Beyond the Compliment Sandwich: Providing Specific, Meaningful, and Actionable Feedback for Young Children

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Mrs. Hernandez and Mr. Novota, colleagues at a pre-K–grade 3 elementary school, are discussing how they use "of the moment" observational assessment to provide immediate, actionable feedback to learners.

Mrs. Hernandez, a first-grade teacher, describes how she uses the "compliment sandwich" approach (compliment-constructive criticism-compliment) during observational assessment. She opens by sharing something that the child did well, such as "Good job writing so neatly!" then points out what they need to work on, which might include "Remember to begin your sentence with a capital letter" or "Check your sight words!" She ends the interaction by giving the child another compliment or some encouragement, such as "Keep it up!" or "I like your story!"

Mr. Novota, the pre-K teacher, shares his approach. During block play, he uses a version of the compliment sandwich but with a twist. He begins by sharing with the child something specific that they did well, such as "Wow! You solved your tippy tower problem!" Next, he refers them to an element of

prior learning, such as "Remember when we discussed how some shapes can be used to make spaces inside structures?" Then, he asks questions or gives the child an actionable strategy to consider, making sure they can use it independently. He might say, "Think about what pieces you might add or take away from your tower to make an inside space. I wonder, how could that work?" Finally, he exits the interaction by giving the child a nudge into practice, such as "Here are a few arches and cylinders to get you started. I can't wait to see what you do next!"

Mr. Novota reports that the entire interaction lasts less than a minute. Mrs. Hernandez jots down a few notes in her planner about Mr. Novota's approach.

Effective feedback involves neither giving advice nor evaluating performance. It entails commentary that is "goal-referenced; tangible and transparent; actionable; user-friendly (specific and personalized); timely; ongoing; and consistent" (Wiggins 2012). Quality feedback increases learning and motivation and predicts student achievement (Hattie & Timperley 2007). Indeed, NAEYC (2020) underscores that developmentally appropriate practice necessitates having "well-prepared and qualified early childhood educators to engage in effective decision making" regarding assessment, feedback, and instructional choices (4). Effective decision making is crucial when attempting to provide meaningful feedback to young learners. Based on its potential positive effects on a variety of child outcomes, intentional feedback should be a priority in early childhood education.

While feedback is vital within the cycle of teaching and learning, it is often overlooked. Providing substantive, actionable feedback to learners beyond a "Great job!" can be challenging. Teachers may grapple with what to emphasize in the moment, what to leave out, and what to save for another day. Due to a myriad of factors, teachers spend only a few seconds each day giving feedback to individual children (Hattie & Yates 2014).

Along with these challenges, research suggests that not all types of feedback lead to the same results. Some can even stifle achievement and development (Procházka, Ovcari, & Durinik 2020). When feedback is too general or is issued as a blanket statement to groups of children, children can become disengaged and lose motivation. For example, general feedback such as "I like your story!" or "Good job writing so neatly!" may send a message

that rewards low effort or overemphasizes procedural tasks that lack problem solving and creativity (Denton 2018). Likewise, if a teacher issues a general praise statement to the entire class, such as "Everyone did a great job on the math assessment," some children may dismiss the feedback if they feel they did not actually do well—whereas others may accept the feedback if they put forth effort but did not reach the intended objective.

This article focuses on providing specific, meaningful, and actionable feedback to children in preschool through third grade as part of the assessment process. We use the mnemonic WRAP to reflect how early childhood educators can offer consistent feedback that recognizes effort, promotes growth, and highlights meaningful ways to apply feedback for future learning. The mnemonic stands for

- **Well:** Share what the child did well.
- **Refer:** Refer to the child's prior learning.
- **Action and agency:** Provide a strategic action to foster the child's agency.
- **Practice:** Communicate what and how the child can practice.

Recasting the Compliment Sandwich

A common approach to offering feedback, one that was utilized by Mrs. Hernandez in the opening vignette, is the well-known compliment sandwich. The compliment sandwich is used for feedback in many different contexts, from educational settings to the business world. It typically consists of sharing a specific area of weakness that is couched between two positive, complimentary statements, with the positive statements requiring little to no relevance to the weakness identified (Procházka, Ovcari, & Durinik 2020). Mrs. Hernandez should be commended for taking the time to comment on her children's strengths and needs. However, for children to apply her feedback, they need more explicit, actionable, strategic guidance regarding next steps and how to implement them (Rabbani et al. 2022).

WRAP strategies can be applied across academic content areas, developmental domains, grade levels, and for classroom management purposes when providing behavioral feedback.

As faculty members in the Department of Early Childhood Education at Towson University (a large, mid-Atlantic region university), we (the authors) are charged with analyzing programmatic data on teacher candidate performance on NAEYC standards, as measured by signature assessments like the edTPA (a performance-based assessment of teaching used across the US during student teaching experiences). While analyzing the assessment data of our own undergraduate educator preparation program, it became clear that providing effective feedback is an area of significant need not just for undergraduate teacher candidates at our institution but nationally (edTPA 2021). Anecdotally, we have observed that providing meaningful feedback to learners and families, in both written and verbal form, often stymies our teacher candidates. They are unsure how or where to begin and end the interaction, and they may lack confidence regarding how to direct the learner in a strengths-based way.

To address these trends and areas of need, we created WRAP. WRAP strategies can be applied across academic content areas, developmental domains, grade levels, and for classroom management purposes when providing behavioral feedback. While the WRAP strategies can be applied across all grade levels, this article focuses specifically on using the strategies for providing feedback to children in preschool through the primary grades.

In contrast to the compliment sandwich, WRAP provides teachers with a concrete protocol that encourages agency and progress for children. WRAP allows teachers to cultivate a growth mindset in children and to build connections between children's prior learning, current progress, and future learning. It helps to emphasize learning as a process and not a product, and it can be delivered in written, oral, and/or visual form. This is important because verbal and visual feedback are often used with young children who may not yet have the requisite literacy skills to read written feedback.

WRAP in Action

The next day Mrs. Hernandez decides to try Mr. Novota's approach while circulating among her students during the time when they are independently writing. She pulls up a chair next to Lucas and, quickly glancing at his writing, realizes his story would benefit from more detail.

"Lucas!" says Mrs. Hernandez, "I noticed you spelled was correctly in your story. You worked hard to learn that spelling, and I hope you are proud of yourself. You kept at it and didn't give up!"

"Thanks," Lucas replies. "I used the word wall."

"Using that tool was a good idea!" says Mrs. Hernandez. "I wonder, do you remember when you learned about *showing* rather than *telling* in our writing? The author might say, 'As she turned the corner, her lip quivered and her eyes pooled,' rather than 'She walked away and started to cry.' "

"Yeah." Lucas adds, "I also remember we talked about how instead of saying 'the wind blew,' we could say 'the wind screamed.' That way we could really hear how it sounded."

"Exactly!" replies Mrs. Hernandez. "Look at this sentence in your story. 'I walked back to the swings, and I was happy.' Think about showing instead of telling here. Writers do that by helping the reader see what characters are seeing, feeling, and hearing instead of *telling* the reader. Think about this as you write: What does your face look like when you are happy? What does your body look like? How do you feel inside? What sounds do you hear when you feel happy?"

"Okay," says Lucas. "Maybe I'll show I was happy by saying 'I smiled and ran to the swings.' "

"That's a start!" says Mrs. Hernandez. "Try painting a picture of your happy feelings with your words. Give it a try, and let me know how it goes. I can't wait to see what you write next!"

Mrs. Hernandez used the WRAP method to offer Lucas meaningful, actionable feedback. A discussion of each component of WRAP follows.

W = Share What the Child Did Well

When providing feedback, both in spontaneous, daily interactions with children as well as in more formal assessment situations, most teachers consistently comment on what children are doing well—as they strive to grasp concepts or meet an instructional expectation. Sometimes praise statements are general, such as "nice work." The W in WRAP, for *well*, encourages teachers to go beyond giving the child a general compliment and instead point out a child's actions or behaviors that demonstrate target skills and knowledge. For example, Mrs. Hernandez gives Lucas specific praise when she says, "I noticed you spelled was correctly in your story. You worked hard to learn that spelling, and I hope you are proud of yourself. You kept at it and didn't give up!"

Research suggests that praise statements regarding children's words and actions should be specific, highlighting exactly what the child did well. This is referred to in the literature as "behavior-specific praise" (Royer et al. 2019; Markelz, Riden, & Hooks 2021). Thinking back to the opening vignette, instead of saying "Good job building that tower!" Mr. Novota uses statements like "Excellent work! You discovered that using the same shapes on all sides of the base makes a sturdier tower." Behavior-specific praise should be related to the learning target when applicable and should acknowledge creativity and problem solving. ("Examples of WRAP" below illustrates how this first strategy—and each strategy in WRAP—can be used in the block area of a preschool classroom.)

R = Refer to Prior Skills and Knowledge

Refer statements build a bridge for young children so they can apply prior skills and knowledge to solve more complex problems related to content or a specific learning target. Prior knowledge and skills are those that were previously learned, taught, or assessed, as well as the familial, cultural, and community foundation that each child brings to the classroom. Related to developmentally appropriate practice, feedback should include "deep knowledge about each child, including the context within which

each child is living. Educators acquire much of this knowledge through respectful, reciprocal relationships with children's families" (NAEYC 2020). Prior knowledge includes, but is not limited to, what is taught and assessed in the classroom.

Young children need varying amounts of support to apply prior knowledge to new learning (Shing & Brod 2016). Teachers can provide this support by connecting the "new with the known" and structuring their feedback in a way that makes these connections explicit. This helps children understand and integrate new constructs into their thinking and actions. By referring to prior learning, teachers make learning relevant to what the child already knows.

For example, in the vignette above, Mrs. Hernandez's feedback helped Lucas make connections and recognize a way to improve his own writing. Rather than her previous approach of saying "We need to work on adding details," Mrs. Hernandez instead says, "Remember when you learned about *showing* rather than *telling* in our writing? The author might say, 'As she turned the corner, her lip quivered and her eyes pooled,' rather than 'She walked away and started to cry.' Writers do this to help the reader see what characters are feeling instead of just *telling* the reader what happened." ("Examples of WRAP," below, includes additional information about how WRAP can be applied to writing instruction in first and second grades.)

A = Action and Agency Empower the Learner

While the compliment sandwich highlights what a child did well and targets an area for improvement, WRAP feedback empowers children to take ownership of their own learning. This is because it promotes *action* and *agency*. *Action* refers to the notion that teachers can provide concrete, rather than theoretical, strategies for children to attempt in a learning context (Jørnø & Gynther 2018). *Agency* can be defined in this context as interactions between an adult and child that encourage the child to take intentional action and have autonomy over their own learning (Varpanen 2019). (For more about agency in early childhood settings, see "Assessing Agency in Learning Contexts: A First, Critical Step to Assessing Children" in this issue.)

While general statements may not limit children's capabilities, they also may not empower children to extend learning beyond what is anticipated or expected by the teacher or in the curriculum. Teachers can promote agency by asking questions that elicit children's thinking and reflection. For example, to encourage Lucas toward intentional action in his learning, Mrs. Hernandez says, "Look at this sentence in your story. 'I walked back to the swings, and I was happy.' Think about showing instead of telling here. Writers do that by helping the reader see what characters are seeing, feeling, and hearing

instead of telling the reader. Think about this as you write: What does your face look like when you are happy? What does your body look like? How do you feel inside? What sounds do you hear when you feel happy?" Teachers can also promote agency by providing the child with a strategy to build on their strengths. For example, "You can use the word wall in the classroom to help you correctly spell sight words" or "You can whisper read the text to yourself to see if there is anything missing from your story."

P = Practice to Propel Growth and Learning

Feedback should guide children toward progress or mastery related to a learning goal. *Practice* means that children have opportunities to apply feedback from previous steps and become aware of how they are developing and improving over time (Masters 2014). This sends the message that learning does not stop after an assessment or a teacher's feedback concludes and that specific actions lead to new learning.

Practice statements place emphasis on a growth mindset: learning is a process that takes time, which means that children will have many moments of smaller improvements and even some setbacks before they fully master a skill. For example, as Mrs. Hernandez adopts the WRAP approach, she says to Lucas, "That's a start! Try painting a picture of your happy feelings with your words. Give it a try, and let me know how it goes. I can't wait to see what you write next!" When teachers communicate what and how a child can practice, they signal to the child that learning involves time, persistence, and practice, rather than emphasizing a single performance or product.

Examples of WRAP

WRAP Meanings	WRAP Examples During Block Play	WRAP Non-Examples During Block Play	WRAP Examples During Writing Instruction	WRAP Non-Examples During Writing Instruction
W = Share what the child did well	Wow! You discovered that using the same shapes on all sides of the base make a sturdier tower. You solved that "tippy tower" problem!	What a cool tower! Whoa! Look what you built!	I noticed you spelled was correctly in your story. You worked hard to learn that spelling, and I hope you are proud of yourself. You kept at it and didn't give up!	Your paper looks great! I understood what your story was about.
R = Refer to prior learning	Remember when you learned that builders plan for both the outside and the inside of structures? We discussed as a class what an open and closed space could be used for inside spaces and decided that builders could try to use shapes like arches and cylinders to make rooms inside buildings.	Remember that other people can add to your towers but only you can knock it down.	Remember when we learned about showing rather than telling in our writing? The author may say "As she turned the corner her lip quivered and her eyes pooled," rather than "She walked away and started to cry."	Remember the rule about only capitalizing the first letter of the first word of the sentence.
A = Provide a strategic action to foster agency	Look at this level of your tower. Think about what pieces you might add or take away from your tower in order to make an inside space. I wonder . . . how could that work? What could people do inside the space you make? What items could you put into the space when it is built?	I want you to try to make it taller and taller. Do you think you can build something even taller than you?	Look at the sentence in your story: "I walked back to the swings, and I was happy." Think about showing instead of telling here. Writers do that by helping the reader see what characters are feeling instead of telling the reader. Consider these questions as you write: What does your face do when you are happy? What does your body look like? How do you feel inside?	You need to add even more at the beginning. Try to switch up how you start your sentences.
P = Transfer into practice	Here are a few arches and cylinders to get you started. I can't wait to see what you do next.	You can put a sticky note with your name on this tower! You can only on 1 homework tool	Try painting a picture of these feelings with your words. Give it a try, and let me know how it goes. I can't wait to see what you write next!	We will have to review when to use periods and other punctuation because you didn't use any

Conclusion: Try a WRAP!

Feedback is essential for learning and growth. Intentional assessment practices include effective feedback. Shifting from the more common approach of using the compliment sandwich, teachers can adjust their current approaches to feedback. As seen in the vignettes and accompanying figures, the components of WRAP can be readily

implemented and adapted into interactions with young children. Changing the feedback paradigm requires no additional materials or resources. To get started, consider the following:

- **Be honest.** Only provide commentary on learning that children have achieved or are in the process of achieving. This may entail focusing on a smaller step or an element of a task that the child can perform fully. Being honest with children, grounded in a strengths-based perspective, builds a foundation for respectful, trusting relationships between teachers and children.
- **Avoid generalizations.** "Good job!" may reward a child with momentary warm feelings, but specific praise makes children feel seen and known for their efforts and particular accomplishments. Moreover, specific praise helps children become aware of incremental improvement in their growth and learning.
- **Think bite-sized.** There is no need to express every strategy in each feedback situation that might assist children in their learning. Focusing on one small strategy at a time can make a big impact and lead to continuous improvement.
- **Engage with families.** Families play the most important role in a child's development and learning. Teachers can share the WRAP components with them to further reinforce the learning process. They can give examples of these verbally or in writing. Because teachers may not have daily access to families, they can send a regular WRAP update, where they write down feedback related to a child's daily or weekly goals.

Mrs. Hernandez arrives at the faculty professional development meeting the following month with excitement. She shares with Mr. Novota how his approach to providing feedback has changed both performance and agency in her students. With daily practice, Mrs. Hernandez has grown much more confident in her ability to offer actionable, explicit feedback, and she is encouraged by children's responses. Rather than merely saying "Thank you" after receiving feedback during writing instruction, for example,

students now ask clarifying questions about their next steps and are empowered to put feedback into action independently. She has observed an improvement in their writing, and she recognizes that her feedback is more individualized and reflects children's cultural, cognitive, and social assets. With this new technique, she has noticed that children show greater engagement and curiosity about themselves as learners.

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Audience: *Administrator (director or principal)*, *Faculty*, *Student (higher education)*, *Teacher*, *Trainer*
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