

Written feedback

By Mick Walker

It's worth spending the little bit of time considering written feedback, this is the area that attracts quite a lot of attention, especially with regards to things like teacher workload. There's evidence that written comments are more effective in moving pupils forward than say for example using marks or grades. However, whilst high marks may motivate some pupils, low marks may well have the opposite effect on other pupils.

There's also evidence that giving marks and comments doesn't necessarily work. Pupils read the mark or grade and not actually the comments, but written feedback is not always effective. Here we need to consider the quality of the feedback. Does it actually help or hinder? Does it clarify or confuse? Is it worth the time and is it worth the effort? And is the feedback appropriate? I've seen one side of A4 of teachers' comments given back to infants who can't actually read. So this raises the question: who is the feedback for? Is it really having a positive impact on the learner or is it to simply to comply with a marking policy or set of expectations about teacher behaviour? Feedback is an effective basic human interaction, but in a teaching and learning environment we don't ask quite often enough about whether the feedback is actually making a difference and how do we know it's making a difference?

Marking is something that is generally referred to in feedback but the impact of marking has been of particular interest in terms of teacher workload and the DfE teacher workload challenge which was in 2014 found that marking was one of three top causes of teacher mark load. In fact 53% of about 47,000 people thought that whilst marking pupils work is necessary and productive it's frequency in depth is often burdensome. Much of this was associated with what has been described as deep marking, or triple marking. That means several iterations of comments between the teacher and pupil using different pens so this transaction goes backwards and forwards, but there's no evidence that this is actually effective but yet the practice, the use of this, is very widespread. The DfE report reducing marking, use of workload around marking, met three I think very useful suggestions that marking should be:

- meaningful
- motivational
- manageable

There's also a report from a group of 16 schools in Wigan, the 'Wow' schools, 'With Others We Succeed', who tried a variety of approaches to marking pupils work in order to evaluate the impact on pupils, teachers and indeed parents. Was it meaningful? Was it motivational and was it manageable? The trial approaches including things like just stopping marking to see if actually made any difference and indeed it did make a difference, but it led to changes in classroom practice like structuring lessons to allow time for speaking to pupils, a different mode of feedback. There were some significant gains in terms of reduced workload and an increase in pupil satisfaction. Now this is not to say that written feedback is wrong. Teachers need a repertoire of feedback techniques, but it is important that schools and teachers should evaluate their practice to see what actually works and, by that, I mean what actually impacts on teaching and learning.