

Jewish Community Secondary School

Marking

Evidence Based Practice in Marking and Feedback

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Abstract

“Ensuring teachers of the future are equipped with an up-to-date understanding of the latest research and a desire to use evidence to inform their teaching practice is key to improving schools.” (Gibb, 2017)

Schools around the country are adapting their policies to be in line with current research. Carnine (2000) argues that there is an urgent moral imperative to improve student outcomes by utilising the evidence base. In the past, decisions have been made by “wishful thinking” and “appealing nostrums.” Historically, many other professions (most notably medicine) have “matured” as they became more reliant on scientific evidence and less on at best anecdotal evidence and at worst blind ideology.

Coe (2013) convincingly demonstrates that schools have become expert at “faking improvement.” In response to escalating accountability and competition schools have embarked on programmes and implemented policies with manufactured measures of success. Though this is not a deliberate process in the sense that no school leader sets out to utilise flawed methodologies, it is a pernicious process which must be sensibly and honestly evaluated.

It is for these reasons that school policies must be subjected to the cold light of empirical evidence gleaned from seminal research and publications. This document will aim to outline the evidence base on common marking practice and discuss its impact on student outcomes.

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1. Feedback as promoting student outcomes

It is generally assumed in schools that feedback aids learning, that marking is a form of feedback and therefore by deduction, marking aids learning. This section will examine the evidence on feedback interventions generally and marking as a subsection of feedback particularly.

1a. Evidence on feedback generally

The most commonly cited source for the effect of feedback is the Education Endowment Foundation's Teaching and Learning Toolkit. This states that feedback has an effect of +8 months (very high), a low financial cost and a reasonably strong evidence base.



The evidence that the EEF uses to make this claim are meta-analyses. This is a form of research where the researcher combs all published evidence on particular interventions, evaluate their evidential security and takes a weighted average of the effect, published as an *effect size* (for more on effect sizes see Coe, 2002). Other researchers, like the EEF or more famously John Hattie, then take those meta-analyses and average out their effect sizes.

To say the least, such an approach is a blunt instrument. Researchers have noted significant concerns with such an approach. The first is that of statistical competence:

"In summary, it is clear that John Hattie and his team have neither the knowledge nor the competencies required to conduct valid statistical analyses. No one should replicate this methodology because we must never accept pseudoscience." (Bergeron, 2017)

Another damning concern is the way that meta-analyses obscure negative results by taking a mean. In a seminal 1996 study, Kluger and Denisi found that even though on average feedback interventions have a positive effect, over a third of studies found that feedback interventions actually had a *negative* effect on performance. James Mannion of the Institute of Education recently summarised this concern as:

*"Imagine if a school leader said to their colleagues, 'We're all going to do a new thing but there's a one in three chance that we'll be making things worse'; they would be unlikely to garner much support for their new initiative. However, in the absence of a systematic impact evaluation of any shiny new initiative (or existing area of practice), **this is precisely what school leaders are saying** – even if they don't realise it." (Mannion, 2017) – emphasis my own*

Feedback is an extremely complicated activity and the literature takes great pains to define what is good feedback and what is not good feedback. These findings have not filtered down to schools where the working assumption is that, with obvious exceptions, feedback is effective at promoting learning. The key point here is that policies must anticipate and accommodate this evidence base.

1b. Marking as a sub-set of feedback

Marking student work is an act of feedback. As such in an evidential sense it can be considered as a sub-set of feedback, with all the relevant complications, including that the evidence suggests

that over a third of it will result in a negative effect. An obvious limit to the scope of marking as a sub-set of feedback is that marking will only be a tiny percentage of the entirety of feedback that a teacher gives.

In terms of marking specifically, there is very limited direct evidence. A recent EEF report (2016) concluded that

“The quality of existing evidence focused specifically on written marking is low”

Continuing to relate this to school policy:

“This is surprising and concerning bearing in mind the importance of feedback to pupils’ progress and the time in a teacher’s day taken up by marking.”

The EEF did present a number of potential directives regarding improving marking policies but these recommendations are based on extremely flimsy evidence and have been widely criticised (see Didau, 2016 and Farrow, 2016). In response, the authors of the report have been very clear that:

“We would be very happy if people took the current lack of evidence on marking as the key finding of the report” (Richardson and Coleman, 2016)

There is no alternative conclusion but to therefore assert that **any marking policy is based on no evidence at all**. That is not to say it will not be effective, but that we have no way to know if it promotes or hinders learning.

1c. The cognitive science argument

The lack of evidence above is retrospective and correlational. We have no evidence of where teachers have marked student work and this has led to learning gains. The field of cognitive science offers us a causal mechanism as to why this would be ineffective. Cognitive science looks at how the mind works, thinks, remembers and learns. One of the dominant findings from the cognitive sciences is the difficulty of transferring knowledge to a new context. Essentially whenever a person forms a new memory (or learns something) that memory is tied to a number of contextual cues. These cues could be the things the teacher is saying, the particular words used in exposition or even the physical environment of the room. Most student knowledge is therefore *inflexible* in the sense that it is tied to cues. Without those cues, the memory cannot be retrieved.

If a student submits work, it can be thought of as a response to a question from the teacher. If that piece is then marked, the student can now respond to a new question from the teacher. When this has been achieved we generally assume that the student has in some way improved and that this improvement carries through to the long term. However, this conclusion is fraught with difficulty. In reality all that has occurred is that the student has responded to one prompt from a teacher, and then *on a specific piece of work* has made a *specific improvement* given a *specific cue in the form of feedback*. This says nothing at all about future performance and the evidence would indicate that at the next opportunity to demonstrate this “new” knowledge the student will not be able to do so due to the inflexibility of their knowledge. For more relevant reading, see Willingham (2002) or Soderstorm and Bjork (2015).

2. Impact on Workload

Discussions of marking are inevitably tied up with workload. Any activity which teachers spend time on will contribute to workload. The question for leaders and policy makers is how much time, and could that time be better spent. This section will look at the absolute impact on teacher workload in terms of amount of time as well as the absolute financial cost.

2a. Absolute impact on workload

In response to concerns of escalating teacher workload fuelling a recruitment and retention crisis, in 2016 the government commissioned a working party to assess the impact of marking on teacher workload. The paper (DfE, 2016) reports on a number of surveys uses extremely strong language to discuss school marking policies.

"...53% of sample respondents thought that, whilst marking pupils' work is necessary and productive, the excessive nature, depth and frequency of marking was burdensome.

Marking...[is] an unhelpful burden for teachers...the time it takes is not repaid in positive impact on pupils' progress."

"...teachers have less time to focus on the most important aspect of their job – teaching pupils."

The report therefore argues that

"cutting out the unnecessary frequency and depth of marking to create a manageable workload has clear benefits in retaining experienced teachers and supporting newly qualified teachers."

The findings of the report became governmental priorities after publication (Morgan, 2016).

Below is my calculation for how much time I would spend marking if I were to meet the feedback policy at JCoSS. I have tried to be conservative with my estimations:

1 KS3 piece a fortnight (30 students)

3 KS4 pieces a fortnight (60 students)

4 KS5 pieces a fortnight (35 students)

Total of **130 pieces a fortnight**

If each piece took 3 minutes:

390 minutes

6.5 hours a fortnight

~**123.5 hours a year**

This leads to a conservative estimate of ~1360 hours for the department and does not include time taken discussing marking in meetings, briefings etc.

2b. Financial impact

It could be argued that there is no extra financial impact to this workload. However, it must be noted that teachers are being paid to do a job, and if they are doing this job they are not doing

some other job; they are missing the opportunity to do other work. This opportunity cost must be carefully evaluated. Marking as a teacher activity has no evidence to suggest it carries impact. There are many teacher activities however, that do carry evidence to suggest they have an impact. That 7.25 hours a fortnight could be spent on some other activity that would carry exactly the same financial weight but would have a greater impact on student outcomes. There are many activities carrying significant weight in the research which would be much “safe bets” in terms of focussing teacher activity.

2i. Case Study 1: Stephen Tierney

Tierney is Chair of the influential Headteachers' Roundtable, the SSAT's Vision 2040 Group and CEO of the Blessed Edward Bamber Catholic Multi Academy Trust. In his 2017 piece addressing issues of workload and marking he writes:

“At the same time people look at ways of efficiently marking they may also want to discuss and think about why mark? The road to a reasonable workload is paved with doing less work. Many people reject this as they then have to decide what's most important and what they will no longer individually or collectively do; it's a hard call. By not making a conscious decision the decision is made for you; your family, friendships and well-being all suffer. The system then loses more teachers than it can ever hope to replace. It's time to decide what not to mark this weekend.” (Tierney, 2017)

3. Ofsted and Performance Management

There is no doubt that the proliferation of marking policies has in part been driven by Ofsted and within school performance management. This section will discuss current Ofsted guidance on marking and its use as a performance management tool within schools.

3a. Ofsted

Sean Harford, the National Director of Education at Ofsted, has made his position and guidance for inspectors very clear. In a 2016 blog on the Ofsted website, he states, as we have seen that:

“...there is remarkably little high quality, relevant research evidence to suggest that detailed or extensive marking has any significant impact on pupils' learning.”

Going on to then issue a directive to inspectors as:

“...inspectors should not report on marking practice, or make judgements on it, other than whether it follows the school's assessment policy.”

This means that, theoretically, if a school had no marking policy they would receive a clean bill of health from Ofsted.

3i. Case Study 2

It is reasonable for school leaders to be concerned that what Ofsted say and what they do might not necessarily marry. The Michaela Community School in Wembley is therefore an instructive case study. Michaela were inspected in 2017 and received a report with Outstanding across the board. Indeed, there are barely any criticisms in the report at all, which notes:

“Across years and subject areas, teachers use approaches that support pupils' learning very effectively over time, as the striking progress seen in pupils' subject books shows....

Disadvantaged pupils make substantial progress and achieve as well as other pupils...

Pupils who have special educational needs...make similar exceptional progress from their starting points at a similar rate to all pupils."

These comments buck national trends and are impressive in their own right. Most notably, Michaela does not have a marking policy and their teachers do not mark student work.

Below is a list of other secondary comprehensives known to me who have also radically de-emphasised marking from their T&L policies:

School	Progress 8	Most recent Ofsted
<p>I have deleted this data as the information was passed to me on social media – I have not verified it nor asked the relevant schools for permission to publish. Thread accessible here</p> <p>https://twitter.com/adamboxer1/status/934825954974806017</p>		

3a.ii. Ofsted on Workload

It is also worth noting the flipside of this equation. Ofsted have announced and extensively discussed in public their intent to ask workload related questions (Spielman, 2017). Sean Harford (2017) has been extremely active on social media trying to encourage head teachers to take steps to reduce their teachers' workload making explicit reference to the Government's workload document discussed above. Not only can we expect inspectors to ask Senior Leaders what they are doing in this regard, but it will now be a question on the questionnaire to staff.

3a.ii. JCoSS's prior inspection

In December of 2015 JCoSS was inspected by Ofsted. One area for school improvement is:

"ensuring that all pupils' work is thoroughly marked in line with the school's policy to help them improve"

This directive has formed a central plank of learning walks, observations and faculty reviews.

There are two halves to this sentence. The first half is that the work should be marked in line with the school's policy. As discussed, such advice to schools would still be valid after the new guidance as it relates to the policy. If the school has a policy, the policy should be followed (though this of course is not to pass any comment on the *quality* of the policy per se). The second half argues that such actions will "help them improve." There is a clear causative link here between the two clauses, the marking helps the students improve. As we have seen above and will also see below, Sean Harford has made clear that inspectors in future should not issue such instructions. However, there is reasonably a question over schools who have received this guidance in the past. Unaware of any clear published evidence on the matter I asked Sean Harford about this over twitter:

Adam Boxer @adamboxer1

Hi @HarfordSean if a school has feedback from an old inspection relating to improving thoroughness of marking to improve progress (as well as comply with policy) will they be held to that after all the changes?

7:40 p.m. · 24 Jan 18

View Tweet activity

Replying to @adamboxer1

I covered this here: gov.uk/government/upl...

1 2 12

Adam Boxer @adamboxer1 · 10h

So that overrides any previous feedback from prior inspections?

1 1 1

Sean Harford @HarfordSean · 10h

Inspectors should follow what I have set out in the update.

1 1 1

Adam Boxer @adamboxer1 · 10h

Great thanks!

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Great thanks!

1

Harford referenced his 2016 School Inspection Update (Ofsted, 2016) upon which the blog post referenced above is based. Amongst other comments about marking, our concern is addressed as:

"...regardless of any area for improvement identified at the previous inspection, please do not report on marking practice, or make judgements on it, other than whether it follows the school's assessment policy. Also, please do not seek to attribute the degree of progress that pupils have made to marking that you consider to be either effective or ineffective. When reporting, please do not make recommendations for improvement that involve marking, other than when the school's marking/assessment policy is not being followed by a substantial proportion of teachers; this will then be an issue for the leadership and management to resolve."

3b. The role of marking in performance management

The use of marking in performance management is widespread. It is predicated on the assumption that good marking and good teaching are interlinked. As we have discussed above, this assumption is extremely precarious and is based on no tangible empirical evidence. Interestingly, (as discussed above) Ofsted themselves have recognised this, with Sean Harford (2016) writing that:

"Inspectors will also not seek to attribute the degree of progress that pupils have made to marking that they might consider to be either effective or ineffective."

In short, we are working in a knowledge vacuum and we lack the empirical tools to be able to relate pupil progress to the marking which they have experienced.

This is reflected in one of the opening statements of the Government's workload survey into marking (discussed above):

"...providing written feedback on pupils' work – has become disproportionately valued by schools"

In a similar vein, Harford also instructs that:

"...inspectors will not make recommendations for improvement that involve marking..."

Despite the fact that inspectors will therefore not recommend improvements involving marking, schools across the country will still be featuring marking heavily in school, departmental and individual teacher improvement plans. This is out of step with the evidence and with our state-sponsored regulatory bodies.

3bi. Behavioural proxies

Assessing teacher performance is recognised within the research literature as being an incredibly difficult task (Sutton Trust, 2014). As a complex performance, quality of teaching cannot be directly evaluated but must be inferred from proximal behaviours. In line with multiple sources of evidence Coe (2013) lists a number of commonly used proxies for teacher quality and evaluates them as "poor proxies for learning", and therefore poor proxies by which to judge teaching.

<u>Poor Proxies for Learning</u> <u>(Easily observed, but not really about learning)</u>
1. Students are busy: lots of work is done (especially written work)
2. Students are engaged, interested, motivated
3. Students are getting attention: feedback, explanations
4. Classroom is ordered, calm, under control
5. Curriculum has been 'covered' (ie presented to students in some form)
6. (At least some) students have supplied correct answers (whether or not they really understood them or could reproduce them independently)

Marking has become one such proxy. The student's book has become a proxy for their learning and the marking in it has become a proxy for the teacher's quality. Because of the lack of evidence surrounding marking as a useful proxy of anything (other than compliance with school policy), the Government workload document states:

"[marking] is serving a different purpose such as demonstrating teacher performance or to satisfy the requirements of other, mainly adult, audiences.

Too often, it is the marking itself which is being monitored and commented on by leaders rather than pupil outcomes and progress as a result of quality feedback."

It is perfectly possible for a teacher who achieves outstanding outcomes and learning gains for their students to never have marked a book. Conversely, it is perfectly possible to find "outstanding" marking in students' books but for their teacher to not be producing outstanding outcomes.

This is a state of affairs which is not unique to teaching. In many social settings, managers must seek out proximal behaviours to inform management decisions and discussions about performance. Campbell's law states that:

"The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor" (Campbell, 1976)

Similarly, and more pithily, Goodheart's law states that:

"When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure" (Strathern, 1997)

4. Affective Justifications

Within the psychological literature, *affect* is used to describe a person's disposition, feelings or emotions towards something. Marking is often justified by reference to such affective ideas and this section will deal briefly with two of these.

4a. It shows students that you care

I am aware of a conversation between a head of faculty and an NQT (details of which school and any other identifiers omitted for online version). The head of faculty said to the NQT that they should expect poor behaviour as the books had not been marked. Marking the books shows that you care and that students behave better for teachers who they think care about them.

In my opinion this statement is flawed, and indeed dangerous, on a number of levels. There is no evidence that I am aware of which suggests that students behave (or learn) better if they think their teacher cares about them. There is also no evidence to suggest that students think that a teacher who marks their books cares more about them than one who doesn't. We have a large body of evidence about how to promote good behaviour in schools (see for example Bennett, 2017), none of which relates to marking. Teachers should not *need* to show students that they care before they will behave well and, even if they did, there are many better ways to do so than by marking student books.

4b. Parents want it

It could well be the case that parents in general, and those at JCoSS in particular, expect teachers to be marking books frequently. Certainly there is plenty of anecdotal evidence from year and phase leaders to suggest that this is the case. An important caveat to that evidence is that most of our parents are extremely supportive and rarely complain about anything; we must be wary of allowing the loudest voices to dictate policy.

Even if this is a belief held by the majority of parents, it is highly questionable whether it is at all relevant. The key difference between the public and private sectors is that in the private sector the "customer is always right." This is not the case in the public sector. We do not serve "customers"; our service is to the best interests of the child in front of us. It is of course preferable to have parental support for our actions but it is not necessary. As professionals, our decisions, knowledge and expertise must be respected. If we decide that a certain policy is appropriate or inappropriate then we must be able to carry that through. Obviously it would be incumbent upon us to reach out and explain our reasoning but our obligations do not carry beyond that.

5. Recommendations

It should be emergent from all of the above that there are serious problems with the way marking is carried out and the “disproportionate value” which is ascribed to it. The most pressing issue is, without a doubt, to radically de-emphasise the role that marking plays in performance management on a teacher, faculty and whole school level. As above, there are schools which have completely abandoned their marking policies and Ofsted have made it abundantly clear that such an action would not be penalised. It is also the case that in order to promote outstanding teaching and learning, something else must take its place.

To my mind, the prerequisites for any such policy must be that they are:

- a) Evidence based
- b) Subject specific
- c) Workload proportional to impact

5a. Evidence based

It is clear that our marking policy is not evidence based. There are a great number of ways that teachers can become more evidence-based in terms of their practice. A useful starting point would be the Sutton Trust's *What Makes Great Teaching* (2014) which covers a number of areas in this regard. Rosenshine's *Principles of Instruction* (2012) draws in a wide range of evidence from observational studies and the cognitive sciences to distil the actions of master teachers and is also helpful in this regard (it is worth noting that neither of these documents reference marking except to say that it is “not currently by research as valid” in terms of assessing teacher quality).

5b. Subject specific

Lee Shulman's seminal 1986 paper *Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching* led the call for subject-specific pedagogical methods as opposed to generic ones. He coined the phrase “pedagogical content knowledge” (PCK) to represent how the teacher's knowledge of the *what* of teaching must influence the *how*. In essence, teaching methods cannot be declared a priori and in isolation from the content. Different taught subjects will by definition have different content material and must therefore have different pedagogical methods.

It does not appear that this philosophical position has been particularly widely adapted amongst teacher education circles who have continued to focus on generic examples of “good practice” which are almost always divorced of content material. Christine Counsell is one academic who has been bucking this trend. Her *Genericism's Children* deserves wide attention as an elegant meditation on the misuse of Bloom's Taxonomy as a tool for improving teacher performance in a general sense (Counsell, 2016).

Observational studies also indicate the weakness of an approach which focusses on generic policies and pedagogical approaches at the expense of the subject specific. Coffey et al. (2011) discuss teacher transcripts of assessment for learning that have been lauded in the literature as good practice. They show that when the actual subject matter is taken into account these are not effective examples of moving learning on.

5c. Workload proportional to impact

Workload, as noted above, is a highly pressing matter for schools across the country. Simple economic models dictate that in times of sparse resources teachers' time must be directed in the most effective and efficient manner possible. As such any policy must take into account a ratio of workload to impact and aim to maximise impact and minimise workload.

One example of such an approach is "whole class feedback." This means that student work is read, but not marked. Whilst the teacher is reading the work they jot down a number of common themes as well as the names of one or two students who have outstanding parts to their work. In the next lesson the feedback on common errors is delivered to the whole class who can then reflect and perfect their work as the feedback is delivered. Doug Lemov has described this process as "something brilliant, simple and replicable to reduce workload without eroding outcomes" (Lemov, 2016). This is not to say that this is the policy that JCoSS should adopt, but it is an example of a viable alternative.

5i. Case Study 3: Huntington Research School

John Tomsett, head of Huntington Research School, is an influential school leader whose writings have been quoted in JCoSS policy discussions in the past (specifically around graded lesson observation). Huntington were recently visited by Ofsted who awarded them an Outstanding grade, and were specifically praised for their approach to teacher workload as a "driving force" behind their grading. Tomsett has provided this approach on his website, with one relevant section reading as:

"4. Marking and Feedback policy designed from the bottom up, based upon a set of principles, different according to department..."

Ultimately, the DfE can do very little to reduce workload – it is up to school leaders to set a culture where staff are cared for, well-trained and valued and policies are based on common sense and the principle that we shouldn't be doing things unless they clearly help improve student outcomes." (Tomsett, 2017)

6. Conclusion

It is hoped that this document has provided an overview of the research on marking. Schools across the country are in the process of wrestling with very difficult issues of teacher performance, increased accountability, a volatile and diminishing workforce and escalating workload. The temptation for easy answers must be tempered with an objective reading of the evidence and an honest attempt to improve outcomes for all stakeholders.

As far as my own anecdotal experience goes: the current KS3 marking and feedback policy is, in my opinion, a good one. It is evidence based, subject specific and not overly burdensome on teachers. Despite this, I still believe that the importance placed on it as part of performance management is disproportionate. Even more so this is the case in KS4 and KS5 where the policy is less effective as per my criteria above. I suggest this is also true in other faculties across the school.

As a workforce we are capable of writing outstanding feedback policies which meet the demands of the evidence and can support our students to make outstanding policies. How we will manage the implementation of such a policy is secondary to the policy itself.

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