Can the feedback given to students for homework tasks been improved?

Action Research using teacher and pupil perceptions.

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Abstract

This study offers primary empirical research focused on the development of formative homework-feedback within a school setting. This is achieved by reviewing existing theoretical studies and employing action research with the assistance of pupil and teacher focus groups. The findings and discussions in this research are focused on exploring the current and changing perceptions of teachers and pupils on homework-feedback during the course of the research. The study aims to find ways of developing assessment that promotes self-regulation and life-long learning of pupils within the context of one school. Through this personalised investigation we looked at the implementation of strategies such as effort and attainment grading, dialogic feedback, focus questions and comment-only marking. Whilst recognising the barriers, which prevent more formative assessment of homework feedback taking place, such as time and lack of confidence, this study looks for practical ways to use formative feedback to raise self-awareness and confidence of our pupils. The theoretical research studied is supported by the empirical research conducted. This is a study that aims to highlight the need for teachers to continue to further their professional practice and look for opportunity to involve pupils with assessment pedagogy development.

Keywords: homework feedback, formative feedback, teacher feedback, effort grades, comment-only marking, participant action research, focus groups, pupil voice

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1. Introduction

Homework feedback is commonly seen as a contentious topic between pupil, teachers and parents alike (See Watkins and Steven, 2013). It can put pressures on all three stakeholders and can have a negative impact on learning if mis-managed. Following instructions outlined by the last Government in 1998, many schools have retained homework policies that set out expectations for pupils to have work to complete outside the classroom. The feedback given for homework tasks is also a requirement in these guidelines. There are currently no centralised regulations for homework and feedback within the UK. This should allow for enhanced autonomy with homework content and feedback within schools.

There is a wide range of study on the theme of feedback and its implication for learning, but little research can be found that relates specifically to homework feedback. It is commonly stated within the research that formative feedback is preferable over summative, and the focus on skill and self-regulation of learners can have a positive, lasting impact on life-long learning (See Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Ryan and Deci, 2000). In this study it was my intention to explore the existing theoretical arguments for using formative assessment for homework feedback and then apply to the setting of my school.

I use formative feedback for homework tasks regularly in my role as Head of The Art Department in an independent, secondary school. It is one of my responsibilities to set homework tasks and, more importantly, provide regular feedback. There is a common perception that homework feedback should include a grade and comment. This grading of work can then be referred to in summative reporting. This method of feedback is familiar to teachers within this school. Informally, teachers discussed the positive and negative implications of using grading and comments. They appeared to be reluctant to explore alternative forms of assessment to enhance the development of learning for their

pupils. This may be because they did not have the confidence to take risks, or the time to investigate the implications further.

As a teacher of a skill-based subject, I want to encourage the development of expertise and self-regulation in my pupils. Autonomous learning is expected within my academic area, and students need to develop this criteria and demonstrate their skills this to perform well in external examinations. One of the main goals my teaching is to nurture and develop opportunities for life-long learning in parallel to assessed academic skills. I wanted to look in more detail at ways of empowering my students and work towards guiding them in their learning rather than instructing them and see if this can be extended to a whole school development.

This is an empirical study looking at gathering primary data on the perceptions of teachers and pupils within one school. Many of the theoretical studies on feedback sourced called for empirical research to be carried out to trial feedback conceptions. For this study, I have employed mixed methods of research. Action research has been used, as I wanted to make changes to current practice on a local scale, using the opportunity of study to benefit my pupils and my professional practice. This paper investigates the development of formative feedback methods, some of which were favoured by pupils, others that they felt should be avoided in the future.

Groups of colleagues and pupils at my school were involved in the research over a twelve month period. This school is a fee-paying, independent secondary school for girls. Four groups of year seven pupils were involved in the research and progressed into year eight during the research period.

The pupils acted as participants in the focus groups, critiquing current practice and any developments, whilst fellow teachers acted as researchers, investigating themes within their homework assessments. By using action research, the development of assessment pedagogy was directly linked to the needs of the pupils within our school. The interaction with pupils throughout the study meant that whilst assisting with developing assessment practice, they were also developing an understanding of their own needs from homework feedback.

In this study, it was my aim to explore two questions:

• Can homework feedback be improved?

• Can dialogic feedback be used to enhance learning?

As outlined in the theoretical research, homework feedback should be formative and promote life-long learning. In this research we established the current perceptions of homework and set about trying to improve the feedback given to pupils to prompt self-regulation. Teachers at this school commonly employed a number of strategies and in this research we explored and questioned their suitability in homework feedback. These strategies included:

• Effort grading

• Focus questions

• Comment-only marking

• Attainment grading

• Dialogic feedback

Dialogic feedback has been explored within Higher Education as a constructive way of providing feedback that promotes dialogue and discussion about learning between student and tutor (Yang and Carless, 2012). In this study, we looked at using dialogic feedback for homework tasks and also employed it indirectly with the use of focus groups for the data collection and analysis.

Pupil and teachers perceptions were used to track progress and analyse the extent of improvement seen. In attempting to answer the two initial questions, it was anticipated that a whole school homework marking/feedback policy could be formulated as a result of this research.

2. Literature Review

Can the feedback given to students for homework tasks been improved? Could creating a dialogue between teacher and pupil facilitate deeper learning?

This literature review is focused on the analysis and evaluation of existing research and theory based on education policy for homework, its monitoring and assessment. The body of literature and research on this subject is extensive and diverse. Homework is a controversial subject in the UK, drawing on opinions from stakeholders including parents, pupils, teachers, schools and UK government that are well documented within the media. Researchers have continued to explore the opportunity to use homework to further student learning and look at ways in which homework and independent study can lead to higher achievement within schools. I have decided to concentrate on five aspects of homework and feedback in particular, within this literature review:

1) Homework

2) Theoretical studies into formative assessment and grading

3) Parental perceptions

4) Teacher perceptions of homework feedback

5) Pupil perceptions of homework feedback

I am writing from the position of a practising secondary school teacher; working within the independent, fee-paying school sector. In my experience, setting homework tasks and providing feedback have a positive impact on the progression of learning for individual pupils. In this literature review I am keen to explore whether other researchers support this

view with theory and evidence of practice. It is my intention to keep an open mind but I am aware that my own experiences may influence the outcomes.

2.1. Homework: An introduction

Schools are expected to make sure children are given feedback on their homework. It should be given in a way that lets your child know - how well they have done, how they could do better' (http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20121015000000/http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Schoolslearninganddevelopment/SchoolLife/DG_179508)

This advice for parents on homework, as outlined by the current Conservative government in 2013, is taken from the national archive. There is no longer any guidance on homework that is easily obtainable for stakeholders and there is limited information on what the parental expectations of homework tasks should be. Thus the quality and quantity of feedback expected from teachers is open to wider interpretation. This guideline for homework feedback does not indicate any measurable outcomes for teachers or pupils leading to inconsistencies in expectations of stakeholders and differences in the effectiveness of feedback from teachers.

Homework is viewed as a contentious subject and is a source for debate within media and politics; whilst on a local scale it is an area causing conflict between children, parents, teachers and schools (Faulkner and Blyth, 1995). Homework has been a prominent part of a young person's experiences in British education and has been an important element of teaching and learning since the nineteenth century. This has supplemented the taught curriculum in schools, with work to be completed out of school hours as the responsibility of

the learner, usually at home (Sharp, 2002). Suitability of tasks set for homework or independent study are decided at a local level, within schools by classroom teachers.

Homework as a theme presents issues in a socio-political level, in addition to an educational context. Homework was made statutory in 1988 as part of education reform in England, under the control of a Labour government, instructing primary and secondary schools to establish homework policies, most commonly taking the form of homework timetables for children as young as five years old. Included in these policies were other implications including:

- The monitoring of tasks given to pupils

- The standardisation of assessment, primarily formative assessment

- The grading and feedback given for homework tasks (Hallam, 2006).

This was an attempt to ensure all schools no matter their social context and the diversity of pupils and families, would have an expectations for homework to be completed and for parents to be more involved in their child's learning. (Sellgren , BBC News, 24/09/2013, www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-24126000).

In 2012, Michael Gove (the then Education Secretary) scrapped the guidelines for homework introduced by Labour in 1998 following complaints from parents that too much homework had a negative impact on family time and opportunities for play and sport (BBC News, Education, 4/03/2012, www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-17250653). He criticised the emphasis that had been placed on time to complete tasks over the quality of homework that was being produced. Although the government guidelines were removed, there has been no attempt to replace and improve on the previous practice (BBC News, Education, 4/03/2012).

Schools have been given more autonomy and opportunity to self-regulate; many have retained homework policies, as successful alternatives have not been suggested (BBC News, Education, 4/03/2012).

With changes to homework marking policies there are many stakeholders to consider. Watkins and Steven (2013) highlight the careful balance needed to appease all stakeholders:

> *Teachers see homework as a necessary expansion of daily instruction, parents expect it, principals view it as a catalyst to higher test scores, and the students understand it as an inconvenient truth about their busy lives… Essential school stakeholders value homework, but its implementation and unity of purpose remain unclear. (p80)*

In practice within the independent education sector, social constructs add further emphasis on the expectations for each stakeholder to maintain their role:

- Headteachers must ensure high standards of achievement are maintained in summative assessments in key stage assessments

- Teachers are setting tasks to complete syllabi, they are reviewing and evaluating pupil progress with grades and comments

- Pupils are completing tasks and have expectations of further tasks being set with detailed feedback and grading

- Parents, in independent schools, are paying for the children's education and base their expectations of homework and marking on their own experiences.

With growing emphasis laid upon independent learning and self-regulation of learners, homework is a useful tool to monitor progression of skill, knowledge and understanding

(Myers, 1999). Furthermore, the assessment and feedback should provide the opportunity to inform future tasks and learning for the individual student. This complements formative assessment and feedback theory as seen below. It is essential that the tasks being set are purposeful and relevant; there have been extensive studies questioning the relevance of homework being set to pupils in British schools. Sharp (2002) and Hallam (2006) go as far to suggest that homework can be viewed as harmful to teaching if tasks are boring and uninspiring leading to an enforcement of failure. I would suggest that the feedback given for homework could be seen in a similar light. If a pupil is spending time and effort producing work that reflects knowledge and a use of skill, then it also can be damaging to their learning if the feedback given is not purposeful and enlightening for the student. Faulkner and Blyth (1995) support this claim with their position on good homework feedback in that it needs interaction between pupils and teacher. There needs to be dialogue and an understanding of each stakeholder's needs.

It is widely believed that homework has a positive impact on academic achievement. There has been research that supports the view that a school that sets relevant and regular homework is often successful in academic achievement, but the two cannot be intrinsically linked as there are also other factors that create the positive working environment for the pupils (Blyth and Faulkner 1995, Hallam 2006, Sharp 2002) including pastoral care, class sizes and social backgrounds of students.

Blyth and Faulkner (1995, p448) use comparisons with our international counterparts to suggest that homework could have importance to the academic success of pupils; Japan and Sweden (two countries with the highest scores in pupil achievement) place an emphasis on the importance of homework, with pupils expected to complete eight to nine hours of

homework a week. Comparing this evidence to the UK, success rates at GCSE and A-Level are high within the independent sector, where there is an expectation for all older pupils to complete an average of two to three hours of homework a night (Hallam, 2006).

There is an ongoing debate concerning the social divide amongst UK pupils. It is commonly perceived that, those from more affluent families are achieving higher grades in public assessments compared to those from lower economic backgrounds. Homework is part of this debate, with a belief that the support from home and a suitable environment for homework to be completed is more for independent school pupils than in state schools (Sellgren, BBC News, 24/09/2013).

Linked to the debate over the economic gap amongst UK pupils, Higgins, Kokotsaki and Coe (2011) present strategies for improving learning linked to the Pupil Premium initiative which provides monetary support to schools with students, who met the criteria for being economically disadvantaged within UK society. Homework and feedback are listed separately as low cost strategies that can have a moderate to very high impact on learning. It seems apparent from their findings that homework and feedback on tasks are viable ways of raising achievement for all, even more so than such high praised initiative such as Assessment for Learning (see Black and Wiliam 1998). It is claimed that rapid feedback could potentially be 124 times more effective than the reduction of class sizes (Higgins, Kokotsaki and Coe, 2011, p14). However, it seems obvious that more challenging homework tasks can be set and evaluated formatively in the time available for teaching smaller classes.

The literature relating to homework raises questions concerning its impact on student achievement and its application within the national curriculum. The research examined is

often inconclusive, supporting the need for further research, such as this study, to take place. Hallam (2006) examines homework and its impact on education, she challenges the *status quo*, and asks for further research into the relevance of homework to the achievement of individual children (p2). Sharp (2002) critiques the existing literature on homework and highlights the need for more studies into certain aspects of homework including measuring the positive impact of independent learning, grading and feedback given to learners (p3).

2.2. Theoretical studies into formative feedback and grading

There is a need for better understanding of the theoretical arguments for more formative assessment. The perceptions of feedback and its purposes by some of the key stakeholders will be identified below. Formative assessment presenting itself as dialogic feedback is the focus of this study, by requiring pupils to take more responsibility for their learning and being self-regulated. Some researchers believe that more profound learning can take place with pupils' growing self-awareness (see, for example, Butler and Winne, 1995; Lucas 2012; Boud and Malloy, 2012).

There is the proposal that effective feedback should be tightly linked to the promotion of self-regulated learning as it will encourage life-long learning and equip students with the skills to tackle other tasks and challenges (Butler and Winne, 1995). There are various diagrams and models sourced that categorise different stages and dimensions of feedback that should be considered when trying to be informative on future learning. Yang and Carless (2012) present a theoretical study based on the context of Higher Education. They propose a framework that promotes the sharing of responsibility of feedback between teacher and pupil

using a dialogic feedback triangle (Figure 1). This feedback triangle can be adapted for use and made just as applicable in secondary education.

The feedback triangle is reliant on three key themes, which need to be considered when supplying feedback:

- The content of the feedback needs be appropriate and pose questions and themes to be considered which further learning

- The teacher needs to ensure the feedback is given in a timely manner, and there is time given to consider revision and how to improve and progress learning

- The feedback needs to be presented appropriately to motivate and encourage learners.
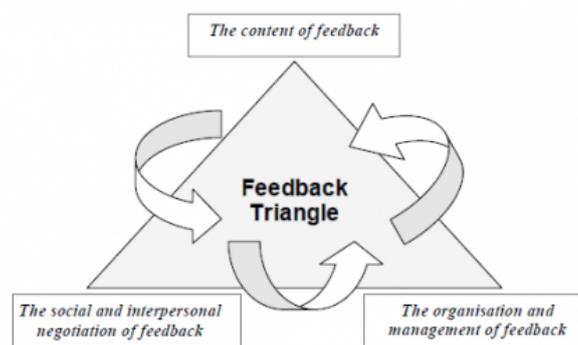
Figure 1: The feedback triangle (https://uwaterloo.ca/arts/blog/post/talking-about-assessment-feedback-triangle)

The three dimensions of the triangle need to be balanced, if the teacher puts more time into the written feedback, correcting work and pointing out all the errors, it can weaken the experience of discussing feedback, as there is little need for self-regulation. The need for balancing the dimensions becomes more apparent with dialogic feedback, in which pupils have the opportunity to discuss their homework with their teacher. Figure 2 highlights the complexities of the barriers that prevent effective dialogic feedback from taking place.
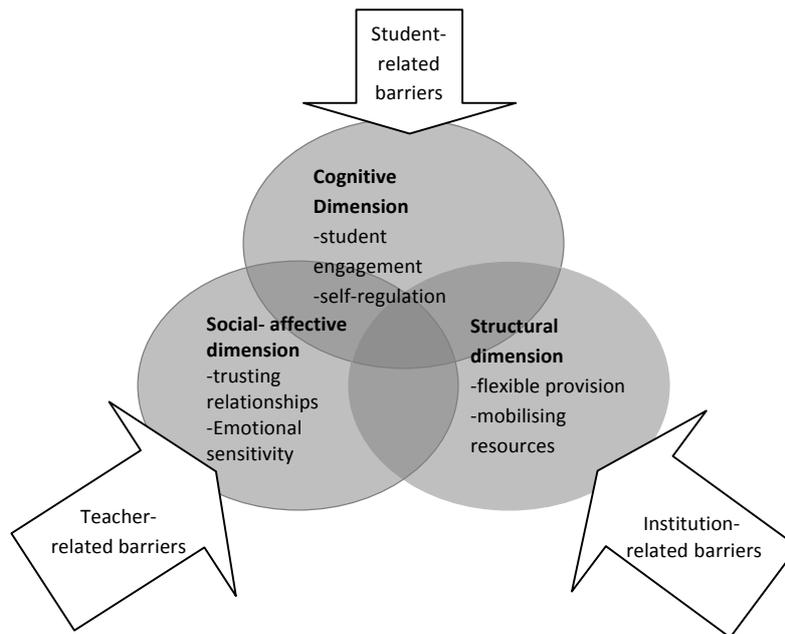
Figure 2: The architecture of dialogic feedback

Students were reluctant to engage with dialogic feedback if they lacked self-awareness and self-esteem. Teachers were unable to use discussion if they did not have, for example, significantly strong enough rapport with their students. This type of feedback cannot take place if there is emphasis on accountability linked to external examinations and grades.

Yang and Carless (2012) and Hattie and Timperley (2007) comment on the need for further empirical research to be carried out to test their models. They admit that their studies are conceptual, with minimal primary research and data (Yang and Carless, 2012; Hattie and Timperley, 2007). There are the obvious concerns over practicalities including time management and availability of resources that are needed for effective feedback of this kind to be carried out. They discuss their awareness of these constraints, and more specifically, to advance the effectiveness of this feedback study, there is a need to carry out work that looks at altering the teachers' mind-sets, re-conceptualising feedback from focusing on the reporting of errors to encouraging self-regulation (Yang and Carless, 2012, p10). Currently,

this is more common on a small scale and mainly led by *enthusiasts* (Yang and Carless, 2012 p9). It is my intention to investigate whether there is a viable way of using these models to encourage teachers to engage with dialogic feedback on a larger scale.

Hattie and Timperley's research (2007), similar to Yang and Carless (2012), presents a conceptual analysis, providing a classification of different types of feedback also exploring the theoretical field; analysing relating studies to support their generalisations.

Hattie and Timperley (2007) present a *Model of feedback to enhance learning* (2007, p87) from looking at relevant theoretical research and coding their findings. By beginning with purpose (reducing the distance between current and desired understanding), they suggest there is dialogue and shared responsibility for teachers and students to progress learning through feedback. They propose a framework using three questions to be considered for effective feedback and that each feedback question should work on four levels:

Feedback questions:	Levels of Feedback:
'Where am I going?'	**Task-Level (FT)**
'How am I going?'	**Process-Level (FP)**
'Where to next?'	**Self-Regulation Level (FR)**
	Self-Level (FS)

Figure 3 (Hattie and Timperley, 2007)

Task level and self-level feedback are identified as the most common types given, but are not considered as the most effective. Self-level in feedback could include comments such as

'Well done!' and 'Good girl' as generic praise, favoured by teachers (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p96 and Brown, Harris and Harnett, 2012). This will be discussed later in this chapter.

Where Hattie and Timperley's research analyses the theoretical field, Glover and Brown's (2006) investigation into the effectiveness of feedback, uses university tutors' feedback on independent assessment tasks, to provide insight into how an empirical study into feedback can be realised. Using a similar approach to my study, Glover and Brown gathered qualitative data through interviewing and coding. This demonstrates the possibilities for an investigation with a different perspective; the study suggests a position of an outsider using insiders for a source of data collection. Through the coding of feedback given by six chosen tutors, the data is arranged into three categories. Categories 1 and 2 demonstrate the heavy use of recognition and correcting of errors with less focus on explaining changes that need to be made, as previously discussed by Hattie and Timperley (2007).

Category 1	**Acknowledging the issue**
Category 2	**Correcting the response**
Category 3	**Additional explanation**

Figure 4 (Glover and Brown, 2006, p4)

The students complained that feedback is often not of assistance as it is not formative, the feedback is instead focused on specifics to a particular paper (Glover and Brown, 2006, p2). Hattie and Timperley's research (2007) supports this statement, agreeing with the belief that teachers spend more time giving task specific feedback and not enough time is spent on

providing feedback on the development of skill and self-regulation (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p91).

The use of grading in feedback is a theme requiring further investigation. Its use in Higher Education (HE) is often a necessity. It is an issue that Glover and Brown (2006) highlight as a cause for disparity between the perceptions of students and tutors. The researchers report that students credit importance to grades as measurements of achievement (2006, p9), this can place undue emphasis on grading, overshadowing the formative function of feedback. This will be discussed in more detail below. This a concern that is to be explored in this study, firstly establishing whether the issue is similar in secondary schools, and then if grades cannot be removed, can the impact of scoring be minimised or used to possibly enhance formative feedback?

Smith and Gorard's empirical research challenges the conception that a grade has a negative impact on the progression of learning. Smith and Gorard (2005) attempt to conduct an experimental evaluation of changing assessment practice for one year group in a secondary state school within the UK. The findings, although not conclusive, raise questions regarding implementing re-conceptualisation of feedback and the removal of grading. The research was based on the premise of a *treatment* group (p24) receiving formative feedback with no grades for an entire academic year and three other teaching groups received grading with minimal comments for tasks. Using the data gathered and after contextualisation, the progress from the treatment group was deemed inferior to that of the three other groups. Smith and Gorard use observations and interviews to help explain the results and the conclusion is not that grades are superior to written or verbal feedback, but that the treatment group was at a disadvantage, when value-added data and the circumstance of individuals

within the group were considered (p36). This does however highlight the possibility for retaining grading as a valid form of feedback and prompts consideration for the wider application of formative assessment. The practical implementation of formative assessment needs to be carefully managed; re-conceptualisation should happen in a timely manner, and be open to adaption, depending on the context of the school and the needs of teachers and pupils (p37).

In the media it is commonly perceived that the issue of grading is particularly contentious within the independent, fee-paying sector, as there is a culture of paying for better grades (150 of the top 200 schools in the A-Level league tables were fee-paying schools in 2013). Grades through key stages are deemed important by parents and pupils alike. As this study is based in an independent, fee-paying girls' secondary school, the findings of PISA (2013) regarding inflated grading are of interest:

> *Teachers tend to give girls and socio-economically advantaged students better school marks, even if they don't have better performance and attitudes than boys and socio-economically disadvantaged students.* (PISA: In focus 26, 2013)

This observation highlights the potential invalidity of grading as a form of assessment. In this research I am keen to challenge the use of grading for homework on this basis including inflation of grades. By gathering information on the views of teachers and pupils and involving them in the re-conceptualisation of assessment this study establishes the best vehicle for formative feedback for the context of this school as suggested by Smith and Gorard (2005).

2.3. Parental Perceptions

Parents are key stakeholders in education policy and more specifically the issue of homework. It has already been stated that parental voice has shaped current homework policies with the removal of expectations of children to spend a set amount of time on homework each night. Parents have a voice that government listens to, and their rights and responsibilities with regards to the education of their children are frequently referred to within the news media.

The recognition of the responsibility by parents to support their children with homework can be intrinsically linked to their attitude towards schooling; Blyth and Faulkner (1995) present a spectrum of parental attitude, ranging from high expectations for their children which at times may seem unrealistic, to little interest in attainment, apathy and anti-social attitudes which can be projected onto their children (p451). As previously stated in the introduction section to homework, this supports the position that homework can be identified as contributing to the cycle of social and economic disadvantage (Sharp, 2002, p1). There are therefore two polar parental views on homework to be considered:

1) Parents who wish to be actively involved, taking great interest in monitoring work set and its assessment
2) Parents who have little interest in school, do not see it as their responsibility to support learning and do not support their child with their studies

Obviously, there are many parents that fit on the spectrum between these extremes. This would include those who believe homework is important but feel unable to help with it because they do not have the confidence, knowledge or skills to assist. Sellgren (BBC news,

24/09/2013) reports on the concerns of parents who wish to engage with their children's education;

*'Mum and dad try to help and of course teaching methods have changed and that can confuse them' (*Sellgren, 24/09/2013)

Parents have expectations of homework and the feedback that should be given, based on their own personal experiences of schooling. When they are unable to support their children with their studies this can be frustrating. Without the understanding of assessment and current pedagogy parents can hinder learning (Sharp, 2002). Parents can feel alienated and can be critical of current pedagogy (Blyth and Faulkner 1995, p449).

The government has previously attempted to engage parents as 'agents' (Smith, 2000) in furthering pupil achievement, using parents' prior knowledge to support the learning at home. The education reforms in 1998, introduced by 'new' Labour following the 1997 election, outlined an active role for parents regarding homework, beginning with supporting primary school-aged children with literacy and numeracy at home. Sharp (2002) also discusses that Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) guidance makes it the main aim for parents to be involved and supportive of their child's learning. Sharp takes this issue and questions the suitability of different types of support parents can give. Can it be the case that parents who encourage self-reliance with their children can produce higher achievers than those who actively assist with the completion of homework tasks?

In general, parents appear to be in favour of homework, but Ofsted have cited homework as one of the most commonly reported issues raised by parents in Ofsted inspection

questionnaires (Sharp 2002).   Some parents see the importance placed by schools on homework as potentially undermining the importance of play, sport and activities within the community, bringing added disruption to family life. This view is supported by Hallam (2006). By raising awareness of homework feedback with parents through this research I am attempting to involve them further in the discourse surrounding their children's education and how they can be further supported with their learning in a positive manner at home.

I am convinced that parents have a crucial role to play in encouraging the effective use of homework as a tool for self-learning. However, there may be many reasons for their lack of engagement in the activity of progressing their children's learning. They may have the perception that they lack the confidence, understanding of the processes or skills to assist with tasks, particularly to promote self-regulated learning, if they are aware of it. However, they are a powerful influence on their children and to support them in their responsibility to further their children's learning and perhaps pass on their own positive experiences, strategies might be put in place on a local level, led by the schools.

2.4. Teacher Perceptions

There is limited literature focused on the perceptions of teachers regarding homework feedback in secondary schooling in the UK. There is, however, empirical research available, from the UK and abroad, which gives some indication on teachers' beliefs about the general purpose of feedback and what it should look like. There was a wide range of studies available that were predominantly based on the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language. On inspection these readings have been omitted, as their findings are hard to apply in the context of this study.

A key question to ask in this research study is, whether teachers find giving feedback to students beneficial. Commenting on homework is simply a particular form of feedback and so it is important to try and analyse the relationship of that feedback to homework. Lee (2009) reviewed written feedback on students' writing and questioned teachers to gain an insight into how teachers construct feedback and their attitudes towards the assessment process. A theme throughout his findings was that teachers understand feedback to be beneficial to the progression of learning, but current practices need revision as teachers' efforts are not leading to visible improvement in their students' learning. This could be attributed to the feedback being too summative in nature. The presence of a grade in feedback closes the opportunity for discussion about the task as pupils may lack the confidence or motivation to improve their work if the grade has already been given. This became evident in my analysis of findings.

In general, teachers have positive beliefs concerning feedback, but in reality, the feedback given by teachers does not always carry the weight as intended. Brown, Harris and Harnett (2012) support this view with their study based in New Zealand, where they used data from the Teacher Conceptions of Feedback survey (TCOF) in an attempt to gain understanding of teachers' attitude towards formative feedback. In both studies there are common themes given to explain the disparity between the desired use and purpose of feedback and the actual practice that is documented. These are:

- Accountability

- Time pressures

- Misunderstanding of assessment pedagogy

2.4.1. Accountability

Teachers are informally, but sometimes formally, judged by their student's academic achievement and progress in summative assessment, predominantly, in public examinations (Brown, Harris and Harnett, 2012, p977). In preparation for such tests, teachers are keen to give comprehensive feedback, which allows little room for autonomy and often is focused on the corrections needed. This type of feedback is task focused (see Hattie and Timperley 2007) and also does not accommodate pupil self-regulation of learning. The regulation of feedback by teachers is reinforced by the use of numerical or alphabetical grading that is often given to work. Teachers are aware that the grading almost certainly will draw students' attention away from the written feedback, yet they continue to keep this assessment construct in place (Lee, 2009, p16). It is possible that they are reacting to school policy rather than applying their own autonomy, even though this may not benefit the pupils.

Linked to accountability, Brown, Harris and Harnett (2012) present particularly compelling findings, as it is derived from first-hand data, that indicate assessment feedback differs in purpose depending on the assessment culture in that country (p977). Countries with assessment environments that promote high-stake testing press for learning improvement and accountability within feedback. Teachers who have success in public examinations as a prioritised outcome of learning can often provide feedback that has a negative impact on life-long learning and skill growth (p977). This position has relevance to the UK context, with continuing pressures of teacher accountability and specifically performance-related pay (https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-advice-to-help-schools-set-performance-related-pay), Understandably the purpose of feedback can be misinterpreted.

2.4.2. Time pressures

Lee (2009) presents evidence of time saving measures that teachers employ to ensure feedback is thorough and comprehensive such as using symbols or lettering for coding of errors. Also prioritising of time often leads to no allowance for redrafting of work from students (p18). Teachers are aware that it is good practice to allow students the opportunity to revisit work and improve, but expectations to complete extensive syllabi to fulfil curriculum objectives have led to the common complaint from teachers 'There isn't enough time!' (p18).

It is my opinion, that with the on-going pressures in the UK education system for high performance in public examination, it will require a strong educational leadership to make changes to feedback practice which move away from correcting school work to providing commentary for improving learning. School policies need to reflect this change as they often dictate the ethos of a school's pedagogy and assessment practice (Brown, Harris and Harnett, 2012).

2.4.3. Misunderstanding of assessment pedagogy

Teachers are aware of teaching practices such as comment-only marking, peer marking and self-assessment, but find it difficult to put these strategies into practice (Lee, 2009). For students to understand how to assess their own work and that of their peers, they need to have a model of good assessment and feedback. It is the teachers' responsibility to provide homework feedback that improves self-regulation (Brown, Harris and Harnett, 2012), but teachers do not always understand how to best provide meaningful feedback that encourages development of skill for future tasks (see Hattie and Timperley, 2007 and Harris and Brown, 2010). Hattie and Timperley discuss four different types of feedback and their effectiveness,

one of which is feedback about the self. This type of homework feedback is aimed at praising the individual and has the least effect at improving learning. Brown, Harris and Harnett (2012) support this theory with evidence from the TCOF highlighting the regular use of generic praise and the misconception by teachers that it is motivating (p970) and will enhance learning.

Teachers' perception of homework assessment and the context of feedback will require more investigation in this study. This research has provided opportunities to further explore the assessment practices that took place on a local scale by gathering primary research from teachers, including anecdotal accounts. We then challenged the current practice, actioned change and strengthened the validity of the theoretical findings above.

2.5. Pupil perceptions

Secondary school pupils' perceptions of assessment and the purpose of feedback have until recently been widely ignored by policy makers within the UK (Peterson and Irving, 2007, p238). There are a few studies, which are focused on the child's view of education policy, specifically on formative feedback. The studies that have been analysed support the recommendation for this area to be further investigated (Lee, 2009; Peterson and Irving, 2007).

In Peterson and Irving's investigation (2007), in which they explored secondary school students' conception of assessment and feedback, they found most understood assessment and feedback to be information that shows a level of learning to parents, teachers and employers and themselves; this can be easiest seen as a grade or mark (p242). The students

did not feel the assessment informed future learning as a priority. Its purpose was to label ability (p242) and gave them a sense of pride and accomplishment (p246). This is supported by my findings and is discussed in that chapter. Integral to this labelling of ability was the belief that assessment is most unbiased when it is seen as a formal task, completed in test conditions. They did not consider opportunities for peer or self-assessment, such as homework marking, to be worthwhile forms of assessment (p245). These comments have an interesting bearing on this study; there is a clear disparity between teachers' and pupils' views on assessment and feedback in this study. The opportunity for pupil voice allows insight into young people's views on formative assessment and the prospect to see if views change during the period of research.

Looking at the differing perceptions of teachers and pupils, Peterson and Irving's findings suggest that students believed that assessment held teachers accountable for their learning (p243) whereas, teachers felt they were motivating students with the feedback they provided. Linking this to previous discussion on feedback impacting on motivation and self-esteem, students discussed the impact of low grades on their learning. The comments indicated some would blame teachers and avoid the subject in future (p244), rather than use feedback to progress learning. This is one small study and I was keen to see if this position was transferable in the context of this research.

Another disparity was provision of praise in feedback. Brown, Harris and Harnett (2012) presented the teacher's view of generic praise being motivational for students. Peterson and Irving (2009) disagreed; from the pupils' perspective, the priority for feedback was that undirected praise should be avoided, even if honest (p246). This was confirmed by my findings and discussed in the relevant chapter.

Corrective feedback and summative feedback were more familiar to pupils. Although formative feedback received some recognition it was less commonly received (Peterson and Irving, 2007, p246). Students in Peterson and Irving's empirical study inferred that feedback comments indicated where improvements should be made, but often did not explain how they should be achieved. Interestingly, when compared to teacher perceptions, the studies reviewed highlighted disparities in experiences between the two groups of stakeholders. Teachers felt they were putting effort and time into feedback that is not being read (Lee, 2009), and pupils felt that teachers were not giving appropriate feedback (Peterson and Irving, 2007).

This position of pupils in Peterson and Irving's study was encouraging for developing self-regulated learning. It suggested that pupils show willingness to further their learning and wanted to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to do so. There is, in my experience, a tendency for pupils to be reliant on teachers for providing the knowledge needed to succeed. Harris and Brown (2010) presented the argument that students want feedback to advance their learning but there is little apparent goal setting or self-regulated learning (p12). It is not clear whether the skills needed to be self-regulating were being taught.

This position is supported with Glover and Brown's research (2006); tutors felt that they were working hard to provide useful comments that were being ignored, but students believed the comments lacked clarity and were limited. It becomes clear in the research that students did not possess the necessary language for assessing learning; they did not understand the assessment objectives and perhaps did not possess the necessary skills to self-regulate and progress their own learning (Glover and Brown, 2006, p12). Tutors had unintentionally

reinforced the power of grading by focusing comments on *mark-loss not learning-focused* (Glover and Brown 2006, p13).

These few studies highlight the importance of pupil voice in education policy. Their opinions and perspective on educational experiences vary with age, gender and social background (Peterson and Irving, 2009, p239). By involving young people in research the inference is they have the opportunity to participate and have more self-awareness in education. DeFur and Korinek (2010) support the position of using pupil voice in the decision making for improving teaching and learning,

> *'Beneath the veneer of adolescence, students have a solid sense of what is effective and important to keep them engaged and successful in learning'*
> (DeFur and Korinek, 2010, p19)

O'Boyle (2013) supports this view of young people, and urges the reader to avoid thinking of young people as immature (p129). O'Boyle states this as a common stereotype, along with them being unmotivated, non-communicative and more self-promotional (p133-134). The author argues this traditional view of teenagers is promoted by adults in the media and is not representative of young people. She challenges the view that young people are objects and education is something put upon them (O'Boyle 2013, p128). Pupils have rights and responsibilities within schools, and therefore have a voice that should be listened to. If we want young people to become active citizens and be engaged in society, then listening to students is a step towards this goal (O'Boyle, 2013, p136). Within my research, I found the pupils engaged more readily in discussion, displaying improved confidence, as the study progressed.

Defur and Korinek (2010) and O'Boyle (2013) both took the position that asking students to share their views on education experiences has empowering effects, increasing student self-worth, self-respect and learning, they are more engaged. If these authors are correct, in creating a culture where there is regular time allotted for young people to have their opinions heard on pedagogy and assessment in their classroom, the opportunities for dialogic feedback and formative assessment will become more frequent.

2.6. Conclusion

Much of the research concerning homework refers to perceptions of stakeholders and the disparities in understanding the purpose of tasks and feedback. Homework is considered as a worthwhile activity to further the learning and raise the achievement of learners by teachers, pupils and parents alike (Faulkner and Blyth, REF; Higgins, Kokotsaki and Coe, 2011). The research reviewed highlights the potential for feedback to be more formative and therefore effective in the progression and growth of learning.

Feedback for tasks currently relies heavily on recognition of errors and their correction (Glover and Brown 2006). The theoretical research of Hattie and Timperley (2007) supports this view and makes suggestions for more formative feedback to be used in the classroom. The majority of studies serve as a conceptualisation for future research, many suggesting further routes for empirical investigation (Yang and Carless, 2012; Hattie and Timperley, 2007). In this literature review I have discussed some of the barriers that have prevented teachers from implementing formative assessment on a larger scale, mainly:

- Time
- Accountability (linked to public examinations)

- Misunderstanding of ethos

(Brown, Harris and Harnett, 2012; Lee, 2009; Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

Yang and Carless (2012) point out that there is formative assessment taking place within schools, but often this is on a small scale led by individual enthusiasts. It was the intentions for this investigation to look at employing formative assessment through homework on the larger scale of five different subject areas therefore exploring the possibilities for formative assessment to have a wider impact.

Grading of work is an issue that will need further empirical examination. Having established that pupils are keen to keep grading to demonstrate progress to others, Smith and Gorard's (2005) research highlighted that grading was favoured by students for its familiarity and showed progression of learning where the employment of formative assessment was mis-managed.

Any development of assessment and feedback strategies needs to take teachers' and pupils' perceptions into account. By listening to the views of pupils and teachers, we can avoid teacher misconceptions (Lee, 2009) and empower students to take responsibility for their learning (O'Boyle, 2013).

My literature review has covered a range of different aspects of perceptions and theoretical arguments for formative assessment. In my Findings and Discussion chapters, many of these aspects are again explored in more detail in relation to my empirical research. I describe the perceptions of pupils and teachers within my school setting in regards to homework, its purpose and how feedback is currently provided. This is an action research investigation,

thus, the change in perceptions and re-conceptualisation of feedback, as discussed in this literature review, will also be revisited.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology, research methods and the approach that has been adopted for this study. It also includes a review of the reliability, validity, ethical concerns and limitations. The rationale for this study has arisen from the initially proposed questions:

- Can the feedback given to students for homework tasks be improved?
- Could creating a dialogue between teacher and pupil facilitate deeper learning?

This small-scale study aimed to explore the perception of homework feedback from the viewpoints of teachers and pupils. In addition to gaining an understanding of perceptions, the teachers (including the author) actively wanted to adapt the current systems of providing feedback to enhance the learning journey of pupils at the study school, by aligning the perceptions between teachers and pupils and finding a common language and framework that all stakeholders can effectively use/understand. This research does not seek to explore interpretations of homework feedback on a larger scale beyond this individual school. However, it could provide further insight that supports, or contradicts, the perceptions of researchers reviewed in the previous chapter. It might also provide a starting point for further research of this area by others.

3.2. Research design

To carry out this research a variety of research models were considered. It was my intention to use personal experience and take the opportunity to further my professional practice whilst investigating how homework feedback could be improved. Employing action research has provided the opportunity for pupils to actively benefit from the study in practical terms not just theoretical. Stringer (2008) defines action research as,

> *A distinctive approach to inquiry that is directly relevant to classroom instruction and learning and provides the means for teachers to enhance their teaching and improve student learning. – Action research can be integrated into regular classroom activities to assist them to enhance student learning and improve their professional practice. (p1)*

Over a sustained period of time, action research provides the opportunity to experiment with assessment pedagogy, review it, analyse the impact and then adapt the pedagogy to improve effectiveness in the classroom through an ongoing a cycle (Stringer, 2008).

As a form of qualitative research, this investigation incorporated the use of focus groups and tracks the development and change of practices. Participatory Action Research (PAR), in which participants also act as researchers (Stringer, 2008), has been employed to enable the inclusion of other professionals and teaching colleagues to provide more conclusive evidence from which to build a feasible framework for homework feedback. Feedback for homework is predominantly for formative assessment purposes (see Black and Wiliam 1998); it would be difficult to use comparative research or focus groups in isolation to produce data from which valid inference could be drawn.

I considered phenomenological and ethnographic research but the necessary sized sample group or a significant single experience was not available for this study to be prominent strategies of research.   Phenomenological research is suited to gathering data concerning a shared experience by a group of people or a phenomenon that has taken place (Creswell, 2007). Homework feedback is a shared experience for pupils and teachers but the emphasis on this study is on change, not the single event that has taken place. Ethnographic research focuses on the shared language, behaviours and beliefs of a group of people (Creswell, 2007). I believe this method is more relevant than Phenomenological research as it looks more closely at the similarities of participants within groups. However, it would still emphasise my position as an observer and outsider; taking a snap shot of events, rather than documenting changes to our professional practice.

Grounded theory is used for the development of the empirical research and coding of data, the ethos of which has been employed in this work. Grounded Theory allows the researcher to develop a theory once empirical research has been carried out, rather than having a theory, which can be tested (Creswell, 2007). As the study progressed, changes and adaptations were made to the focus group questions, providing a rich and diverse source of information from the participants, some of which was not initially anticipated. The method of combining action research and grounded theory has been the most suitable. Changes to practice were explored whilst any changes to beliefs and attitudes were also recorded.

3.3. Data collection techniques

Using focus groups was an effective way to obtain qualitative information quickly and was an easy way to track changes of perceptions and attitudes. By using groups rather than

individuals in discussions, there was the opportunity for participants to listen to other views and contribute, which was found to enhance the outcomes, as I did not need to exert tight control on the discussion. Silverman (2013) presents this method for data collection with the following parameters:

- *Recruiting a small group of people…who usually share a particular characteristic*
- *Encouraging an informal group discussion 'focused' around a particular topic or set of issues*
- *The discussion is usually based on the use of a schedule of questions*
- *Although focus groups are sometimes referred to as 'group interviews', the moderator does not ask questions of each focus group participant in turn but rather, facilitates group discussion, actively encouraging group members to interact with one another*
- *Focus groups may be reconvened at a later date or a series of focus groups may be held, using the outcome of an earlier focus group to specify the subjects under discussion*
- *Typically the discussion is recorded, the data transcribed, and then the data are analysed using conventional techniques for qualitative date, most commonly content or thematic analysis*

(Silverman, 2013, p213)

Keeping within these guidelines, for the focus group discussions, a variety of themes were discussed and participants had the opportunity to speak freely and at length if they wished to. As this study is based on the action research model, reflecting and revising the themes of discussion for the focus groups occurred to meet the needs of the investigation as areas of interested developed.

The focus group method of collecting data does have its weaknesses; the relationship between the moderator (myself, the teacher) and the participants (my peers and pupils) could have impacted on how able they felt to speak honestly and freely within the focus groups. In doing so, they may have held back information that they felt would negatively impact on our relationships, or provided information that might put them in favour. Stringer (2008) discusses the importance for considering four key areas when working with participants in action theory: relationships, communication, participation and inclusion (p34-36). By balancing these areas, a researcher can work towards obtaining efficient and effective data from the participants. By treating participants with respect and actively encouraging involvement and confidence, all those involved can benefit positively whilst contributing to the study.

Written documentation, such as diaries and tracking homework feedback, was initially considered as data to be collected for this study. However, as previously discussed these methods of data collection have not be pursued. Pupils believed that they were not often honest in their comments to teachers and peers in dialogic feedback, whilst although the teachers did agree to keep a log of progress in diaries, these documents did not materialise due to heavy workloads.

3.4. Data analysis methods

Initially it was proposed that the analysis of data for this study would use the triangulation method (Stringer 2008, p49; Silverman 2013, p136): using teacher focus groups, pupil focus groups and self-reflections from the teachers who acted as researchers. As written evidence

was not received, the reporting was reliant on my personal reflections as a teacher and researcher, and the discussions from the focus groups.

Open coding, used in grounded theory, was employed to analyse the discussion content from the focus groups, looking for key themes and developing concepts to be investigated in further discussions (Creswell, 2007, p64). In exploring methods to use to analyse the data, I had the option to select a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) such as CAT or Nvivo 10 to code the discussions, or I could complete the coding manually. The data collected was a manageable amount so that I could code the material myself. I used pre-set themes (anticipated themes) and emergent themes (themes that provide new areas of relevant interest). By completing the coding by hand, I was able to refine this to the level of detail that the study required, and pick up on vocal expressions and pauses such as "uh huh… hmmm" that could indicate themes that might otherwise be missed using a computer programme.

3.5. Reliability and validity

Reliability and validity were a priority in the conduct of this study, as in any qualitative research. Validity is important to ensure that the findings generated would provide authentic conclusions that could lead to worthy discussions and an effective framework for homework marking. Silverman (2013) highlights different factors that need consideration in qualitative research in order to present a study with acceptable levels of reliability in the chosen methods and good levels of validity in the conclusions drawn (p284). It is important to minimise the influence that I, the researcher, might have on the results and inferences made at the different stages of the study (Sillitoe, Dissertation Proposal, 2013):

- The reliability of focus group responses would be acceptable by reducing the opportunity for the moderator of the focus group, me, to impose bias on discussions; ensuring that the responses given by participants were truthful.

- The reliability of my documentation of focus group meetings could be brought into question if I, the researcher, did not make attempts to preserve the nature of context of discussions in their entirety.

- Coding can impact on the validity of results if the research relies on assumptions based on existing themes cited in literature. It is important that I was open to emerging themes and differing perceptions from the participants and did not seek to report the expected findings and discuss the expected themes.

By undertaking the spirit of Grounded Theory and conducting an action research project, there was the openness to varying emerging themes and the opportunity to ensure the reliability of focus group data was good.

Using only focus group discussions as the main data to be analysed, will in this case improve the reliability of the study. With having many sources of data such as field notes and self-reflections, commentary from focus group sessions maybe under-analysed in a limited time frame (Silverman, 2013, p137). By using this single source, I gathered data that is focused on the purpose of the study, with participants who were familiar with the format so that the data collected could be analysed to give a 'true state of affairs' (Silverman, 2013). I recognise the limitation of using this single source approach. This could have impeded the depth of my analysis, for example, the teacher saying one thing about their feedback on homework and actually doing something else. I felt I could trust the reliability of the data provided by my

peers, as the focus was on documenting change and I could cross-reference pupils' comments if required.

3.6. Ethical Concerns

There were potential ethical issues from using my place of work for the empirical setting of my research. As an in-sider conducting research (Herr and Anderson, 2005, p31), I had the dual responsibility of conducting research with limited bias whilst also ensuring the students' education was not compromised in any way. Taber (2007, p131) highlights the ethos 'do no harm' that must be undertaken whilst conducting research; the researcher must make the security of participants a priority, and this includes ensuring their educational needs are met (BERA, 2004, p7). To combat the possible negative impact on the students, action research provided a more holistic approach, encouraging gradual change in pedagogy and the opportunity for feedback. Changes in practice are common in teaching as it is an evolving profession and innovation such as improving feedback is seen as a positive act.

The inclusion of student views throughout the development of the study should ensure their needs are being further met.   There was no intentional comparisons of classes, or individuals, therefore the students also acted as participants in the PAR (Stringer, 2008, p27). The students were encouraged to speak freely and honestly without fear of being judged. By conducting research over a twelve-month period with the same Key Stage 3 classes the possible negative impact on student progress was considered. As a precaution, parents were informed of the study and were asked to provide consent for the students to be participants (Stringer, 2008, p46; BERA, 2004, p6).

This was an objective study, not evaluative (Dowling and Brown, 2010, p127). As I used my work place for the research, it was important that within the study, bias towards or against the school was minimised. I looked for other ways of presenting feedback, so that making judgements on colleagues was avoided or limited (Stringer, 2008, p124). Members of staff gave consent and were made aware of any potential implications on workload; I asked them to consider making changes to their practice for the research and so needed to ensure that they fully understood the objectives and what was required of them from the beginning of the study.

Data protection was a concern and so the school has not been mentioned by name, as it is not necessary to do so. Teachers and pupils involved in the study have been given pseudonyms where selective identification is needed (BERA, 2004, p8). Participants were made aware that the study would be summarised for professional development and presented to the school senior leadership team; the participants also have the right to have copies of the conclusive report (BERA, 2004, p10). There was the concern that this will influence their commentary in focus groups, and so question and discussion was focused on eliciting positive and constructive comments that can encourage development and change.

3.7. Method

3.7.1. Focus Groups Selection

Selection of pupils

After discussion with the participating teachers, I decided to use pupils that, at the beginning of the project were finishing year 7 (their first year at secondary school) and by the end of the study were completing year 8 (their second year). This was because I wanted to focus on

pupils who were not studying towards any external examinations or testing; I wanted the teachers to have the opportunity to experiment with homework tasks and feedback, the participating teachers felt that their subject curriculums for this year group allowed them to do that; limiting any possible negative impact on academic studies.

The year group was made up of 75 girls from mixed-ethnic backgrounds and all the participants had to pass an examination and interview to join this fee-paying secondary school. Some of the pupils involved in the study have academic and subject specific scholarship places at the school, but this does not appear to hold any bias on responses given during discussions. The pupils were familiar with working in small groups and actively contributing to class discussion, so they may be expected to be more articulate and enthusiastic than others in their demographic group outside of this school.

At the start of this study, following discussions with the teachers concerned, 16 key stage three pupils were selected as participants, giving a sample size representative of 22 per cent of the year group cohort. During this study two participants left the school for unrelated reasons, and were not replaced. The pupils were arranged into four groups of a manageable size for discussion. Pupils were selected using MidYIS data that was available to all teaching staff. A MidYIS score is the product of a baseline assessment for pupils of ages eleven to fourteen, developed by the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM). It measures what is called 'developed ability', which they define as, *students' underlying raw learning potential, free of the influence of curriculum-based teaching* (http://www.cem.org/secondary). To establish a baseline each student is tested on vocabulary, maths and non-verbal skills, which contribute to an overall curriculum-free measurement.

Four pupils with the highest scores in the year group (coded as group 1), four pupils from the middle (group 2) and four pupils with the lowest scores (group 3) were chosen for this study. A fourth group of girls identified as having dyslexia were selected (coded group D). This served as a mixed ability group and gave the opportunity to explore any emerging themes related to the written, reading and processing skills of understanding and participating in feedback. The coding of groups was applied after the study for clarity in the report. Evidence of responses from a group being 'better' than another was not anticipated or found.

Selection of Teachers

To select teachers for participants in this study I employed opportunist sampling (Dowling and Brown, 2010, p27). I presented an overview of the research proposal to all teachers and asked for volunteers to participate. Four teachers from varying subject areas and disciplines participated in the research. They all showed interest in personal and professional development as educators with two teachers becoming acting Head of Departments during the study.

As colleagues, the participating teachers in this focus group acted as critical friends as well as participants to observe. During focus group discussions we discussed developments as peers; at times I posed questions as a participant, and they asked for my perceptions as a fellow contributor.

I understand that this selection process does have its weaknesses in that I may not be getting a balanced overview of the perceptions of all teachers within the school, but it provided an enthusiastic group of participants who were committed to exploring change and had the confidence to discuss developments and shortcomings.

3.7.2. Collection of focus group data

For this study, as already discussed, I relied on focus group discussions to gather data. Initially I proposed to carry out the empirical research over a three month period; however, for valid inferences to be drawn in the analysis, I then extended this time frame to twelve months, ensuring action research could be carried out effectively and providing the opportunity for changes and developments to be explored and reviewed.

Three discussions were held with each sample group of students and teachers during the summer term of the academic year 2012-2013, and the autumn and summer term of academic year 2013-2014. Pre-existing school commitments and wanting to ensure scheduling of meetings was convenient for all participants restricted the number of focus group discussions that could be held.

The questions and prompts given for discussion were focused on eliciting perceptions in a positive manner. Questions were open ended, and clarification was given to participants when requested. The questions served as a starting point for discussion and if a conversation answered the question set, and subsequently other themes were discussed, the moderator did not intervene. The initial questions for each round of discussions are listed in the appendices of this study.

I am aware that there are weaknesses in using this approach to moderating focus group discussion (as discussed in the reliability and validity section). In order to make the coding and analysis more straightforward I could have adopted an interviewing technique that kept the discussions to a regimented questioning schedule. I was also in danger of leading the discussions, guiding participants to give what they perceived to be desired responses, as

outlined by Silverman (2013). I found that discussion flowed more easily when I used my existing relationship with participants to build rapport, when I rephrased questions and when I added clarification to suit the participants involved. As I was aware that I could bias responses, I allowed the conversation wherever possible, to flow between participants.

3.7.3. Analysis of data

All students are recognisable to the researcher by voice on the recordings, and each pupil focus group was given an unintelligible corresponding number so no inferences could be drawn about selection and groupings. This ensured that the pupils and teachers could not be identified from the data. The teachers were not mentioned by name in the transcripts or findings, they were given pseudonyms and codes for their subjects.

Interviews were either transcribed or detailed notes were taken for each discussion. Notes were firstly annotated, and then annotations were reduced to codes. The codes were pre-set and emerging: considering responses that addressed the initial set questions and also themes that were not expected. The coding was then reduced or extended depending on the level of detail required for valid inferences to be drawn in the findings. Key phrases and quotes from participants are also highlighted for commentary in the findings and discussion chapters. All coding is tabulated in the findings chapter.

3.8. Limitation of Study

There are limitations to this research that should be acknowledged. Firstly the scale; this study has been conducted on a small scale using a sample from one year group and not all teachers of that sample group were involved. Secondly, this is the development of a framework that is attempting to meet the needs of the pupils and teachers of a specific school

at a specific time. Therefore, the findings may not be transferable to another school or a wider context.

3.9. Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the methodology, methods and ethical issues connected to this study. I have given my rationale for selecting participants and data collected. The approach to data analysis has been explored and will be revisited in later chapters. Key ethical issues have been addressed and discussed. In the following chapters the qualitative data will be analysed and inferences made.

4. Findings

4.1. Introduction

The aim of my research is to look at:

- The existing perceptions of homework feedback
- The constructs that are currently in place for the delivery of feedback and the expected content
- The implications on future learning and attitudes of teachers and pupils within this specific school setting.

The discussions held with focus groups and the action research that followed, was aimed at addressing the initial questions:

1. Can the feedback given to students for homework tasks been improved?
2. Could creating a dialogue between teacher and pupil facilitate deeper learning?

Research has been conducted by combining the methods of focus groups and action research. The pupils in focus groups informed the action research by providing suggestions, perceptions and feedback on current practice. The teachers involved in the study became action researchers by developing assessment pedagogy using this data.

Within this chapter I will present qualitative data and discuss ideas and themes, which will be developed in the next chapter.

4.1.1. Focus Group Discussions

This chapter features the results of both pupil and teacher focus group discussions and a commentary on the action research that took place in response. The results for the pupil groups and teacher focus group discussions are collated separately into the following sections depending on availability of results. There are some answers that can be cross-applied to a variety of categories:

- Perceptions on the purpose of feedback

- Pupils' misunderstanding of teacher perceptions

- Effort grading

- Positive and negative grading

- Formative feedback

- Summative feedback

- Comment length

- Feedback explanations

- Time pressures

- Personal relationships

4.1.2. Pupil Selection

When considering which year group to focus upon for this study, initial discussions with the teachers involved highlighted concerns about disruption of the examination preparation programme if key stage four and five pupils were used. Thus year seven into year eight groups were involved in the research. This prevented the complication of quantitative impact on examination results being considered in the data analysis.

4.1.3. Pupil Groupings

As discussed in the methodology, pupils were selected using MidYIS data and arranged into ability groups plus a dyslexic group. I initially chose not to use mixed ability or friendship groups as I was attempting to see if there was a difference in responses depending on ability. During the study, two pupils left the school and there were some unexpected absences on scheduled discussion dates. To ensure there was a good group size, for the last focus group discussions, two groups were brought together. I felt this did not impact on the results as the previous two discussions with each group showed little noticeable difference between them.

4.1.4. Questions

For each focus group the questions were decided before the discussions and as outlined in the method section of the Methodology chapter (3.7.2), these were used as prompts to assist with engagement in discussion. The theme of questions remained the same for all discussions;

- Initially asking for perceptions of current practice
- Ideas for future practice
- In subsequent discussions I enquired about reflection on changes that had taken place.

A full set of questions can be found in the appendices.

In the first discussion with each of the pupil focus groups I used visual aids; photographs of different types of assessment, to prompt discussion about suitability of feedback. This was my attempt to make the discussion less personal about their experiences within this school, which I felt would make it easier for them to be honest at the start of the study.

The teacher focus group was introduced to Hattie and Timperley's 'Power of Feedback' (2007) in the first session as a construct that could shape the action research that was to follow. It provided a framework for identifying different types of feedback and purposes, and engaged the teachers with more effective ways of promoting development of skill and understanding.

4.1.5. Coding

All discussions have been recorded and then transcribed or written in detail note form. An example of transcribing can be found in the appendices. To filter the data collected and group the findings into themes, I used predetermined codes where questions prompted responses, and added additional codes that were needed to group emerging themes that became apparent during analysis (Saldana, 2013). Table 1 presents the codes that have been used:

Mis-conceptions	MC	Teachers and pupils making assumptions about the other group's perceptions
Grades positive	GP	Grading discussed in a positive manner
Grades égative	GN	Grading spoken about in a negative manner
Time pressures	TP	Time needed to complete tasks effectively
Dialogic marking	DM	Discourse about feedback between teacher and pupil, can be verbal or written
Effort grading	EG	Attitudes and perceptions linked to explicit effort grading of homework tasks.
Comment length	CL	Length of teachers written comments for homework tasks
Personal comments	PC	Feedback regarding the personal, using information about the individual student, not only the task in hand.
Questions in comments	QC	Prompting for dialogic feedback, focus questions for formative assessment
Formative comments		

	FC	Comments focused on the development of skill and correcting mistakes
Summative marking	SM	Ticks and crosses, comments such as 'Good work' which do not promote development of skill or learning
Feedback purpose	FP	Perceptions from different groups on the purpose of giving feedback for homework tasks
Homework purpose	HP	Perceptions from the different groups on the purpose of homework tasks within the school curriculum
Feedback explanations	FE	Time and preparation for the explanation of how feedback is presented: coding systems, level descriptors, assessment criterion
Next step	NS	Discussion about development of whole school strategy and further exploration of pedagogy
Parent input	PI	The focus groups' perception of parental input on homework and their perceptions on its purpose and effectiveness in developing learning
Participant Action Research	PR	The focus groups' perception of being involved in the process and future involvement in action research studies

Table 1: Coding for Qualitative Findings

4.2. Pupils

4.2.1. Perceptions on the purpose of feedback

To establish how homework feedback can be improved, I wanted to determine what the pupils' understanding of the purpose of homework feedback. This was discussed in each group and the responses were varied but not contradicting. They all felt homework feedback was an established activity and they had expectations for teachers to regularly mark their homework tasks as well as their classwork. The purpose of feedback was seen as having to be meaningful. It was a way to identify strengths in both skills and knowledge and to identify where improvements needed to be made. Student 3 in Group 1 summarises this view:

> To tell you what you have done well, what you need to improve on and how
> well you have done it, maybe look back and see how you have improved
> (student 3, Group 1, 27/06/13)

The pupils valued the opportunity to reflect on past work and plan for future tasks using formative feedback, demonstrating some level of self-regulation (Group 2, 5/07/13). It became apparent that it was important to the pupils that the feedback came from the teacher and not from their peers; some pupils indicated that teachers were seen as the voice of authority within their learning:

Teachers are experts, so they can check you are doing your homework (Student 5, Group 2, 5/07/13)

Teachers can see if we are trying (Student 7, Group 2, 5/07/13)

To see how you work inside of school and outside of school, to see if there is a difference in the quality of work (Student 12, Group 3, 5/07/13)

The pupils identify homework feedback as having importance to the development of their skill and understanding, the importance of their teachers input in their studies, perhaps more so than their own capabilities, is to be further explored.

4.2.2. Pupils' misunderstanding of teacher perceptions

In order to improve the quality of feedback given to pupils, it is important to note the present perception of teachers' attitudes and behaviours by the pupils. Throughout the course of focus group discussions, the girls made many general references towards what they believed were the teachers' attitudes towards providing feedback. The girls were all appreciative of thorough relevant formative feedback, but they felt summative feedback (ticks, crosses and grading) was not meeting their expectations of teacher's feedback:

The teacher doesn't care; they are just being lazy and just ticking it (Student 11, Group 3, 5/07/13)

If you try really hard and you think the teacher just ticks it you think 'why should I put lots of effort in, if the teacher isn't going to read it?' (Student 6, Group 2, 28/11/13)

The pupils indicated a respect for the authority of teachers, highlighting their expertise, but there was the occasional frustration that was shared concerning the formative feedback received from some teachers, which indicated some mistrust:

They ask you to go back and finish things, you finish it but then they don't go back and mark it. I had an essay, I put it in the back of my book, and they said they couldn't find it, I kept asking them to mark it and she kept forgetting. They only mark current work. (Student 14, Group D, 9/07/14)

Some teachers, they do really good things at the start of the year and then they kind of just give up and stop doing it because it is actually quite hard. (Student 11, Group 2, 9/07/14)

This was not a common theme, but it was still a concern from the pupils, something I had to be aware of in the action research.

4.2.3. Effort grading

Effort grading of homework tasks is a common practice within this school. The pupils were very vocal in their opinions of this summative marking. There was a small minority that saw this feedback as positive, but the majority saw it as an opportunity for misunderstanding from teachers that led to de-motivation or the effort grades being ignored completely:

I don't really listen (sic) to effort grades (Student 13, Group D, 10/07/13)

Sometimes when you put lots of effort in, teachers don't know how much effort you put in (student 15, group D, 10/07/13)

Some of us spend a long time on work but our handwriting isn't very neat, they assume we haven't (made an effort) because it's not neat. (Group 2, 28/11/13)

This was a common attitude amongst all four focus groups; they were explicit in their view that it would be an improvement if effort grades were not used in homework feedback. This is a positive and constructive criticism that was explored in the action research.

4.2.4. Positive and negative grading

Grading of work, whether it is a letter, mark out of ten or level is common practice within schools and this school is no exception. As discussed in the literature review, grading is a controversial topic and therefore I was keen to explore the views of the pupils, to establish whether it was a motivating tool of feedback or if it inhibits development of skill and the self-regulation of learners.

Throughout the study the perceptions from the pupils were mixed, but a gradual change in attitude occurred; moving from a very positive opinion on the use of grading, to a position where the pupils questioned its suitability and purpose. To begin with, the pupils in all four focus groups felt that grading was important to establish their positioning in learning (how much knowledge and skills they have) and some suggested it was more important than comments and a tool for comparison, both against peers and between subjects. In group 2, the mid-MidYIS group, a pupil summed up this common view:

Moderator)   *What about grades, are they important?*
Student 5)   *Yes*
Moderator)   *How?*
Student 5)   *You can see where you are.*

Student 6)   *If you have two pieces of homework writing, and one has seven and the other eight, you can look at one and say it is better and identify the technique you used*

                                                   (Group 2 05/07/13).

Being able to make comparisons was seen as a positive measure, but this changed over the period of the study. Comments that were made varied were in later discussions (held in December 2013 and July 2014) indicated a shift in belief, concerning comparisons of being motivating:

I don't think they should always put a mark (Student 8,Group 3, 5/07/13)

Sometimes other people go around saying I got ten out of ten and I got six out of ten and I feel rubbish (Student 10, Group 3, 5/07/13)

The pupils may not have been aware of it, but they are identifying a link between grading and self esteem. The pupils did this on a number of occasions, comparing themselves negatively against peers and between subjects that they studied:

Moderator)   *So, would it motivate you still if you got bad grades?*
Student 10)   *I would think I am really bad at that subject, I am not going to bother about it, I am not that good.*

                                                   (Group 3, 5/07/13)

Throughout the study the pupils retained the view that grading was important to establish personal goals, but they did not necessarily want to share the grade information with others. The implications of self-esteem and peer relationships on the understanding of feedback are discussed further under the sub-heading of Personal relationships (4.2.9).

4.2.5. Formative Feedback

As teachers at this school, we agreed that we use formative comments as a way to make suggestions for improvement and to praise students for good work. As discussed in the literature review, Hattie and Timperley (2007) identified four different types of feedback. They suggested some were more useful to encouraging development of skills than others. Taking their view that self-regulation and the development of skill should be the priority for feedback (Hattie and Timperley, 2007), I was keen to ask the pupils what they saw as the 'best' feedback and how it should look. The pupils came up with the following criteria:

- *What was good what was bad and a short comment* (Student 1, Group 1, 27/06/13)
- *When you have a comment that tells you what you have done well and picks out specific points to improve on* (Student 3, Group 1, 11/07/14)
- *When they do it (mark work) regularly you actually read the comments through* (Student 6, Group 2, 9/07/14*)*
- *I think it would be better if they are completely honest, then you actually know how to improve* (Student 2, Group 1, 11/07/14)

They also gave warnings for what teacher should avoid:

Sometimes comments are not very useful, they are explaining things that are obvious (Student 1, Group 1, 11/07/14)

I think if they say "great work' and 'good effort' you think, I know it isn't perfect, so what can I do to make it better? (Student 9, Group 3, 5/07/13)

The views of pupils on how comments are used in a formative manner are crucial to this study. The pupils have expressed a desire to improve their work; teachers need to work in collaboration with pupils to ensure their needs are being met.

4.2.6. Summative Feedback

Summative marking is a form of feedback that is often employed by teachers, such as marks out of ten, which are accompanied by ticking work to indicate correct answers, and crosses to show wrong answers. The literature reviewed suggested that this is not a type of feedback that can be used for formative means (Smith and Gorard, 2005). The pupils discussed their views on summative marking and their opinions supported the literature studied:

> *Some just tick, tick, tick, you get your mark and you don't understand where you have gone wrong* (Student 8, Group 2, 5/07/13)

> *I don't see how this has been marked, it is just a tick* (Student 11, Group 3, 5/07/13)

Not surprisingly, the girls preferred ticks rather than crosses, positive recognition compared to negative, but during the study they repeatedly made reference to the inefficiency of this marking. In trying to improve feedback pedagogy, this is a form of feedback that the pupils recommended teachers avoid, this is discussed further in the final chapter.

4.2.7. Comment length

The pupils were given visual examples of various types of feedback in the initial discussion, one of which had a comment from the teacher that was longer than the length of written work from the pupil. Every group used this example to discuss a dislike of lengthy teacher comments. It was agreed amongst the pupils that an extensive comment meant you didn't perform well in the task. The girls said they 'switched-off' if there was a long comment and they would not read the whole feedback because they felt de-motivated by the perception of a lengthy comment being negative.

The pupils had suggestions for improvement:

> *General comments like 'good', I don't think that's good. Specific, short   and personalised is better* (Student 7, Group 2, 9/07/14)

> *I can be a bit thick sometimes and not read the whole sentence and get confused if the sentence is not easy to understand* (Student 6, Group 2, 5/07/13)

In the action research phase, shortening comments was a focus. On reflecting on this, the pupils were aware of this change, but made further suggestions for there to be a balance between length and detail:

> *They are writing less but it is becoming less detailed* (Student 8, Group D, 9/07/14)

The theme of comment length has elicited different responses from pupils and teachers. It was agreed that it is important for the length of comments to be manageable both to read and to write, but the content needs to be specific and personalised to the pupil.

4.2.8. Feedback explanations

To shorten the length of feedback comments or to provide subject specific information, some teachers at this school use symbols or level descriptors to provide formative assessment. The pupils are aware of this method of marking, but its effectiveness in providing more in-depth assessment information was questioned. The mid-MidYIS group (group 2) discussed issues with the practicalities of using subject specific marking schemes:

> *Sometimes they use different numbers, sometimes the marking slips are given out explaining the way the subject is marked, but you never actually read it* (Student 7, Group 2, 5/07/13)

> *In some subjects there are marking schemes so you have to stick them inside*
> *your books, (some subjects) have really difficult symbols to understand*
> (Student 5, Group 2, 9/07/14)

To improve the effectiveness of feedback, there is the opportunity to use symbols and abbreviation to speed up marking, but there needs to be an improvement in clarity and usability for the pupils.

4.2.9. Personal relationships

The rapport between pupil and teacher was an emerging theme from the pupil focus groups. To improve feedback for pupils there needs to be consideration for their personal feelings; the girls often discussed feedback in reference to the impact on self-esteem. A common concern from the pupils was when feedback was negative; they lost pride in their work (Student 2, Group 1, 27/06/13), and felt bad (Student 3, Group 1, 27/06/13).

Their working relationship with teachers was important to them; they wanted teachers to like them and value their contribution in the classroom:

> *Sometimes a teacher won't like you and you think that is why you got a low*
> *mark and so you don't bother* (Student 13, Group 3, 2/12/13)
> *You want the teacher to like you and not think you are stupid* (Student 7,
> Group 2, 9/07/14)

Knowing that the pupils valued the personal opinions of teachers, it was not surprising that they wanted more personal positive responses to the work they produced. The pupils outlined specific behaviours teachers should avoid when giving feedback:

- Avoiding applying sanctions to pupils in front of the whole class as it embarrasses individuals (Group 2, 28/11/13)

- Avoid summarising feedback for the whole class, students want to know about individual progress (Group 2 and D, 9/07/14)

- Avoid making personal comments about the impact of their learning on their future career or earnings. (Group 2, 5/07/13)

These suggestions highlighted the concern the pupils had with the personal aspect of learning. They suggested that the pupils needed to feel good about themselves if they are to learn effectively. This required further exploration during the action research. It raised the question: is there a way of building the confidence of pupils whilst keeping feedback relevant to the student and focused on developing skill and self-regulation?

The pupils provided responses that demonstrated awareness and understanding of what effective feedback was for them. The teacher focus group provided the opportunity to hear the views of teachers on the same themes, whilst we were also able to work towards improving feedback practices to meet the needs the pupils had identified.

4.3. Teachers

As previously stated, the teachers acted as fellow researchers. The discussions held with teachers allowed time for reflection on pupil comments and planning the action to be taken in response. This is a summary of the initial perception of teachers, organised into relevant themes and a record of the changing attitudes in relation to the action research.

4.3.1. Perceptions on the purpose of feedback

We initially felt that we had a good understanding of how best to provide formative feedback to the pupils. It was a common aim to provide feedback that is encouraging and supportive of pupils as individuals and the development of their subject specific skills. The Hattie and Timperley research (2007) was discussed, the four different types of feedback (see literature review) were looked at. Initially, it was felt that the optimum form of feedback would be focused on developing self-regulation and skills. In reality, we found more time was spent providing feedback on *Self* (generic comments aimed to boast self esteem) and *Task* (corrections on the specific task set) (Hattie and Timperley 2007). Comments on feedback included:

> *In my feedback I focus on the task but end with a generic comment. I don't think the generic comment is necessarily a waste of time, it boasts their self-confidence* (Teacher 4, 21/05/13)

> *I often use 'keep up the good work', I think you need to encourage them* (Teacher 1, 21/05/13)

> *I gave verbal feedback, then I was going to give the best (homework) house points, I ended up giving them all house points, because I couldn't pick just one, and they would get upset (*Teacher 2, 21/05/13)

Some teachers were quick to defend their style of feedback, but all were willing to explore developing their practice to meet the needs identified by the pupils. At points during the study, the pupils' comments led to some interesting reflections. One teacher identified a problem with writing long comments:

> *In my subject if the dyslexic girls misunderstood a concept, I would write a three-line explanation and I am thinking the problem is sorted…if they are not*

> *reading the comment there is a disconnection between the two.* (Teacher 1, 21/05/13)

The dyslexic group prompted much discussion amongst the teachers; their responses as a focus group identified how some of the feedback is not adequate for all students.

4.3.2. Effort grading

The teachers were in agreement with pupils that effort grading is not an effective form of formative assessment. They recognised that pupils did not like effort grades in their subject areas. Towards the end of the study, Teacher 1 expressed the view that the effort grades were patronising (4/06/14). Some teachers were reluctant to stop using effort grades altogether, some experimented with using effort grades as a form of self-assessment and dialogic feedback (Teacher 1, 21/05/13).

4.3.3. Grading and summative feedback

The teachers thought grading of work was an expectation set by the school. It was perceived as something we had always done, and this study gave us the opportunity to question it (teacher 4, 21/05/13). The concerns highlighted in the literature review (Smith and Gorard, 2005) with regards to grading overshadowing any written formative assessment were discussed:

> *You give them a grade and they ignore the comment* (Teacher 1, 21/05/13)

The other teachers agreed with this view. Teachers also admitted to using grading and smiley faces just to vary the style of marking (Teacher 2, 4/06/14). Comments on the inflation of

grades raised questions about the validity of grading work and its purpose as a form of homework feedback:

> *Teacher 3) I don't think at this school we ever really go below four out of ten, we don't tend to go that low*

> *Teacher 1) It is a real issue with vocab, they get ten out of ten and put it away. Its not meant to be a tick box exercise* (21/5/13)

So, why do we place so much emphasis on the inclusion of grades? Is it because we feel accountable if we do not grade? Is it for our own use? Teacher 1 expressed the view that it is easier to write summative reports on pupils if you have grades to refer to, but questioned whether this was the best way to track progress in markbooks (4/06/14). We all questioned whether our use of grades might be for our own purposes and not the most effective way of giving formative feedback. This was not a question that was easily answered:

> *What about if we got rid of levels or grades altogether? I think that would be interesting to move away from identifying (progress) by grades, we know where they are with their learning.* (Teacher 3, 4/06/14)

As with the pupil focus groups the use of grades in formative feedback remains controversial. Within the teacher's focus group, there was a shift from believing grades were an expectation from the school, to questioning its effectiveness and whether there were alternatives that could be employed instead, including comment-only marking.

4.3.4. Formative feedback

Using this opportunity to explore assessment practice gave the teachers time to pose their own questions and highlighted some contradictory views:

I think it is a good thing to point out the best piece of work each week... not sure if it is healthy to do that, but in the real world this happens. That isn't what I want them to focus on, I want them to focus on their own performance (Teacher 1, 4/06/14)

This identifies that there is imbalance in the idealistic view of what feedback should be and what happens in the classroom. We wanted them to focus on their own development as learners, but at the same time we were employing methods that promote comparisons between students, something that the pupils disliked.

At the end of the action research we reflected on the content and structure of their formative written feedback. The majority felt that the study had allowed for focus on improving comments and making them more specific. Avoiding generic praise made feedback more personal and teachers appreciated the pupils' positive feedback (4/06/14).

4.3.5. Feedback explanations/ Time pressures

When looking at improving the way in which feedback is given to pupils, it is important to also take into consideration the needs of the teachers; the most common complaint from those in the focus group was that there was not enough time to prepare explanations for feedback or time for students to use the feedback formatively.

If you are spending time explaining your marking policies and such short lessons, that is a lot of time wasted (Teacher 1, 4/06/14)

This was a frequent response in all discussions with the teacher focus group. The teachers wanted more time, so that the majority of the girls could benefit from the feedback they are providing.

> *If the girls don't even read comments maybe we need to look at how we structure our lessons, so when books go back out, we allow time for them (pupils) to process what the feedback says and ask questions* (Teacher 1, 4/06/14)

The teachers shared the pupils' views on complex assessment criteria and the standardised level descriptors as being difficult to comprehend (Teacher 3, 4/06/14). They felt standardisation of language across the school curriculum could save time in lessons otherwise spent explaining feedback.

The pressure on teachers to assess homework on a regular basis and to find time during lessons to ensure pupils comprehend the feedback given was a problem that was not resolved during the action research. Teachers continue to work towards a balance, ensuring enough time is given to provide feedback of good quality, but not too demanding on time for teachers and pupils.

4.4. Dialogic marking

Dialogic feedback requires time and effort to become established as a valid form of formative feedback within the classroom (Yang and Carless, 2012). I was keen to see if this was a method of homework feedback that could be adapted and used within this school to promote self-regulation of learners. The responses from teachers highlighted some dialogic feedback was already being used within some subject areas, although it was not recognised as an explicit activity:

> *I get them to write an effort grade and write a sentence about their work before they hand it in, then I can see how they feel and what they want to do next.* (Teacher 1, 21/05/13)

If I write a question then I tell them I expect a response (Teacher 2, 21/05/13)

One teacher highlighted the need for further guidance on the use of dialogic feedback as a construct that would assist pupils to articulate their needs. The frustration was expressed as:

Three girls wrote they couldn't do it (the homework task) and I thought argh… you could have someone at home help you or ask me for help, or you could have just had a go. (Teacher 3, 4/06/14)

It was felt that further experimentation within dialogic feedback was needed. This comment demonstrated that if teachers and pupil do not have an open and honest form of communication then dialogic feedback could not take place.

4.5. Action Research

The action research within this study was carried out alongside the focus group discussions. The discussions provided possible improvement to feedback that could be experimented with. We employed action research using the cycle method. Figure 5 illustrates the process that took place. Each *reflect* stage and *revised plan* stage took place following a pupil focus group discussion.
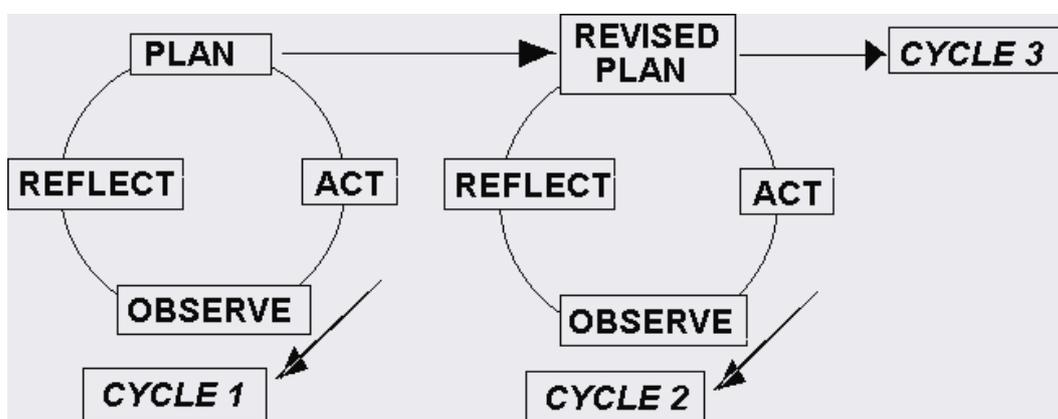

Figure 5: The Action Research Cycle (Kolb 1984)

Action research has some distinctive guidelines that the teachers need to be aware of and act accordingly:

- This is a critical *collaborative* enquiry by
- *Reflective* practitioners who are
- *Accountable* in making the results of their enquiry public
- *Self-evaluative* in their practice, and engaged in
- *Participative* problem-solving and continuing professional development

(Zuber-Skerritt 1982)

For the action research to be successful the teachers recognised their responsibility to ensure the pupils learning was not hindered for the sake of the study. They had to be open to discussion and criticism, showing willingness to reflect on their practice and be committed to furthering their professional teaching practice. The group adhered to these guidelines for action research and following the initial pupil focus group meetings in July 2013, the teachers identified three key areas to be focused on during this study:

- Comment length (shortening the comments but keeping the feedback specific)

- Effort grades (To avoid giving effort grades for homework tasks)

- Formative feedback (Avoid generic praise, keep praise focused on skills and tasks, and ensure there is a balance of praise and targets for improvement)

(See Appendices)

Teachers were encouraged to explore these three themes in a way that would benefit their students and subject area. This provided the opportunity for the group to explore more different ways of providing feedback and in the reflection phase, they shared their experiences and see if cross-curricular links could be formed.

Pupils commented on the changes to homework feedback; they appreciated teacher 3 posing more focused questions in feedback, they felt it prompted them to read the feedback and think formatively (Group 2, 28/11/13). The omission of effort grades was felt to be positive and we began to question the relevance of grading when the comments became more focused on task and development of skill (Teacher Group, 4/06/14).

In the second teacher discussion (December 2013) we reflected on the feedback from the pupil focus groups. The positive impact of the question posed by teacher 3 (4/06/14) in feedback (4.3.3) was discussed and the plan was revised. In addition to using focus questions, there was more specific trialling of the following methods of feedback:

- Avoiding generic praise

- Attempt dialogic feedback before or after teacher comments, asking for reflection on effort and task

- No effort grades

The third discussion meeting (July 2014) focused on reflection of trials and discussing the next steps following the formal end of the action research. The teachers considered the possibility of adopting a whole school homework feedback strategy, trying to establish if it was feasible and if it would be applicable to all subject areas. The group identified some subject areas that may have difficult adapting to change and whole school attitude towards policies might present problems:

> *I think it is possible to have one policy, it is just most whole school policies are not well adhered to. So perhaps a policy that is slightly structured, but each department has to come up with something based on the whole school policy, then maybe people will stick to it.* (Teacher 2, 4/06/14)

Here teacher 2 has not only made a suggestion for creating a workable homework feedback policy, but also made the suggestion for action research to be adopted on a whole school level. She has employed the ethos of action research; suggesting that each department, works *collaboratively* and in a *reflective* manner, *evaluating* their practice to attempt to solve problems with the current use of homework feedback (See Zuber-Skerritt 1982).

The use of action research within this study has allowed for collaborative on-going research to take place. Both teachers and pupils have benefitted from the experience. When asked if they would be willing to participate in future research projects, all were enthused by the possibilities:

Moderator)   Would you be willing to participate in this sort of research in
              the future?

Student 13)   Yes, because we all have different opinions

Student 11)   Yes, otherwise if you do something, and we don't understand it,
              what is the point?

(Teachers Group, 4/06/14)

This was the first time these students had been asked to participate in developing new ways of assessing work, it has been an opportunity for them to have their opinions heard and also raised their awareness of formative feedback and self-regulation of learning.

4.6. Conclusion

The focus groups and action research has provided a platform for exploring attitudes and beliefs towards formative feedback. Both teachers and pupils have worked collaboratively in experimenting with feedback practices, and have reflected on their experiences, sharing their

perceptions in a constructive manner with the focus on improving the assessment of homework, so that there is a promotion of self-regulation and deeper learning by the pupils. All participants have identified some key themes for on-going development. In the spirit of action research, there is yet more revision of plans required as the needs of students and teachers continue to change.

It was the intention of this study to investigate whether formative feedback could be improved and whether dialogic feedback between teacher and pupil could facilitate deeper learning. The next chapter will use these findings to discuss the extent to which the study has answered these questions.

5. Discussion

5.1. Introduction

This chapter summarises the findings derived from the research and makes recommendations and suggestions for future developments. It is based on the analysis of the study findings with reference to the literature review. At the end of the chapter I will reflect on the limitations of the study and what I learned from the experience of conducting a study, which uses action research and focus groups to gather qualitative data for analysis.

The aim of this study was to investigate the role of feedback for homework tasks, initially citing government guidelines on homework feedback. As a starting point, in the literature review I identified that there can be varying opinions on what is good formative feedback. Within this study I wanted to use empirical research to investigate the differing perceptions from relevant stakeholders, including pupils and teachers. Focusing on these two main groups for this study I set about trying to answer two initial questions:

1. Can the feedback given to students for homework tasks be improved?
2. Could creating a dialogue between teacher and pupil facilitate deeper learning?

The studies reviewed were focused on the perceptions and use of general feedback. The research I undertook gave me the opportunity to look specifically at improving the positive impact teacher feedback can have on pupils' independent study. In the Literature Review chapter, I highlighted the lack of research into teachers' perceptions of homework feedback; this investigation empowered teachers within this school to share their responses and also act

as participants in the action research and make changes to their feedback practices. In this study I wanted to promote the use of pupil feedback within action research. Their responses in focus groups have guided the changes that the participating teachers actioned during the study.

5.2. Summary of research

A significant amount of qualitative data gathered from focus group discussions and action research conducted by a group of teachers which including myself has been summarised in the previous chapter. It has become apparent that the perceptions and experiences of teachers and pupils were complex and at times contradictory. Some inferences can be drawn from the conversations I had with teachers and pupils, yet the information seems to present more questions than conclusive answers.

5.2.1. Can the feedback given to students for homework tasks be improved?

Reflecting on the theoretical arguments cited in the literature review, the answer to this question has to be positive. The theoretical arguments given by Hattie and Timperley (2009) indicate that as the curriculum develops and the learning needs of our pupils continues to change with technological innovation, homework feedback can and should be improved. This should be more relevant to developing self-regulation and the life-long learning of our pupils so that they can cope with a changing world.

This question is not challenging the theoretical argument that calls for self-regulation; it is concerned with whether teachers can find ways to provide effective formative feedback. This is in spite of:

- The pressures on time
- Concerns over pupil self-esteem
- Fear of accountability
- Pupils under-performing in external examinations.

This study contains some examples of good feedback practice from teachers that challenges pupils to be self-regulating and responsible for the growth of understanding and skill. It highlights the need for change in how we provide homework feedback and serves as a starting point for action research into this issue. This reflection is discussed later in this chapter as a future development.

The responses quoted in the findings chapter, show the pupils' and teachers' attitudes on homework feedback evolved over time. Teachers grew in confidence when taking risks and the pupils were receptive to changes, appreciating the time and effort teachers were giving.

This study does not provide strategies that can be transferred to other subject areas or schools, but it does attempt to prompt teachers to take action and experiment with their practice to enhance their pupils' learning experiences. The pupils valued being a part of my research and it raised their awareness of what makes good feedback. By continuing with similar methods of study, there is the opportunity to train pupils to be self-regulating with their learning.

5.2.2. Recommendations for whole school policy

The following recommendations are relevant to the context of this school and should not be seen as easily applicable to other schools or a wider scale. The suggestions of strategies for improving homework feedback are the results of action research and discussions within the focus groups.

Homework feedback must be:

- **Honest**

  Pupils do not want inflated grades or teachers to write positive comments, which are not reflective of the pupil's ability; they prefer comments to be realistic and relevant.

- **Concise**

  Comments should be relevant; content should be focused on one or two comments of praise and one or two comments for improvements to the work. The length of the comment should comparable to the work submitted: a short essay will need a short comment, whereas for a longer piece of work a more detailed comment would be expected.

- **Constructive criticism**

  The comments focused on improvements should be linked to skills to be developed by the pupil and how to go about implementing change (See Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

- **Skill focused praise**

  Comments of praise should be focused on skills, making the pupil aware of areas of strength in their work (See Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

When giving formative feedback teachers should avoid:

- **Giving effort grades**

  These have been seen as patronising by students and can impact negatively on their self-esteem.

- **Only using ticks or crosses and a mark out of ten**

  This form of assessment is not seen as formative by pupils and can lead to confusion if numbers and ticks do not correspond.

- **Giving undirected praise**

  Similar to effort grades, praising comments, such as 'good work', 'well done', that are not linked to skill is not seen as formative or encouraging. Pupils have questioned their validity and so it should be avoided (See Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

- **Making comparisons between pupils**

  Pupils expressed concern about being 'singled-out' in a group situation or sharing their marks with their peers, they prefer to have feedback personalised and have the opportunity to keep it private.

- **Using comments about a pupil's personal life, career aspirations or the amount of effort used for the task**

  Again, feedback comments should be skill based. Trying to motivate pupils at this school by discussing information of a personal nature has not been seen by pupils to be successful.

Strategies employed by teachers in the action research are recommended to be trialled and adapted by other subject areas within the school:

- **Delaying grades**

  Teachers continue to give comments and grades for homework together. The pupils commented that the grades distract them from reading the comments. To avoid this they suggested giving grades out once the comments have been read, then the pupils get the opportunity to read the advice given by the teacher more thoroughly and without distraction. (Teachers Focus Group, 4/06/14)

- **Use dialogic feedback**

  In addition to delaying grades, by asking the girls to engage in a written or verbal dialogue with the teacher the formative comments can be considered by pupils and acted upon. Teachers also have a greater awareness of their comments' impact on learning and the pupils' perceptions of tasks.

- **Consider using focus questions in comments**

  By providing a question in the formative feedback students again are encouraged to interact with the feedback, teachers can then assess the level of understanding from the pupil. Focusing questions on the task and developing skill appears to give positive results. (Pupil Focus Group discussions, 9/07/14; 11/07/14)

- **Restructure lessons to allow time for re-drafting and clarification**

  Often homework tasks are a way of summarising an activity or reinforcing a skill. By using homework as an introduction, the skill being used can then be improved upon with the guidance of the teacher.

Some of these recommendations require structural changes to embedded practices within the school. To achieve this, teachers need to feel confident to take risks with their practice of feedback without being fearful of accountability. This requires the active support of the school's senior leadership team. Some staff are more willing and confident to take risk than

others and it is suggested that it is the responsibility of the senior leadership team to encourage and empower all staff to experiment with assessment innovation.

5.3. Limitations of the study

There are several aspects of this study that limit the inferences that can be drawn from analysis and discussion. The scale of this research is limited to a specific school, with one key stage 3 year group and five teachers who volunteered to participate. Thus, this research is a snapshot of feedback and the highlights the potential for changes to be made with the assessment pedagogy within the school.

Using qualitative data as the basis for this study, the focus has been on the learning experience of pupils and the impact formative feedback can have on life-long learning. At no point during this empirical study has the quantitative impact on achievement in external examinations been discussed. It may be that formative assessment practice can have a positive impact on examination results by preparing students to be more independent in their academic studies, but this research does not set out to measure this (see pupil selection (4.1.2) in Findings chapter)

As existing research applies to feedback in general, this study has focused on formative comments for homework. Homework provides the opportunity for pupils to work independently; the feedback is crucial to identify specific areas for development; the literature review emphasised the lack of material in this area. The theories and concepts

referring to general feedback have been applied to this study and the findings demonstrate relevance. Although this study is not intended to apply to all forms of feedback, there is the option to explore this as a further development.

In choosing action research as a method of study its purpose was to be a catalyst for change in feedback practices. Action research is often conducted over a period of years (Stringer 2008), and this study had a limited time frame of one year. Other commitments within the school calendar have meant that the action research has not been as thorough as I had envisaged. Changes in practice have taken place but they need further exploration and extended time for embedding into the curriculum.

Time limitations led to only a small number of changes being evidenced in this study. The teachers involved in the research have not consistently employed new methods of formative feedback and need further encouragement to do so, as a result not all pupils were aware of changes that had occurred. This may also have been because of the small number of staff involved. Perhaps with the next stage of development more staff should be involved and from more subject areas.

As the moderator of the focus groups I have questioned my impact on the validity of inferences that can be drawn from the discussions. As a teacher of the pupils involved and a colleague of the teachers, I have been concerned that the responses and discussions that have taken place may be biased due to my association. For example, the pupils may have wished to impress me and the teachers may have wished to appear more innovative than their peers. I am aware this may produce bias in their responses but the evidence collected demonstrates thought, questioning of practice and a sharing of opinions that are a balance between

constructive criticism and praise. As responses have been supported by previous findings concerning feedback, the validity of inferences drawn appears to be 'good enough' for this scale of study.

5.4. Future development opportunities

There is potential for this research to lead to similar studies in other contexts or on a larger scale. The findings from this research presented a number of emerging themes that could not be thoroughly investigated in the time frame.

In discussions with pupils, I did not anticipate that an element of the action research would need to be focused on changing the mind-sets of pupils. As already discussed above, it could be that the pupils were trying to please me with their responses, but the girls' perceptions of positive feedback were focused on developing skill to raise achievement, not for life-long learning. Further investigation could be developed with the aim of making pupils self-regulating and shift their focus from achievement in examinations to the wider picture of learning, preparing them, not just for the next exam, but also for adulthood.

If in the future we want pupils to be self-regulating, we must also work on encouraging teachers and policy makers to shift the focus from summative achievement to the experience of learning. In this investigation I worked with like-minded professionals who were willing to experiment and take risks with their practice. The next stage of development for this research is to take it to a larger scale; the whole school, and try to encourage all teachers, including those less willing, to participate and recognise the benefits of formative assessment and self-regulation.

Hattie and Timperley's research (2009) and Deci and Ryan's research (2000) into self-regulation of the learner, present theoretical discussions that need to be investigated further with empirical research. Linking self-regulation to homework feedback alone has proved difficult, as the pupils are not all confident autonomous learners in the classroom. A wider investigation looking at feedback for all tasks and embedding formative practice would be beneficial to this school.

A collaborative approach to developing whole school policy was welcomed by the pupils involved in this research as reported in the Findings chapter. This successful collaboration with pupils also invites the opportunity for more action research to take place within the school. Using action research should be seen as an ongoing venture. By involving the pupils we have the opportunity to embed assessment practices and whole school pedagogy in an effective manner.

As an initial area to be investigated, it was surprising that the use of dialogic feedback had limited exploration in this study. Teachers and pupils expressed a lack of time available to ask for the feedback and to have the opportunity to respond effectively. When dialogic feedback was used, the pupils responded positively towards it and found it a useful tool to forward their understanding and boost self-esteem. In my opinion, to employ dialogic feedback effectively will require commitment of time and consistency from the teacher to embed it into the learning programme, so it becomes the expected form of feedback for homework tasks.

The impact of homework feedback on self-esteem for these girls was a prominent theme identified in the findings. This study has highlighted a major factor in how homework feedback is perceived. Further investigation could be focused on the theme of raising self-esteem and encourage risk-taking from the girls.

The limitations discussion identifies that this research does not set out to make generalisations, or provide strategies that can be used in other schools. The findings are relevant to this school and its context. Further research could be developed to make comparisons between schools. These may be of a similar or differing context such as state, faith, free schools and academies. As the pupils at this school are all female, it would be interesting to see whether there is a contrast with all male or mixed schools.

5.5. Conclusion

This study does not conclude with an explicit set of rules to be followed or strategies to employ in order for homework feedback to be effectively formative or to promote self-regulation to the learner. It serves as an example of how action research and focus groups can be used within the school environment by practitioners to explore assessment pedagogy.

The literature reviewed gives convincing arguments for changing the nature of homework feedback to give more emphasis to skill development and self-regulation. In my empirical research I have demonstrated that the issues preventing this change are complex and multiple. The initial questions may not have been answered in a conclusive manner, but their nature does not require that. The inquiry presents the opportunity to investigate current practice and

challenge the *status quo*. By being given the chance to explore pupil perceptions there is now the opening for improving assessment pedagogy further in collaboration with pupils. This experience has taught me, as a practitioner, the importance of trying to continually develop my practice and the learning experience of pupils in my charge. Working alongside colleagues and having them participate in the research has shown me how to encourage and motivate my colleagues to investigate and adapt their assessment practice to promote life-long learning.

Pupils often view us, as teachers to be the voice of experience and knowledge within the classroom. The process of researching homework feedback, reminds us that the opinions and insight from pupils are valid and should acted upon (See O'Donoghue, 2003). Education is not an experience that is simply imposed upon pupils but something that they are a part of.

6. Appendix I: Exemplar transcript of pupil focus group discussion

Group 1 Discussion 2, 9/12/13

I – Interviewer S1/2/3/4 – Student Interviewees

09/12/2013 8.50am

0.01

I: Ok, so I have met with three other groups now, about looking at how homework is being marked in classes; so I just want to get your views and feedback… do you feel that there has been any differences, not specifically with homework, but differences, is it different being in lower four (Year 8) than Upper three (Year 7)?

S1: yes

I: in what way?

S1: I don't know it is just, it's harder. I don't know, I don't really get the point of year 8

I: ok… in what way?

S1:I don't know, what do you really do? Like, in year 7, it's your first year… in year 9 you start thinking about your GCSEs, what do you do in year 8?

I: Ok, that's interesting, girls… anything else?

S2: I think in year 7 you are under less pressure, if you get something wrong then it's not so important, teachers don't get as angry, not that they don't get angry at you, they don't seem to mind as much.

I: Ok, what about you (S3)?

S3: err, I think year 8 is more important because you are older, and you are seen as more responsible.

I: Ok, quite differing in a way, how about you (S4)?

S4: well, you get an extra lesson,

I: Do you? I didn't know that, ok…

S4:Yes, in English, so you get more homework so that is added pressure…

I: OK, that's interesting. Ok, so what about homework, has that changed at all this year?

S2: We get more definitely

I: do you… longer tasks or just more of it?

S1: no just more of it, because I think every subject is thirty minutes, but we get more subjects each day

I: so some subjects are setting it more than once a week?

S1: Yep,

I: so homework-wise with this study that I am doing, there are some teachers that have been involved, there is (Teacher 1) from RE, (Teacher 2) from DT, (Teacher 3) for Classics and Latin, and (Teacher 4) for Science and Biology, they are the four teachers involved in the project. Do you have those teachers at all?

S3: Yes I have one

S4: Yes I have two

S1: Yes I have one

I: you have one, plus me…

S1: Yes

I: you all have me

S2: I have all of them apart from one.

I: Ahh, brilliant, so have you notice then S2, much difference in the way the teachers have marked homework?

S2: No not really…

I: Ok, alright, let's put it another way, out of all these teachers who have been marking your homework, is there anything good that they have been doing? Or anything that works well for marking homework?

S2: well from Teacher 2 we don't have much homework

I: oh really, so I guess it is hard to judge then…

S2: yes.

I: alright another way to put it, what is good homework marking in your opinion?

S2: they don't just give you a mark out of ten, they actually say what you have done wrong, 'to improve you could do this…'; but also so 'you have done well in this…' as well.

I: so you get a comment and a grade

S1: yes, I like having a grade as well, because you can see if you have improved since last time; rather than just having a tick and 'excellent' , you instead know what you can do next time.

I: that's sounds good, so that sort of way of marking doesn't work for you?

S1: yes,

I: So do you get a lot of ticks and 'excellents'?

S 1/2/3/4: Yes sometimes

I: that doesn't help?

S3: No, not really!

I: you were saying homework marking with comments was quite good…

S4: Yes,

I: so what sort of comments would you like?

S4: not brief ones, most of them are pretty brief, I like them to explain I what I have done wrong. For them to explain what went wrong and what could be done to make it better.

I: do you all read the comments?

S: yes.

4.30

I: do you have time to act on the comments?

S1: sometimes that is our homework, to answer, so if he (Teacher) has asked us to add to some of our work, we will do that for homework,

I: Is that a good way to work? Or is it a bit of a waste of time?

S3: No I think it is a good way…

S2: I don't really see the point in it… I don't mind doing it because it is quite easy.   I mean you have read the comments, you are going to act on the comments next time, and you are never going to do that piece of work again. Why would you go and say what you are going to do better next time?

I: The stuff I have been reading, they have different type of comments, they put it into blocks, what you have talked about then is quite specific to the task, focused on the piece of work you have done, what about, do you think it would help if teachers gave you more vague stuff about skills? Say with art, rather than me saying 'next time you draw an apple, I would like to see you doing this…' instead I would say 'You need to work on tone or the size'

S3: yes

I: do other teachers do that? I am not saying my way is the right way, I am just interested in it

S2: I like your way, it is not saying it is just specifically for an apple.

I: Do you think that other teachers could do that? Please don't worry about offending me, I won't be offended if you are honest!

S4: I think it depends on the subject

S1: Yes, I can't think of other subjects that use those sorts of skills

I: what about languages, do they use those sort of skills or something else?

S1: usually they will tell you what you have got wrong.

S3: Or they will ask you to revise, verbs, yes.

I: what about RE and Sciences, what are their homeworks like? Do you get constructive feedback from those homeworks?

S3: Its like 'expand on that point…' or maybe 'you could have answered this in a better sentence' or 'why don't you re-phrase that' or something.

I: and would that work? Or how could they improve it?

S3: I don't know, they are still set on that one task,

S1: I think after you have done the homework you forget about it, and it doesn't really matter. So if they went through it in class, you would understand it better.

I: that sounds interesting, sounds like a possibility. So what do you think about what S3 was saying about the feedback being task based… so when the comments are specific to the piece of work..

S1: ahh, that's useless.

8.00

S4: I think peer-marking works well, because you can see how other people have done on their homework. You can compare to yours

I: what do you think about the task stuff?

S4: I wouldn't really look at it, it is not very important to me.

S2: I think it should be more general to do with that kind of task, so, if you do something similar to that you could have something to look back on.

I: Alright, cool, is there any really bad marking that happens in the school? You don't need to give me subjects, just thinking are there any times, when you have thought 'why have I spent so much time doing that homework, and this is how it is marked?'

S1: when they just say good…

S4: yes, that is really annoying…

S3: or when you have spent ages doing some homework, and someone else hasn't and they say 'it's fine, don't worry about it'

I: I bet this is really annoying…does that happen?

S3: yes sometimes

I: ok, so what I have been doing with these teachers, so we have DT, RE, Biology and Classics and Latin, what we agreed was that we were not going to give effort marks this term,

S4: Yes I don't like effort marks

I: that's good since we are not doing those!

S4: yes, so say you are doing a project, one of them say is a model, and say one is a poster… sometimes a teacher will give a better mark to the model because they think they would put more effort into it.

S2: some people do their homework really fast, and other people it takes longer. The person who does it fast, gets the work all right and the other person who take ages doesn't, the person who gets it all right gets a good effort grade when they didn't put any effort in.

I: that's interesting, so last bit, we agreed we would still give you a grade, mark out of ten, with the comment, I know you said didn't like it brief, we said we would do a sentence on improvement and a sentence on what was successful with the work. Does that still sound like a good way to do it? Or, should I suggest something different to the teachers?

S1: At least then it is not just 'good' or 'well done' or something.

S4: did you say there would still be the mark out of ten?

I: yes,

S4: good,

I: so is there anything further?

S2: no that is good,

S1 yes that's good

I: Cool, thanks girls.

11.33

Appendix II: Questions for pupil focus group discussions

Discussion 1: June/July 2013

Cohort 1, 2 and 3, student 1-4 in each cohort Year 7 – Year 8 girls.

Group 1 – High ability (According to Midyis scores)

Group 2 – Mid ability (According to Midyis scores)

Group 3 – Lower ability (According to Midyis scores)

Group D – SEN/ Dyslexics (According to Midyis scores)

Explain what the project is about

My big essay, my investigation is based on Improving the effectiveness of homework feedback or you might think of it as marking. I want to look anyhow your homework tasks are marked and how feedback is given. I then want to look at whether the feedback is useful to you and if it helps improve your understanding and learning.

If you don't understanding any phrases or questions just ask and I will explain. It is not a test! There are no wrong answers, your opinions are what are important, so try and be as honest as you can, and your answers will stay anonymous.

We are going to chat today and again in September, possibly a third time in October.

The subjects involved in the study are:

Science

DT

Art

Latin

RE

Is everyone happy to proceed?

1. Why do teachers need to give feedback? How many different reasons can you think of? *Mind map if appropriate*

2. What motivates you to do your homework?

   Mind map if appropriate

3. What type of feedback makes you want to learn more or improve your knowledge?

Look at examples of homework marking x3

4. What can you see in this picture?
5. How would you feel if this was how your homework was marked?
6. What is good about this feedback?
7. Is there anything that could be improved?
8. What could the student do next with this feedback?
9. So what types of homework feedback doesn't help you do you think?
10. Anything to add?

Discussion 2: December 2013

Remind girls of the conditions from first meeting, it's for a dissertation and anonymous

Focus on subjects involved

1. How does it feel to be in l4? Difference to u3? With regards to lessons?

2. Generally have there been any changes in homework tasks? Dialogue with teachers?

3. Discuss what was discussed last time, examples of homework what they requested

Recap on the purpose of homework marking

4. In the subjects we discussed, have you seen any changes?

5. It might not be in every homework, but have there been any changes in the way your teachers communicate ideas for improvement?

6. Teachers agreed that they would limit the amount of written comment, they would be specific in comments, would give a mark out of 10 and encourage you to write a comment. Has this helped? What hasn't been as successful?

Discussion 3: July 2014

1. How do you feel about homework?

2. How long do you spend on homework each night?

3. How do you think your parents feel about homework?

4. What is the purpose of homework feedback in your opinion?

5. Tell me about some good homework feedback

6. Tell me about ways of marking that do not work for you

7. Would you like more input in homework feedback?

8. Have you seen any changes over the last year?

9. If the school was to adopt a policy, so everyone marks similarly would that work in your opinion?

10. Do you think there would be any problems?

11. Is there any advice you would like to give teachers? (that teachers need to be aware of that works for you) 96

12. Do you think pupils should have more input in school policy?

Appendix III: Parental permission letter for participating pupils

Dear Parent or Guardian:

As part of my professional development as Head of Department at *(School Name)* I have been studying for a Master's Degree in Educational Assessment. I am writing to you as a faculty student in the Department of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment at The Institute of Education, London. I am conducting a research project focused on developing the provision of effective homework feedback, formative assessment and how to further her learning. I request permission for your daughter to participate.

The study consists of focus group discussions with students and a volunteered group of teachers. Teachers will be developing their professional practice and trialing different ways of providing feedback. The project will be explained in terms that your daughter can understand, and your daughter will participate only if she is willing to do so. Only I and members of the research staff will have access to information provided by your daughter. At the conclusion of the study, pupils' responses will be reported as group results only and a summary of the group results will be made available to all interested parents; please email me at the school if you require a copy of the results.

Participation in this study is voluntary and if you give permission for your daughter to participate, she is free to refuse to participate. If your daughter agrees to participate, she can end participation at any time. You and your daughter are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your daughter's participation in this research study.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with your daughter will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of encrypted files, with hard copies stored in lockable storage, where only I will have access.

This research study is designed to promote innovation within teaching and learning within the school and to meet the assessment criteria for a Master's Degree; therefore the information obtained will be released to the Institute of Education for assessment. All students involved will be given pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

Focus group discussions will be digitally recorded, which only I will have access to. The files are only for education purposes and will be destroyed once the research study is completed in December 2013.

This study has an 'opt out' option for participants. Should you wish for your daughter not to participate please email me at: *(Email Address given)* giving her full name, form group and house at any time during the study and her contribution will be made void. For your information, the first student focus group will take place in the next week. Should you have any questions or desire further information, please do not hesitate to call me at the school or email me. My faculty tutor is (*Tutor Name)* should you wish to contact her.

Thank you for your support and co-operation,

Miss Amy Sillitoe

Head of Art

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