



Reducing teacher workload through ‘real- time’ personalised feedback

Research report March 2018

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Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Table of figures	3
Review Group Recommendations	3
Research topic, questions and hypothesis	3
Approaches to reducing workload	4
Research Project	5
Research methodology	5
Description of the identified intervention	5
Results	7
Outcomes of teacher questionnaires	7
Outcomes of interventions	9
Analysis of teacher Interviews	9
Impact on teaching - verbal versus written feedback	9
Impact on student learning	10
Learning Outcomes: different ability groups - different experiences	11
Impact on quality of work	12
For whose benefit is marking?	12
Impact of being a part of the trial	12
School awareness	13
Assessment data collection and analysis – impact on teacher workload	14
Formal assessment	14
Time taken in managing data	15
Reliance on formal testing used for data	15
Validity of data analysis	15
Data collection – informal methods	16
Analysis of students interviews	17
Students' responses to feedback and marking	18
Impact on different ability groups	18
Research limitations and considerations for interpretation of the results	18
School Culture	19
Conclusion	20

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Table of figures

Table 1: Termly non-teaching workload and relative proportions of workforce working total hours on these activities	7
Table 2: Teacher perception of their school's data management expectations	8
Table 3: Cost to schools associated with data management activities	8
Table 4: Teacher perceptions of marking in schools	8

Review Group Recommendations

Two recent reports, "Eliminating unnecessary workload associated with data management" and "Eliminating unnecessary workload around marking" of the Independent Teacher Workload Review Group (DfE, March 2016) offer a thorough and proactive analysis of the root causes of these problems and suggest a necessary way forward for the teaching profession. In summary, it was recognised that "when used well, data can have a profound and positive impact. They help teachers to teach, school leaders to focus on the right issues, Ofsted to do its job, and the Government to understand how the education system is performing in England. "Too often, however, the collection of data becomes an end in itself, divorced from the core purpose of improving outcomes for students" (page 5 "Eliminating unnecessary workload associated with data management" DfE, March 2016) and "marking practice that does not have the desired impact on student outcomes is a time-wasting burden for teachers that has to stop." (Page 3 "Eliminating unnecessary workload around marking" DfE, March 2016).

Research topic, questions and hypothesis

To summarise the current problems associated within assessment, data management, workload and their relationship to students' outcomes, research points to the following major causes for concern: teachers' wellbeing and retention are impacted negatively by both frequent and sometimes unnecessary data analyses and the unnecessary workload that arises in the form of excessive deep marking. Research seems to indicate that 'after the event' feedback is neither efficient nor effective and that "too often, the collection of data becomes an end in itself, divorced from the core purpose of improving outcomes for pupils"(Eliminating

unnecessary workload associated with data management – Report of the Independent Teacher Workload Review Group, March 2016, page 5).

With these conclusions in mind, we undertook an evaluation of current practices in our schools (The Aquinas Trust) with regards to the gathering and use of assessment information. The research examined the diversity and quality of assessment, as well as the extent to which the work associated with gathering and use of assessment information impacted on teacher workload, improved student outcomes and enhanced the quality of school transition processes.

In response to the recommendations of these reports, which were to “reduce the amount of formal testing, data collection and its analysis by adopting the principles of quality formative assessment” and “reduce the amount of marking and improve the value of feedback to students and teachers through high quality verbal feedback” the research sought to answer the following two research questions:

1. What is the impact of current practices in the trust’s schools on teacher workload and student outcomes?
2. What is the impact of personalised, ‘real-time’ assessment and feedback on teachers’ workload and the outcomes for students?

Approaches to reducing workload

In order to answer research question 1, teacher questionnaires were used. To answer research question 2, teachers from the primary sector and the teachers of English in the secondary schools were involved in the research. Questionnaires and interviews were also used to assess the impact of the teachers’ assessment, marking and feedback on learning outcomes. With selected focus groups of students and teachers, structured interviews were held to evaluate both the method of the research and the resultant data.

The null hypothesis was that there would be no significant difference in teacher workload, nor difference in the performance of those students receiving increased verbal feedback compared to those who do not. The experimental hypothesis was that there would be a significant difference in reduction of teacher workload and improvement in student performance of those students receiving increased verbal feedback, compared to those who received written feedback through teacher marking.

Research Project

Research methodology

To address the aims of the research, the independent variable (IV) of intervention type was operationalised by creating two conditions: IV Level 1 (Control condition) - no intervention, IV Level 2 (Active control) - increased formative assessment and verbal feedback given, with reduced written feedback.

To introduce the interventions to the assigned groups, within the chosen Yr4, 5 and 7 Year groups, 24 parallel classes were divided into the trial and control conditions. In the trial classes, teachers were required to make formative assessment and give verbal feedback during the lessons instead of written feedback. Teachers in the control classes continued with their current school practice of giving written feedback according to their marking policies.

Description of the identified intervention

Class teachers (CTs) provided the relevant learning in a chosen genre of writing in the following way: all CTs planned lessons, for one week, for the following learning outcome - *Draft and write by using a wide range of devices to build cohesion within and across paragraphs*. The teachers were able to choose the writing genre most suitable for their Year classes. The lessons were no longer than 45 minutes and delivered as follows:

- **Day 1** - CTs provided a general outline of the new concepts being taught and modelled examples which exhibited the planned outcomes – no more than 10 min. Students generated their own examples which incorporated the taught material. CTs assessed the students' outcomes throughout the lesson by offering personalised feedback and requiring the students to make improvements in their next attempts.
- **Day 2** - It was anticipated that the lessons would continue in this manner throughout the first two days in order to master the focus skills.
- **Day 3** - The students were given an opportunity to apply the learned skills. The CTs shared the expected standard of writing and asked students to produce an extended purposeful piece of writing which was marked and given written feedback by the teacher.

The intervention explored the impact of the increased personalised feedback in assessing writing on teacher workload. When giving verbal or written feedback, the CTs were asked to focus on spelling and punctuation and text organisation and structure. The teachers marked the students' writing only once a week on Day 3. At the point of giving verbal feedback, teachers only noted VF in students' books. If they wished, CTs had a choice of following this with one word or a phrase in students' books, indicating the focus of the feedback.

Determining the number of units for testing and randomisation:

The following classes were involved:

School	Class	Class	Class	Class	Class	Class
St Patrick's	Yr4A*	Yr4B	Yr5A*	Yr5B		
OLSG	Yr4A*	Yr4B	Yr5A*	Yr5B		
St Joseph's Jnr	Yr4A*	Yr4B	Yr5A*	Yr5B		
Holy Family	Yr7A*	Yr7B	Yr7C*	Yr7D	Yr7E*	Yr7F
Trinity	Yr7A*	Yr7B	Yr7C*	Yr7D	Yr7E*	Yr7F

* Active control group (ACG)

17 teachers and 810 students took part in the trial.

Results

Outcomes of teacher questionnaires

An online survey was conducted to reach out to all teachers in the Trust. Alongside surveying the school practices and their impact on teachers, an attempt was made to evaluate the school cost associated with teachers' time spent on certain activities. Anonymously, teachers stated their current salaries. This information was used to calculate the average hourly cost to the school per teacher. Combining the information from the Table 1 with the average hourly teacher cost to the school, Table 3 illustrates, using an example of a two-form Primary school, potential areas where schools could seek efficiencies in savings.

Table 1 shows that a full-time teacher who gets on average 42hrs of Planning, Preparation and Assessment time per term (10% of the total, based on 13 weeks and 32.5hrs per week directed hours) spends disproportionately large amounts of time on planning and marking. Average time spent on these two combined activities in the 40+hrs category amounts to more than 80hrs per term for around 40% of teachers, which is almost twice the amount of time allocated through PPA.

	1-10hrs	10-20hrs	20-40hrs	40+hrs	Number of responses
Planning	15.8%	15.8%	26.3%	42.1%	95
Marking	9.8%	21.7%	29.4%	39.1%	92
Data management	19.4%	39.8%	24.7%	16.1%	93

Table 1: Termly non-teaching workload and relative proportions of workforce working total hours on these activities

Source: Teacher questionnaire

The questionnaire results in Table 2 point to an assumption that the majority of teachers feel that the workload problem is rather with the activities which have little value to them rather than the workload as such being unmanageable.

	Workload is unmanageable	Too frequent	Often waste of my time	Done for accountability purposes	Little value for me as a teacher	Rarely someone looks at it	Takes too much valuable time	Can be done by non-teaching staff
Data collection	11.3%	21.3%	16.3%	65%	13.8%	12.5%	25%	20%
Data analysis	7.7%	12.8%	10.3%	58.9%	11.5%	10.3%	24.4%	20.5%
Data reporting	8.5%	20.7%	6.1%	54.9%	14.6%	8.5%	29.3%	13.4%

Table 2: Teacher perception of their school's data management expectations

Source: Teacher questionnaire

	Percentage of teachers who agreed	Illustration of the cost to a two-form Primary school with 17 teachers
Data management is often a waste of their time	13%	£5,181.60
Data management is of little value to them as teachers	14%	£5,699.76
Someone looks at the data rarely or never	13%	£5,181.60
It is done for accountability	65%	£26,944.34

Table 3: Cost to schools associated with data management activities

Source: Teacher questionnaire

	Strongly disagree				Strongly agree	Number of responses
	1	2	3	4	5	
It takes too much of my time	8.6%	18.3%	34.4%	16.1%	22.6%	93
It is too complex	16.1%	39.8%	25.8%	10.8%	7.5%	93
It is done too frequently	8.5%	20.2%	43.6%	12.8%	14.9%	94
It is done for the benefit of the students	8.6%	16.1%	26.9%	31.2%	17.2%	93
It is done for the benefit of the teacher	9.8%	20.7%	34.8%	25.0%	9.8%	92
It is done for others to see	12.8%	11.7%	17.0%	25.5%	33.0%	94

Table 4: Teacher perceptions of marking in schools

Source: Teacher questionnaire

During the interviews, many teachers positively commented on the recognition by their school leaders of the issues associated with the teacher workload. Teachers felt that their policies on

marking have been improved, resulting in simpler and less time consuming marking. Table 4 shows that there is a perception of marking having relatively limited value for the teachers and that it is done for others to see (58.5% of responses in categories 4 and 5).

Outcomes of interventions

Analysis of teacher Interviews

The results of the workload trial were related to the hypotheses above i.e. that there would be a significant difference in reduction of teacher workload and improvement in student performance of those students receiving increased verbal feedback, compared to those who received written feedback through teacher marking.

This analysis explores the extent to which the interventions contributed to a reduction in teacher workload and also had a positive impact on the student progress.

These interviews were recorded and the ethical issues were made clear to the participants in focus groups of the sharing of information between participants. The interviews in the five schools were conducted during June and July 2017.

Impact on teaching - verbal versus written feedback

The overwhelming feedback from the teachers interviewed concerned their perceptions of the definite positive impact of the trial. The benefits for them as teachers were reported as two-fold. In practical terms, although there were some variations, all experimental group teachers suggested that there had been a significant decrease in their workload. The amount of time gained in providing less written feedback varied from at least one hour per week, with which one teacher was “delighted”, to a 50% reduction from four hours to two hours, which was more common. Furthermore, having given extensive verbal feedback, the written feedback could then be “whizzed through” for some, making “the whole process work really well.” Significantly, this freed up time was usually spent at lunchtime, after school, or at home on marking for all of the ACG.

When asked to what use they would put ‘the good amount of time gained’ by not marking, the answers reflected both professional and personal advantages. Planning was frequently mentioned as being given more time, especially for practical lessons; as was being able to get the class ready for the next day “rather than rushing around in the morning.” Time was perceived by teachers to be used more productively. One teacher’s observation is indicative of how this was used. “I had more time to finish reports and was able to get other work done such as planning and adapting the lesson for the next day.”

On a more personal level, just leaving school earlier and going home without marking was frequently cited as a factor in the increased well-being felt by many of the teachers. The experimental nature of the trial and the ensuing enforced change of intransigent attitudes towards marking was seen by most of the experimental group teachers involved to lead to an improvement in their teaching pedagogy by enabling them to be more reflective on their “die-hard” attitudes and practices.

“I was forced to perhaps reflect a little more on own teaching style, forced out into the classroom, where I should be, walking around rather than a bad habit of teacher-led lesson from the front of the classroom.”

Being “out in the room more” was a common experience that was felt to be beneficial – as was spending more time personalising the feedback rather than giving generic feedback and focussing on one particular point. Teachers felt that it was easier to correct mistakes as the students were making them: seeing the immediate impact in the lesson was reported to be far more effective than finding errors later when marking books, whereas with verbal feedback “it is there and then, it’s in the moment.”

Some teachers found it useful for the students to record just a word or phrase from the verbal feedback that they were given and, because they had such detailed individual feedback in the first lesson, they were not making as many mistakes as they might have made in the second lesson. Feedback could be given to a whole class, “but only 10 students would capture what you were saying.” Individual feedback was, therefore, seen as more effective. On the question of the workload combination of planning and marking, i.e., what should take priority, the overwhelming consensus of opinion was that “I would rather plan longer than do the marking.”

“We have all been there marking till 11 o’clock, 12 o’clock, or silly o’clock in the morning; you write your comments, think about the feedback you are going to give to the children and they don’t even look at them.” Knowing that they were going to give verbal feedback also made some teachers think about their approach to planning and, for some, this meant that it had become “far more intense and focussed”, and “if you spend time on the planning then you get the children to achieve”.

Compared to their normal planning practice, much more thought was put in by some teachers into the lesson scaffolding in anticipation of the feedback and support that they would have to give to specific groups when teaching a new and complex skill. Because the teachers were able to stand next to the student and provide verbal feedback in real time, there was a significant observation that the teacher’s understanding of the student’s abilities was better than when reading their work separately at home, or after school. They also reported that they understood the student a lot better from talking with them. They could “see their process of thinking” when they had a conversation with the students. “Personalising feedback is definitely what I want do more of and I think I have stopped doing that somewhere along the line.”

Impact on student learning

Overall, verbal feedback was seen as having a “significant impact”; students were observed to apply what was said and so stopped making the same mistakes, “because they were immediately able to spot their mistakes and make improvements, capturing the misconception there and then.”

The need for re-drafting was reportedly reduced and there was no need to plan for an extra lesson, as student errors were “fixed” in the middle of the lesson. Customarily, the same piece of writing was not always followed up the next day and so real-time feedback meant that the child has an opportunity to improve that piece of work when otherwise they might not. Writing

out whole pieces of work can be onerous and boring for some students and especially time-consuming for those classes under the pressure of national testing. This immediate feedback was seen to reduce the need for this.

In walking around the classroom, teachers saw students who were re-drafting, but repeating the same mistakes and not including the elements that they were supposed to as suggested by teachers' written comments. "So we would stop and talk about it and they would start again and improve it immediately". It was recognised that all students have different areas on which they need to focus and, therefore, giving "bespoke feedback" was seen as pro-active and reportedly appreciated by the students.

The opportunity to discuss in detail, for example, how to structure sentences could not be done in written feedback. The emphasis on re-reading and checking work was thought to be much more effective when done verbally and "then they (the children) start to do that independently." The teachers found that they were not just correcting errors in their feedback, but also being positive, praising good examples of good work and sharing things with the other students. "When a child is getting something in the lesson that they weren't getting before, it is an achievement. I was able to focus on more things when talking to the child than when I was reading the work." In talking to the students more, although teachers found this more intense during the lesson, they observed that the dynamics of the classroom changed – not only did the atmosphere in the classroom become "buzzing", but there was a definite feel that the interaction between teacher and student was more "fluid and exciting". The teachers felt that they had gained "an appreciation of students on paper and in person."

Learning Outcomes: different ability groups - different experiences

"I very much enjoyed the experience and the students enjoyed it too. It moved them all on with their learning journey, regardless of ability."

The experimental group teachers said that they had thought much more about what they expected from different ability groups and that their planning was much more thorough. However, it was noted by a number of teachers that the impact of the change in feedback was experienced differently depending on the ability group. Significantly, a recurring theme concerned the difference that verbal feedback had had with lower attaining students. They needed "the reassurance of what it is I need to approve and that additional time given to them in verbal feedback had a huge impact." There was a common understanding that these students are often not sure of what to write and so write slowly. Verbal encouragement was found to be effective in addressing this. "The lower ability started feeling so much better, standards improved simply because it impacted on their self-esteem." A common perception was that a lot of students with special educational needs (SEN) "will often stop what they are doing and give up". Real-time verbal feedback boosted these students' confidence in seeing their work improve immediately and the extent to which they were willing to re-draft was markedly improved. Similarly, English as an Additional Language (EAL) students were also reported to understand better "if you spoke to them rather than write it for them".

When sitting in mixed-ability groups, those teachers who favoured this verbal feedback approach felt that students with SEN were getting personal feedback, but - importantly - the student that was sitting next to them whom the teacher knows is "an uber bright child with an

incredible flair for writing” was also getting personal feedback. *All students progressed at whatever level they were working.* It was found that middle/high achievers would act immediately upon verbal feedback in that they remembered what was said to them and would act on that. During the interviews, it was rare to have a student who was able to recall the feedback given through written marking. The low achievers did benefit from verbal feedback, but could only be given one thing at a time to focus on and they were more likely to forget what it was. It was agreed, however, that giving verbal feedback in real-time had a significant positive impact on the students of lower ability. “They all seemed to really like it this way.” On a practical note, having a teacher assistant (TA) in the room was universally seen as being beneficial when adopting this approach.

Impact on quality of work

Notably the use of verbal feedback was seen to have a significant impact on the quality of the written work produced by the end of the week. The experimental trial teachers, compared to the control teachers, believed that - because of the one-to-one verbal feedback - there were notable improvements in the quality of the work in the trial week than evident in the previous week.

The examples of this improvement as cited would range from a student in one of the Primary schools paragraphing for the first time, or using time connectives and chronological order, to a Secondary school student writing “a very long story, when sometimes it’s hard to get a page out of him”.

For whose benefit is marking?

“If someone was to look at books where work hasn’t been marked, I would feel embarrassed.” Even if verbal feedback was not against school policy (in one school the SMT had actually provided verbal feedback stamps), the teachers participating in the trial had often spent “a fair bit of time” marking almost every single piece of work, and not necessarily effectively. Because they spent time moderating each other’s books, and with book scrutinies adding to the pressure, the teachers often voiced an opinion that there was an unspoken expectation that everything had to be marked. Some of this was admittedly self-inflicted. The over-riding feeling of guilt inherent in the culture of teaching in marking every single piece of work meant that they would sometimes act “robotically when it came to marking”. Many factors contributed to this: fear of “being told off” and the feeling that they would be judged detrimentally if they didn’t undertake quality marking every day - “The demons in my head say I must mark every piece of work.”

Impact of being a part of the trial

“In the past...I did something for someone else and now I do it because it is for students.” The majority of the teachers recognised the need to break this cycle of over-marking because that was what made their workload unmanageable. Being a part of the trial had brought an awareness that written feedback was also not always the most effective way. “In an ideal world, it would be great to think that all students took notice of all that was said written down,

but we know that this is not the case.” The use of more verbal feedback was perceived as being a way of “making this job manageable.”

Another recurring perception was that their school’s marking policy was often shaped by the Ofsted criteria, putting pressure on them to show evidence of response to marking and progression by their detailed written comments, “so we have got our evidence in their books, ticked that box.” However, during the experimental lessons, they were more focussed on the students, wanting them “to really embed this skill”. Most of the teachers would now like to make verbal feedback the main form of daily feedback and only mark the final written piece to judge if the students had actually understood and used the skills taught. The day-to-day progress could be assessed through face-to-face interactions with students.

However, the challenges of using predominately verbal feedback were also acknowledged. It was recognised that it cannot always be presumed that all verbal feedback will be of the same standard, or have the same positive impact on student learning and quality of their work. Furthermore, some students complained because they wanted to see something written. One boy looking at his piece of work said, “Miss, you took my book and haven’t wrote anything”, even though the teacher had sat with him giving verbal feedback. Another main disadvantage was the worry about not having time to give feedback to all of their students, although it was recognised that not all of the children required the same amount of time. “Some children just needed 30 seconds.” It was reported that the students that ignored written feedback were the same students that would also disregard verbal feedback, although the opportunity for the teacher to catch this was much enhanced in the verbal feedback condition.

All of the experimental group teachers found that their approach to their teaching was very different during the trial lessons. Their comments suggested that they had been made to question what they had previously regarded as “normal” practice. All reportedly found it worthwhile. When asked - looking back at the trial week - where they saw the biggest difference, the teachers’ responses focussed on how they moved the students on; really questioning themselves on how they use feedback and their willingness to embrace innovative methods. “Otherwise, we end up as teachers teaching the same old way we have always taught” and “I think outstanding teachers take risks, sometimes when pushed, thinking outside the box”.

School awareness

The leadership in the trial schools recognised teacher workload as an issue and most were working hard to address it, such as thinking about work-life balance. In reflecting on their experience, the experimental group teachers said, “I will embed it (verbal feedback) properly into my own practice. I think it is really useful, providing everybody is on board with it. It has to be a whole school policy.” This sentiment was reiterated throughout the interviews. The need to collaborate with colleagues, reflect in groups, tweak plans and strategies and share resources was seen as paramount to its success. The need for moderation by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and professional development was recognised, as was the need “to ensure that everyone was singing from the same hymn sheet.”

The experimental group teachers commonly reported that they “had not realised it would be so exciting’, that learning and teaching could become more fluid and interactive. They now perceived more explicitly that the student and teacher were working towards the same goal. The dynamics of learning shifted, because the teacher and student were interested in what each other had to say. However, for this to be of any benefit in their schools, it was recognised that the headteacher and senior colleagues would have to show a commitment to this approach and demonstrate a willingness to provide support and training for all staff in what, for some, would require a significant change in mind-set.

Assessment data collection and analysis – impact on teacher workload

“The accountability system – at all levels – can be a driver of excessive data management demands” (Eliminating unnecessary workload associated with data management - Report of the Independent Teacher Workload Review Group March 2016).

How to keep track of student progress is and has been a core issue in education, and is as sensitive to the political climate of the time as any other aspect of a child’s education. The arguments for the validity of summative and formative analysis of student progress have been well documented. Both have their strengths and weaknesses. Research suggests that an outstanding school will get the balance right by enabling students to reach their full potential and at the same time reducing the “plague of the current education system—teacher workload” (Eliminating unnecessary workload associated with data management - Report of the Independent Teacher Workload Review Group March 2016).

Formal assessment

Within the research data, there were variations in formal assessment practice across the participant schools, but termly and end - of - year formal assessments in Literacy and Maths were common to all. These would take the format, generally, of ‘levelling’ the student in various ways, such as, for example, using target trackers where teachers “go along ticking off the objectives (achieved/not achieved).” In some schools, these were also done at the end of every half term giving, typically, levels/bands, such as with the labels ‘secure’ or ‘developing’.

Universally, the “top level analysis” of this emergent data was undertaken by the school leaders. A common format would be for the data to be put into tables to check individual student progress, but also to make comparisons between groups. The teachers were then usually given statistical information on how particular groups were progressing, but sometimes it could be as generic and vague as “boys not doing very well”.

When asked how they used this data and of what value this data was to them, the responses were mixed. Some teachers saw it as “essential to track and target”, but “The Head pulls out the data, teachers don’t do that. And they don’t really use it” was more indicative of the majority of responses.

Several of the teachers also noted that “there was a marked absence of interest shown on how the dissemination of this data was then followed up.” The common perception was that this was solely “so we can keep an eye on who is making progress”, and that no “concrete strategic plans were put into place to tackle the anomalies identified.” Moreover, “it has little value to me as a teacher” was a common perception amongst the teachers interviewed.

Time taken in managing data

The collection of the data itself and the hours putting this data on the school's database manually, especially after assessments, was seen to be a "laborious" and "meaningless" task by many of the teachers interviewed. "I haven't finished it yet; taken around 10 hours already; wasted hours, takes hours and hours." The overriding perception was that "if it made a difference, it would be worthwhile, but it doesn't. No-one come backs to the teacher." Every subject in the national curriculum has to be covered and there are 15/20 strands to Maths and English and this was seen to be an "overwhelming task".

Reliance on formal testing used for data

"Only a snapshot"

When the teachers were asked if they thought that they knew the students better compared to any test data, the unqualified reply was "definitely". In some of the schools where data analysis was heavily reliant on commercial tests (PIRA and PUMA), there was an agreement that the tests do not allow the students to show a true reflection of what they can do. "I would like to see more teacher assessments. I know we have to have a standard assessment, but it's about being accurate. Sometimes I think 'Gosh, they got three questions wrong' and I know that they can do them."

"If as a teacher you know your children better, then you will be able to make that judgment more accurate; nothing worse than teaching to a test".

The use of the Target Tracker was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. While recognising its validity in spotlighting key areas of concern, and that "gap analysis, does show specific needs of the children", there was criticism that the overall objectives were too broad. Sometimes, the teachers felt that they were having to go into fine detail when all they needed to know was more basic information, i.e., whether the child is on track, below or above. When asked if they were collecting data for themselves or for someone else, some teachers felt "that they were doing it for someone else", even if they didn't know who that person was.

However, some teachers felt that the person who really benefits is the teacher into whose class the child is moving the following year. Those teachers would be able to see where the likely gaps are from the outset of the academic year and to use these to inform their planning. The feedback given from the previous teacher was generally seen to be accurate and was also useful in seeing which band the child was in and if they were 'on target', especially in the first term. However, teachers still tended to undertake their own assessment early on in the term, using the information from the Tracker only as a guide in the first weeks of term. Again this brought into question "whether the amount of time putting information on the tracker is disproportionate to its actual use."

Validity of data analysis

It was further questioned by some teachers as to whether any systems exist to ensure that the judgement recorded is robust. "It is only one teacher's judgement that a child can achieve a particular skill in whatever subject area." (This judgement was seen to be better concerning writing skills because of moderation, and in some schools' the moderations also took place in

Religious Education (RE). Written pieces had to be scrutinised by the RE coordinator and justification given as to why a child had achieved a certain level.)

Not only was disbelief expressed that someone actually “goes along and checks the Target Tracker”, a discrepancy in the use of the data generated was also noted by some teachers. The impartiality of the subsequent analysis was questioned. Being an empirical device, it was recognised as being useful statistically in giving an overall view of performance, but some teachers questioned its objectivity. “While you say that 60% means a child is on track, another teacher might not agree with that. One teacher could think one thing and a different teacher, something else.” And, from another teacher, “It doesn’t really tell us what level the child is on. It is left to just one teacher to decide whether the child is on target or not.”

Furthermore, the validity of targets themselves were sometimes questioned. “I might not agree with a certain target and so I look and see what constitutes that child being on that target – it should be left to the teacher’s judgement.” All such comments would suggest that discussion on the content of the Tracker and the criteria used for deciding what that content should be needs to be part of a more open and inclusive debate and “not as the prerogative of the Head Teacher.”

Where there was a discrepancy between a teacher’s perception of the child and the child’s profile as portrayed by the Tracker, a further difficulty was recognised by some of the teachers: “Say a child in my class is given a 4S [according to the Tracker] and then, going to the next class, they are well below where they should be ” (as perceived by the following year teacher) ,” that shows that they are not moving forward ... so they are regressing, instead of progressing. This could be a problem for parents.”

Data collection – informal methods

There was an acknowledgement from a number of teachers that the more informal methods of collecting data on a child’s progress were equally—if not more—productive than their customary approaches. Handover sessions with the previous teacher took place in all schools. Meetings with Heads and Inclusion Managers to discuss a child who had not made progress for a long time took place also in some schools in the research, although the frequency of these meetings differed between the schools. In one school, these meetings “take place twice in the six-monthly progress meetings, comparing boys and girls. We don’t discuss goals specifically—don’t go into detail. We think about what kind of interventions we can provide for them.” Such meetings were reported to be extremely useful and provided a more pro-active approach for all concerned.

There was an overall understanding of the need for the school leadership, especially the Headteacher, to be accountable for the students’ performance, but it was thought that “it would be more informative for the Head to see what a child can do or can’t do” and “to sit with you as a teacher so you can tell them what your children can do, what they can’t do and show him where **you** identify their certain needs and how **you** have moved the child forward.”

Again, this reinforces the recommendations of the report of the Independent Teacher Workload Review Group (Eliminating unnecessary workload associated with data management, March 2016).

“Teachers need to know if students are on track to achieve end-of-year expectations. Whether students are where they should be, but are best placed to make such judgements through their professional knowledge without recourse to elaborate assessment, data generating and recording systems.” As in the written feedback, there was a common thread running through the teacher interviews that they should be more forthright and if “something wasn’t working, the Head needs to know”. There is little evidence from this research that this was happening in any systematic nor consistent fashion.

Analysis of students interviews

One of the foci of this research was to determine if the nature of the skills assessment and related feedback influenced the students’ eagerness to learn. The students were interviewed separately and a number of themes emerged. When asked if they had noticed anything that was different during the trial week, the students, almost universally, said, “Yes – our teachers didn’t mark our books, they told us what we needed to do.”

Students were then questioned on the impact that this approach had had on their learning and which type of feedback they preferred – written or verbal (or both).

Asked, individually, if they preferred verbal feedback or written feedback, nearly all students agreed that verbal feedback was more effective. A common perception was that when the teachers write in their books, “We don’t understand what they mean, but when they were telling us, it was easier to understand” and “I had a chance to ask the teacher if I didn’t understand something, which you don’t get with written feedback.” Students also felt that they produced more writing and of a better quality during the trial week and that they had “learnt more”. In one case, “before, I did one page on a Greek myth; during that week, I did five.”

Nearly all the students interviewed could recall the specific points that their teacher had made to them and the areas in which they thought that they had improved. “The teacher pointed out full stops, and it didn’t take me too long before I started to remember to put them in” and “I always started sentences the same way. I was more conscious not to do it.”

It was reported by the active intervention students that they were checking their work more, re-reading it and that, being aware of the teacher’s presence near them, they felt more comfortable in asking for help in clarifying what they needed to do. A number of children felt that they did not always have sufficient time to talk to the teacher and, subsequently, appreciated the personal feedback that they received during the course of the trial lessons. The overwhelming majority of students felt that they had a chance to ask questions to help understand “...so that you didn’t make the same mistake again”, or asked, “How can I improve?” Thus they were able to “capitalise” on opportunities for learning and, at the same time, provide evidence that met one of the descriptors needed for the school to be seen to be outstanding.

Students' responses to feedback and marking

The immediate impact and benefit of the verbal feedback was also widely appreciated by the students, such as in the comment "...easier to understand mistakes". The merits of the verbal feedback approach also meant that students "...didn't have to re-write the whole piece; it would change as I was writing it, based on what the teacher said." This was seen as being an improvement on customarily writing the whole piece and, when the teacher gave written feedback, "then having to re-write the whole thing again." Corrections could be made whilst in the middle of working on their writing.

The teachers verbal reinforcement of guidance during the course of a lesson, even as basic as remembering to use punctuation (a common occurrence), was reported by student as having a positive effect. "I know that my punctuation is dreadful, I have had the same target for ages. If I'm reminded during the course of the lesson, I will do something about it." The perception of the students of the positive effect on learning through the immediate nature of verbal feedback was, therefore, very similar to the reported perceptions of the trial teachers.

When questioned about the lack of written feedback in their books, some students stated that they did find written commentary useful in remembering what they needed to focus on. Sometimes a student would forget what the teacher had said and so "...it was nice to be able to look in our books and read what she had written." However, when asked in the interview—which took place at some point after the trial lessons—if they had remembered what the teacher had said to them, most remembered what their teacher had said very accurately. In contrast, only a few in the control group could also remember the written feedback.

Impact on different ability groups

It was noticeable from the students' responses that there was a difference in perceptions between the ability groups. The higher attaining students were more likely to appreciate and internalise written comments, whilst the lower attaining students found verbal feedback more helpful and motivating. However, this was not universally the case; one higher attaining student, who found writing difficult, really enjoyed the verbal feedback. He was quite explicit on why this was, "I was putting it right, there and then." Nevertheless, across all ability groupings, the students interviewed agreed that they had experienced not understanding what the teacher meant in the written feedback, or in how to implement what they (as students) were being asked to do, but, contrastingly, "because the teacher was saying it, I understood." Again, this echoes the teachers' impressions of the immediate positive impact of "bespoke feedback" for their students.

Research limitations and considerations for interpretation of the results

It is important to note the methodological limitations of this research, given its relatively short-term and exploratory nature. The student participants were drawn from particular age groups (School Years 4, 5 and 7) in a particular location and time, with a somewhat small sample size and a single curriculum subject area (English) across one school week with a particular set of

teachers. The conclusions from this research should, therefore, be seen in this context. It is not intended to suggest that the findings are necessarily generalisable to a wider population and range of subject areas, although it is possible to speculate that such a transfer would be worthwhile to explore subsequently.

One potential source of bias in the outcomes is that all participating schools were faith schools who belonged to the same Trust that sought to share similar policies and practices in their schools. There were constraints in terms of time and research methodology (such as the limits in the scope and depth of discussions) and these should be addressed in any future research.

School Culture

A school's culture reflects and responds to external stimuli, such as local, regional and national policies, as well as the more immediate views of community stakeholders and professional groups. The issue of teacher workload should be seen as a symptom of the much wider challenges currently faced in education, such as related to funding formulae, safeguarding, curriculum innovation and preparation for the wider world of work and lifelong health and success. There is a danger, therefore, that any narrow approach in tackling teacher workload may contribute to unintended further increases in existing pressures on a school's teachers and leaders.

A range of cultural barriers may prevent the schools from implementing new initiatives to reduce workload. Each school has unique features and it is important to focus on the desired outcomes that are likely to be pertinent to individual students, teachers and their school rather than trying to implement somewhat arbitrarily a chosen approach to 'good practice'. The data analyses in this study imply that a particular focus should be placed by school leaders and governors on making sure that there is clear understanding of the purpose of activities, such as assessments, marking and planning beyond the adherence with policies and the 'delivery' of target test results. Even with the implementation of effective practices, there is always a danger of falling back into established and unproductive routines, despite seeing the value and benefits of new approaches. School leaders should also consider evaluating the financial impact of activities associated with information management, marking and planning and (as with other financial management) seek to optimise the use of valuable school resources, particularly staff expertise and time.

Class teachers are usually likely to be best placed to make appropriate professional judgements about the learning outcomes of their students. It is in the classrooms where most of that information is gathered and used on a daily basis, and school leaders are in a good place to empower and upskill their teachers in using such information. Through frequent pupil conferencing, it is suggested that school leaders will benefit by having a better understanding of their students' abilities and progress. The assessments should be seen as opportunities to identify needs rather than solely accountability measures. Judgements of teacher and school effectiveness, both internal and external, should be based on more robust and reliable information about the quality of education.

Schools should be incentivised to innovate and enable their teachers and leaders to seek what works best in order to promote outcomes that go beyond a narrow set of student results against which the teachers and schools are often being measured.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding any limitations in design, the trialled approach reported here of personalised 'real-time' verbal feedback has the potential to reduce significantly teacher workload and not necessarily only through a reduction of time spent on formal assessments. It can also directly impact on a reduction in written marking and free up time for more effective planning. The merits of the trialled approaches are relatively inexpensive to implement through teacher education and the offer of regular moderation opportunities. Another merit of the trialled approach could be its straightforward transferability to other subject areas and age groups. In the time when the new National Funding Formula is causing concerns to some schools, there is an opportunity to improve the efficiencies of teacher deployment through the review and reduction of unnecessary and/or ineffective activities associated with assessment, marking and data analyses. There is also a potential for greater levels of student engagement and participation in their learning through a better understanding of the feedback being provided which they can implement without any delay.

The sense of belonging to the research project was real and tangible from all the participants. Teachers being given the opportunity to engage in an experimental programme with a defined sense of purpose was also reported to be pivotal to the success of the research, such as in the comment that "[reflecting] on my practice in a more formal situation made me do what outstanding teachers do automatically". The teachers involved in this small classroom-based research study recognised the benefit of teacher-led 'in-house' research and its implications for future school development plans. The collaborative nature of the research across the schools within the Aquinas Trust was seen to be an important step forward in informing future policy changes with regard to data management. Financially, there could also be benefits, as professionally recognised teacher-led research could also lead to teacher-led education and training. The collaboration across the schools was also recognised as a positive step in their mutual further development.

All of this would suggest the need for a paradigm shift in the culture of teaching with regard to data management and the use of feedback. This would need a "growth mindset attitude among staff and students," where students are willing to reflect on their work and respond to feedback independently and where "the headteacher is willing to engage with the research and question widely-held assumptions", thus putting trust back "into the professional judgement of teachers" (Case study: reducing marking workload without compromising on student outcomes Clare Sealy September 2017 -The Key for School Leaders).

We suggest that this research echoes the aims of the 'Closing the Gap: Test and Learn Research Report' (Richard Churches - Education Development Trust - Winter 2016) in ensuring that "engagement in research is reinforced as an important part of teachers' practice" and the "mundane realism" of the classroom is given the recognition it is due.

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