



# **Reducing teacher workload**

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## Research topic

The research topic covered a trial of six different approaches to reduce marking workload within sixteen schools over an average of one term. The approaches used were: Marking in the Moment; Visible Learning into Action; Minimal Marking; Self-Assessment; Symbols; and Marking Conferences.

## Review Group Recommendations

The research and approaches selected to reduce marking workload were informed by the findings and evidence from the Workload Review Group Report '*Eliminating unnecessary workload around marking*' (WRGR, 2016), the Education Endowment Foundation report '*A marked Improvement*' (EEF, 2016) and Hattie's work on feedback from '*Visible Learning into Action*' (Hattie *et al*, 2016).

The three main principles of effective marking – that it should be *meaningful*, *manageable* and *motivating* – and the following key messages from the Workload Review Group Report formed the basis of decisions on which approaches to trial:

- Acknowledging pupils' work, valuing their efforts, checking outcomes and decisions about what to do next can be achieved without written feedback
- Written feedback on pupils' work has become disproportionately valued by schools and quantity of feedback should not be confused with quality
- Marking should be varied by age group, subject and pupils' needs, and consistency achieved by consistent high standards rather than unvarying practice
- Accepting work that pupils have not checked sufficiently detracts from pupils taking responsibility for their own learning
- Marking is often monitored rather than pupil outcomes. A culture challenge is required to 'debunk' the myth that hours spent marking is what good teachers do

Evidence from the 2016 EEF report that written marking was only one form of feedback to pupils was considered alongside Hattie's work on feedback using the 'Visible Learning impact cycle' (2016). These jointly underpinned discussions with schools and final decisions about selected approaches. An important additional element in decision-making was the intention to take account of each school's individual starting point and journey in developing marking practices. The six trialled approaches were selected jointly by the schools, who then individually selected which method they wanted to carry out, thus enabling them to take ownership of an approach that fitted within their own context.

## Approaches to reducing workload

Six approaches were developed within sixteen schools:

1. **Marking in the Moment** (six schools). Evidence for this approach came from the WRG and EEF reports that oral feedback and engaging in dialogue was effective for pupil learning, and so this would lessen teachers' written marking workload.
2. **Visible Learning into Action** (one school). Evidence for this approach came from the WRG Report's key messages and Hattie's work on 'Visible Learning'. This method was trialled through a whole-school approach that took account of different ages, subjects and pupils' needs. The school started by reviewing the impact of current practice and then using this as a basis to develop a range of more effective ways to provide feedback that lessened written marking.
3. **Minimal Marking** (three schools). Evidence for this approach came from the WRG and EEF reports that oral feedback and engaging in dialogue was an effective way to develop pupil learning, and so would lessen teachers' written marking workload.
4. **Self-Assessment** (two schools). Evidence for this approach came from the WRG and EEF reports and Hattie's research on pupils taking responsibility for checking their own work and planning next steps. It was expected that this would lessen teachers' marking workload, while increasing pupils' learning independence.
5. **Symbols** (two schools). Evidence for this approach came from the WRG Report that checking and acknowledging work could be carried out with a range of methods, so this would lessen teachers' written marking workload.
6. **Marking Conferences** (two schools). Evidence for this approach came from the WRG Report that acknowledging pupils' work, valuing their efforts, checking outcomes and decisions about what to do next can be achieved without written feedback. The conferences provided an opportunity for teachers to have a dialogue with pupils about their work that replaced the need for written feedback. It was expected that this would increase pupils' engagement in assessing their own work, while lessening teachers' marking workload

All of the approaches were measured using the same research methods:

- **Surveys.** Questionnaires were sent to teachers: a) at the start of the project to identify a baseline of their current marking workload concerns and inform trial developments; b) at the end of the project to identify impact on marking workload
- **Interviews.** Small group interviews took place with pupils, to collect their views on how the project impacted on them
- **Focus groups.** These were carried out with teachers during the project to identify and resolve any on-going project issues
- **Project research journals.** Teachers recorded their on-going reflections about the projects to discuss with colleagues and inform developments of each approach

- **Data reviews.** Pupil progress data was reviewed in each school to ensure that pupils were not negatively affected by the project

## Research Projects

All six approaches used the same research methods (see previous page). The first survey was completed by 21 schools initially interested in joining the project (\*16 finally took part and completed), which provided data from 114/187 teachers on current marking practices, impact on children's learning and staff workload. Key findings included:

1. Significant differences in time spent marking within schools (1-30 hrs) irrespective of age group taught (other than FS) and working full or part-time;
2. Concern that time spent was not commensurate with impact on pupils' learning;
3. Impact on work/life balance affected home/leisure time, creating stress;
4. 'Dogged' application of school policy, irrespective of individual pupil need;
5. Pupils often did not read or understand comments, so these were often repeated and explained again verbally;
6. Marking seemed to be for some-one other than pupils, mainly for SLT and Ofsted;
7. Whether marking was 'manageable' appeared to depend on individual perception, irrespective of time spent.

## Marking in the Moment

'Marking in the moment' focused on providing immediate targeted verbal feedback to pupils in lessons to reduce written marking. Six schools (48 teachers) used this method in English and Maths, with some teachers supplementing verbal feedback with symbols for additional prompts, or to identify which work had received verbal feedback. Each school aimed to target two groups in a lesson for verbal feedback and then minimally mark the other pupils' work as necessary. In the original survey, teachers in this group reported spending between 2-18 hours marking. Most of those returning the final survey (18/20) reported that it lessened their marking workload; some described this as "*drastically reducing marking*", but two said, "*It had less of an impact than I hoped*" due to their previous use of verbal feedback to supplement written marking. All wanted to further develop this method to include more subjects and devise other ways to increase its effectiveness for pupils. Teachers described the impact on pupils as increased confidence, self-esteem and motivation, and better progress. Their reflections included:

- A register was used to tick off children each lesson. This led to discussions of children who might have previously missed quality time with the teacher
- Comparisons of books ensured a shared understanding of how live marking would be recorded to give clarity for children, teachers and others
- Clever choice of seating arrangements enabled other children to listen into 'conference conversations' and also improve their work
- The immediacy allowed children to recall what they intended to write as they edit
- Some children enjoyed the chance to make improvements during the lesson, but others felt it was distracting, so this had to be taken into account

## Visible Learning into Action

'Visible Learning into Action' was a whole school strategy that started with Hattie's 'Visible Learning impact cycle' (2016) where 15 teachers jointly reviewed the place of feedback within their teaching and impact on pupil learning. Pupils' views were sought through interviews about marking and feedback. Teachers in each year group then designed a new feedback practice based on this evidence. FS/Year 1 increased the use of verbal feedback and minimised use of stamps and (coloured) pens. Years 2-4 used ticks, coloured pens and stamps to replace extensive written feedback; pupils were encouraged to self-edit and minimal teacher comments were made on 'next steps' and where work was exceptionally well done or wrong. Year 5-6 pupils used self-assessment and peer marking. Whole class generic feedback was given to help pupils edit their work. Teachers kept research journals and shared reflections of progress on marking at the start of each staff meeting. The impact differed across year groups; teachers of Years 5-6 noticed the most significant drop in marking workload and those FS/Y1 the least. Teacher reflections included:

- Staff looked more broadly at the children, rather than having a narrow focus on where they made mistakes. Now teachers look at pieces of work as a whole and are able to celebrate more of what children have achieved
- Staff said they focused more on adapting teaching to meet pupils' needs because they weren't marking 30 books in great detail every night
- One teacher reported seeing a dip in what was produced by the children, but felt this was now a more accurate picture, as the children weren't being 'spoon fed'
- Some children struggled with new levels of independence, e.g. using a dictionary to correct spellings, because they were used to teachers correcting work for them
- Teacher discussions identified that previous marking was training children to be lazy and reliant on teachers telling them how to improve; now the onus is on them

## Minimal Marking

Minimal Marking involved three schools (9 teachers) reducing their marking through different feedback strategies across Years 1-6. One school adapted their previous use of written comments with coloured pens by replacing some of this with verbal feedback, while another school replaced all written comments with verbal feedback. Both schools supplemented this, where occasionally necessary, with minimal symbols. The third school initially planned to use only symbols to replace written feedback but found this was not meaningful for pupils, so changed to use verbal feedback with small groups and 'marking in the moment'. All of the teachers' marking workload was significantly reduced, with one describing this as 'significant': "*I have not taken any books home since the project began*". Teachers adapted their practice to address pupils' needs within different contexts, using guided groups, pupil self-assessment, peer marking, stickers with a deeper learning question and occasional comments, if necessary. Teacher reflections included:

- The shift towards whole class oral feedback and next steps in learning activities was more effective
- Teachers began to consider how they could adapt their classroom practice and this altered significantly as their approaches to feedback altered
- The feedback children found most motivating and meaningful was verbal feedback in small groups with the teacher. This built their confidence and enabled them to work with each other and not feel singled out
- Teachers' preconceived notions of what a child found motivating and meaningful was challenged; simple symbols were motivating and others in common use held negative connotations, engendering feelings of failure
- In Years 3 & 5, if a child had not done enough work, a rocket was drawn in their book to indicate they would have to still complete an acceptable amount of work

## Self-assessment

Self-assessment was carried out in two schools (11 teachers). One school focused on two classes for each of Years 2, 3, 4 and 5 in English lessons, where pupils used marking symbols to assess their own work and set their own 'Next Steps'. Selected symbols were allocated to success criteria and a 'Next Steps' symbol replaced the previously used green comment from the teacher (circled in green for continuity). The other school designed a self-assessment grid for pupils in Years 1, 3 and 4, to use for English and Topic work. The grid used a simple traffic light system. In Year 1, pupils coloured in dots according to how they had met the success criteria (RAG rated) and then this was RAG rated by the teacher to give a visual representation of where the pupil and the teacher felt work had been completed correctly. Some spellings were identified and work was stamped against learning objectives. In Years 3 and 4, pupils had additional space on the grid to write their evidence or next steps and the teacher could make comments on the evidence. Spellings and grammar were identified and the work was stamped against the learning objective. All teachers reported that much less time was spent marking and that pupils had become more independent; they were more skilled at assessing their own work and identifying what they needed to do to move on their learning. Initially, pupils needed clear guidance about what to do, but found the symbols and grids easy to use and good for 'at a glance' assessment of a piece of work. Teacher reflections included:

- Higher ability children benefited from targets in the front of their books, linked to the national curriculum with a symbol as a visible reminder of how they can improve further and select what they to do to deepen their learning next
- The project also impacted on all other areas of teaching as children naturally looked for their own next steps in other curriculum areas
- The project highlighted gaps in children's knowledge; they were not always previously able to find features of their writing, but now could. One teacher reported that the children made progress faster when they were invested in the assessment of their own work, as they are active and not passive in the process

- Children said that the responsibility of looking for evidence gave them a better understanding of what they had done well and areas they needed to improve
- Children were used to being told what they needed to do, which made them complacent – one child said “*When it’s written down for you, you don’t have to think, you just do what it says*”

## Symbols

Symbols were used by two schools, one of whom already used marking symbols but developed this strategy further; it used symbols in a mixed class of Year 3/4 pupils, while the other school worked with two teachers from Years 2 and 4. In the school new to using symbols, pupils were tasked with finding or designing symbols they thought were appropriate and made sense, and then these were displayed in their classrooms. The other school developed their current system, after reflecting on feedback from pupils and teachers about what had worked well previously. They used the symbols for which pupils had expressed a preference and clearly understood. The number of symbols was reduced as teachers reported that “*Too many symbols make marking meaningless as children forget what each of the symbols mean and are unable to act on the marking*”. All teachers reported that their marking workload had lessened (in one case “*dramatically*”) and that marking was more focussed. Pupils responded positively, noting quickly what was done well and where improvements were needed. Teacher reflections included:

- Symbols reminded children of the many skills they are expected to know and how it looks in their book, so were readily available for them to look back on
- Pupils had to think about the meaning of the symbols, so they were more engaged with what they meant
- Marking is more focussed, using a marking overview sheet each lesson  
This is a much more personalised approach to children’s learning, more meaningful, and importantly, manageable for teacher workload
- I give more meaningful feedback to the children and they are receiving better quality lessons because feedback is instant. It has changed my teaching practice

## Marking Conferences

Marking Conferences were used by two schools (9 teachers) across Years 1, 2, 5 and 6. One school used three strategies: ‘Whole-Class Conference Marking’ led by the teacher, where all pupils used the same marking sheet to assess their work against success criteria; ‘Small Group Conference Marking’ where pupils worked with the teacher after being grouped according to their area of development need; and ‘1:1 Conference Marking’ where individual pupils met with a teacher to discuss their successes and next steps. During small group and 1:1 marking conferences, other pupils completed other activities independently. The second school had used 1:1 conference marking before; these had been popular with pupils, but time-consuming, so they developed this model further. Teachers used weekly success criteria to assess work at the end of each session and reviewed these in weekly small group conferences, firstly in English and later in

Maths. Codes identified what had been achieved and how independently pupils had worked, no written comments were used. During the project, the school made further changes - becoming flexible about when marking conferences were held and using some whole class or 1:1 conferences where these better meet diverse pupils' learning needs. All the teachers new to conference marking reported that 1:1 marking conferences were most effective and resulted in good progress in children's work, but finding the time for this was viewed as "*incredibly difficult*". They found the whole class model enabled all marking to be completed within one lesson, but teachers could not be specific enough for individual children. Views on small group marking conferences were mixed; they met more specific needs than whole group conferences, but some children lacked the ability to work independently when teachers did this. The school with previous experience of conference marking found their new practice was much quicker and children engaged well with the process and made good progress. All of these teachers stated that their marking workload had significantly decreased. Teacher reflections included:

- Small group conferencing was most effective for Year 6 than younger children due to greater levels of independence
- The children benefited from working individually with teachers to see where they need to improve, but it was hard to find time to do this
- Marking conferences seemed to motivate the children as they felt they had more guided support
- Weekly success criteria was key to encouraging pupils independence, forming part of whole class feedback and grouping pupils for marking conferences

## Limitations of data

Four issues affected our data, despite all schools using the same research methods to collect information on their results.

1. Seventeen schools started this project, but one left during the trials, so did not complete (1 from 'Marking in the Moment' group)
2. Not all teachers carrying out the six trialled approaches completed the final survey, so those data responses may not reflect all experiences (1. Marking in the Moment 26/51; 2. Visible Learning 15/16; 3. Minimal Marking 4/9; 4. Self-assessment 3/11; 5. Symbols 3/10; 6. Marking Conferences 9/18).
3. Within each approach, schools were encouraged to trial this in a way that reflected their individual context needs. This provided rich data that was meaningful for each school to use and develop their own marking and feedback practice, but made comparison between school findings less robust.
4. Each approach was trialled for one (summer) term, so responses about changes in marking workload may not accurately reflect experiences over a whole academic year.

## **School Culture**

**What cultural barriers may exist to prevent take up of new initiatives to reduce workload?**

**What specific issues may reduce the effectiveness of the approaches you have developed?**

**What steps could be taken to reduce these cultural barriers?**

The biggest barrier to implementing new marking policies is the fear of what Ofsted's view of what 'good' marking looks like. Despite Senior Inspectors best intentions to deliver the message that Ofsted have no view on marking, anecdotal evidence would suggest that this message is not getting through. As a result, schools are reluctant to implement new marking policies, particularly those that are due an imminent Ofsted visit.

Evidence also suggests the myth still exists that hours spent on marking is the sign of a 'good teacher'. This exerts a significant amount of pressure on teachers and perpetuates the 'marking for marking sake' mind-set.

To overcome these barriers, time should be given over to ensuring all staff understand the reasons for embedding a new marking policy, what the new approach will be, how it will be implemented and what the perceived benefits will be. Clear checkpoints should be established to review data to ensure that there are no detrimental effects on children's progress.

Schools should also be encouraged to adapt their new marking policy to fit their school's context. This delivers a tailored approach to suit the needs of the children in their school and enables staff to feel confident that it will have the desired impact in the classroom.

## Conclusion

**Discuss the relative merits of each of the approaches you developed. How effective were they, what do they cost to implement and what resources are needed, including staff time?**

Each of the approaches reduced teachers' marking workload and had no negative impact on pupil progress.

There was no cost for any of the approaches, although two schools reported buying some additional 'stamp' resources for using symbols to mark work.

Staff time was required at the start to enable them to review current school practice and establish how their selected approach of providing feedback would be carried out. It was also required for meetings to share on-going practice and resolve any issues of concern.

**What recommendations would you make to other schools hoping to reduce staff workload in this area?**

**Teachers carrying out the projects made the following recommendations:**

- The most important thing to consider is the impact that your existing practice is having and what the proposed practice will have – it may look wonderful but what is the impact? Part of the problem is that changing habits is difficult, teachers need to be able to see why what they're doing is not an efficient use of time
- Have a clear marking policy or agreed set of actions set out before you start so that there is no confusion. SLT need to be kept in the loop so that they can be supportive when monitoring books and conducting any pupil interviews
- Have a clear idea about what you want feedback to 'look' like, keep meeting and having 'marking clubs' to reassure staff
- Share the new feedback policy in a staff meeting and revisit half termly with people bringing books so it can be discussed and any issues or uncertainty, addressed
- Ensure feedback is part of a holistic approach to teaching and learning
- Discuss what you are planning with your class, be clear how you will provide feedback
- Let children feel part of the process so they take more ownership and responsibility for their learning
- Trial 'Marking Conferences' in different ways to see which fits best with the children's needs and levels of independence
- Carefully consider which activities are left for children to complete while holding marking conferences, to ensure that all children at all times are completing something purposeful and meaningful. If a focus group is needed, plan this for when an additional adult is available to support, or consider pre-teaching

Don't try to apply too many 'rules' across the school - every year group has to manage it differently due to needs in their class and independence levels of the children.

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