

Why schools should gather feedback from their students

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When schools gather, reflect and act on the feedback from their students, they are able to increase engagement and motivation, support students' wellbeing and lift their performance. Improving feedback is a low-cost, high-impact strategy towards school improvement (Evidence for Learning).

It is important for teachers to know their students and what they need, and to be responsive and targeted, rather than indiscriminately providing support. This helps teachers to both assist student learning and to improve relationships (Fletcher-Wood, 2018). By being genuinely curious, teachers can also challenge assumptions they might make about their classes (Timperley, Kaser, & Halbert, 2014).

School is fine for extroverts! Sometimes the quieter, shy students are overlooked, as they avoid contributing to class discussions.

Key points:

- By seeking feedback teachers can increase both their teaching impact.
- Feedback can be used to: identify prior knowledge, understand learners mindset and motivation, check understanding of learning intentions, conduct formative assessment, and reflect on learning.
- Use of student feedback also enables teachers to better support their students social and emotion learning, and overall well-being.
- A continuous cycle of gathering and valuing student feedback leads to engaged students, responsive teachers, and collective efficacy.

In their book, *Quiet at School*, Coplan and Rudasill (2016) suggest strategies – including technologies – that give students time to think and respond to questions, anonymously if they wish, so that teachers can know them better and address their needs in a safe environment. Berman and Graham's (2018) work on responsive teaching and inclusive education focuses on learning for all, offering questions that teachers should ask themselves, like 'what do we already know and what do we need to find out about this student?' and 'how did my teaching support my students' learning?'

Questioning to improve teaching and learning

An overall understanding of the classroom climate is essential to teaching and learning.

At all stages in the learning process, it is important to craft useful questions, aligned with purpose, whether it be identifying mood, mindset and prior knowledge; clarifying goals and learning intentions or checking understanding (Gonzalez, 2014; Wiliam, 2013). Developing good questions in advance and planning their use during lessons is critical to gathering valuable information. Teachers need to consider what questions they will ask to drive learning targets and stimulate and assess powerful thinking; and how they will ask the questions so that all learners are engaged in thinking and supporting their ideas with evidence (Berger, Rugen, Woodfin, & EL Education, 2014).

Identifying prior knowledge

When commencing a new topic, effective teachers identify the prior knowledge and skill levels of their learners to allow for differentiation and targeted teaching.

The rationale for this pre assessment is grounded in research from neuroscience and cognitive psychology: people construct new knowledge and understandings based on what they already know and believe (McTighe & Willis, 2019). Entry assessments can activate related prior-knowledge memory circuits and facilitate the linking of new information in short-term memory. If new knowledge is to be constructed from existing knowledge, teachers really need to pay attention to the incomplete understandings, the misconceptions, and the naïve renditions of concepts that learners bring with them to a topic (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

Learners' mindset and motivation

When teachers and students believe that intellectual abilities are not fixed but can be developed with effort, they have a growth mindset. Teachers can use questioning to identify students' mindsets.

A growth mindset has positive effects on students' motivation, engagement and willingness to accept new challenges, and consequently on their academic performance (Dweck, 2006). Research in neuroscience is increasing our understanding of mindset (Ng, 2018) and the importance of language used in the classroom. Asking students about mistakes that they have learnt from, or their pride in their work, can reveal the mindset they hold. This helps teachers to design activities that build confidence in taking on challenges. Having a growth mindset is similar to intrinsic motivation, reducing the need for extrinsic rewards.

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Checking understanding of learning intentions and goals

Sharing learning intentions is a fundamental requirement, so students know what is expected and how it will be evaluated (Hattie & Clarke, 2019).

Hattie (2009) called this ‘teacher clarity’ in his meta-analysis work, and found an effect size of 0.75, well above the 0.4 figure that he considers ‘average’. Knowing the ‘big picture’ (such as where a lesson fits into the broader curriculum) helps students see the progression of learning and can motivate them, but this is not always clear in class (Hattie, 2012, p. 54; Hattie & Clarke, 2019). Fletcher-Wood (2013) describes his own classroom research using cognitive science to improve the sharing and understanding of learning intentions.

As a result of questioning, Timperley et al. (2014) found that in one secondary school many students were unable to provide strong answers to a key metacognitive question, ‘Where are you going with your learning?’ Some were also dissatisfied with the type of assignments they were asked to complete. As a result, the teachers decided to focus on assessment for learning, with a particular emphasis on clarity of intentions, as well as ensuring that the assignments they created were challenging, engaging and without excessive overload. Trust and confidence grow among students when teachers respond like this, quickly and substantively.

Understanding content: formative assessment

‘Formative evaluation’ has a very high effect size of 0.90 (Hattie, 2009).

Any assessment – even an end of unit test – can be used formatively. Different teachers will find different aspects of classroom formative assessment more effective for their personal styles, their students, and the contexts in which they work, so each teacher must decide how to adapt ideas for their practice. Many teachers use end of lesson check in tools, variously named as ‘leave passes’, ‘exit tickets’, ‘exit cards’, or ‘parking lot’ (Government of South Australia, 2010; Hattie & Clarke, 2019; Marzano, 2012). As long as teachers continue to investigate that extraordinarily complex relationship between ‘What did I do as a teacher?’ and ‘What did my students learn?’ good things are likely to happen (William, 2013, p. 20).

It is also important to move beyond snapshots of student learning to tracking over time in a longitudinal way (Cox, 2012). The regularity of formative assessment creates opportunities for constructive feedback, which helps build a trust-based relationship between teachers and students (William, 2013).

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Reflection on learning

Reflection in a learning context is a deliberate and active process that should include recalling the event and posing questions to explore why things turned out the way they did, as well as what possible actions could have given a different outcome (Dewey, 1933).

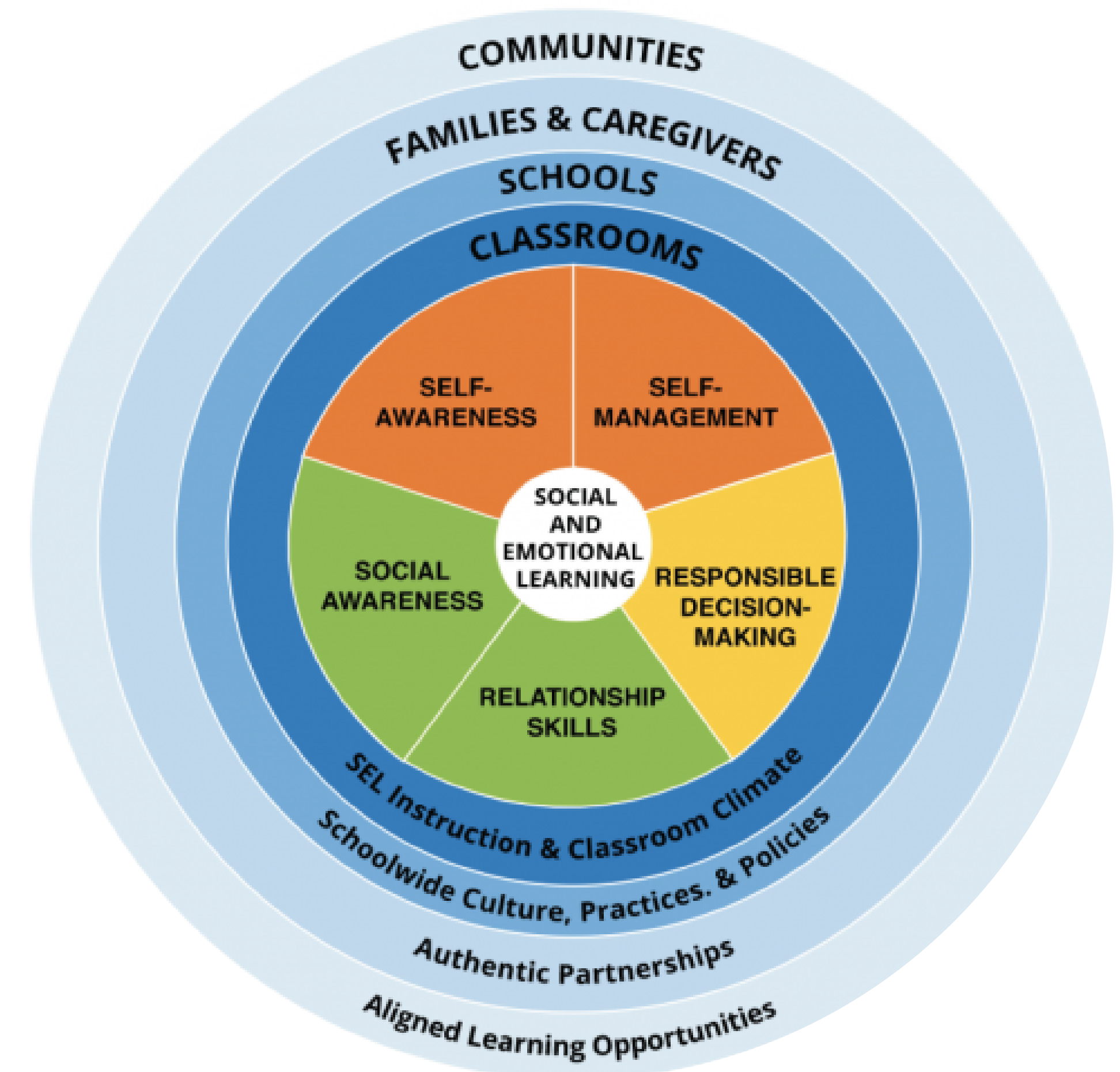
When students are ‘assessment capable learners’, they are aware of their current levels of performance compared to their goals. Teachers empower students to use their voice to reflect on their thinking and learning through small group learning (effect size 0.49), classroom discussions (effect size 0.82) and self-reported grades (effect size 1.44). These are all high leverage influencers toward student achievement (Hattie, 2012).

Students who have the agency to reflect on the quality of their work and judge the extent to which it meets goals or criteria, are able to revise it accordingly. They learn more and do better in school. These ‘learning to learn’ skills also enable students to succeed in the world beyond school, enhancing their ability to define goals, adjust learning strategies, and to assess both their own work and that of their peers (OECD, 2005).

Social and emotional learning (SEL)

Responsive teachers know their students deeply and help them develop social and emotional competencies.

They have a wide repertoire to draw from in assisting them to identify and develop the five Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies in their students: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship skills. As Weissberg (2016) suggests, promoting social and emotional development for all students in classrooms involves teaching and modelling social and emotional skills, providing opportunities for students to practice and hone them, and to apply the skills in various situations.



Teachers recognize that SEL is about students starting to understand their emotions and make responsible decisions. If they have these skills through explicit SEL instruction, their wellbeing is positively impacted.

Well-being

The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) asks 15 year old students about their well-being, defined as 'the psychological, cognitive, social and physical functioning and capabilities that students need to live a happy and fulfilling life'.

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The results of PISA 2018 show that school life is closely related to the well-being of 15-year-old students (OECD, 2021). For example, on average across OECD countries and in 43 education systems, students who perceived greater support from teachers scored higher in reading, after accounting for the socioeconomic profile of students and schools (Schleicher, 2020). In another recent study, 79% of educators across five continents believed positive emotions are 'very' or 'extremely' important for helping students to achieve academic success, and specifically in developing foundational literacies such as reading and mathematics (77%), for emotional literacy (82%), communication skills (81%) and critical thinking (78%) (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019).

Many educators believe that emotional well-being has become more important since they started their career, in light of increasing anxiety and depression among young people, and the changing labor markets. As students' sense of belonging at school has been declining in this century, Schleicher (2020) also suggests principals and teachers need to pay attention to what is happening outside the classroom. Teachers can naturally foster skills in students through the interactions throughout the school day. Adult-student interactions support SEL when they build positive student-teacher relationships, enable teachers to model social-emotional competencies for students, and promote student engagement (Williford & Wolcott, 2015).

Developing a school learning culture

Collective efficacy is the shared belief that the school's staff can have a positive impact on student achievement, in spite of other influences.

A continuous cycle of gathering and valuing student feedback leads to engaged students, responsive teachers, and collective efficacy. Hattie places collective efficacy at the top of his list of influences on student achievement, with an effect size of 1.75 (Donohoo, Hattie, & Eels, 2018). Rudduck & McIntyre (2007) agree that consulting with students helps understand their values, beliefs and opinions, and is a strategy that can be used to improve student outcomes and facilitate school change.

Teachers need dedicated time to regularly gather, analyze and share information about students' strengths and weaknesses with their colleagues, as in professional learning teams, so that they can find the best approaches to make students feel part of the school community (OECD, 2021; Schleicher, 2020).

Responsive teachers and school teams gather feedback from their students to reflect on their own practice and gain a greater sense of their collective impact.

Research shows that by reflecting and acting on what they find from student feedback, teachers can increase engagement and motivation, support students' wellbeing and lift their performance. A collective approach to feedback is an important step towards school improvement.

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