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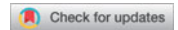


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Building a Culture of Engagement through Participatory Feedback Processes

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ABSTRACT

In response to school environments in which teachers and students feel disconnected from the learning process, we developed a three-part curriculum feedback system with the goal of creating a school-wide culture of engagement through participatory feedback processes. Here we describe the barriers to participation and ownership that are addressed by our curriculum feedback process, provide a rationale for each component of the multi-prong feedback process, and illustrate how each part of the feedback system was implemented in our pilot schools. We argue that addressing feedback regularly, optimizing the process to be user-friendly, and demonstrating appreciation for positive and constructive feedback can help any curriculum supervisor foster a school-wide culture of engagement among teachers and students.

KEYWORDS

Student voice; school climate; teacher voice; curriculum feedback; social-emotional and character development

In today's education climate of high-stakes testing and accountability, it is common for challenged, urban schools to have state-level oversight or mandates that create strong pressures toward complying with highly scripted and scheduled curricula. When students and teachers are treated as passive recipients of mandated, assessment-linked curricula, neither group feels ownership nor engagement in the learning process, and the emotional climate of the school often is negative (Cohen et al. 2009). Despite increasing regulations and pressure to improve performance, academic achievement has not risen to any appreciable degree across such schools. Enhancing opportunities for student and teacher voice can create a healthier school and a more positive learning environment and lead to more positive outcomes for students (Voight 2015; World Health Organization 2003).

For the past five years, we have developed a curriculum feedback system to foster a culture of engagement that would respect the constraints present in highly challenged schools. This feedback process is designed to create greater student and teacher participation and ownership of a social-emotional and character development (SECD) curriculum, called MOSAIC (Mastering Our Skills And Inspiring Character; www.secclab.org/mosaic), in urban middle

schools. SECD is becoming an increasing focus of educational policy and concern among those preparing educators for their work in schools (Hatchimonji et al., 2017). SECD competencies include self-control, emotion recognition and management, establishing relationships, ethical decision-making and problem solving, organizing and planning, and working effectively with others in groups, as well as dispositions such as diligence, optimism, forgiveness, appreciation, and having a sense of positive purpose. It does not take great imagination to suspect that students' SECD would have a meaningful influence on their achievement in school. Indeed, research has established that social-emotional development and challenging academic goals exist in reciprocal synergy. Systematic, multiyear instruction designed to promote students' social-emotional development, character, and growth mindset leads to improved attitudes about school, less truancy, reductions in problem behaviors in classrooms, and better student outcomes on college and career-ready standards (Durlak et al. 2011; Johnson and Weiner 2017; Jones and Bouffard 2012).

Here we describe a process for incorporating teacher and student curriculum feedback carried out in an SECD curriculum in six diverse urban middle schools. This process could be implemented by

a variety of school personnel—school psychologists, school counselors, school administrators, or SECD instructional teams. Although we believe this process to be particularly important in the implementation of SECD programming, our approach is not unique to an SECD curriculum. Rather, this approach could be used in any academic or specials area, implemented by a content area supervisor or coach.

Challenges of promoting participation and ownership through curriculum feedback

Due to barriers we encountered in our first year of implementation, our original plan for the MOSAIC curriculum feedback process required revision. The obstacles we faced are typical of low-performing schools and likewise, our adaptations to overcome them could be applied across many schools of similar status (Wiggins 2012). During the first year of MOSAIC implementation, the feedback process included brief monthly surveys (five questions) and more in-depth quarterly surveys (10 questions) about receptivity and responsiveness to specific lesson activities, completed by teachers and students online. The monthly participation rates in the feedback process were much lower than expected. In the first month of implementation, teacher participation rates across the six schools ranged from 19.44% to 84.62%. Through conversations with teachers, administrators, and students, it became clear that the initial structure of the curriculum feedback was untenable. As in many urban public schools, the teachers and administrators of these schools were beset by testing and accountability pressures and stressed by never-ending lists of assessments used for tracking progress. Overwhelmed teachers saw the MOSAIC curriculum feedback as “another thing to do” on an already long list. Other contributing barriers included a history of unacknowledged feedback and pervasive fear that the information would be used to punish teachers for not completing lessons with fidelity. Further, technology access across schools was unreliable, meaning that some teachers needed to plan weeks in advance to complete computer-based surveys. In spite of these barriers, we were committed to engaging teachers and students in a systematic curriculum feedback process that would take into account the perspective of all participants in the MOSAIC curriculum. We believed that once teachers, students, and administrators experienced changes made based

on their feedback, they would learn to value having input and participation and ownership would increase.

Making curriculum feedback work

We determined that fostering a more positive attitude toward the feedback process among teachers—an attitude that would value the opportunity to engage students in shaping the curriculum and therefore create time and space for this important activity—would require a sustained, multi-pronged approach that balanced the goal of obtaining feedback from participants with the constraints of a stressed school system. Through the refinement of three feedback processes, described in detail below, we were able to stimulate a culture of engagement among teachers and students working with the MOSAIC curriculum (Table 1).

Process 1: Bimonthly teacher and student feedback survey

What did this feedback look like?

Process 1 asked teachers and students within each MOSAIC classroom to provide feedback on the most recently completed two months of the program. Curriculum writers and implementers then used this information to make substantive changes to the lessons. Teachers used a Likert scale to rate the extent to which they were able to complete the lessons and the extent to which they referred to specific topics throughout the school day. These questions were designed to assess the feasibility of completing the curriculum as written. Open-ended questions asked students and teachers to report which aspects of the MOSAIC curriculum were helpful and which aspects could be improved. These questions were designed to capture the consensus opinions of an entire classroom of MOSAIC students and their teacher so that curriculum developers could efficiently determine which curriculum changes to prioritize.

To communicate how the curriculum feedback was used, the curriculum team developed regular reports that summarized the open-ended responses, described how curriculum writers addressed the feedback, and provided actionable suggestions for how teachers could address concerns within their classrooms. These reports and the resulting curriculum changes demonstrated to teachers and students that

Table 1. Summary of feedback processes.

	Process 1	Process 2	Process 3
Frequency	Bimonthly	Biannually	Annually
Who completes	Teacher and students	Students	Teachers, staff, and administrators
What it is	Written classroom-level survey feedback on specific lessons	Written individual-level survey feedback on MOSAIC's impact	In-person focus-groups on structural aspects of MOSAIC
Format	Online survey	Paper survey	In person
User-friendly	5 min, 6 times/year, during MOSAIC class	5 min, twice/year, during MOSAIC class	End of year, before summer break; provide compensation; recruit highly motivated teachers
Utility	Efficient: Frequency of feedback, online format, and classroom consensus allows for specific and timely curricular changes	Comprehensive: Obtains individual student impressions of MOSAIC and its impact	Detailed: Allows for clarity and nuance around concerns noted in written forms of feedback
Limitations	Does not allow for individual student input	Takes significant time and resources to summarize large amount of information	Gathers opinions of highly engaged and enthusiastic participants only

their voices had been heard (See [Appendix A](#) for an example report).

What made this feedback format user-friendly?

Process 1 consisted of a five-minute online survey completed by MOSAIC teachers six times per year during the MOSAIC class period. The feedback process was written into the curriculum as a reflective writing prompt about the lessons, followed by a class discussion about how to improve the curriculum. Reducing the frequency of the feedback process from monthly to bimonthly and incorporating the survey process into the written curriculum was critical to reducing the administrative burden on teachers and encouraging their participation. Additionally, administering the surveys online allowed survey responses to be efficiently analyzed so that the curriculum developers could act upon the suggestions and create summary reports to distribute to administrators and teachers, thereby reinforcing the value of participating in the feedback process.

How was this feedback process useful?

The bimonthly feedback process was useful because it allowed for efficient response to curriculum suggestions. After our first year of implementing this feedback process, suggestions from teachers and students led to several specific changes in the MOSAIC curriculum. These changes, in turn, communicated to MOSAIC participants that their feedback was heard, acknowledged, and translated into tangible improvements. For example, a common suggestion from both students and teachers was to include “more interactive activities.”

We addressed this request by incorporating pedagogies that built on the multiple intelligences of middle school students, such as artistic demonstrations, interviews, and audio and video examples. For instance, to introduce the concept of constructive creativity, we added an interactive lesson asking students to list as many possible uses of a paper clip as they could in two minutes. Teachers and students responded enthusiastically to increased opportunities for interaction, listing the paper clip activity as one of the most helpful and well-liked lessons in their bimonthly feedback survey.

Students also demonstrated that they craved more opportunities for engagement and input by suggesting, “[MOSAIC school-improvement discussions] could be better by actually seeing our solutions in action. We could participate in the solution to the problems.” These student comments reinforced our belief that students were eager to be involved and share their opinions about their learning environment. In response, we expanded the school-improvement component of the curriculum, allowing classrooms to use twice the amount of time to develop school-improvement suggestions through building communication skills, and present them to school administrators. Through this change, we have seen more successful implementation of student school-improvement suggestions across all six MOSAIC schools. For example, students in one school received administrative support for their suggestion to encourage their peers to use the school bathrooms more responsibly. These students then created humorous bathroom signs to tell students to wash their hands and throw away their paper towels.

Many teacher suggestions focused on the readability and utility of the curriculum materials. In response to teacher requests, we made the curriculum materials

more user-friendly by adjusting font size, spacing, and incorporating built-in organizers within each monthly unit. In addition, based on specific district-wide events, such as high school applications and an annual “Week of Respect,” we rearranged the order in which specific topics were addressed in the MOSAIC curriculum to create a school-wide synergy between the MOSAIC curriculum and topics in other classes.

Process 2: Biannual individual student feedback survey

What did this feedback look like?

In Process 2, each student who participated in MOSAIC was asked to complete a brief survey that included 10 items using a Likert scale and three open-ended items at the middle and end of the academic year. Process 2 asked the students their thoughts about MOSAIC (“___ was the most helpful MOSAIC skill I learned this year because ___”), their classmates (“How much do you think that other members of your MOSAIC class help each other?”), and teachers (“How much do you feel your MOSAIC teacher listens to you?”). These questions were designed to capture how supported students felt by their MOSAIC classmates and teacher and to obtain individual-level suggestions about the MOSAIC curriculum. Unlike the bimonthly feedback, which focused on a consensus of classroom opinion, this feedback format provided each student the opportunity to express his or her thoughts about MOSAIC.

What made this feedback format user-friendly?

We amended this form of feedback for schools with limited access to technology. Rather than having students fill out the surveys online, we provided paper copies of the surveys to students. We found that although paper surveys were not analyzed as quickly as online surveys, paper surveys dramatically improved participation rates. As with the bimonthly feedback, the surveys were included as a reflective lesson in the MOSAIC lesson and were completed during the MOSAIC period, so extra class time was not required to complete the surveys.

How was this feedback process useful?

The biannual student feedback process (Process 2) fulfilled an important objective: to obtain feedback from every MOSAIC participant. This process was less

efficient but more comprehensive than the collaborative, collective student feedback elicited in Process 1. Because this process included a high volume of participants, the information gathered could offer a powerful summary of the student viewpoint. However, due to the large number of data points, Process 2 required a more cumbersome data entry and analysis process, particularly when paper surveys are necessary to optimize participation. We used this process between implementation years to make changes to the structure of MOSAIC classrooms (increasing instructional time, changing student–teacher ratio), rather than making changes to the curriculum in real time.

Process 3: End-of-year school staff focus groups

What did this feedback look like?

The written feedback from Processes 1 and 2 allowed for systematic input by all participants in MOSAIC. However, in order to gather comprehensive feedback efficiently from such a large group, feedback could not include nuanced details about how and why specific lessons were ineffective. Process 3 provided a small group of participating teachers and school staff the opportunity to reflect and provide feedback on the MOSAIC curriculum at the end of the academic year. These focus groups were made up of 5–10 teachers and counselors from the participating schools and each meeting concentrated on a particular aspect of the program. Sessions were two hours and consisted of a predetermined list of questions facilitated by a program consultant.

What made this feedback format user-friendly?

The timing, compensation for professional development hours, and selection process, contributed to the success of Process 3. Scheduling the focus groups directly after the last day of classes was convenient for teachers and school staff. Compensating participants at their professional development hourly wage provided incentive to participate and communicated that participants’ time was valued. Lastly, recruiting specific teachers and school staff who were particularly engaged with MOSAIC acknowledged these individuals for their exemplary work and effort throughout the year and also reinforced the importance of their opinions. It is important to acknowledge, however, that this selection bias leads to focus groups that are not

necessarily representative of the majority of teachers implementing the program.

How was this feedback process useful?

Process 3 added nuance that allowed curriculum developers to understand reasons behind suggestions from the written forms of feedback. For example, one focus group topic centered on ensuring that the curriculum was developmentally and pedagogically appropriate. It became clear that the frequent request for “more interactive activities” had different meanings for teachers and students in each grade level. In the focus group, teachers noted that the sixth graders had difficulty defining character virtues in the introductory lesson to each curriculum unit. One teacher suggested that sixth graders required experiential activities to help them develop personalized virtue definitions. In response, the curriculum was adjusted for sixth graders to include several interactive examples, including videos, stories, and current events, when introducing a new virtue. This change impacted every unit of the curriculum, and greatly strengthened its usability for this age group.

MOSAIC curriculum feedback in action

It was a Friday morning and the summer was quickly approaching. This time of year brings both hot temperatures and impulsive actions. The principal and assistant principals at the middle school were particularly harried that morning. Parents of several students had been called in to talk about an incident. As the day progressed, the details of the incident became clear: Several seventh grade students had sent revealing pictures of themselves to other students in the school, and the pictures had found their way onto social media. This was a case of cyber-bullying, and the administrators wanted to quickly mitigate the potential social, psychological, and legal damage.

Teachers, students, and administrators in this middle school recognized that as an SECD curriculum, MOSAIC was equipped to address the aftershocks of this cyber-bullying incident and prevent future similar incidents from occurring. Through Processes 1 and 2, both forms of written feedback, teachers and students requested that the MOSAIC curriculum add lessons to directly address bullying. This concern was echoed by the focus groups in Process 3. Through the detailed conversations offered by the focus groups, curriculum writers were able to brainstorm solutions with teachers. A review of the MOSAIC curriculum and the school

district’s calendar led to a solution that allowed for a convergence of the goals of the MOSAIC curriculum and the requests of the teachers and students. The topic of bullying would be addressed during the district-wide “Week of Respect” by introducing the concept of an upstander. The upstander language was adopted to refer broadly to a person who demonstrates MOSAIC character virtues and skills. Using the term “upstander” also allowed the lessons specifically to address standing up to bullying and other injustices.

The upstander changes were summarized in the feedback report provided to teachers and administrators (see [Appendix A](#)) so that they would be aware that their suggestions had been heard and used to improve the curriculum. After these changes were implemented in the curriculum, we received feedback from teachers and students (through Process 1) that revealed that this adjustment was a success. Students related to the upstander language and teachers believed the topic was both relevant and important. Through this process, it became clear to teachers and students that their feedback was valued and that the process could be used to effectively address their concerns. No repetition of this type of incident has taken place.

Principles of using curriculum feedback to promote a culture of engagement through participatory feedback processes

Developing a value for the feedback process represents one critical step toward creating a culture of engagement through participatory feedback processes. Curriculum feedback exemplifies an aspect of engagement in the learning process whereby individual input influences what is taught and how it is taught. Because curriculum is the centerpiece of schools, we believe it is an area that can reclaim disempowerment more effectively and efficiently than many others. What we have learned from our work with SECD curricula applies to principles for integrating curriculum feedback into any subject area:

1. Acknowledge and address feedback regularly
 - For feedback to be valued and prioritized, it must be heard and addressed.
 - Showing students small, tangible ways in which their input yielded changes in practice can foster an increased sense of engagement in school.

- In the MOSAIC feedback process, this principle was accomplished by efficiently incorporating suggestions into the curriculum and using regular summary reports to communicate these changes.
2. Solicit feedback in a user-friendly way
 - To lessen the burden of the feedback process, feedback must be solicited creatively (e.g., request less often, adapt collection methods).
 - Feedback must be integrated into standard operating procedures as part of the lesson structure for the feedback process to feel less burdensome.
 - Aligning feedback with reflective processes necessary to arrive at useful feedback gives the feedback task itself pedagogical value.
 - In the MOSAIC feedback process, we improved participation by focusing on access to surveys, incorporating feedback into natural reflective processes, and decreasing the frequency of requesting feedback.
 3. Demonstrate appreciation for feedback contributions
 - To build trust and honesty in the feedback process, it is important to acknowledge all feedback contributions and maintain a spirit of continuous improvement.
 - In the MOSAIC process, we used the regular summary reports to convey appreciation for both positive and constructive feedback, which allowed teachers and students to feel comfortable sharing their honest opinions about the MOSAIC curriculum.

Conclusion

The ultimate aim of any curriculum feedback process is to create a culture in which opinions of all participants are valued. This culture allows participants to feel more engaged in the learning process and results in a flexible curriculum that meets the goals of educators and students alike. In the context of SECD, feedback embodies principles of empathy and constructive problem solving that are the essence of those programs. However, those same principles are no less important

for any academic subject area. Students and teachers are engaged in a collaborative learning process that should be marked by continuous improvement. Therefore, the feedback processes presented have value in any school, but in schools beset by academic and behavior challenges, they are an essential part of turning those schools around and supporting student and teacher engagement and efficacy.

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Appendix A: Sample Feedback Report



MOSAIC Feedback Report

This report summarizes student and teacher and provides responses and recommendations from the MOSAIC Support Team.

Successes

- Skill generalization
 - Several teachers observed students using these MOSAIC skills and virtues during language arts, math, lunch, recess, and specials classes.
- Student engagement
 - Students liked these specific activities most: paper clip activity, creating class norms; setting smart goals; learning the stories of Malala Yousafzai and Steph Curry.

Obstacles

- Timing
 - Several teachers and students reported that the district Week of Respect was not coordinated with the MOSAIC curriculum.
- Student engagement
 - Some students felt the vocabulary used in MOSAIC was challenging.
 - Some students felt they could not bring their school-improvement suggestions to fruition.
- MOSAIC materials
 - Some teachers found the font in the written curriculum too small.

Suggestions

- Format of lessons
 - Some teachers and students suggested including more interactive games.
 - Some teachers suggested including an outline of each month to aid in organization.
- Lesson topics
 - Some teachers suggested using simpler vocabulary for younger students.
 - Students requested learning about bullying in MOSAIC.

- Some teachers and students suggested aligning the October curriculum with the Week of Respect.

MOSAIC Support Team Responses

1. Thank you!
 - First, we are grateful for every student and teacher who has taken time to give us constructive and honest feedback about the MOSAIC curriculum.
2. Changes already made:
 - Because of your feedback, we will incorporate the following changes to MOSAIC curriculum this year:
 - Continuing to increase hands-on activities.
 - Revise formatting of curriculum to include larger font size and incorporate monthly lesson outlines and more clear lesson headers and scripts.
3. Changes to Come:
 - The following changes to the MOSAIC curriculum are still to come!
 - We will align more closely with the Week of Respect and focus explicitly on being an upstander in the face of bullying.
 - We will revise the vocabulary and pedagogical strategy used when introducing virtues to be more developmentally appropriate for the younger grades.
 - We will expand the school-improvement discussions to provide students with more time and opportunity to participate in the actions they suggest.