

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PEER FEEDBACK IN LOWER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL GRADES

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Abstract/Izveleček

This paper presents the results of a study conducted on seventeen first- to fourth-grade elementary school students, the aim of which was to examine the students' perceptions and assessments of the importance of peer feedback and the ways in which peer feedback is carried out. This paper emphasizes the need to raise awareness of the basic skills that are necessary for effective peer feedback – the development of critical thinking, evaluation, observation skills, communication skills, the development of empathy, self-confidence, and the development of respect for others.

Dojemanje vrstniških povratnih informacij učenecv v nižjih razredih osnovne šole

V prispevku so predstavljeni rezultati raziskave, izvedene s sedemnajstimi učenci, in sicer od prvega do četrtega razreda osnovne šole. Cilj je bil preveriti dojemanje in ocene učenecv o pomenu vrstniške povratne informacije in načinih izvajanja vrstniške povratne informacije. V prispevku je poudarjena potreba po ozaveščanju osnovnih veščin, ki so potrebne za učinkovito povratno informacijo vrstnikov – razvoj kritičnega mišljenja, vrednotenja, sposobnosti opazovanja, komunikacijskih veščin, razvoj empatije, samozavesti, razvoj spoštovanja do drugih.

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Introduction

Today, the development of self-observation and evaluation skills is crucial and is closely tied to peer feedback. Creating conducive conditions for students to reach their potential and educational goals involves regular monitoring and feedback (Šalković et al., 2018), which is considered the basic purpose of evaluation. Feedback is a means of reviewing students' work (either individual tasks or the learning process) with the intention of improving the achievement of educational outcomes during the learning process (Jurjević Jovanović et al., 2022). Teachers indirectly aid this development by providing feedback and serving as role models (Orlich et al., 2010). During self-evaluation, students identify their competences and set achievable goals. Teachers play a pivotal role in guiding this process. Research indicates students tend to rate peers' skills higher than teachers do (Šalković, et al., 2018; Staubitz et al., 2016), thus highlighting challenges such as accuracy, sincerity, and favouritism. Many students fear evaluation and struggle to use negative feedback constructively. In practice, teachers in Croatia often use affirmative methods to mitigate negative feedback effects.

The question arises whether the educational system, by emphasizing affirmative feedback, may inadvertently hinder the preparation of young people to face both the positive and negative aspects of their work in society. Patchan et al. (2017) examined peer feedback depth, suggesting it be observed through three responsibility components: assessment, feedback, and a combination of both. They emphasize the importance of objective peer feedback, aligning with the fundamental value of responsibility in society. Teaching should cultivate responsible individuals and society. During self-evaluation or peer feedback, students should understand the purpose of evaluation and its connection to responsibility towards oneself, others, and society. Encouraging students to view "negative feedback" as a catalyst for positive change is vital for academic growth.

Panadero et al. (2016) outline two effective approaches to peer feedback. The first involves evaluating a specific piece of student work, providing concrete advice for improvement, along with praise or constructive criticism. This approach teaches students to recognize both the strengths of their work and areas for improvement, while fostering a growth mindset. The second approach involves evaluating one's own work and that of peers, considering individual achievements and potential areas for growth.

This encourages students to analyse abilities and potential within given contexts, promoting realistic expectations and discouraging unfounded comparisons.

Adachi et al. (2017) suggest that peer feedback contributes significantly to students' development and their ability to think critically. Chen et al. (2021) offer insightful findings regarding the preparation of students for peer feedback. They note that 47% of survey participants will provide fair assessments only if they believe others will do the same, while only 34% believe other students will make fair assessments. Understanding students' attitudes towards mutual evaluation is crucial. While 63% feel comfortable evaluating peers, 18% feel unsure about the process, and 17% find negative feedback from peers distressing. Despite challenges, 82% of students view peer feedback through digital tools as an impartial method beneficial to their learning.

Improperly guided peer feedback can lead to detrimental outcomes such as mistrust, competition, discomfort, and anxiety (Levine et al., 2010; Lerchenfeldt et al., 2023). Therefore, it is vital for teachers to understand the purpose of peer feedback and ensure its proper direction, along with objective evaluation of students. Peer feedback fosters mutual responsibility, which is crucial for student autonomy and academic development, benefiting both students and teachers (Serrano-Aguilera et al., 2021). It promotes individual responsibility and motivation, enhances group work dynamics, and cultivates problem-solving and metacognitive skills (Lerchenfeldt et al., 2023). Ultimately, peer feedback plays a significant role in shaping students' learning experiences, guiding their future actions, and providing valuable insights for teachers to improve their teaching approaches.

Evaluation in the Croatian Educational System

Evaluation is fundamental to student education in Croatian elementary schools. Modern teaching methods prioritise student-centred learning, where students engage in research, problem-solving, reflection, and self-evaluation, with teachers serving as mentors (Matošević, 2020). Recently, evaluation has shifted away from traditional summative assessments towards a focus on providing high-quality feedback to enhance student learning and academic performance.

Evaluation typically involves providing feedback or assessing students' knowledge and skills, categorized as summative or formative. Summative evaluation occurs at the end of the learning process and assesses learning outcomes.

In contrast, formative evaluation takes place during the learning process and provides specific feedback to guide students towards desired outcomes (Orlich et al., 2010).

In Croatian elementary schools, evaluation aligns with subject curricula, with a primary focus on enhancing student learning skills and performance (Jurjević Janković et al., 2022). The evaluation process begins with planning the teaching process and defining educational outcomes, followed by planning the evaluation itself. Evaluation is structured around three areas: evaluation for learning, evaluation as learning, and evaluation of learning outcomes. Methods and activities for teaching are selected next, with continuous evaluation occurring during class implementation. The teaching process concludes with reflection, where teachers analyse outcomes, content, activities, and student engagement (Jurjević Jovanović et al., 2020). The choice of evaluation type depends on the specific goals and content being evaluated (Brajković and Žokalj, 2021).

Methodology

The Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this qualitative research is to examine the perceptions and evaluations among grade students of the importance and methods of conducting peer feedback. In other words, to determine from the student perspective the ways and frequency of conducting peer feedback in the teaching process, as well as its purposefulness and usefulness in work. In accordance with this aim, two research questions were posed:

1. Which strategies are used to encourage and facilitate mutual feedback among students in class?
2. Do students value giving feedback to their peers as a contribution to their progress?

Context of the Study and Participants

Elementary school education in the Republic of Croatia is free and compulsory, beginning with enrolment in the first grade and lasting eight years, from the age of six to fifteen. Class teaching / single-teacher education characterises the first four grades of elementary school, and subject teaching occupies the fifth through eighth grades. High school education, which in Croatia lasts three to five years and is not

compulsory, enables students to acquire knowledge and skills for work and/or further education. The classes in schools are organized in two shifts (morning and afternoon).

The research was conducted in a school with combined classes. In the Republic of Croatia, a combined class comprising students from two grades from the first to fourth grade has a maximum of sixteen students. The said school is in a rural area of the eastern region of the Republic of Croatia and has 322 students in four one-teacher classes and ten subject-teacher classes. The sample for this research was chosen intentionally since it encompasses two grades from the same school with a smaller number of students. The research was conducted in the main school (13 students) and a branch school in a nearby village (4 students). A total of 4 classes (1st to 4th grade) were included, from a combined class department in the main school, and another combined class in the branch school. The combined class in the main school included 3rd- and 4th-grade students, while the combined class in the branch school included 1st- and 2nd-grade students. A total of 17 students participated in the research, and it is important to emphasize that these were students whose parents had signed written consent for their participation in the research. Thus, the criterion for the selection of the sample was exclusively the voluntary participation of students, which implies the inclusion of all students regardless of academic success.

Research Instrument

The research was conducted using standardised, open-ended interviews in which the order of questions and the way questions are asked are predetermined (Patton, 2015). The presence of the researcher who monitored the process is also important because, in qualitative research, the researcher is a key instrument (Yin, 2016). The interview questions were constructed and designed for our research purposes. According to Patton (2015), this type of qualitative interview “consists of a set of questions carefully worded and arranged with the intention of taking each respondent through the same sequence and asking each respondent the same questions with essentially the same words” (p. 645). Each participant was given the opportunity to respond in their own words, and no pre-written responses were offered (Patton, 2015). The interviews contained several questions, some of which related to peer feedback. Here are several questions the answers to which are included in this article:

1. What does the term peer feedback mean?
2. Do you give feedback to your friends on their work/accomplished tasks? How often?
3. Does the teacher encourage peer feedback in your class and in what way? Please describe the process.
4. Does it help you in your own progress when you analyse other students' works? Does it motivate you to learn? What are the results of your learning and work?
5. Do you often reflect on your work, and how do you evaluate your own work?

The interview was conducted with students on one occasion, in October 2023. The video recordings and transcripts of the interviews remain stored on the researchers' computer and are available to the reader upon request.

Ethical Considerations

Before conducting the research, participants were acquainted with its aim and purpose. Written consent for interviewing the children was obtained from the school principal as well as the children's parents. The children's names remained anonymous to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the data. Labels were used instead of names to distinguish each research participant. The mentioning of the name of the institution in which the study was conducted was avoided. Because of the anonymity of the data, the interviews with the children are not available on public channels nor anywhere online.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were coded using the open coding method, where the codes obtained were grouped into categories according to thematic criteria (Creswell, 2012). Each thematic chapter consists of brief descriptions of the participant's responses and the area background data. The coding was done "manually" by the researcher, without the use of a qualitative data analysis program. One person coded the data, and the other two researchers were responsible for validating the coded data from the interviews. The researchers discussed the coding scheme with each other, comparing and discussing similarities and differences. They analysed the relationship between the data and the classification system to verify the meaningfulness and accuracy of

the categories and the inclusion of data in the categories. As Patton (2015) notes, the categories were judged according to the criteria of internal homogeneity (the extent to which the data in each category are related in a meaningful way) and external heterogeneity (the extent to which the differences between categories are clear). The research questions were used to interpret the research results. However, the data analysis itself is presented thematically, i.e., it involves categorising data into a series of descriptive categories (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Considering that the entire study was focused on a constructivist paradigm in which the researcher, as the most important instrument in data collection, aims to understand and interpret individual statements and visions of the research participants, the researchers relied on the criteria of credibility and internal validity, which refer to the existence of trust in the results and interpretations of the studies. Thereby, the researchers used peer debriefing (mutual presentation and comparison of researchers' results about their understanding of the teacher's statements and visions, intended to prevent bias), and thick data descriptions (providing enough information) (Lincoln and Guba, 2013).

Results

The qualitative analysis of the data was followed by the coding of the data, which resulted in six categories: *The concept of peer feedback*; *Methods of peer feedback*; *Peer feedback outside of school*; *Teacher's role*; *The purpose of peer feedback*; *Self-evaluation*.

The Concept of Peer Feedback

Peer feedback is a process in which students provide each other with feedback on a completed task or learning process. For students, peer feedback often presents an opportunity to exchange opinions with other students, which helps improve their knowledge and skills. According to the students' answers, peer feedback was observed in helping other students develop their competences. It is important to note that peer feedback connects students and helps them develop critical thinking and expression. Most importantly, peer feedback can play a significant role in the students' development of self-confidence, social competences, collaborative competences, and responsibility toward oneself and others.

"Well... when you help someone, I mean, when you... tell someone what they did right and what they did wrong." (Student 3)

"Well... when we evaluate each other, when we help each other, when we look in each other's notebooks, and stuff like that." (Student 7)

"When we tell someone what they did good and what they did bad." (Student 9)

"Feedback is when we exchange notebooks and when we give each other grades." (Student 10)

"Feedback is... well, for me it means when I want to explain something to someone so that they do better in school, get better grades, when the teacher can explain something well to them, and when I can simply help someone to... to have a better final grade than me." (Student 14)

Methods of Peer Feedback

In the teaching process, peer feedback can be conducted in various ways: orally, in writing, or with the help of digital tools. Our research participants confirm this, with a focus being on spotting and correcting mistakes. Peer feedback contributes to the development of classroom cohesion and allows students to evaluate each other in a supportive manner, which is the main purpose of feedback, together with the aim of individual and communal progress. Additionally, through an active evaluation process, students improve their own work and learning processes.

"We exchange notebooks and look at the mistakes. ... Well... no, I don't know... maybe in Science class." (Student 2)

"Well, sometimes we have to write it, and sometimes it's on the smart board. ... Well, mostly at school, in Math, so that we can all do better. In all the classes, writing, multiplication table... to learn better... well, that was in Art class, we were painting and I made everything blue, so it didn't look so good, but it was good in the end. To change that." (Student 6)

"For example, in Croatian, when we were looking at notebooks... ours... let's say, I give mine to Noa, and he gives me his, so we go through each other's notebooks... We talked about it and wrote about it, but mostly talked about it. ... Yes, every time during Art class. ... To share what you really think and feel, if it's good or not, to say what you really think." (Student 7)

"Well, sometimes we talked about it and wrote about it, and sometimes it was on the smart board." (Student 8)

"Mostly in Art class. ... When we are in front of the board and give feedback to each other... We speak about it mostly." (Student 11)

"Because we insult each other... We laugh at others. ... We speak about it." (Student 12)

Peer Feedback Outside of School

Peer feedback is a process that students can also apply during play or joint activities outside school. The use of peer feedback outside school signifies that peer feedback is important to students.

"Well, when I was at my friend's house, we ran and commented on each other's work." (Student 2)

"Well, we talk both at school and outside of school. ... Well, while we walk back home. About grades, this and that, about our topics. Children's topics." (Student 7)

"My friend and I walk home and talk about how we did certain things at school." (Student 12)

"When me and my friend Lana are playing or walking, we both say how something could go, how we could do something new in school..." (Student 14)

Teacher's Role

The teacher's role in the process of peer feedback is crucial. The teacher is a guide and moderator – they teach students how to evaluate others and how to give feedback. During peer feedback, it is important that the teacher be present and focused on student presentations so that peer feedback does not turn into insults and belittling, as stated by one of the interviewed students.

"Well, mostly at school, in Math, so that we can all do better. In all the classes, writing, multiplication table... To learn better. ... Well, she uses it every day to make us angry, to teach us as best as possible. To get us to fifth grade." (Student 6)

"We need to, we need to be honest." (Student 8)

"We need to say what they did wrong and what they need to correct." (Student 12)

"Well, if the teacher says we need to help someone if they don't know how to do a task, and if the teacher has to correct someone, I'll help someone else to correct it." (Student 17)

The Purpose of Peer Feedback

Peer feedback has multiple roles, and the teacher's task is to convey these roles to students in order to achieve the desired outcomes of the evaluation process. These roles include the improvement of learning, development of self-confidence, encouragement of active learning, development of empathy, collaborative learning, better classroom cohesion, and development of responsibility towards learning. However, the purpose of peer feedback differs for each student.

"A better grade. ... To get a better grade." (Student 4)

"Well, it's not a problem for me if someone tells me that I need to add something, because I tell them too, it's not a problem. It doesn't happen often, but it helps me. ... We encourage others... Yes. It helps me. Then I know what someone did wrong, so I won't do the same as them. ... Well... Yes. I know what I need to learn." (Student 6)

"Well, they help me, they help me more than they think." (Student 7)

"To see which mistakes we make and to how to do better the next time." (Student 12)

"They help me because I can... for example, if Lana explains something to me now, I remember it immediately and do it in some exam or paper." (Student 14)

Self-Evaluation

During peer feedback, students often reflect on their own work or learning. In this way, it is possible to influence the personal development of students, to develop their awareness of different possibilities and perspectives, their skill at setting realistic goals, critical thinking, and responsibility for one's learning and achievements. Generally, in the process of self-evaluation, students think about how they can improve.

"And... (pause). Well, when I'm doing something and I look at something and remember what else I could change in my work." (Student 3)

"Ah... I don't know, I think so. I look at what I can do better and then I do it." (Student 6)

"Well, sometimes. ... Well... I don't know. I think about what I can do better." (Student 8)

"Yes, all the time. ... Well, I take a look to see if I made a mistake and what I can do better." (Student 12)

"Well, I think about what I can do better or at all, what the mistakes are and so on." (Student 17)

Discussion

Analysis of the students' responses revealed that the students mainly perceive peer feedback as helping others to improve their own learning or work and thereby obtain better grades. These attitudes pave the way towards building an active and supportive classroom community. Lloyd et al. (2016) indicate similar conclusions based on their research that shows how peer feedback plays an important role in building classroom community and communication between students. Furthermore, according to the students' answers, one can determine that they often consider the grade, and not knowledge, as the aim of learning, and thus of peer feedback.

It is necessary to understand that these results do not represent general data that can be applied to all students in the Republic of Croatia. In other words, these results cannot be used as a general conclusion. However, the data can be used as a basis for future research and as a way to understand students' perception and the value attributed to them by conducting peer evaluation. Based on these results and the students' answers, one can conclude that peer feedback can be implemented in various ways and with different subjects. Students mostly highlight Art, Science, foreign languages, and Math classes. Students understand that the aim of peer feedback is the progress of each of them, so that their achievement is even greater.

Peer feedback is sometimes done with the help of technology – the use of smart boards in class. It should be said that digital tools are mentioned in one of the two combined classes since not all classrooms are similarly equipped, and some lack smart boards. Some of the practical methods that can be found in students' responses include the exchange of notebooks and correction of mistakes; students' oral feedback on what was done well and what needs to be improved, and peer feedback through a smart board.

In their research on the effectiveness of peer feedback, Panadero et al. (2016) indicate two approaches: evaluating work solely on the basis of achievement, and evaluating one's own work. The authors especially note the importance of affirmative feedback, whereby it is necessary to emphasize what is good and to highlight in an encouraging way what needs to be improved. The students who participated in this study showed that affirmative feedback, which improves their approach to learning and work without making them feel incompetent, is very important to them. In the study by Šalković et al. (2018), students often rate other students' work more highly than the teachers do. This research also confirms that affirmative feedback is very important to students, so they provide this kind of information to their classmates; however, it is important to note that students' peer evaluations tend to be overly positive compared to objective assessments of performance. This discrepancy between peer feedback and objective reality suggests that while students value supportive communication, they may struggle with providing constructively critical feedback that accurately reflects areas needing improvement. Hence, it must be noted that peer feedback is a process that should be gradually adopted and learned, while simultaneously developing critical thinking skills (Adachi et al., 2017). Similar conclusions are found in Chang and Wongwatkit (2023), who assert that peer feedback significantly improves learning achievements, increases motivation, and at the same time improves cooperation, communication, and critical thinking. Our research has shown that students discuss their work and learning even outside school, during play or other free-time activities. This underlines the importance of early teaching of peer evaluation.

With the right approach, students will have multiple benefits from peer feedback, not only in school, but also beyond it. Serrano-Aguilera et al. (2021) indicate that peer feedback and the development of skills required for peer feedback affect individual responsibility towards work as well as responsibility towards oneself and others. Similar conclusions can be made in the case of students who participated in this research.

Xue et al. (2023) conducted research aimed at gaining insight into whether peer feedback affects students' literary abilities and concluded that peer feedback positively affects the overall quality of writing. Students who carried out peer feedback showed better results in poetic expression; therefore, it can be concluded that their creativity was also encouraged. Peer feedback had a particularly positive impact on students with better prior knowledge and achievements. Furthermore, Wijnia et al. (2022) determine that information received in peer feedback contributes to students' sense of autonomy and competence. That is, according to the students, feedback that includes a complete answer and explanations truly contributes to their educational values. The students' answers indicate that they consider feedback from their peers to be important. The validity of this is evidenced by the answers, which show that students implement feedback and peer evaluation even when not in school.

The responses show that teachers did point out to the students that the purpose of peer feedback is to help others, and that the aim is for each student to achieve a better result. Chen et al. (2021) come to similar conclusions and point out that most students have a positive attitude towards peer feedback. Moreover, the students highlight the necessary qualities of the person providing feedback – sincerity, concern for the other person's feelings, and so on, which can also develop students' empathy. Staubitz et al. (2016) and Patchan et al. (2017) conclude that frequent challenges in the process of peer feedback are accuracy and sincerity during feedback, that is, student impartiality. In connection to that, the results of the research conducted by Chen et al. (2021) indicate that most students will evaluate objectively only if they feel that other students also evaluate objectively, while only 34% of students believe that other students do so. Additionally, the teacher's role and the importance of a guided peer feedback process is also evident from research results, which indicate that non-objective feedback can lead to a sense of competition between students and can damage their interpersonal relationships (Levine et al., 2010). Likewise, it can also contribute to the development of discomfort or anxiety (Lerchendeldt et al., 2023). Therefore, it is key to emphasize that it is necessary to constantly reflect on and improve the process of peer feedback so that students are truly encouraged by it and feel that the process fosters their progress.

Students indicate that peer feedback motivates them to study and helps them with their own work. They perceive feedback from other students as useful, as well as giving feedback to other students, both for the benefit of others and for their own

work. All students note that they can improve their learning with the help of peer feedback, and most students often carry out a self-evaluation process, that is, they reflect on what they did well and what they still need to work on to improve it. Panadero et al. (2016) highlight self-evaluation as one of the effective approaches but specify the prerequisites for a successful and effective approach to self-evaluation. It is necessary to make students aware of the differences in peer capabilities, with a special attitude to themselves and the analysis of their own capabilities. Therefore, peer feedback can be carried out together with self-evaluation in such a way that students are guided by their own and others' capabilities, and that they evaluate specific tasks based on this. Cheong et al. (2023) conducted research with students on how self-evaluation and peer feedback can mutually help students reach several important conclusions: self-evaluation is effective even when peer feedback is conducted because it complements peer feedback, owing to differences in student thinking, and it is interesting to note that self-evaluation works effectively on students with both high and low achievements. It can be concluded that peer feedback contributes to the development of self-image, self-confidence, critical thinking, self-confidence, and so on.

Our research results show that peer feedback forms an important part of the teaching process from the student's perspective. The teacher has a key role in laying out the foundations for the peer feedback process, and in developing the necessary skills so that students can evaluate themselves and other students. Since the school also has a role in forming character, during the process of peer feedback, it is possible to touch on numerous issues that will, with a proper approach, result in the development of positive traits and achievements.

Conclusion

The evaluation of students in elementary school is a ubiquitous and increasingly studied topic among counsellors, teachers, scientists, and other educational experts. Since evaluation is an indispensable part of student education over its entire duration, teachers of lower grades of elementary school have a special task in laying the foundations for and developing the basic knowledge and skills of students regarding evaluation. The modern approach to education places the student at the centre of the process, whereby they are trained to look for solutions, while evaluating themselves, their work, and others in their environment. In recent years, within the

Croatian educational system, the true purpose of evaluation has often been discussed and is often located in feedback that will help students achieve better results and their full potential. In the learning process, other students, peers whom the students trust and who go through similar challenges and perform similar tasks, play an important role. In this light, it is vital to discuss the importance of peer feedback.

Peer feedback can be encouraged by diverse methods, the most prevalent being the conversation method, the oral presentation method, or the writing method (correcting of work by other students). Methods supported by digital tools are used somewhat less often, with a smart board being used most often. By encouraging peer feedback, teachers also encourage fundamental values such as sincerity, empathy, and responsibility. Students perceive peer feedback as helping others to improve their own knowledge or work, and they benefit greatly from the feedback they receive from their peers.

The contribution of this research is reflected in its emphasis on the importance of the process of peer feedback, and thus of self-evaluation. A further contribution is its identification of the fundamental skills necessary for effective peer feedback, and what is achieved through peer feedback: the development of critical thinking, evaluation, observation skills, communication skills, the development of empathy, self-confidence and self-esteem, along with the development of respect towards others and other people's opinions. The contribution also emphasises the role of teachers in the peer feedback process. This research can be used as the basis for further consideration of how to improve peer feedback in the teaching process and what teacher competences are needed for guiding peer feedback towards purposeful and effective evaluation.

Research Limitations

Limitations of this research include the subjective assessments of students. However, it is crucial to note that the opinion of each student is important. Another limitation might be the presence of the teacher in the room during the interviews with the students, whereby the students were more reticent in the beginning. Since this is qualitative research, another limitation of the study might be the small sample as well as the fact that it was conducted at one point in time. Since the research was conducted in only one Croatian school, further research should increase the sample

size, and the results from this research should not be generalized, but rather serve as a basis for future research and provide insight into students' reflections and experiences regarding peer evaluation.

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