

Schools are surveying students to improve teaching. But many teachers find the feedback too difficult to act on

November 26 2021, by Ilana Finefter-Rosenbluh



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Education departments have been investing in [feedback-based tools](#) to assess school performance. These include [student perception surveys](#),

where students provide feedback on the quality of their learning and their experiences in the classroom or at school.

The hope is such feedback will provide teachers and other school staff with information to help foster a positive learning environment. But our [recent study](#) shows teachers don't know how to act on the data from the surveys, and that students question the value of them.

It's one thing to invest in and gather feedback, but without the ability to act on it, the feedback is useless. Educational systems and [policy-makers](#) should support teachers to respond to feedback-based assessment data. This is particularly important in times of ongoing disruptions to school routines, which put both teachers and students under extensive pressure.

How popular are student perception surveys?

Australian states have been using school-level surveys like the [School Opinion Survey in Queensland](#), the [Student Survey in NSW](#) and the [School Survey in the Northern Territory](#) for years.

Similarly, there is the [Attitudes to School Survey](#) in [Victoria](#), which asks students to rate statements such as "my teacher makes learning fun" and "my teacher uses more than one way to check we understand".

Education departments in nations such as the [United Kingdom](#) and the [United States](#) have also developed [student](#) perception surveys to assess teaching practice. The rise of such surveys reflects a spike in [survey companies advertising their services](#) to help improve teaching and learning with data-informed insights.

'You can't have these surveys without some kind of support'

We wanted to explore the influence of such student perception surveys on teachers' practice, as perceived by both students and teachers.

Our study took place in Victorian secondary schools before the pandemic. It was based on nearly 1,000 students' surveys providing their perspectives on their experience in the classroom.

To measure change, we administered the surveys twice: around the beginning of the year and towards the end of the year. The study also included 14 teacher interviews, and focus groups involving 33 students.

Interestingly, findings showed teachers did not change their practice over time in response to student feedback.

In the focus groups, some students expressed scepticism over the power of their voice to change teachers' practices and their ability or willingness to translate the feedback into tangible actions.

One student told us:

"there are certain students who deal with certain things and teachers know that, but they don't really do much to prevent it from happening again because they don't know how [...] they will maybe help that one student if he asks for it specifically, but they need to [...] prevent it from happening again and to other students [...]"

Another student said:

"I think [teachers] care about [student feedback] but like, they have too much on their mind to actually realise what they're doing, or to realise what they need to do to change the way that they teach [...]"

Similarly, teachers lamented their struggles to respond to their students'

needs. Expressing their hope for support from the education system, they asked for more guidance to sustain their students' growth. As one of them explained:

"Honestly, I didn't understand what I can actually do with some of the questions [...] like classroom belonging [...] I went back to the kids and used that as one of those conversations where I said, 'okay you guys have all reported that you don't think anyone cares about you, and you don't care about each other. What's going on? because I watch you work together and you're amazing [...] what's the difference between what you think and what you're actually doing in the classroom?' but this strategy clearly wasn't enough [...] you can't just have these surveys without some kind of support [...]"

Likewise, another teacher noted:

"How do you use this feedback and then turn that into something in the classroom? [...] wasn't really too sure of how to act or to respond to it."

Some teachers opposed the surveys, seeing them as external measures that undermined their professionalism. One of them suggested:

"Teachers get really pissed when they feel like their effort or approach is being attacked or negatively commented on, and it's almost like there's a complete shutdown, and it's like no, you don't need to make me feel crap about my life, I'm not going to take anything on board."

Support is key, especially during disruption

Teachers and students face multiple challenges which the pandemic has exacerbated, [nationally](#) and [internationally](#). These include family [financial hardship](#) and resource-limited study environments, ethical issues with remote learning anchored around student well-being, and

access to technology and essential online resources.

The ongoing disruption to schools in Australia and globally has left many teachers and students in more need for emotional and instructional support.

As school districts weigh and debate the use of feedback-based assessment tools, they must also examine how teachers can be supported in responding to such data.

Equally, policy-makers and [school](#) leaders must rethink how education systems can help shape teacher education programs and provide professional learning opportunities that guide the use of assessment data to sustain [teacher](#) growth and improve student experience.

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