

# **Eliminating unnecessary workload around marking**

**Report of the Independent Teacher  
Workload Review Group**

**March 2016**

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## Foreword from Chair, Dawn Copping



Working with a highly skilled and very experienced group of educational professionals in my role as Chair of the Marking Policy Review Group has not only been a privilege, but an opportunity to see the challenge of excessive workload from a range of perspectives. Classroom teachers, school leaders, education bloggers, Unions and Ofsted were all represented: every meeting reflected a determination to reduce workload and eliminate unnecessary tasks from the daily lives of teachers.

What was very clear from the start was the shared view that marking had become a burden that simply must be addressed, not only for those currently in the profession but for those about to enter it. Our job was to discover how we ended up here and how we could make the long overdue change needed to help restore the work-life balance, passion and energy of teachers in this country.

As part of our work we looked at current practice in many schools, looked back through educational writing and perspectives, heard from colleagues in the independent sector and considered the research available in this area to identify a manageable way forward. I am grateful to the Education Endowment Foundation for sharing their work-in-progress of their review into marking.

Whilst we learnt a lot along the way one message was very clear: marking practice that does not have the desired impact on pupil outcomes is a time-wasting burden for teachers that has to stop.

My hope is that school leaders take this report and consider what they are expecting of the staff in their schools. I hope they take note of what OFSTED has clarified about marking and take advantage of their right to make decisions in their schools that meets the needs of their staff, pupils and community. I hope that this work will mark a turning point and will lead to policy and practice that is based on what we know about marking rather than what we think we know.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'D Copping'.

**Dawn Copping**  
**Headteacher, Shaw Primary School**

## **Eliminating unnecessary workload around marking**

As the workload challenge showed, all parts of the education system have a role to play in reducing the unnecessary tasks that take teachers and school leaders away from their core task: improving outcomes for children. There is no single reason behind excessive workload. Government must always introduce policies with thought and planning. The accountability system must encourage good practice rather than stimulate fads. School leaders must have the confidence to reject decisions that increase burdens for their staff for little dividend. Teachers themselves must be more active in using evidence to determine what works in the classroom. Two things are clear. Nobody intentionally sets out to create unnecessary workload, and everybody involved in education – from Government ministers to classroom teachers – has a role to play in reducing burdens. This report looks specifically at issues around marking, explaining what the problem is, how it has arisen, and how it can be addressed. It offers a way to make a positive difference.

## Summary

1. Effective marking is an essential part of the education process. At its heart, it is an interaction between teacher and pupil: a way of acknowledging pupils' work, checking the outcomes and making decisions about what teachers and pupils need to do next, with the primary aim of driving pupil progress. This can often be achieved without extensive written dialogue or comments.
2. Our starting point is that marking – providing *written* feedback on pupils' work – has become disproportionately valued by schools and has become unnecessarily burdensome for teachers. There are a number of reasons for this, including the impact of Government policy, what has been promoted by Ofsted, and decisions taken by school leaders and teachers. This is not to say that all marking should be eliminated, but that it must be proportionate.
3. The **quantity** of feedback should not be confused with the **quality**. The quality of the feedback, however given, will be seen in how a pupil is able to tackle subsequent work.
4. This report will help schools review their practice with the aim of **shrinking** the importance marking has gained over other forms of feedback and **stopping** unnecessary and burdensome practice.
5. Marking is a vital element of teaching, but when it is ineffective it can be demoralising and a waste of time for teachers and pupils alike. In particular, we are concerned that it has become common practice for teachers to provide extensive written comments on every piece of work when there is very little evidence that this improves pupil outcomes in the long term.
6. There is also a cultural challenge here. In many cases the view is that you must spend hours marking to be a good teacher; that writing pages of feedback makes you more effective; and that there is a link between the quantity of marking and pupil progress. These are myths that need to be debunked.
7. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach. A balance needs to be struck between a core and consistent approach and trusting teachers to focus on what is best for their pupils and circumstances. With this in mind, the marking review group has developed specific recommendations for Government, Ofsted, employers, governors, school leaders, teachers and researchers, which can be found at the end of the report.
8. In summary, we recommend that all marking should be **meaningful, manageable and motivating**. This should be the perspective adopted by all engaged in education, from classroom teachers to the Department for Education (DfE).

## What is the problem?

*'Marking every last shred of work with developmental and next step marking, checking that the children have responded to the marking and getting them to respond to yesterday's marking as well as today's marking, and marking that they have read my marking and so on ad infinitum.'* (Middle leader, primary, workload challenge respondent)

9. The analysis of the workload challenge survey showed that 53% of sample respondents thought that, whilst marking pupils' work is necessary and productive, the excessive nature, depth and frequency of marking was burdensome. We took this view as our starting point, recognising that too much value is currently placed on written feedback. We wanted to send some clear messages about its place and purpose in order to eliminate unnecessary teacher workload.

10. Marking has evolved into an unhelpful burden for teachers, when the time it takes is not repaid in positive impact on pupils' progress. This is frequently because it 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.

11. The consequence of this skewed dominance of written feedback means that teachers have less time to focus on the most important aspect of their job – teaching pupils. There are also wider implications for the workforce: 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 as they concentrate on what attracted them to the profession in the first place: making a difference to pupils.

12. Our remit was to pay particular attention to 'deep marking'. From a review of the educational literature, there appears to be no broadly agreed definition for this term or any theoretical underpinning of its educational worth. As a working definition we adopted the following:

*'Deep marking is a generic term used to describe a process whereby teachers provide written feedback to pupils offering guidance with a view to improving or enhancing the future performance of pupils. Pupils are then expected to respond in writing to the guidance which in turn is verified by the teacher.'*

13. We agreed to use the term deep marking to encompass the terms dialogic marking, triple marking and quality marking.

14. The growth of deep marking seems to have arisen for several reasons, including: practice which misinterpreted and ultimately distorted the main messages of Assessment for Learning; Ofsted praising particular methods of marking in an inspection report so that

other schools felt they should follow the same example, and false assumptions about what was required by Government.

15. No Government or Ofsted guidance or policy has set deep marking as a requirement. The [Teachers' Standards](#) state that teachers should 'give pupils regular feedback, both orally and through accurate marking, and encourage pupils to respond to the feedback'. This is not a requirement for pupils to provide a written response to feedback: it could simply that pupils should act on the feedback in subsequent work.

16. Deep marking also seems to have been supported by an assumption that marking provides a more thorough means of giving feedback and demonstrates a stronger professional ethic, as well as improving pupil outcomes. Deep marking often acts as a proxy for 'good' teaching as it is something concrete and tangible which lends itself as 'evidence'. In some cases, the perception exists that the amount of marking a teacher does equals their level of professionalism and effectiveness. These are false assumptions.

17. We considered what ineffective marking looks like:

- It usually involves an excessive reliance on the labour intensive practices under our definition of deep marking, such as extensive written comments in different colour pens, or the indication of when verbal feedback has been given by adding 'VF' on a pupil's work.
- It can be disjointed from the learning process, failing to help pupils improve their understanding. This can be because work is set and marked to a false timetable, and based on a policy of following a mechanistic timetable, rather than responding to pupils' needs.
- It can be dispiriting, for both teacher and pupil, by failing to encourage and engender motivation and resilience.
- It can be unmanageable for teachers, and teachers forced to mark work late at night and at weekends are unlikely to operate effectively in the classroom.

18. There is little robust evidence to support the current widespread practice of extensive written comments and so we propose an approach based on professional judgement. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is looking in detail at the existing evidence on marking as part of a review, to be published shortly, including identifying gaps in research and where we need a better evidence base to serve teachers and leaders.

19. Marking should be part of an assessment policy alongside other practices that inform teachers, create positive pupil outcomes and drive future planning. Giving marking

separate policy status may have contributed to the perception that it is more important and has more impact than other types of feedback.

## How to change practice

20. We believe that three principles underpin effective marking: it should be meaningful, manageable and motivating. Marking practice too often responds to myths and fads, rather than focusing on these principles. To change practice in schools and classrooms, we think there are two challenges:

- Embedding the principles of effective marking in all schools; and
- Challenging the ‘false comfort’ of deep marking.

## Embedding the principles of effective marking

**Meaningful:** *marking varies by age group, subject, and what works best for the pupil and teacher in relation to any particular piece of work. Teachers are encouraged to adjust their approach as necessary and trusted to incorporate the outcomes into subsequent planning and teaching.*

21. Marking should serve a single purpose – to advance pupil progress and outcomes. Teachers should be clear about what they are trying to achieve and the best way of achieving it. Crucially, the most important person in deciding what is appropriate is the teacher. Oral feedback, working with pupils in class, reading their work – all help teachers understand what pupils can do and understand. Every teacher will know whether they are getting useful information from their marking and whether pupils are progressing.

22. Consistency across a department or a school is still important, but this can come from consistent high standards, rather than unvarying practice. Shared expectations of marking will help everybody to be clear about what is required of them, but each subject and phase should be able to determine the policy in their areas, responding to the different workload demands of each subject/phase, and drawing on teacher professionalism to create meaningful and manageable approaches. Policies should be judged against the actual hours spent on marking, and adjustments to requirements made where necessary.

**Manageable:** *marking practice is proportionate and considers the frequency and complexity of written feedback, as well as the cost and time-effectiveness of marking in relation to the overall workload of teachers. This is written into any assessment policy.*

23. The time taken to mark does not always correlate with successful pupil outcomes and leads to wasted teacher time. Examples of disproportionate marking practice include: extensive comments which children in an early years’ class are unable to read, or a written dialogue instead of a conversation. If teachers are spending more time on



marking than the children are on a piece of work then the proportion is wrong and should be changed.

24. Senior leaders and governors are responsible for the effective deployment of all resources in the school. They should take into account the hours teachers spend on marking and have regard to the work-life balance of their staff.

25. The key is for schools to challenge and review their marking practice, making sure they are considering the impact on teacher workload when setting expectations. Teachers will be better able to exercise their professional judgement about the type of work to be set, including more extensive written tasks, if the marking load is manageable and when released from the burden of deep marking every piece of work.

26. Feedback can take the form of spoken or written marking, peer marking and self-assessment. If the hours spent do not have the commensurate impact on pupil progress: **stop it.**

27. In the Workload Challenge responses, a key driver of particular marking practices was seen to be Ofsted. In response, in the Spring of 2015, Ofsted clearly set out that it does not expect to see any specific frequency, type or volume of marking – it is only interested in the overall effectiveness of marking policies on outcomes for pupils. This clarification is now contained within the [School Inspection Handbook](#):

Ofsted **does not** expect to see a particular frequency or quantity of work in pupils' books or folders. Ofsted recognises that the amount of work in books and folders will depend on the subject being studied and the age and ability of the pupils.

Ofsted recognises that marking and feedback to pupils, both written and oral, are important aspects of assessment. However, Ofsted **does not** expect to see any specific frequency, type or volume of marking and feedback; these are for the school to decide through its assessment policy. Marking and feedback should be consistent with that policy, which may cater for different subjects and different age groups of pupils in different ways, in order to be effective and efficient in promoting learning.

While inspectors will consider how written and oral feedback is used to promote learning, **Ofsted does** not expect to see any written record of oral feedback provided to pupils by teachers.

If it is necessary for inspectors to identify marking as an area for improvement for a school, they will pay careful attention to the way recommendations are written to ensure that these do not drive unnecessary workload for teachers.

28. It is important that schools take notice of the Ofsted clarification document and that Ofsted continues to train its inspectors so that every school inspection reflects these important clarifications. We are heartened to note that Ofsted is monitoring reports

against the clarification information and taking action where necessary, including asking for reports to be rewritten.

**Motivating:** *Marking should help to motivate pupils to progress. This does not mean always writing in-depth comments or being universally positive: sometimes short, challenging comments or oral feedback are more effective. If the teacher is doing more work than their pupils, this can become a disincentive for pupils to accept challenges and take responsibility for improving their work.*

29. An important element of marking is to acknowledge the work a pupil has done, to value their efforts and achievement, and to celebrate progress. But there are many ways to do this without extensive marking. And too much feedback can take away responsibility from the pupil, detract from the challenge of a piece of work, and reduce long term retention and resilience-building.

30. Accepting work that pupils have not checked sufficiently and then providing extensive feedback detracts from pupils' responsibility for their own learning, particularly in editing and drafting skills. Pupils should be taught and encouraged to check their own work by understanding the success criteria, presented in an age appropriate way, so that they complete work to the highest standard.

## **The Challenge**

31. In conclusion, if your current approach is unmanageable or disproportionate, stop it and adopt an approach that considers exactly what the marking needs to achieve for pupils. The impact on teacher workload must be taken into account when reviewing, developing and following marking practice and school assessment policies.

**Look at examples of school practice and how some schools have addressed the challenge of reducing teacher workload in marking at**

<https://teaching.blog.gov.uk>

# Recommendations

## **DfE:**

- **DfE** should commit to using its influence to disseminate the principles and messages of this report through system leaders.

## **Ofsted:**

- **Ofsted** should continue to communicate the clarification paragraphs in the inspection framework through updates and other relevant channels.
- **Ofsted** should continue to monitor inspection reports to ensure no particular methods of marking are praised as exemplars and ensure training of inspectors emphasises the commitment in the framework.
- **Ofsted** should monitor the impact of the revised inspection Framework on the practice of schools.

## **LAs/MATs/RSCs/Governing Boards and School Leaders:**

- Use the three principles set out in this report to review the school's marking practice as part of an overall and proportionate assessment policy in partnership with their teachers and governors.
- Evaluate the time implications of any whole school marking and assessment policy for all teachers to ensure that the school policy does not make unreasonable demands on any particular members of staff.
- In partnership with their teachers and governing boards, monitor their marking practice as part of their regular monitoring cycle and evaluate its effectiveness on pupil progress.
- Challenge emerging fads that indirectly impose excessive marking practices on schools.

## **ITT providers:**

- Draw on research and make trainees aware of emerging findings and evidence.
- Ensure requirements made of trainee teachers conform to the principles of this report.
- Include a repertoire of assessment methods in training.

## **Teachers:**

- Seek to develop a range of assessment techniques to support their pedagogy.
- Actively review current practice to ensure marking adheres to the three principles in this report.

## **Researchers:**

- Research current marking methods deployed in schools.
- Work with schools to evaluate current marking and assessment practices in schools to promote good practice.

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