the grades, I kept a checklist on my desk and would place a check next to the students’ names that had logged onto the computers and looked at their comments.

In our classroom, students are to file all of their completed work in a three ring binder that was provided for them at the beginning of the year, we call these binders the students’ portfolios. These binders have a tab specifically for writing and students are to keep and revisit all finished writing assignments. Each week, students are to take the week’s previous assignment and file them in their portfolio. In doing so, not only are students creating a record of the year’s work, but they can also easily look back at their past work and remind themselves of their goals and areas of improvement. During our writing times, I closely observed these portfolios and made note of any students that would retrieve their previous writings in order to remind themselves of their past comments. Another intervention that I implemented was the wording of my feedback on my students’ writing. Although this was something that could not be measured during the inquiry project, I was hoping that I would be able to note some changes in my students thinking during my final interviews. I began to pair all of my praise on student work with a goal. For example, I used a “Stars and Wishes” type format to evaluate student essays. I wrote, on a separate sheet of paper, three stars or strengths about the paper, and three wishes or goals for students to work on in their upcoming writing. I began to word all my feedback in this manner, so that I was not simply correcting the student’s writing, rather providing them with goals or areas for them to improve in. (See Appendix D for Stars and Wishes Feedback Example)

Some of my most substantial data was produced over a two-week period in which I had the students’ in my class write creative and descriptive paragraphs. During week one, each student was given a picture and the topic sentence of a story. I then asked them to write the first paragraph of the story that the picture was telling. Students handed in a
rough copy of these paragraphs on which I wrote comments such as “Nice Job” or “Good, reread and revise” and then handed them back. During the second week, the students were given a different picture and asked to again produce the first paragraph of the story the picture was telling them. When I looked over these rough copies, I placed a yellow and a green sticky note on each student’s work. On the green sticky notes I put two positive comments about their work, and on the yellow sticky note I wrote two goals for their final draft. The benefit of having these two paragraphs to compare and contrast was that I could actually see if or how the student’s work changed depending on whether they were given specific or generic feedback. (See Appendix E for Student Work Examples)

After

My most informative and telling data came from the after portion of the inquiry project. In order to gain an understanding of how the different forms of specific feedback had affected the students, I conducted individual interviews with six students in my class. I picked these six students depending on their participation in both creative writing paragraphs, and I also tried to select students with differing writing abilities. In these interviews I asked students about their thoughts and feelings about the writing we do in sixth grade. I also evaluated how they felt about the two creative writing paragraphs and asked about how the different types of feedback made them feel and which they felt was more helpful for them in the long run. In addition, I asked students questions about how they felt about the feedback they have been receiving all year and asked if they felt another form, such as a conference, would be a more effective way of receiving the teacher’s comments on their writing. (See Appendix F for Interview Questions)

Data Analysis

Steps Taken to Analyze the Data
After collecting so much data, it was difficult to know exactly what steps to take to analyze the information in a manner that would be the most effective and the most helpful in finding an answer to my wondering. I began with the student surveys. As I read through the student responses, I began to see trends in student replies, and as a result I began to highlight any recurring themes among the surveys. I used different colored highlighters to emphasize different responses and then typed up the emerging themes in a word document.

My next step in analyzing my data was my Google Docs checklist. Much to my surprise, not a single student came to me to let me know that they had looked up their comments online. I had a checklist next to my desk, without a single mark on it. Also, during our writing sessions, I used the same checklist to mark off if any of my students used their portfolios as a resource. Again, my checklist went untouched, as none of my students used their portfolios as a way to refresh their memories of past goals.

The most difficult information to analyze was the creative writing paragraphs I had the students complete. I found myself a bit overwhelmed with the task of analyzing thirty-five individual student paragraphs, so my first order of business was to select a smaller student sampling. I first whittled down the paragraphs by only looking at students that had completed the paragraphs from week one and week two. When I finished this task, I only had ten samples to look at, due to student absences and prior obligations. I took the samples from week one that had been given generic teacher feedback, and compared the students’ rough drafts to their final copies. I was interested to see how students reacted because students in our classroom are used to getting feedback written only on their final copies and also, they are used to seeing much more written on their work than “Good work,” or “Read through and edit.” Placing the student paragraphs side by side, I circled any changes the students had made between copies without any teacher suggestions. I found that all ten students had gone through their papers and made only the grammatical changes I had
marked on their rough drafts, but had not made any significant changes in the construction or wording of their papers.

For the second week of my data collection from the students’ creative writing paragraphs, I took the students’ rough drafts and gave the students a new form of specific feedback. Instead of writing the comments within their papers as I had been doing prior to this intervention, I wrote their comments and goals on two different colored sticky notes placed directly on their papers. I also went through the students’ papers and circled grammatical or punctuation errors that I saw, but did not correct these errors. I worded their goals in a way in which students would have to really think to make the changes such as, “Read back through your paragraph, can you find some run on sentences? How could you edit these to add more sentence variety?” By phrasing my feedback in such a way, I was attempting to place the accountability on the students. To analyze this data, I also placed the students’ rough and final copies next to each other, and circled the changes that the students had made from one draft to the next. I had given each student two goals to work on in their final drafts and paid special attention to whether or not the students took these suggestions to heart in their final copies. The student changes that were made varied for each individual. Of the ten students whose paragraphs I analyzed, two students made only grammatical/punctuation changes, six students made the two changes or improvements that were suggested on the sticky note, and the final two students revamped their papers and handed in a final product that was much different than their original draft.

My last piece of evidence to analyze was my student interviews. Of the ten students whose work I sampled from the creative writing pieces, I chose six of the students to interview individually. I chose students that had interpreted my specific feedback from the second writing paragraph at different degrees. I asked all of these students the same questions, and again looked for trends in their answers. I recorded each interview on
GarageBand to make it easier for me to go back and revisit the students’ responses. After listening to each interview, I was mainly interested in knowing how the two different types of feedback, generic vs. specific, had affected the student’s differently. By interviewing these students as my culminating piece of evidence, my goal was to gain an overall understanding about whether or not they felt that specific teacher comments on their writing was worth their time and whether or not they felt this feedback was helping them to grow as writers. After hearing the student responses, I compared their answers to the other data I had been collecting and began to draw three overall conclusions from all the information I had collected.

**Explanation of Findings**

*Claim #1: During writing, providing students with specific feedback on their rough drafts, generally increased student confidence in their final products.*

While analyzing my data, a common theme that popped up frequently was student confidence in writing. While reading through my surveys, I began to highlight an answer any time a student said that the comments they received on their papers increased their confidence, or if students said that the feedback they received on their writing decreased their confidence because it was not stated in a positive manner. Of the seventeen surveys that were returned to me, nine students mentioned teacher feedback being helpful because it made them feel good about their work. One student in particular mentioned when answering what her ideal specific feedback would look like, she said,

“Good comments help me a lot because they make me want to keep writing, make me happy/smile, make me feel appreciated, keep me motivated, and get me in a good mood.”

It is apparent to me that when this student receives constructive feedback on her writing, she is more confident in her abilities and more eager to write again. The other eight
students that answered that specific feedback helps them to remain confident also stated that feedback helps them to feel good about the work they do.

After I administered the two creative writing paragraphs, I conducted my student interviews. I asked the students to compare how they felt about the two different kinds of feedback they had received. All six students responded that although the generic feedback had made them feel good about their work because it stated “Good job” it left them feeling a little lost when it came to revising their drafts. One student mentioned,

“You wrote reread and revise on my first paragraph, so I reread and revised but I didn’t know exactly what to do. This one (the rough copy with the sticky note) gave me sort of an example, a little more specific. It didn’t just say read back through, it helped me to know what to look for and so I looked for ways to change it (his writing). I thought this one was better.”

By providing this student with more specific feedback, he was given more direction on his second paragraph, and he felt more confident with the changes he had made, as opposed to the first paragraph he constructed in which he only made the grammatical changes that I had noted for him. By providing students with specific feedback on their rough draft writing, teachers are providing the students with a guide, and this added direction helps students to feel more confident about their final product.

Claim #2: Specific feedback and comments on writing can be misconstrued by some students, leading them to believe that there are “right” and “wrong” answers.

While analyzing my initial surveys, I became aware that many of the students that had filled out the survey for me continually used the words right and wrong when explaining how specific feedback helped them to improve in their writing. Some examples from various survey questions include,

[The text continues with several paragraphs that are not fully visible in the image.]
“If I got it wrong, I would like to know why and what the right answer is. If I got it right and got like a 10 out of 10, you would give me a compliment.”

“I look at what was wrong and I don’t do that on the next assignment.”

“If you could tell me more of what I do wrong on my writing.”

These types of answers shocked me, as I had thought before starting this inquiry project that specific feedback on student work would help the students view writing as a gradual process, a subject that is graded, but has no WRONG answer. I had a hunch that generic feedback on student writing aided the feeling that there was either a good paper or a not so good paper. However, I was certain that specific feedback, especially the kind I had been giving, helped students to see that they should value their work and create goals for themselves to improve their skills. This was not the answer that my data showed me. Of the seventeen students that completed my survey, ten students made some mention of feedback showing them the right or wrong answer for their writing.

Since this was my initial survey, I had thought that perhaps these feelings would change for some students throughout the implementation of my interventions, especially since I began to word all feedback as a goal for improvement rather than a correction. When I conducted my final interviews, five of the six students interviewed still made a mention of feedback on their papers helping them to identify what they had done incorrectly, or wrong. Once again, the data I collected conflicted with my original hunch. One student had stated during his survey that feedback helps him to point out the things he did wrong, and during his final interview he still stated,

“Your comments made me think my writing was good but the yellow sticky note told me that things I had done wrong and that you wanted me to fix. So I fixed those things, like you said “Try adding similes” so I think, yeah I added one simile so I could get that right.”
Obviously, despite my interventions, some students in my classroom still hold the view that teacher feedback on their writing is a way of knowing what they did wrong, and how to fix it so that they can get it “right” to please their teacher. Some students interpret specific feedback as a way of zoning in on areas that they can improve upon in their writing; others misinterpret these comments as the minimal changes necessary to please the teacher and receive a “good grade.”

Claim #3: When provided with both a letter grade and the opportunity to receive specific feedback, some students displayed concern strictly for their grade.

One of my most burning sub-questions was whether or not students place more value on the comments that the teachers provide for them, or more value on the grade that is ultimately assigned to their body of work. Throughout this inquiry process I have collected much conflicting data in regards to this question. When I conducted my initial surveys, one of the questions I asked was about student behaviors when they received back a graded writing assignment. I was curious as to whether the students read the comments or their grades first, and of the seventeen surveys I had, only three students stated that they first read the teacher comments, two students claimed to read whatever they saw on their paper first, and an overwhelming fifteen students stated that they first look for their grade, then read the teacher comments that are given to them. These answers led me to believe that although the students were initially looking for their grades, they also valued their teachers comments, and as a result would read them in order to justify their grade.

I could not be sure that the students were being 100% truthful in their surveys because they know how much time and effort I put into commenting on their writing. So to give them a truer test of the value they place on their teacher’s feedback and comments, I conducted my Google Docs intervention. Out of the twenty-two students that completed this on line essay, zero looked online for their comments after they had their received their
grades. This was the first time I had ever handed students back a writing assignment without feedback directly on it, so the point of this intervention was to see if students would take the extra few minutes to go and look for their comments and goals. This particular piece of data strongly suggested that despite the student’s answers on their surveys, no one in my classroom placed value on the comments they had received on this particular writing assignment.

**Reflections and Implications for Future Practice**

This entire inquiry process has taught me a great deal about the kind of classroom I would like to have myself one day. By collecting data, performing interventions, and drawing conclusions about the information I had gathered, aspects of teaching were revealed to me that I had previously been unaware that I harbored a passion for. Looking back on these past few months, there are things I wish I had done differently, and also various ideas I now have that I wish I could have implemented with my students. All in all though, the goal of the inquiry project was for us, as future teachers, to learn something, and learn something I certainly did.

First of all, I rediscovered my passion for creative writing and my interest in helping each student in my class view themselves as capable and wonderful writers. When I first conducted my student surveys I was shocked to see how many students saw writing as a black and white subject, with right and wrong answers. Throughout my own experiences, I have begun to view writing as a process, a subject in which you can only improve upon your skills. However, somewhere in their schooling, the students in my class have let their grades become the most important aspect of their writing, not the actual work that they produce.

This concern for grades only was showcased when none of the students in my class looked up their Google Docs science paper comments. All of the students in my class were satisfied because they had all received A’s on the project, and as a result, were not
interested in finding out what I had commented upon in their actual writing. If I could go
back and do this project again, I would be interested to test and see how the reactions of my
students would have been different if they would have received a less than desirable grade
on the writing piece. In my student surveys, many students responded that if they got a bad
grade on an assignment, they would read through the comments to find out why, leading me
to believe that students simply use teacher feedback as a way of justifying their score, not as
a tool to help them grow as a writer.

This project helped me to really think about the type of writing classroom I would
want to develop as a sixth grade teacher. One of the teachers from MNMS explained, in the
survey that he completed for me, that he holds conferences with his students on a regular
basis about their writing. Another teacher stated that she shares with her students a list of
writing tips at the beginning of the year which they add onto as the months pass. She also
has a writing folder in which students keep all of their work from the year, and they are
required to reflect upon their progress throughout the year and devise goals for each
upcoming assignment. I found both of these techniques to be quite interesting and useful for
the students, and as a result of this inquiry process, I believe I have devised a feedback style
that I would like to carry out one day in a classroom.

A method of feedback that I feel would be effective would be a definite multiple step
process beginning on the first day of school. To begin, I would want to establish the idea for
my students that writing is a process, and place value on becoming a writer, not just getting
good grades in writing. When my class completes writing assignments, I would like to
ideally collect their rough drafts and note my specific feedback on this copy of their writing.
After reading their work, I would complete a “Stars and Wishes” type feedback on a
separate sheet of paper so students do not have to search through their papers for their
comments. I would like to note 2-3 aspects of their writing that I view as strengths, and then
note 2-3 goals or improvements that they could work on not only in their final drafts, but also in their writing in general.

My next step would be to then hand back these rough drafts to the students for them to use as a resource when completing their final copies. Students will have either writing folders or portfolios in which they keep all of their writing pieces and feedback. Students will be encouraged to use this as a tool to improve their writing by referring back to their old work and reflecting on either how they have grown or how they could still improve. When students hand in their final copies, I would like them to sign up for a five-minute conferencing slot with me. At this conference the student and I could discuss both drafts of their work, talk about their strengths and goals, and finally, I would give the student their grade at the end of the conference.

The goal of running writing in a manner such as what I have described above would be to combat student’s negative views of writing as a subject in which you can have only right or wrong answers. By providing specific feedback early on and conferencing with the students about their goals in writing, I would hope to be instilling the idea that writing is a process, and help the children to discover that as they grow and change, so does the way in which they write. This inquiry process has reignited a spark in me, which I thought had blown out long ago. This progression has taught me that I can use specific feedback on my students writing in new and effective ways that will be beneficial for the children and will help each child in their journey to becoming writers.
Appendix A

Inquiry Context

This year I have had the incredible opportunity of becoming a PDS intern in a 6th grade classroom at Mount Nittany Middle School. This has been a truly unique experience for me as a student teacher, because I actually attended MNMS as a student. At Mount Nittany, all the sixth grade classrooms are contained in one hallway. There are ten teachers altogether, but they are split among two teams, the Yellow Team, and the Blue Team. Lockers line the hallways because students switch classes throughout the day for Math, Social Studies/Science, Foreign Language, Life Arts/Tech Ed, and Physical Education. As students progress through the sixth grade, responsibility and accountability are two behaviors that are encouraged and enforced, as students become more independent and more capable of fostering their own learning.

My sixth grade classroom consists of 23 unique individuals. These 12 girls and 11 boys differ in terms of their learning style, speed, strengths, needs, and ability. No two students are ever exactly alike but similarities and trends in learning can be seen among certain children. This year, my class consists of one Turkish boy, one Chinese boy, one Russian boy, one Russian girl, and one Armenian girl. Although some of these students were born in the United States, most of their parents were not. All of these students are bilingual and speak another language other than English at home. The other 20 students in my class can be mainly identified as Caucasian. Upon first glance it may seem as if my class lacks ethnic diversity, however, each student brings their own background experiences, upbringings, beliefs, practices, strengths, and of course challenges to the table, making my class anything but uniform.
Naturally, there is a wide range of academic levels in my classroom. In terms of reading, six students were scored above grade level. As a result, these two boys and four girls attend Learning Enrichment during our class’ regular reading time. The rest of the 17 students (eight girls, nine boys) were deemed proficient in reading. However, in our classroom we split up into three groups for reading. The children are placed in different groups depending on the amount of support they need in understanding what they are reading. There are five students in the group that requires the most teacher support (two girls, 3 boys), six students in the middle level support group (two girls, four boys), and six students (four girls, two boys) that have proved to be quite independent in understanding their reading. In terms of writing, two students (two girls) were determined to be above grade level and one student (a boy) was scored as below basic. This student attends a Learning Support class one day a week to receive extra help in his writing. The other ten girls and ten boys in the class were scored as proficient and were determined to be right on target for their grade level. In addition, two boys from our class attend either seventh or eighth grade advanced math classes, while the rest of the 21 students are tracked throughout the sixth grade math classes. At the middle school, students are immersed in the Connected Math program. Connected Math is an extension of the Investigations programs where student discovered strategies and group cooperation are stressed. All students in sixth grade cover the same material in math; however, the more advanced math classes move at a faster pace and are introduced to one or two additional textbooks.

In terms of social and behavioral classification there are five students (three boys, two girls) in our class that are high achievers and display strong leadership qualities. These five students hold a great amount of influence over the other students in class. Only three
students (two girls, one boy) are quiet, however, a majority of our class, nine students (five girls, four boys), are eager to socialize and anxious to conform to their peers. Of these nine students, three of them (one girl, two boys) have proved to be easy to get along with, yet seem to have trouble getting their work completed. This has become apparent throughout the year by the amount and frequency of late homework assignments that these students hand in. Our class has three students (one girl, two boys) that tend to display nonconformist tendencies in terms of peer relationships in the classroom. There are two boys in the classroom that are autistic and require a fulltime paraprofessional in the classroom. One of these students also requires occasional Emotional Support as well. One girl in my class has been diagnosed with ADHD and slow processing, which at times can really affect her ability to accomplish classroom tasks. The remaining three students (two girls, one boy) are anxious to please, whether it is their teachers or even other students.

Our classroom has a relaxed and fun atmosphere. Both my mentor teacher and I encourage students to work collaboratively on daily work and projects, therefore, on any given day our classroom is buzzing with activity. Teachers on the Yellow Team also collaborate on a day-to-day basis. Each teacher on the Yellow Team has a partner teacher and in our case, our partner teacher teaches Social Studies and my mentor teacher and I conduct Science class. Since my teacher so highly values teacher cooperation and respect, these are two attributes we encourage in our students as well. We try to make our classroom as interactive as possible, encouraging students to develop close relationships with their classmates, and to build understanding by working and solving problems together in a respectful manner.
Inquiry Rationale

Throughout my time as a PDS intern, I have tried my hardest to take what I have been learning in my Penn State courses and directly apply them to my classroom experiences. A few weeks ago, I collected my student’s science packets from our *Mixtures and Solutions* unit. As I graded their packets, I remembered an article I had read for our Math Ed class entitled “Five Reasons to Stop Saying ‘Good Job!’” by Alfie Kohn. This article discussed the importance of being specific with our reinforcements, and how just telling children “Well Done,” or “Great Work,” all the time can devalue the genuineness of our praise. So as I graded these science packets, I went over each page with a fine tooth comb and in response I made sure to note the specifics of what I thought the student had done well, suggestions for how they could improve their work in the future, and also recorded probing questions to further push and challenge their understanding.

These packets took me an entire week to grade and as I handed them back to the students I began to wonder, do the students really read and take these comments into consideration, or are they simply looking for their grade? This got me thinking about specific feedback and how it affects the different students in my classroom. Thus, my wondering was born. I performed a little mini-test on a weekly spelling assignment. It had become a habit in our classroom for me to grade our student’s word study homework. Each week I would make sure to write one to two sentences to the students either about their progress, or strategies I feel would help them find success in spelling. However, one week, I simply noted their grades at the top of the paper. I had three or four students come to me asking, “Where are your usual comments?” or stating, “I do not understand my grade.” This small experience confirmed my interest in the topic and my journey to inquiry began.
I believe that specific feedback is an area of importance for teachers and students alike. As teachers we are constantly giving feedback to our students and it can be time consuming and difficult to write specific and detailed comments to the students. As a result, we resort to our generic comment reserve and pull out an “Outstanding!” or “WOW!” However, I am forced to ask, what message are we really sending the students with comments such as these. With all the effort they put into their work, are we really conveying an appropriate message by starring the page or attaching a sticker? Or is this all students look for and do they feel the simple comments to be sufficient. I do not know the answers to these questions, and for this reason, my interest has been peaked.

As I explore this topic, I am expecting to find a variety of responses from my students. I am predicting there will be some students that truly value and look for teacher comments, while others simply scan the page for their grade, and others still that skim comments just to get a taste of what their teacher thought of their work. However, I am hoping that my data collection will begin to uncover trends in student responses to specific teacher feedback, I will be able to see a larger picture of how specific commenting impacts student work overall.

**Wonderings**

- How does specific feedback influence my student’s writing in a 6th grade classroom?
  - What does specific feedback look/sound like? *(Research articles, teacher interviews, teacher surveys)*
  - How does specific feedback affect student’s writing development differently than just generic feedback? (i.e. “Good Job!”) *(Student
Specific Feedback

surveys, student interviews, collection of student work, teacher surveys)

• How do different students interpret and use the comments that are given to them? (Student surveys, student interviews, teacher surveys, teacher interviews)

• How do different students react to the comments they read from their work? How does this affect their development as writers? (Teacher surveys, students surveys, student interviews, student work evidence)

• Do students look back or recall previous feedback and take this information into consideration in their other work? If so, how does this affect them as writers? (Student surveys, student interviews, audio/video)

• How does specific feedback affect students differently? (Student interviews, student work samples, peer editing interviews)

• How does specific feedback make various students’ feel about the work they have done? (Student interviews, student surveys, peer editing interviews)

Data Collection Ideas

• Interview
  
  • Interview conducted by uninterested third party person to ensure student honesty. Interview would address the student’s feelings about current comments they are given and how students value the responses they receive.
  
  • Pull student work examples and hold informal conferences with students. Conference about changes that were made. Ask questions such as “What did you feel helped you to make this progress” “What triggered you to change this aspect of your writing?”
  
  • Teacher interviews – “In past years, have you noticed a difference in student performance in writing when giving specific and detailed comments/feedback?”
  
  • Student interviews regarding the differences from their week one and week two descriptive paragraphs.

• Survey
  
  • Survey will be given to all students asking them about ideally what kind of responses they would like to receive on their work and why they feel this way. Students will be asked why they think their ideal feedback would help them improve in the classroom.
  
  • An after survey will be conducted after interventions have been made. These surveys will ask children how they feel they have grown as writers and what part they think feedback on their work has played in their growth. They will be asked which kind of feedback was most helpful for them, and why they feel this way.
Teacher surveys asking about what typical feedback on writing assignments looks like in their classrooms. Surveys will also ask where their ideas about feedback have stemmed from and ask the teachers to note any trends or patterns they have seen in student work due to feedback.

- **Conspicuous Video/Audio**
  - I will record during our writing times in our classroom to see how students are working and responding to feedback.

- **Examples of student work**
  - From beginning of the year up until now. Looking back over their work, what were our comments, did the work change?
  - One week: Offer students a writing prompt. Give them time to write a descriptive paragraph and have them turn in the rough draft. As a teacher, I will make generic comments on the paragraph and ask them to revise and make a final copy to turn in.
  - Second week: Offer students a different writing prompt. Give them time to write a descriptive paragraph and have them turn in the rough draft. As a teacher, I will make specific comments on their work and ask them to revise and create a final copy to turn in.
  - Examine the results and look for correlation between specific feedback and quality of student work.
  - Possible peer editing sessions – asking students to give feedback on their classmates work. Interviews about why they gave the kind of comments they did. Why they thought their comments and feedback would be helpful to their peers.

**February Goal:** Collect baseline classroom data. Hand out initial student and teacher surveys and begin to create an understanding of what kind of feedback students would like to see on their work. Research specific feedback and begin to formulate ideas for interventions.

**March Goal:** Conduct creative writing prompt data collection, conference and interview students about the difference in their work from samples with/without specific feedback. Conduct teacher interviews. Begin interventions.

**April Goal:** Finish interventions. Conduct after surveys and interviews for students to reflect on effectiveness of feedback and their growth as writers. Draw conclusions from data; look for patterns and evidence that did not prove my initial ideas to be correct. Prepare for inquiry.

**Timeline**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.23.09 – 2.27.09</td>
<td>Create and administer student and teacher pre-surveys</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.2.09 – 3.4.09</td>
<td>Conduct week one descriptive paragraph rough/final draft evidence</td>
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<td>Conduct teacher interviews</td>
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<td>Continue researching and practicing effective feedback techniques</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>3.16.09 – 3.20.09</td>
<td>Conduct week two descriptive paragraph rough/final draft evidence</td>
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<td>Review before/after paragraphs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Collect student examples and hold interviews with students</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Possibly begin peer-editing sessions?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.23.09 – 3.27.09</td>
<td>Begin interventions:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Stars/Wishes – Specific comments and goals for the students</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Encouraging students to look back on old work, utilize portfolios and</td>
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<td>previous comments as a way to help yourself grow from one assignment to</td>
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<td>the next</td>
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<td>3. Peer editing – thinking about what kind of comments would be helpful to</td>
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<td>you, then commenting as such on a classmates work</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>3.30.09 – 4.3.09</td>
<td>Continue interventions</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Collect samples/evidence of student work</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Audio/Video during writing sessions to capture which students utilize</td>
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<td>portfolios/previous work and comments</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>4.6.09 – 4.10.09</td>
<td>Begin conducting after surveys and interviews</td>
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<td>Draw conclusions based on data and findings, interpret and analyze</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>evidence</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Compare and contrast beginning and ending data</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.13.09 – 4.17.09</td>
<td>Compile presentation, include video/audio/pictures as evidence</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Utilize student samples as evidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.20.09 – 2.24.09</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>INQUIRY PRESENTATIONS!</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Boys and Girls of Room 117,

As an intern this year I am required to complete a very large research based study. I am very interested in the writing we do in sixth grade and the habits you have in terms of your writing process. Please take the time to answer the questions I have listed below. These questions may be answered in fragments, bullets, or any other way you see fit. Please answer truthfully and honestly, as you will not be judged on how you answer. Just know that these answers will remain confidential, and will be seen by my eyes only. I deeply appreciate your help. Please return this survey by Friday February 27, 2009.

Sincerely,
Miss Roe

1. Tell me a little bit about what your ideal feedback/comments/pointers on a graded writing assignment would look like? What kind of comments do you think would be most helpful for you? What would these comments look like? How would you use this information to help you grow as a writer in the future?

________________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________________
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2. Tell me about your typical behaviors when you are handed back writing assignments. Do you usually read over all the comments or skim through them? Do you look for your grade first?

________________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________________
3. When working on writing assignments do you ever refer back to your old work for ideas on how to improve your writing? Why or why not?

_________________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________________

4. What do you think the best part of teacher feedback on writing assignments is?

_________________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________________

5. What do you think the worst part of teacher feedback on writing assignments is?

_________________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________________

6. Any additional comments are welcomed. Feel free to comment on the type of feedback Mrs. C and I give you on your writing assignments. Any information you give will be helpful; so don’t be shy! 😊

_________________________________________________________________________________________________________
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_________________________________________________________________________________________________________
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Appendix C

Hello Teachers and Friends,

My name is Carly Roe and I am currently completing my PDS internship at MNMS in Mrs. Ceschini’s 6th grade classroom. As you may know, all PDS interns are required to complete a research-based inquiry project by April of this year. Throughout my time in Mrs. Ceschini’s classroom, I have found that I have a great interest in how feedback affects the students in our classroom. In particular, how specific feedback on graded writing assignments affects our students as writers.

I am interested to know what role feedback plays in your classroom, what approach you take in grading writing assignments, and any observations you have made on how certain feedback has affected student’s writing. Below you will find a few survey questions. I would greatly appreciate any information you would like to share or feel would be relevant to my study. I am eager to hear your responses! Surveys can be e‐mailed to ckr119@psu.edu or placed in Mrs. Ceschini’s mailbox where there will be a folder with my name on it. Thank you for your time, knowledge, and wisdom.

Sincerely,
Carly Roe

1. Tell me a little about what your feedback on student's writing assignments generally looks like?

2. About how much do you tend to write on student writing assignments and what information do you usually include? Could you provide any examples?

3. Where do your ideas for feedback stem from?
4. In your experience, have you noted any trends in how your feedback has affected your student’s writing?

5. Feel free to include any other comments or information that you’d like to share, or feel would be helpful. Thank you again for your time. If possible, please return this survey by Friday February 27, 2009. Thanks 😊
Appendix D

Stars And Wishes Feedback Example

- Sabrina, you really followed the rubric. You took those three paragraphs and provided your audience with many solid reasons for why you both like/don't like winter time.

- You are an excellent proofreader. There were very few grammatical mistakes in your essay. Keep up the great work!

- I love the way your essay showcases the conflict you have with whether or not you like winter or not! When I read your essay, your personality and attitude shine through in your words.

- Throughout your essay, I circled a bunch of words that I would like you to give the boot to! In your future writing, I would like you to work on replacing those words with more vivid and descriptive words.

- As I read, I noticed your sentences began with "and" and "also" frequently. Varying the way you start your sentences will keep your reader eager to read more.

- Remember, when you are writing these essays, that writing them like you talk can add to your style. I'd love to see you experiment with a new style in the next assignments.
Appendix E

Generic Feedback:

Vs.

Specific Feedback:

Appendix F
Interview Questions:

1. How do you feel about the writing we do here in 6th grade?
2. How do you feel about your skills as a writer?
3. Tell me a little about the progress you think you are making as a writer this year.
4. Do you remember when you wrote your first creative writing paragraph, how did you feel about the feedback you received on this paper? Tell me a little about how it helped you with your editing process? What message did it send you in terms of how I felt about your writing? How did these kinds of comments make you feel about yourself as a writer?
5. Now here is your second creative writing paragraph, how is the feedback you received on this paragraph different? Was it set up in a way that is helpful to your editing? Tell me a little about how this kind of feedback helped your editing process. What message did it send you in terms of how I felt about your writing? How did these kinds of comments make you feel about yourself as a writer?
6. Do you think comments on your paper help improve your writing? How do you feel about conferencing face to face about your writing? Do you think talking face to face would be more or less helpful than having comments in writing?

Students to interview:
Omar, Abby, Andrey, *Kevin, *Laura, Annmarie

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inquiry Brief</th>
<th>All parts are included and clear:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(15)</td>
<td>o context, o rationale, o main wondering o sub-questions, o timeline o data collection ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>(12-15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Annotated Bibliography QUANTITY</th>
<th>At least 10 resources are included with a complete paragraph for each. The annotated bibliography features at least 3 types of sources (e.g., books, articles, face-to-face interview, websites, etc).</th>
<th>At least 6-9 resources are included with a complete paragraph for each. The annotated bibliography features at least 2 types of sources</th>
<th>5 or fewer resources are included. Paragraphs may or may not be complete for each.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annotated Bibliography</td>
<td>Each annotated paragraph is thorough, containing both a summary of the source and its application to the inquiry. (4-5)</td>
<td>Most annotated paragraphs are thorough, containing both a summary of the source and its application to the inquiry. (2-3)</td>
<td>Many annotated paragraphs are incomplete. (0-1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of teaching context</td>
<td>1 to 2 paragraphs describing the classroom context as it relates to the inquiry. (e.g., grade level, classroom diversity, school culture and/or other environmental factors) (4-5)</td>
<td>Some details included but missing key information related to the inquiry. (2-3)</td>
<td>Few details included and/or poor description. (0-1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wonderings and Questions</td>
<td>Main question is clearly stated and sub-questions are directly related to main question. (8-10)</td>
<td>Main question is clear but sub-questions are unclear or not related. (5-7)</td>
<td>Main question is unclear. (0-4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection and Analysis Process</td>
<td>Clear description of data collection and the steps taken to analyze the data. Both address the inquiry question directly. (12-15)</td>
<td>Description of data collection steps and/or analysis process lacks detail or does not address the inquiry question sufficiently. (7-11)</td>
<td>The description of data collection and/or analysis is extremely limited or unclear. (0-6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation of Findings (Including Claims and Evidence) (15)</td>
<td>List of claims is clear and indicates growth related to the question (i.e., claims would not have been possible prior to conducting inquiry). The paper and appendix provides a clear explanation of the evidence that supports each claim. (12-15)</td>
<td>List of claims is not clearly related to the question. OR claims are limited in depth. The supporting evidence for some (but not all) of the claims is clear. (7-11)</td>
<td>Claims are unrelated to question or lack depth. The explanation for the evidence that supports the claims is unclear or unlimited. (0-6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflections and Future Practice (15)</td>
<td>Implications for your future practice as a teacher are clear and detailed. Reflections on the process and results of the inquiry are directly related to the process and findings (12-15)</td>
<td>Implications for your future practice as a teacher are somewhat clear and details are lacking. Reflections on the process and results of the inquiry are somewhat related to the process and findings (7-11)</td>
<td>Reflections on the process and/or implications for your future practice as a teacher are minimal or missing. (0-6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization (10)</td>
<td>The paper’s organization is clear and logical, using headings, etc. The body of the paper is concisely written approximately 10 pages in length (double-spaced, 12 point font). [This does NOT include the annotated bibliography, the inquiry brief, or the appendix] (8-10)</td>
<td>The paper lacks organization in some aspects. The paper is not concisely written. (5-7)</td>
<td>The paper is neither well organized nor concise. (0-4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics (5)</td>
<td>Paper is professionally done in terms of mechanics (spelling, punctuation, grammar, citing sources, etc). There are no mechanical errors. (4-5)</td>
<td>There are fewer than 5 noticeable mechanical errors in the paper. (2-3)</td>
<td>There are many noticeable mechanical errors in the paper. (0-1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

98/100 Very interesting study and paper. You examined a very complex subject area for many teachers. (An area about which you are passionate.) I wonder what would have been the impact if you had repeated some of your interventions or you had the opportunity to train your students in the importance of feedback early on in the year. I think this study definitely has had an impact on your beliefs in your teaching and learning of writing.