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## An Analysis of Feedback Given to Strong and Weak Student Writers

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# An Analysis of Feedback Given to Strong and Weak Student Writers

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Improvement-oriented feedback has been shown to be more effective at raising writing achievement than simple evaluative feedback. This study investigates whether teachers differ in the feedback they give to weak and strong writers as well as how feedback differs across grades. Interviews were conducted with 15 teachers about the feedback they gave students on their writing. Contrary to expectations, analyses indicate that both weak and strong writers received minimal improvement-oriented feedback. However, strong writers received more positive evaluative feedback while weak writers received more negative evaluative feedback. This research has implications for both teacher education and the professional development of teachers.



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### **Abstract**

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“Writing today is not a frill of the few, but an essential skill for the many” (The National Commission on Writing, 2003, p. 11), sums up the importance of writing in our society today. The July 2005 report by the National Commission on Writing maintains that over 90% of state agencies surveyed acknowledged that writing is a key factor that determines whether one is hired or promoted. The pervasiveness of standardized assessments measuring progress, particularly the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, provides another example of the need to improve student writing. Research suggests formative assessment is effective in raising student

achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998). While formative assessment has been defined in multiple ways (Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, Kulik, & Morgan, 1991; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Sadler, 1998), it is commonly conceived of as that which measures student knowledge and skills and is used by teachers to appropriately modify instruction to improve student understanding.

One way to help student achievement improve is by giving effective feedback as it serves as a way in which a teacher communicates to students the difference between his or her actual level of performance with the standard or goal. This study investigates whether teachers differ in the feedback they give to weak and strong writers as well as how feedback differs across grades. Sadler (1989) suggests, "The learner has to (a) possess a concept of the *standard* being aimed for, (b) compare the *actual level of performance* with the standard, and (c) engage in appropriate *action* which leads to some closure of the gap" (p. 121). Similarly, Hattie and Timperley (2007) describe formative feedback in the form of questions: *Where am I going; How am I going; and Where to next?*

### **Theoretical Framework**

Inherent in the concept of formative assessment is Vygotsky's (1978) theory of development where feedback has not only been considered an element of formative assessment, but also as a means for moving students into the zone of proximal development where learning takes place. According to Vygotsky (1978), the zone of proximal development includes the skills and understandings that are not yet reached but are in the process of being achieved. Simply put, the zone of proximal development is the difference between a student's potential level when assisted by adults and his or her current level of performance. Feedback serves as a way to scaffold students (Shepard, 2005), move them into the zone of proximal development, and complete a task that they were previously unable to complete on their own (Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). Bangert-Drowns, et al., (1991) explain that students construct their knowledge after receiving feedback as they respond to that feedback, evaluate the responses after receiving feedback, and adjust accordingly.

When learning has been scaffolded, students show increased achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998). In a study conducted by Brown, Pressley, Van Meter, and Schuder (1996), low-achieving second grade students were provided additional coaching and modeling; this group showed improvement over students who were instructed using more traditional means. When teachers ask questions to scaffold a student's efforts, student achievement improves again suggesting a link between

types of feedback and raised student achievement (Elawar & Corno, 1985). Research also indicates that a few, clear goals and objectives can guide scaffolding so it is more effective because by providing scaffolding that more often focuses on fewer topics, the effectiveness of scaffolding is more saturated, and thus, more effective (Many, Taylor, Wang, Sachs, & Schreiber, 2007).

Students may have different levels of actual and potential development, which indicates that they may need different feedback to move into the zone of proximal development. Studies describe forms of feedback that are effective at scaffolding students. Hattie and Timperley's (2007) meta-analysis suggested that feedback that scaffolds students' understanding and is related to learning goals was most effective at raising student achievement. In discussing the use of feedback to move students into the zone of proximal development, one study addresses the use of feedback for learners of different ability levels (Tzuriel, 2000). This research, reflective of Vygotsky's (1978) theory of cognitive development, suggests that while students may seem to have the same level of actual development, they may have extremely different levels of potential development at that instance. This means that, given the same situation, teachers may need to give students who seem to have lower levels of potential development more feedback in order to make gains similar to students with higher levels of potential development (Tzuriel, 2000).

### **Types of Feedback**

Studies suggest that there are certain types of feedback that are more or less effective at raising student achievement (Elawar & Corno, 1985; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The effectiveness depends on the *approach* taken in giving the feedback as well as the *content* of feedback.

*Approach* is defined as feedback that is evaluative versus descriptive, task-oriented versus student-oriented, and improvement-oriented versus achievement-oriented (Tunstall & Gipps, 1996). While students received feedback that was evaluative and descriptive in its approach (Cho, Schunn, & Charney, 2006) research has found that descriptive feedback is more effective at raising student achievement than feedback that merely evaluates the extent to which something is right or wrong (Bangert-Drowns et al., 1991; Elawar & Corno, 1985; Kulhavy, 1977). Evaluative feedback is corrective in nature and typically tells a student whether something is right or wrong. Descriptive feedback tends to explain why something is incorrect and then explains how to improve. Not only is descriptive feedback more helpful

at increasing student achievement, students also reported it is more helpful in improving their writing (Cowie, 2005).

While teachers give feedback related to the task and to the student (Dixon, 2005), studies suggest that feedback that focuses on the task is more effective at raising student achievement than feedback oriented towards the student (Crooks, 1988; Sadler, 1989). In fact, student oriented feedback has been shown to be ineffective at raising student achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). This relates back to how feedback serves as an element in formative assessment as feedback on the person will not help students to compare their actual performance to the standard or expectation and thus is ineffective at scaffolding student learning.

Improvement-oriented feedback has been shown to be more effective at increasing student achievement than achievement-oriented feedback (Cho et al., 2006). Improvement-oriented feedback is more closely related to mastery learning whereas achievement-orientated feedback has a stronger relationship to performance learning. In other words, feedback that suggests ways to improve is more effective at raising student achievement than feedback that describes whether or not one has been successful. As Fuchs and Fuchs (1986) found, when teachers give improvement-oriented feedback, that which discusses what is wrong and how to improve it, student achievement increases. In addition, studies indicate that students appreciate feedback that offered ways to improve rather than feedback that focused on correctness (Burnett, 2003; Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002).

*Content* feedback refers to the substance of the feedback. Matsumura, Patthey-Chavez, Valdes, and Garnier (2002) found that feedback on the ideas within writing helped improve the quality of student writing more than feedback on conventions. Both the lower- and higher-achieving schools included in the study gave minimal content feedback, and results suggested that students' content did not improve significantly on their final drafts. Not only is content feedback effective at raising student achievement, but students did not appreciate feedback that merely provided feedback on conventions (Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002).

### **Feedback that Raises Achievement in Specific Groups**

Different types of feedback may be more effective for different groups of students. For example, lower-achieving students may actually be hindered by self-oriented feedback that takes the form of praise (Cowie, 2005; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Though knowing that feedback has been shown to raise student achievement in certain student groups, there have, unfortunately, been few studies in this area.

The current study aims to identify the content and approach of feedback given to weak and strong writers which may help to fill the gap in the literature. By understanding the feedback strong and weak writers receive, one may come closer to identifying what feedback is most useful at improving the writing of these students. Specifically, this study examines the feedback teachers provide lower- and higher-achieving student writers in their classrooms and answers the research questions, “What feedback do teachers give lower- and higher-achieving student writers?” and “How does feedback differ across grade levels?”

## Methods

### Participants

The participants were teachers from a suburban, Catholic, K through 8 school in the Midwest. The school is currently integrating the Six Traits Analytic Writing (6 + 1 Writing, 2008; Spandel, 2001) model into all grades and subject areas, which coincides with the archdiocese’s curriculum standards. The model offers a common vocabulary and rubrics with criteria that support grade level expectations, formative assessment, and improvement-oriented feedback on the characteristics of good writing. As a result of a 3-year effort to improve student writing, all teachers participated in professional development on the Six Traits Model. Teachers present for a staff development meeting were invited to participate in the research study which consisted of 15 teacher participants with at least two teachers interviewed in each grade level band (i.e., PreK-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8). Participants represented all grade level and subject areas.

### Data Collection

Teachers participated in 30-minute interviews and were asked to bring two student writing samples: one of a “strong” writer and one of a “weak” writer. Most of the questions related specifically to the feedback teachers gave to students on these writing samples. The interview questions asked teachers to refer directly to the feedback given on student writing, ensuring that teachers discussed the feedback they actually provided to students. Using the writing samples to guide the interview helped limit social desirability biases from teachers. In addition to discussing particular feedback given to students, teachers responded about ways they used feedback to inform students of the gap between their actual development and the

learning goals. Teachers were also asked about the extent to which students seemed to use feedback as well as any criteria given to students that related to teacher expectations and learning goals. In addition, teachers discussed the frequency with which they gave feedback on student writing and on using rubrics and examples to demonstrate learning goals (see Appendix A for interview protocol).

All but one teacher interview was recorded and transcribed as the one preferred that notes be taken by hand rather than being audiotaped. The student writing samples shared by the teachers were copied as well. Audiotapes of interviews were transcribed and analyzed through NVivo 7 (QSR International, 2006), a qualitative software package.

### **Data Analysis**

Initial predefined coding categories were guided by the research question and the literature review (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Accordingly, segments of teachers' feedback on students' writing were coded twice, for both the approach to feedback and the content of feedback. Codes and their operational definitions were revised once data were initially coded. Approach feedback is divided into two main categories: improvement-oriented and evaluative. Improvement-oriented feedback refers to feedback that guides a student to improve while evaluative feedback informs students whether they were right or wrong. Evaluative feedback can be further divided into two categories: positive and negative.

In addition to categorizing feedback by its approach, this study also categorized feedback by content, or the substance of student writing. Content feedback refers to the actual substance of feedback and can be divided into seven categories: ideas, sentence fluency, voice, conventions, word choice, organization, and directions. The first six categories of content feedback were guided by the literature review and are commonly noted as traits found in good writing. The last content category, following directions, was added after reviewing the interview transcripts and noticing that several teachers provided content feedback in this area. "They didn't really follow directions here," was a comment heard from multiple teachers across all grade-level bands. Frequencies and percentages in each category were calculated. This study also compared the content feedback given by teachers to the content expected in each grade-level band by the archdiocese.

Each piece of feedback given by the teacher was described by both its content and approach. For example, feedback communicating that the student did not follow grammar rules would be categorized by the following content and approach of

feedback, respectively: conventions and negative evaluative. Data were first coded according to the categories identified from the literature review and adjusted to account for additional categories. A second rater verified the codes from a selection of sample data. Data were again reviewed to ensure coding remained consistent. Less than 4 instances were re-coded out of a total of 84 (see Appendix B for definitions and examples of the coding categories).

## Results

### By Approach

Results suggest that both strong and weak student writers receive minimal amounts of improvement-oriented feedback—the approach of feedback that is more effective at improving student writing. Table 1 shows the percentage of approach feedback received by strong writers and by weak writers. Strong student writers received over 50% more positive feedback than weak student writers while weak writers received 35% more negative feedback than strong writers. Weak writers also received over 17% more improvement-oriented feedback. In general, both strong and weak student writers received less improvement-oriented feedback. The use of evaluative feedback was summed up by one teacher, “I always give feedback... even if it’s small like ‘good’ or ‘nice’ job,” both examples of evaluative, rather than improvement-oriented, feedback.

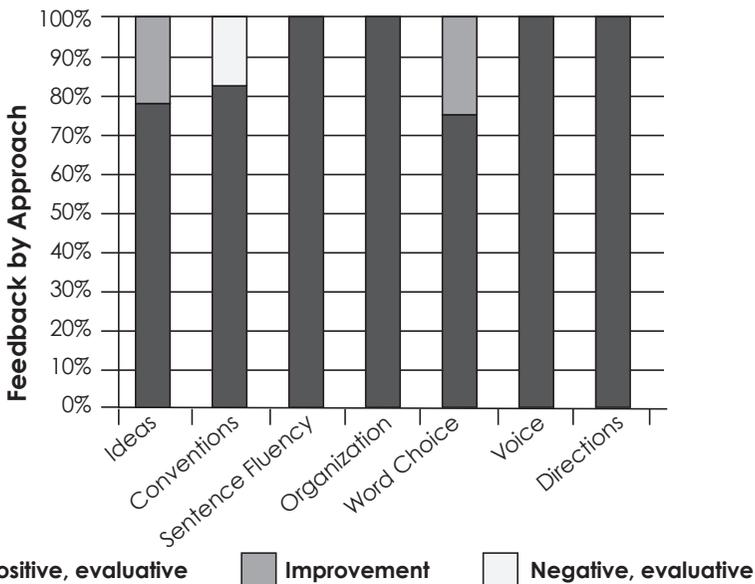
**Table 1.** *Percentage Difference in the Approach of Feedback Received by Strong and Weak Writers*

Feedback approach	Writer		Difference
	Strong	Weak	
Positive	0.81	0.28	0.53
Negative	0.11	0.46	-0.35
Improvement	0.09	0.26	-0.17

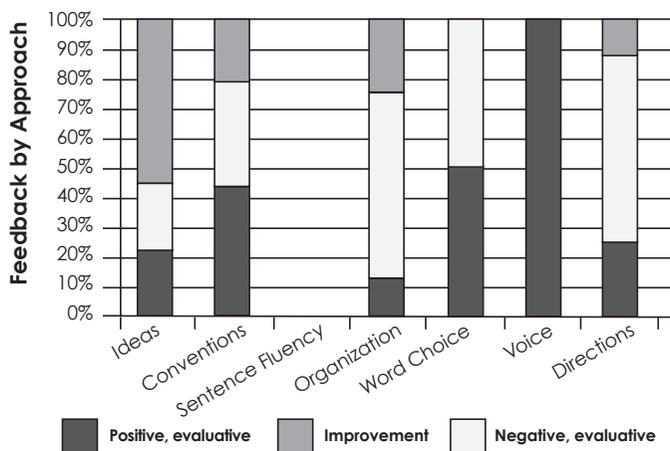
In general, teachers emphasized different approaches of feedback for weak and strong writers in each of the content categories. The approach of feedback can be analyzed further by trait to provide a more refined analysis (See Figures 1 and 2). Sixty-six percent of the feedback on ideas given to strong writers was positive while 50% of the feedback on ideas given to weak writers was improvement-oriented. Strong writers received only positive feedback on organization while nearly 67% of

organization feedback was negative for weak writers. One teacher positively noted the organization of a strong student writer stating, “She had a good beginning—this is what happened—she told me a little about the middle and now she’s going towards the end.” In general, strong and weak writers received little, if any, feedback on voice. Of the feedback given to strong writers on word choice, 75% of it was positive. Weak writers received the same amount of word choice feedback for all three approaches: positive, negative, and improvement-oriented. A teacher, reading excerpts from a student’s story, commented on a student’s poor word choice: “Look at the word use. It’s vague: ‘They didn’t want to kill us...They shot us...’ We forget who ‘they’ is.” In general, there was little feedback given to either student group in sentence fluency.

While strong writers received only positive sentence fluency feedback, weak writers received no feedback in sentence fluency. In terms of feedback on conventions, over 77% of strong writers’ feedback in this category was positive as compared to only 42% for weak student writers. Nearly 36% of weak writers received negative feedback on conventions. Strong writers received only positive feedback on following directions while nearly 67% of weak student writers received feedback on directions that was negative.



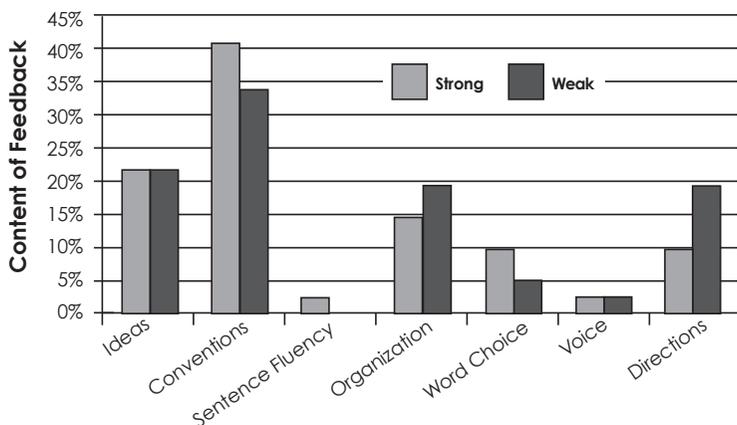
**Figure 1.** Content feedback by approach given to strong student writers.



**Figure 2.** Content feedback by approach given to weak student writers.

### By Content

Both students groups received feedback on the more basic content categories but less feedback on the more complex content categories. The percentage of feedback given to students in each content category is detailed in Figure 3. Both groups received the most content feedback in conventions, ideas, and organization—the more basic traits of good writing. Sentence fluency, voice, and word choice were the content categories in which both strong and weak writers received the least feedback and are typically thought of as the more complex traits of good writing.



**Figure 3.** Percentage of feedback given to strong and weak students by content category.

In addition to looking at how content feedback differed between strong and weak writers, this study looked at whether content feedback differed across grades. These data are organized in Table 2. The majority of feedback given was in the more basic content categories of conventions, ideas, and following directions. Twenty-five percent of content feedback given in this study was on conventions. Feedback on ideas was given 23% of the time. Twenty-two percent of feedback was on following directions. A little over 10% of the total feedback given was on the more complex content categories like sentence fluency, voice, and word choice. A little over 1% of feedback was on sentence fluency, nearly 2% of feedback was on voice, and about 8% of feedback was on word choice.

**Table 2.** *Percentages of the Types of Content Feedback by Grade Level Band*

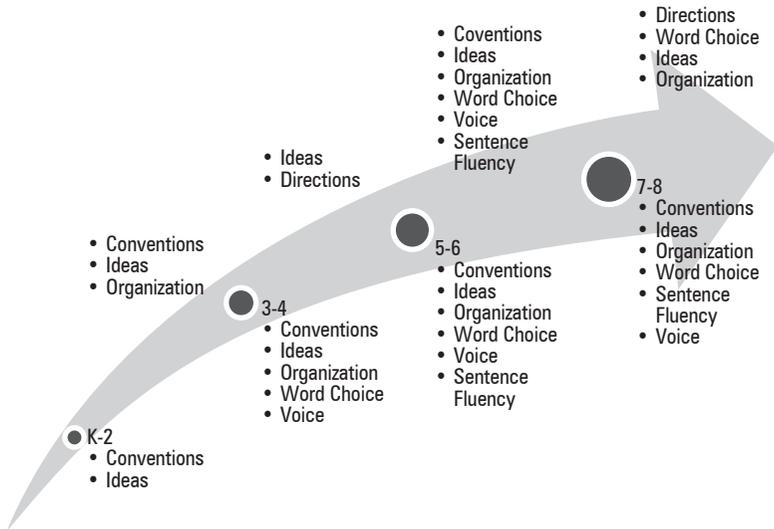
Grade band	Conventions	Ideas	Organization	Word choice	Directions	Voice	Sentence fluency
<b>Primary (K-2)</b>	.55	.18	.14	.05	.07	.02	.00
<b>Intermediate I (3-4)</b>	.11	.33	.11	.00	.44	.00	.00
<b>Intermediate II (5-6)</b>	.28	.28	.28	.06	.00	.06	.06
<b>Junior High (7-8)</b>	.08	.15	.15	.23	.39	.00	.00
<b>Total</b>	.25	.23	.17	.08	.22	.02	.01

**Note:** Percent represents the amount of each content category of feedback given at each grade level band. Total represents the total percent of feedback in each content category.

In analyzing the content feedback by grade-level bands, this study found that 55% of the feedback given to the student samples in pre-K through Grade 2 was on conventions, or the grammar and mechanics of writing. In Intermediate I, Grades 3 and 4, almost 45% of the feedback was on following directions and 33% was on ideas. Students in these grades received no feedback on voice, word choice, and sentence fluency. By Grades 5 and 6, nearly 28% of feedback was given in ideas, organization, and conventions. There was no feedback given on following directions. Nearly 39% of feedback in the junior high grades was on following directions and no feedback was given on voice or sentence fluency.

When compared with the archdiocese's scope and sequence for writing (see Figure 4), the content of feedback did not align consistently. The curriculum standards suggest that basic traits of good writing—conventions and ideas—should be

covered across all grade levels. The more complex traits of good writing (e.g. sentence fluency and voice) should be introduced in the higher grades. The sequence suggests that, in each grade, students build upon what they have learned in earlier grades as well as learn one or more traits so that, by the junior high grades, they have worked with all six traits. The data suggest that while students across all grade-level bands received feedback on the basic traits of good writing, the more complex traits of good writing were minimal, especially in the higher grades. In Intermediate II (grades 5 and 6), only 6% of feedback was on sentence fluency and on voice. Contrary to the archdiocese curriculum standards, no feedback was give on voice or sentence fluency in Intermediate I (grades 3 and 4) and junior high (grades 7 and 8).



**Figure 4.** Difference between the archdiocese graded course of study (below arrow) and actual feedback given to students across grade level bands (above arrow).

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether teachers gave the same feedback to strong and weak student writers both in terms of approach and content. In investigating this, the study also looked at how feedback differed across grade levels. Research in these areas is necessary in determining how the type of teacher feedback affects learning of strong and weak writers.

**By Approach**

Teachers differed in the approach of feedback they gave to strong and weak writers. Strong student writers received more positive evaluative feedback than weak student writers. This seems reasonable since strong student writers most likely have more positive aspects in their writing than negative aspects, which is why they are considered to be “strong” student writers. Weak student writers received more negative evaluative feedback, as they tended to have more incorrect elements in their writing. Weak student writers received more improvement-oriented feedback. One teacher, for example, provided improvement-oriented feedback to a weak student writer, saying, “I told [the student] ‘you have good ideas, try to develop them with more details and explanation.’” The notion that weak writers received more improvement-oriented feedback is reasonable since weak student writers have more errors in their writing and would need to grow more than a strong student writer to reach the same learning goal.

Teachers in the primary grades avoided giving negative feedback. One teacher explained that she provided only positive feedback because negative feedback had the potential to stunt a student’s motivation to succeed in writing, maintaining that elementary teachers “encourage feedback but do not edit.” The data suggest that this belief may be common as students in the primary grades receive more positive and improvement-oriented feedback than negative feedback in each of the six traits; only in feedback regarding directions did students in primary grades receive more negative feedback than positive or improvement-oriented feedback.

While weak writers tend to make more errors in their writing, thus explaining why they receive negative evaluative feedback, research suggests that evaluative feedback, whether negative or positive, is not very effective in helping students make the positive changes in their writing (Cho, Schunn, & Charney, 2006). Research (Bangert-Drowns et al., 1991; Elawar & Corno, 1985; Kulhavy, 1977) has also shown that evaluative feedback is less effective at improving student writing than improvement-oriented feedback, yet both strong and weak student writers received significantly more evaluative feedback than improvement-oriented feedback. This finding is especially important considering improvement-oriented feedback is more effective at raising student achievement.

**By Content**

Data indicate that content feedback on student writing differed across grades. The more complex traits of good writing like voice and sentence fluency are taught

in later years and the more basic traits like ideas and conventions are taught early on. Feedback on conventions, ideas, organization, and directions was seen most often across all grades while feedback on sentence fluency, voice, and word choice was seen least often. Conventions, ideas, organization, and directions were seen most consistently through the grades and thus it makes sense that they received the most feedback.

The school has worked to align its curriculum to the archdiocese's curriculum standards, which provides a recommended progression of writing skills from kindergarten through eighth grade. While the more basic categories of content feedback are seen across the grades, the more complex categories of content feedback are missing. This finding seems contrary to the standards in the archdiocese's graded course of study where the more basic traits are taught earlier and the more complex traits are taught later. For example, while it makes sense that the more basic traits like conventions and ideas are taught earlier on, the data suggest that the more complex traits like voice and sentence fluency were rarely addressed in the feedback given to students in junior high grades. While much of this study's data make sense when understanding the curriculum standards followed by the school, there are a few important points to note where the content feedback does not follow the general sequence (see Figure 3).

While the sample size was small, this preliminary study suggests that there are some important findings that need to be investigated more expansively. The data did support the curriculum standards' sequence for teaching writing and the approach to take when giving feedback. This study also found that little emphasis was placed on the more complex traits like sentence fluency and voice in upper grades. It also indicates that improvement-oriented feedback was limited despite research that suggests it to be more effective at producing achievement (Bangert-Drowns et al., 1991; Elawar & Corno, 1985; Kulhavy, 1977). Strong writers also received less improvement-oriented feedback than weak writers.

## **Future Research**

After considering both the conclusions and limitation of this study, we would make three recommendations for further investigation in this area. To make findings generalizable, the sample size could be expanded significantly to include more participants in more schools. Second, while this study looked at strong and weak student writing samples at one point in time, it would be useful to analyze how

students use feedback to improve their writing over time. This might reveal what forms of feedback students use to improve their writing most effectively. Third, while research suggests types of feedback that are effective at improving student writing, there is little information on how best to support teachers as they learn to give effective feedback to students. By helping teachers to better understand the forms of feedback most useful for the weak, average, and strong writer, they will be able to more effectively help student writing to improve.



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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Protocol**

IF TEACHER DID NOT PARTICIPATE IN SIX TRAITS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, THEN:

- A. What subject(s) do you teach?
- B. What grade(s) do you teach?
- C. How many years have you been teaching (including this year)?
- D. What is your degree in?
  - a. Bachelors? Masters? Doctorate?
- E. CONTINUE WITH INTERVIEW AT 1 BELOW

IF TEACHER DID PARTICIPATE IN SIX TRAITS PD, START INTERVIEW HERE:

- 1. Thank you for bringing in these samples of student writing! Can we start with the 'strong' student writing sample?
  - a. What was the purpose of this assignment?
  - b. Let's walk through this writing assignment. What feedback did you give to this student?
  - c. Why was it important to give this particular feedback to this specific student?
  - d. What happened to this student's learning after he/she received this feedback?
    - i. How do you know?
  
- 2. Great! Let's move on to the weak student writer.
  - a. IF ASSIGNMENT DIFFERENT FROM ABOVE: What was the purpose of this assignment?
  - b. Let's walk through this writing assignment. What feedback did you give to this student?
  - c. Why was it important to give this particular feedback to this specific student?
  - d. What happened to this student's learning after he/she received this feedback?
    - i. How do you know?

3. Were there other occasions in which you gave additional feedback to students on this particular writing assignment?  
How? Conference? Verbal?
4. This is a more general question. When do you typically choose not to give written or verbal feedback on student writing? (What sorts of assignments?)  
Example? Why?
5. What types of writing assignments do you almost always give feedback on?  
Why?
6. In the last two weeks, were there other types of feedback that you have given students on their writing other than the types we have already talked about?  
Verbal? Written? Via Conference?

IF ATTENDED SIX TRAITS, THEN:

7. Has what you learned from the Six Traits Professional Development affected how you assessed student writing this year?  
Example?
8. Thanks. The last part of the interview looks at other forms of assessment. I know that some teachers choose to use self-assessment or peer-assessment in their classroom. Are either of these strategies that you choose to use in your classroom?

IF NO, THEN:

9. Is there a reason why you do not use either? This is helpful to me as a Teacher Education major when I decide whether or not to use these types of assessment.

IF YES, THEN:

- 10a. What is the purpose of using (peer/self) assessment?
- 10b. What types of feedback do (peers/student) give the student writer?

## Appendix B

### Coding Definitions and Examples

CONTENT	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Sentence Fluency (6 Trait)	Well-built and varied sentences, easy flow	"I like the variety of sentence structures you use."
Conventions (6 Trait)	Spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, usage, paragraphing	"Remember to check spelling and capitalization errors in your work."
Voice (6 Trait)	Writing in a way that is individual and engaging, aware of audience and purpose of writing	"Make sure your voice fits with the audience to which you are writing."
Word Choice (6 Trait)	Precise and natural use of words	"Vivid, descriptive language!"
Ideas (6 Trait)	Details enhance the theme of writing	"Good use of supporting details."
Organization (6 Trait)	Appropriate order, structure, and emphasizes central idea/theme	"You are forgetting a topic sentence."
Followed Directions	Related to directions	"You are off-topic."

APPROACH	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Improvement-Oriented	Focusing on areas to strengthen	"Try to vary your sentence structures."
Evaluative	Focusing on evaluation of work as:	
Positive	Good	"Awesome!"
Negative	Bad	"Where's the effort?"

#### About the Authors:

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