Beyond the Bell curve

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Abstract
One of the most important, and neglected, aspects of the school assessment process is the feedback phase. The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the extent to which feedback is being conducted, training in feedback, and the types of feedback practices used in school settings. One hundred thirty-two school assessment professionals were surveyed, and results suggest that most believe in the importance of test feedback and are utilizing it. Results of this study also indicate that test feedback practices are lacking with most practitioners simply plotting scores on a bell curve. Recommendations for more culturally responsive, meaningful, and ethical feedback practices are discussed, including how to incorporate therapeutic assessment values and techniques in school settings.

One of the most valuable elements of school-based psychological assessment is the reporting, or communicating, of the evaluation results, sometimes referred to as the feedback phase of assessment (Assessment Feedback [AFB]; Glazer, 2014). AFB serves as an interface between the assessment process and a period of understanding, support, and intervention for students and families (Pattison et al., 2022). AFB has the potential to assist students and families in understanding psychological assessment results and maximize the utility and impact of psychological assessment in everyday life (Wong et al., 2023).

Several texts outline techniques for the other various aspects of the assessment process (Baron, 2004; Lewak & Hogan, 2003); however, AFB has not received the same attention in the literature (DeMatteo, 2021; Smith et al., 2007). Research examining the benefits of test feedback and the utility of different feedback methods is limited (Fallows & Hilsabeck, 2013; Wong et al., 2023). Of the few studies that have investigated AFB, the focus has been primarily on medical and clinical settings (Jacobson et al., 2015; Merker et al., 2010; Pope, 1992; Zhou et al., 2020). In fact, Pope (1992) described AFB as the most neglected aspect of assessment.

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The neglect of AFB is surprising given the potential benefits and professional and ethical obligation to provide AFB. There is international consistency regarding this obligation to provide AFB and has been recommended by international clinical research groups. Further, ethical guidelines state that psychologists must undertake a reasonable attempt to explain the results of their assessment (American Educational Research Association, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2017; Baxendale et al., 2019; Canadian Psychological Association, 2017; Gruters et al., 2022; National Association of School Psychologists, 2020). For example, the *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists* (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017) stipulates that clinician should

> provide suitable information . . . about the results of assessments, evaluations, or research findings to the individuals and groups . . . involved. This information would be communicated in ways that are developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate, and that are meaningful and helpful. (p. 21)

Similarly, the International Test Commission (2014) states that reporting must be done in such a way that the meaning of the scores is clear to the client.

Despite the international consistency in the obligation to provide AFB, many families worldwide report dissatisfaction with AFB, describing it as a distressing and overwhelming experience (Hennel, 2016; Pattison et al., 2022). Stoner et al. (2005) surveyed parents regarding their perceptions of AFB. The results revealed that all the respondents conveyed that their children's AFB meetings had been traumatic, confusing, and complicated. Another survey of over 1,000 parents in the United Kingdom reported that only half of the families surveyed expressed satisfaction with their child's AFB session (Crane et al., 2016). Families consistently described issues relating to the structure, style, and content of their AFB session (Abbott et al., 2013).

Families are often not actively involved in the AFB sessions, being limited to receiving information and signing documents (Garriott et al., 2000). Additionally, families report feeling alienated during feedback sessions (Vaughn et al., 1988). Families internationally express dissatisfaction with AFB. In fact, research demonstrates that AFB is frequently not remembered or even understood by families (Fallow & Hilsabeck, 2013; Foran et al., 2016). This is particularly problematic for families of low socioeconomic status and cultural and linguistic minoritized groups (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). For example, Salas (2004) interviewed Mexican-American mothers whose primary language was Spanish, which revealed that they perceived the language difference as a barrier in AFB sessions. They reported feeling that they were not heard by school professionals and were marginalized and isolated. They also reported that school professionals engaged in disrespectful behavior. Chinese families have also cited numerous challenges, including cultural and language barriers, poor translation and interpretation services, and disrespect from school professionals (Lo, 2008). They stated that that their input was not valued or welcomed, preventing them from nothing more than minimal participation and understanding.

Delivering AFB also can be a challenging process for the assessment professional, with many reporting nervousness and uncomfortable feelings (Rogers et al., 2016). This is complicated by evidence of inadequate graduate training in AFB (Curry & Hanson, 2010; Jacobson et al., 2015; Varela et al., 2023). Lockwood and Farmer (2020) reported that only half of graduate assessment coursework required training related to AFB.

The purpose of this exploratory pilot study was to investigate feedback practices of assessment professionals (i.e. psychologists and counselors) in school settings. This purpose is expressed through three overarching research questions:

> RQ1: To what extent do school assessment professionals conduct assessment feedback sessions?

Table 1. Participant data.

Highest degree held	%	N
Doctoral	16	21
Educational specialist	51	66
Masters (M.A., M.Ed., and M.S.)	32	42
Years of experience		
<5	25	33
6–10	18	24
11–15	10	13
16–20	15	20
>21	21	28
Do you believe providing test feedback is an important aspect of the school-based assessment process?		
Yes	98	128
No	2	3

RQ2: How does graduate training prepare school assessment professionals to provide AFB?

RQ3: What types of feedback methods and practices are used by school assessment professionals (e.g. models, strategies, tools, and frameworks) when conducting test feedback sessions?

Method

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained. Participation was voluntary and all participants were provided with an electronic informed consent document. Participants were 132 school psychologists from across the United States. Participant demographic information is available in Table 1.

Recruitment of participants

Two recruitment strategies were used to obtain a representative sample. Both methods featured a recruitment letter and an anonymous link to an Supplemental online survey. First, the survey was emailed to school psychology state associations during the fall of 2021. The state associations were asked to share the survey link with their membership. Second, approval was requested to post a national call for participants on the social media site, *Said No School Psychologist Ever*. A response rate cannot be calculated from these recruitment strategies.

Survey design

The survey instrument was designed to collect data about participant demographics as well as information about school-based AFB practices and graduate training. Survey items were initially generated from related survey research completed with clinical psychologists and neuropsychologists (Curry & Hanson, 2010; Jacobson et al., 2015; Postal & Armstrong, 2013; Smith et al., 2007). The surveys then were reviewed by five content experts (i.e. practicing school psychologists) for clarity, content, and usability. The content experts provided feedback; items were added, revised, and deleted based on feedback.

Survey administration

An Supplemental online survey using Qualtrics XM was distributed. The survey included 3 items inquiring about participants' demographics, 14 items that were multiple-choice items; and 2 open-ended questions. Survey items 1 to 3 were demographic, items 4 and 5 were related to research question 1, survey items 6 to 10 were related to research question 2, and survey items 11 to 16 were related to research question 3. All data, collected over 10 weeks, were collected anonymously.

Results

The data were analyzed using the data/analysis tab and crosstabs function of Qualtrics XM. In terms of the first research question, which focused on the extent to which school assessment professionals conduct AFB sessions, a sizable majority of respondents (71%, $n=94$) reported that they always or almost always conduct AFB sessions after completing an evaluation. The majority of the respondents (38%, $n=41$) reported spending 20 to 30 min conducting AFB sessions, while 18% ($n=20$) reported spending 30 to 40 min, 25% ($n=27$) reported spending 45 to 60 min, and 3% ($n=3$) reported 60+ min per AFB session.

The second research question, which addressed graduate training in AFB, thirty-six percent of the respondents ($n=39$) indicated that their graduate training programs only somewhat included coursework that specifically prepared them for providing AFB. Fourteen percent of this group reported their graduate training program did not provide coursework that addressed feedback at all, 30% said very little coursework, and no one reported that their graduate training program provided a great deal of coursework specifically preparing them for providing AFB.

Forty-eight percent ($n=51$) of the respondents reported that approximately 25% of the time in graduate training was spent on AFB. Thirty percent ($n=31$) reported that zero percent of time was spent on providing AFB. Respondents were asked about the extent to which their internship prepared them for providing AFB. Six percent ($n=7$) stated that their internship did not prepare them for providing AFB at all, 16% ($n=17$) reported very little, 30 % ($n=32$) reported somewhat, and 25% ($n=26$) reported that their internship prepared them a great deal for providing AFB. When respondents were asked to select the statement that best describes their training received in AFB, 25% ($n=27$) selected embedded "in my graduate coursework," 31% ($n=33$) reported "I learned from my site supervisor," 11% ($n=12$) said "post-graduate graduate professional development," one person reported that they read a book on AFB, 6 % ($n=7$) reported "professional mentorship," and 26% ($n=28$) reported "no formal training," and they learned on the job by trial and error.

The third research question focused on types of feedback practices that are being used when conducting test feedback sessions. Of the respondents, 81% ($n=83$) reported that they do not use a specific model or framework for their AFB sessions. Only 19% ($n=20$) stated that they do use a specific model or framework for their AFB sessions. The survey asked respondents to describe the AFB model they use and there were no responses submitted. Survey respondents were asked if they use any materials to enhance their AFB sessions. Eighty percent ($n=82$) responded yes, and 20% ($n=21$) responded no. The respondents who indicated that they do use materials to enhance their AFB sessions were asked to describe them. Of the 77 responses received, 88% of the respondents listed using a bell curve or graphs to plot the test scores. The remaining respondents (12%) referred to using their written reports as a resource in the AFB session. No other resources, metaphors, or props were referenced. The respondents were asked if they include the student/child in the AFB session. Only 35% ($n=36$) reported that they did include the child in the AFB. Of those respondents who indicated that they do include the child in the AFB session, the majority (83%) reported that the age of the children they include is middle school and high school age.

Discussion

Three overarching research questions were addressed. Regarding the first research question, Pope (1992) suggested that "feedback may be the most neglected aspect of assessment" (p. 268). However, the results of this survey demonstrated that the majority (83%) of the school assessment professionals surveyed conduct AFB sessions on a regular basis, with the majority spending approximately 20 to 30 min. These results suggest that AFB is a vital component of conducting assessments in schools.

Regarding the second research question, which addressed the graduate training received in AFB practices, most respondents reported receiving little training, which is consistent with the graduate training literature (Lockwood & Farmer, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). Training programs should place a strong emphasis on explicitly teaching this critical component of the assessment process. For example, training programs can make efforts to increase knowledge of AFB literature and increase AFB skills through competency-based approaches like role plays and immersive simulations (Jacobson et al., 2015). This also should include educating trainees on relevant ethical standards/ guidelines, assigning appropriate AFB-related reading, and in-class discussion oriented around understanding the complexity and importance of AFB. Trainees also should become familiar with and develop an understanding of collaborative/therapeutic models and approaches (Finn et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2020).

Concerning the types of feedback practices used during AFB sessions, the majority of the respondents reported not using models or frameworks for their AFB sessions. When the respondents were asked to describe their AFB practices, they reported using the bell curve, or simply providing a written report. These practices, although widely used and not necessarily harmful, do not appear to be collaborative, meaningful, or effective with parents and students.

Implications for school assessment professionals

Psychological assessment remains a critical and unique role of psychologists and counselors in school settings. The results of this study have several implications for practice of school counselors and psychologists. First, school assessment professionals indicated that they are providing AFB, but survey responses to *how* they were providing AFB were somewhat disappointing. Respondents indicated that they do not use models or frameworks and that their AFB practices include reading the written report aloud or plotting scores on the bell curve. The author would like to challenge school assessment professionals to reflect on their AFB practices and consider areas for improvement. How can AFB sessions be enhanced to make the school assessment process and outcomes more meaningful, effective, and ethical?

Suggestions for providing more meaningful, effective, and ethical AFB

AFB sessions are impactful on families; therefore, it is important to prepare the families adequately (Abbott et al., 2013; Hackett et al., 2009). Utilizing culturally responsive practices with every family can help increase AFB effectiveness and reduce the disparities. Efforts should be made to understand the families' concerns, beliefs, perspectives, and knowledge level. Adding a few questions to intake paperwork or to the interview regarding the family's point of view can help foster relationships that are reciprocal and mutually empowering (Kalyanpur et al., 2000) and individualize the AFB session. Anderberg and South (2021) suggest asking questions about how nervous parents are about the assessment results, cultural perspectives, and beliefs about disability; how

much they are hoping or not hoping to receive services; how much they believe their child has a disability; and how much they already know about the disability.

AFB satisfaction is highest among those who rate the assessment professional's manner during the AFB as favorable (Brogan & Knussen, 2003). Many parents report that they appreciate when the assessment professional reports on the child's strengths and recognizes their individuality (Abbott et al., 2013; Braiden et al., 2010; Crane et al., 2016, 2018). Parents notice whether the assessment professional seems trustworthy and competent, and they appreciate when the provider really listens to their concerns and provides them time to process (Abbott et al., 2013; Hackett et al., 2009). The assessment professional's positivity and warmth can mitigate negative emotional AFB experience. Setting a positive tone can include the assessment professional showing the family that they see the strengths of their child, letting parents know that they see their effort and strengths as parents, talking to and about them respectfully, and generally being warm and empathetic in interactions with the family (Abbott et al., 2013; Crane et al., 2018).

Utilizing AFB models and frameworks

Employing a structured model also can increase the meaningfulness of the AFB session. DeMatteo (2021) presented a Feedback Model that is designed specifically for the school-setting. The Feedback Model is rooted in basic learning principles, effective communication practices, and practitioner empathy toward the parental experience of the home-school relationship. DeMatteo's (2021) model includes 16 steps. The preliminary steps of the Feedback Model focus on establishing rapport with the parent, emphasizing the uniqueness of the student and establishing the purpose and agenda for the feedback meeting. The next steps involve the assessment professional providing an overview of standardized assessment, drawing a graph on which the results are to be plotted, and operationally defining the descriptive categories that will frame the AFB. DeMatteo's (2021) model creates a permanent product that is co-constructed and documents the AFB conversation. The cognitive constructs measured are explained and plotted in the appropriate descriptive range and this process is repeated for the achievement measure before plotting the CBM and visual-motor results. Social-emotional and behavioral results are then discussed while the graph of the results remain visible. The Feedback Model concludes with the assessment professional clearly stating the eligibility category, if warranted, and briefly reviewing recommendations to facilitate the student's development in the academic setting (DeMatteo, 2021).

Collaborative approaches to AFB

AFB is a key element in collaborative oriented approaches to assessment, such as therapeutic assessment (Finn & Tonsager, 1992). Collaborative approaches stand in contrast to the more traditional information-gathering approach to assessment (Finn & Tonsager, 1997), in which clients are less engaged in the process of assessment, and feedback is provided as a brief oral summary or written report at the end. Collaborative models can increase equity and fairness, through shared power in the assessment and AFB process (Holman et al., 2021). Finn and Tonsager's (1992) therapeutic assessment (TA) model is designed to engage children and their parents in the assessment process, addressing their assessment questions, and providing interactive feedback (Tharinger et al., 2007). In the TA model, clients help to guide the assessment through framing their own questions. The goal of TA is to promote new understanding and empathy in parents and teachers about their child that allows them to take steps toward systemic and individual change. Therapeutic assessors share their impressions with their clients throughout the assessment process, rather than saving their insights until they are revealed in a singular feedback meeting (Riddle et al., 2002). In

Finn and Tonsager's (1992) study, 32 clients received feedback according to this model and 29 clients received only examiner attention. The clients who received feedback according to the therapeutic assessment model reported a significant decline in symptomatic distress, felt more hopeful, and had an increase in self-esteem.

The benefits of using TA techniques are especially crucial considering the long history of school-based psychological assessment as a tool used to define students by their challenges and needs, leading to distorted pictures of students' capabilities (Harry & Klinger, 2014). The core values of TA, if embraced, have the potential to influence the tone and process of assessments in the school. These include (a) actively collaborating with students, teachers and parents; (b) respecting students, teachers and parents and their diversity; (c) having humility about professionals' expertise and the power of the assessment tools; (d) having compassion for students, teachers, and parents and their situations and treating each with sympathy and kindness; (e) being open and curious about ourselves in relation to students, teachers, and parents and how that might impact the assessment; and (f) being open and curious about how each student has developed as a unique individual (Tharinger, 2019). TA values practiced in the schools has the potential to provide parents and teachers with a new understanding of a student that results in enhanced empathy, motivation, commitment, and positive outcomes, as well as enhanced family-school relationships that are more easily maintained across time (Tharinger et al., 2008).

Integrating selected TA methods in schools

Finn (2007) acknowledged that, in school settings, it may not be feasible to utilize and implement *all* the components of TA and encouraged practitioners to "take what you can" from the model, stating that, above all else, it is of paramount importance to treat clients with kindness and respect, and to remember that no test score indicates an absolute truth about a client. Tharinger (2019) made practical recommendations for what was most applicable to include from TA to enhance the intervention potential of school-based assessments. The recommendations were as follows. First, embrace a collaborative stance toward assessment. Assessments are most useful and their results are most accurate when teachers, parents, and students are engaged as full collaborators. Utilizing a collaborative orientation to assessment, which enhances the intervention potential of assessment. Next, co-construct and address assessment questions with the student, parent, and teachers. Lastly, reframe what have traditionally been labeled "feedback sessions" as "summary and discussion sessions," highlighting the importance of gaining input and sense of "fit" of the assessment findings. Carefully plan and deliver feedback to parents and teachers first, including organizing findings by the co-constructed assessment questions. Tharinger et al. (2007) reported that when techniques of TA were used when conducting assessments in schools, parents, teachers, and students were incredibly grateful and stated specifically that assessments of this type were more helpful than traditional school-based assessments they experienced in the past.

Including the child in the AFB process

Another way to make AFB sessions more meaningful is to include the child in the AFB process. This helps the child to increase their self-knowledge and self-advocacy (Gentry, 2010). The goal is to provide the child with an assessment experience that directly impacts them, leaving them positively changed at the end of an assessment. This goal is achieved through an ongoing focused dialogue between the child, the parents, and teachers and assessors, which can lead to the "coauthoring" of a "new story" about the child, their strengths, their significant relationships, and their

barriers to learning. Assessment professionals can accomplish this by including the child and providing support in grasping and assimilating these new conceptualizations and in trying out next steps in their growth and developmental process (Finn & Tonsager, 1992, 1997). Feedback for children can take the form of a story or a fable that captures the assessment feedback in some metaphor that is relevant to the child (Finn, 2007; Tharinger et al., 2007, 2008) and can serve a number of important purposes, including (a) it is a way to acknowledge the tremendous importance of the parents in the child's life, (b) it provides another medium through which parents may experience empathy for their child and "get in the child's shoes," and (c) when the child learns that the story was created collaboratively, he or she is more likely to internalize the therapeutic message contained therein (Finn, 2007). Including the child in AFB session can serve as a powerful intervention itself.

Limitations

Limitations of this study and approach included several elements. First, a relatively small sample size ($N = 132$) limits the generalizability of the results. Second, the method of survey dissemination prohibited the calculation of overall response rate. Third, determining demographic information such as sex, ethnicity, country the participant practices in, assigned school level, and ratio of assessment professional to students would have helped contextualize the feedback practices. Despite these limitations, this exploratory study adds to the growing body of literature on assessment in schools and highlights the need for further research, increased graduate level-training, and higher quality guidelines focusing on AFB. It is hoped that bringing attention to AFB will lead to increased consideration of this critical part of the assessment process and encourage assessment professionals to reflect on their own practices and consider areas for improvement.

Future directions

The purpose of this study was to investigate feedback practices of assessment professionals in school settings. Future research should more fully address the format of and information included in AFB, and connect those findings with more specific information about how the AFB was received. Likewise, to fully understand the impact of AFB, follow-up data must be collected that includes information on adherence to recommendations and impressions from parents and teachers on how the children involved are progressing in school.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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