

Peer feedback in early childhood education: educational role and implications for teaching practices

State of the art

Feedback is a construct widely examined in pedagogical and evaluative literature, particularly within the context of higher and tertiary education, where it is recognised as an effective tool for supporting and enhancing learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Boud & Molloy, 2013; Grion et al., 2021). Understood as a comment, suggestion, or observation aimed at improvement, feedback provides information regarding the level of performance achieved and fosters processes of self-regulation and reflection. From a socio-constructivist perspective, feedback acquires relational and social significance and, in line with Vygotsky's (1978) thinking, connects to the importance of social support in cognitive development.

Within this framework, feedback becomes a resource for lifelong learning (Council of the European Union, 2018), as the act of producing feedback, arguably more than merely receiving it, activates processes in students such as analysis, revision, integration, and re-elaboration of knowledge (Ramaprasad, 1983; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Nicol, 2010; Grion et al., 2021). Despite its fundamental role in individual growth, a recent literature review conducted between December 2023 and April 2024 revealed that feedback remains an underexplored topic in early childhood educational contexts.

Recognising that feedback occurs within “communities of practice,” where learning emerges through shared participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), a research group, comprising two university lecturers, three preschool teachers, two undergraduate students in primary education, and one doctoral researcher in pedagogy, chose to explore the role of peer feedback among children aged 3 to 6 years. The aim was to investigate its presence in school contexts, to support learning, and to encourage reflection on the significance of observation in early childhood settings.

The lack of observational tools suitable for identifying feedback in interactions among children prompted the research group to develop an observational protocol to facilitate its detection and categorisation according to the various levels outlined by Hattie and Timperley (2007).

Research aims and questions

The purpose of the present study is to examine the presence and characteristics of feedback in interactions among preschool children, including the design and piloting of a data collection instrument based on Hattie and Timperley's (2007) theoretical model. The intention is to foster greater awareness of the role of feedback in early childhood educational contexts, support children's learning, and stimulate pedagogical reflection on the importance of observation in teaching practice.

The research is structured into an exploratory phase and an empirical phase, pursuing four general objectives. The first objective, situated in the exploratory phase, aims to investigate and deepen understanding of peer feedback among children aged 3–6 years. Based on this objective, the following research questions were formulated:

- **Q1.** How does the national and international literature address peer feedback among children aged 3–6 years?
- **Q2.** Are there existing tools for detecting, coding, and analysing peer feedback in early childhood?

The empirical phase comprises three research strands, each with a specific general objective. The second general objective, forming the first strand of the empirical phase, seeks to explore modes of peer feedback among preschool children and to verify the presence of feedback levels previously described by Hattie and Timperley (2007) in children's interactions. This objective led to the following research questions:

- **Q3.** Can peer feedback be identified among preschool children during structured, free, and routine activities?
- **Q4.** Are the feedback levels described by Hattie and Timperley (2007) observable in early childhood settings?

- **Q5.** Can the modes of production and reception of peer feedback, and any emerging types, be identified in interactions among preschool children?
- **Q6.** Is the observational protocol developed by the research group effective for analysing feedback in preschool educational contexts?

The second strand of the empirical phase addresses the third general objective, aimed at investigating the knowledge and practices of preschool teachers regarding peer feedback, to inform a possible shared definition. Corresponding research question:

- **Q7.** What representations of peer feedback do the participating preschool teachers hold, and how can these representations guide the development of a shared definition?

The third strand of the empirical phase corresponds to the fourth general objective, which systematically investigates the knowledge, practices, and training needs of preschool teachers in the provinces of Padua, Venice, and Vicenza (Veneto Region) through a specifically designed questionnaire. Corresponding research question:

- **Q8.** What knowledge, practices, and training needs regarding peer feedback do preschool teachers in Padua, Venice, and Vicenza possess?

Following the review of findings from the exploratory phase (analysis of national and international literature) and the empirical phase (semi-structured interviews and questionnaire), the need emerged to develop an additional final output, “*Key Principles*,” intended to facilitate the use of the observational protocol and provide insights into peer feedback in early childhood. This tool responds to evidence indicating that preschool teachers have limited knowledge and competence in the area, aiming to foster greater awareness and skill in applying peer feedback during educational activities.

Methodological and procedural choices

The research adopts a qualitative approach within a socio-constructivist paradigm (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1996) and employs an ethnographic case study method (Benvenuto, 2015; Leoncini, 2011; Pavanello, 2010). Data were collected through participant observation, video recordings, field notes, semi-structured interviews (Cohen et al., 2018), and questionnaires. Observation in this project is considered a powerful means to enhance understanding of children and relational dynamics among children and between children and teachers.

The research sample consists of five preschools: four in Veneto, Italy, and one in Essex, United Kingdom. Schools were selected using convenience sampling (Benvenuto, 2015), based on criteria such as the availability of teachers already participating in the research group, willingness of schools to participate, geographic location (for Italian schools), and the availability of the preschool director in the UK and the host supervisor during the research period abroad. Specifically, the sample includes: one state preschool in Venice province, one state preschool in Vicenza province, two state preschools in Padua province, and one preschool in Thaxted, Essex. The researcher’s effective time in each setting was approximately two months.

Expected outputs include the development of a descriptive codebook of peer feedback forms, formulation of a peer feedback definition appropriate for preschool children, and the creation of “*Key Principles*” to support teachers in the conscious use of feedback in early childhood educational contexts.

All data were processed in compliance with current personal data protection regulations, in accordance with Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR). The research project received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Department at the University of Padua.

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