Feedback

'Specific constructive feedback about learning, as it is occurring, is one of the most powerful influences on student achievement.' (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2001, p.2)

This chapter deals with two aspects of feedback: oral and written, including marking. It focuses mainly on feedback from teacher to child, but this develops to include children’s feedback to each other and feedback from students such that the teacher is better informed about future teaching and learning issues. Students’ self-evaluation, dealt with in the previous chapter, involves a great deal of student feedback to the teacher.

Feedback that leads to changes in student learning is information provided by the teacher (or by a student, or classmates, from a book, or another adult) regarding aspects of the student’s performance or understanding. A teacher or another person can provide corrective information, a peer can provide an alternative strategy, a book can provide information to clarify ideas, a parent can provide encouragement and share their high expectations, and the learner can look up the answer to evaluate the correctness of the response. Feedback is a ‘consequence’ of performance.

Oral feedback when the class is at work

Various research studies have concluded that feedback is most useful when it focuses on the learning intention of
the task, rather than other features of the work. It is often
the case, however, that most teachers give feedback to
children about four other features of their work before, or
even instead of, the learning intention of the task:
- presentation (handwriting/neatness);
- surface features of writing (full stops, capital letters and
especially spelling);
- quantity;
- effort.

It is easy to see why this happens: those aspects are most
noticeable in children's work at first sight. They are also
relatively straightforward to deal with. Ironically, these are
the very things teachers accuse parents of focusing on at
parents' evenings.

What can happen...

The children have been asked to cut out, order and then glue
muddled-up pictures of a story onto a piece of paper.
Learning intentions and success criteria are displayed
prominently as follows:

We are learning to: Order stories.

How will we know we've done this?: The pictures
will be in the same order as the story we read.

- As the children start to work, the teacher notices that
one child already has glue all over his trousers. She goes
to the child and speaks to him, getting him to go quickly
to the washroom to clean up. The rest of the group starts
to fuss about glue. One child rushes to get a cloth as she
notices glue on her table and the whole class starts to
chat about glue or anything else . . .

- The teacher notices a child having difficulty cutting out
and goes over to help her hold the scissors correctly,
talking about how much better she is getting at this. One
child tells the teacher that she's been able to cut out
properly for a year now. Some children, having roughly
cut out two of their pictures are now going back to them and cutting them out more neatly, because they don’t want the teacher to criticise their cutting. They had not cut out neatly in the first place because they thought the emphasis was on ordering . . .

- The teacher passes a child who has, at last, written her name on the paper with a capital letter at the beginning of her name. She praises the child enthusiastically. Some of the children now cross out their names on their sheets, because they realise they had also forgotten to use a capital letter . . .

- The teacher congratulates one child who is working industriously, saying how pleased she is to see her working so hard. The children sit up straighter to get some praise themselves . . .

So far, the class knows that the learning intention and success criteria are a lie. The teacher has made clear by her words that what she is looking for is not the ordering, but presentation, surface features, effort and cutting skills.

An alternative approach . . .

The following scenario describes a strategy for giving feedback focused around the same learning intention:

- As the children start to work, the teacher notices that one child already has glue all over his trousers. She goes to the child and first says something about the learning intention: ‘Well done, I can see you’ve got the first picture in place. Now what happened next in the story, after the Little Red Hen had dug the ground?’ Some of the children quietly call out ‘Planted the seeds’ and continue with their ordering. The teacher then whispers to the child, ‘You’ve got glue on your trousers. Go and clean up quickly.’

- The teacher notices a child having difficulty cutting out. She moves to her and congratulates her on cutting out all the pictures first: That’s a very good strategy.
You have cut out all the pictures first so that you can shuffle them around and change your mind. Some of the children are now peeling off their stuck-down pictures, because they agree that it is a very good strategy. The teacher then whispers to the child about holding the scissors.

So far, the class knows that the learning intention and success criteria is the truth. The teacher has made clear by her words that what she is looking for is ordering. This technique has been received very powerfully by teachers, who realise how often they have fallen into the trap of focusing on other features and distracting the class from the prime focus of their learning. One teacher said:

‘I recognised things in myself like commenting about the handwriting and spelling, when I should be commenting on the learning intention. It’s been a real revelation to me. I’m aware of it all the time now and when I hear myself starting to say “You’ve left a capital letter out there”, I stop really quickly now and go back to talking about the learning intention.’

It takes a while to get into the habit, but the strategy is simple: hold on to the thought about the secondary feature and make sure that something about the learning intention is mentioned first, then mention the glue or handwriting, if it is necessary, in a whisper. The class will retain their focus on the learning intention, which will be apparent in their improved work.

Marking

Marking children’s work is often directly responsible for regression in many students, tends to demoralise and overwhelm them, and they often make no sense of it. Given this situation, it is timely to begin to reconsider current beliefs and practices in marking.
The problems

Stuck in a rut
One of the problems about marking is that teachers are often embedded in a way of working which is hard to break. Teachers have typically marked children's work by automatically correcting spelling errors and other surface features, acting as a copy editor in a publishing firm, then providing comments at the end. The information is too much for children to process and can be unrelated to the learning intentions. Teachers often feel that they are marking for senior staff or for parents, when the main purpose of the marking feedback should be to give information to children about how well they did against the learning intention.

Giving children too many criteria at the beginning of a task
After sharing learning intentions and making sure children know what to do, it is often the case that the children are then given up to six more learning intentions to pay attention to (e.g. 'What I'm looking for in this letter to the Prime Minister is that you have used persuasive language. Oh, and don't forget your best handwriting, correct spellings, capital letters and full stops, grammar, punctuation and paragraphs.') Children now have seven criteria to deal with in perhaps 20 or 30 minutes.

Under these circumstances, children pay most attention to what the teacher makes clear, by her actions, means the most to her. So a teacher who continually mentions handwriting will have beautiful handwriting in her class, but the children will be producing less work than they could. Always focusing on handwriting slows children down.

The same is true for spelling. Children can only spell correctly words that they know how to spell, so it is of little use to tell them to make sure their spellings are correct. Children learn to spell by the specific teaching of spelling (word- and sentence-level work), by looking at patterns and
doing work where a spelling rule is the learning intention, and also by reading. Asking children to check spellings continuously only leads to spelling becoming too dominant in the writing process. Children worry disproportionately about their spelling and get out of their seats to look up words, often talking to other children on the way. They have by then often lost the thread of their sentence. Ironically, copying out the correct spelling in their work from the word book does not then help them to spell that word correctly the next time they want to use it. It has wasted their time. Worrying about spelling also stops children trying adventurous words and can lead to misspelt words being 'corrected' by them to an alternative misspelt word, or worse, a correct spelling can be 'corrected' by the child so that it is then misspelt.

Expecting children to apply all the criteria they have ever been taught for every piece of writing means that we are treating every piece of writing as a test. It is only in test situations that we ask children to apply all their learnt skills. Imagine making every mathematics lesson a maths test! We know that children's maths progress would be very slow, as has been evident in children's writing. In maths we introduce one skill at a time, teach children to develop that skill, later make sure they apply it and, at regular intervals, test it. We need to do the same with writing, giving children feedback about the learning intention only, ignoring spellings and other features, unless that is the learning intention. On a regular basis we need to ask children to apply all they know about writing in a test essay. Many schools have extended writing lessons every week where children operate in these conditions. Literacy advisers have pointed out that this is not a good idea, because it simply gives children time to practise more of their mistakes, so once every four weeks or half a term would seem more appropriate. In the meantime, we need to be focusing on specific aspects of writing in order to help children develop their skills.

One teacher in New Zealand described the impact of reducing the number of learning intentions in writing:
In one-to-one conferences during writing sessions, I have been amazed at the difference in the quality of discussion and outcomes that I now focus only on the current learning intention with each child. I have no idea how the majority of children managed to enjoy writing when they were constantly bombarded with feedback on all sorts of things.

Giving too much feedback at the end
Having given many criteria at the beginning of the task, we often then give children too much information through marking, which is overwhelming and difficult for children to take in. They are often demoralised by it, especially if there are many spelling errors pointed out when the child’s writing was in fact very good.

One of the most important research findings is that providing a grade for every piece of work can be counterproductive. This mainly applies to secondary schools of course, but there are parallels in primary schools. Grades freeze children into ‘ego-related mode’ rather than ‘task-related mode’. Anyone who gets B or above is likely to feel complacent and anyone with B minus or below tends to feel demoralised. Grades beg instant comparisons with classmates, again leading to complacency or demoralisation. Children ignore marking comments when a grade or symbol is present, because that becomes the most important measure of their ability and achievement. Instead, children should be given information about where they achieved success against the learning intention and where they could improve against the learning intention — both at the same time. Comments are valuable when they relate to the ‘can do’s’ or strengths, and the ‘need to do’s’ or gaps. For instance, given a learning intention of using effective adjectives, we might say, ‘These are the three best adjectives you used and this one needs improving.’ Pointing out the success of the adjectives, then stating that the spelling could be improved, does not fit this formula. Every now and again children do need to know where their work lies in comparison with a standard — but not for every piece of work.
Although grades are rarely used in primary schools, stickers often are. These can act in the same way as a grade, distracting children from other feedback. External rewards are dealt with in detail in Chapter 8.

**Distance marking**

Distance marking — marking away from the children, because there is simply no alternative — takes up much of teachers' lives. A major issue is to find ways to make distance marking more manageable for teachers and more meaningful and accessible for children. Research about distance marking shows that children need to be able to *read the teacher's comments and understand* them. Understanding is often absent, and only the most confident and able children ask teachers to explain marking comments to them. Most children do not ask because they do not want to lose face by making the teacher think they do not understand what she has written. One way a teacher can enhance the value of the comments is to teach the students the skills to seek help, and to create a climate in the classroom that encourages help-seeking.

Children also need to be given set lesson time to read marking comments, and then a short period of time to make a small, focused improvement based on the comments. Without the feedback information being used by the child, the improvement suggestion is unlikely to be carried over to future work in different contexts. For instance, writing *'You could say more about the prince'* will only be worthwhile if the child is then asked to use this prompt to write another sentence about the prince, thus improving the work against the learning intention.

Sadler (1989), in his paper about formative assessment, established three conditions for effective feedback to take place: the children must first know the **purpose** of the task, then how far they achieved this, and finally how to move closer towards the desired goal, or how to *'close the gap'* between what they have done and what they could do. Feedback is information that helps answer one or more of these three questions: *'Where am I going?'* (the learning
intentions) ‘How am I going?’ (preferably related to the success criteria) and ‘Where to next?’

These three questions can work together. The feedback relating to ‘How am I going?’ has the power to lead to undertaking further tasks (‘Where to next?’) relative to a goal (‘Where am I going?’). It is this gap between where the student is and where they are aiming which leads to the power of feedback. Sometimes it is important to transcend the gaps, and it is certainly the case that the ‘gap’ can be markedly different in various subjects. The gap can relate to a lack of knowledge or understanding, to differing ideas of quality (e.g. in art), or the quality of the experience itself (e.g. in physical education).

It is often the case that, instead of giving specific, concrete strategies to help children move from what they have achieved to what we want them to achieve, teachers instead simply reiterate the desired goal. For example, ‘You need to give a better description here’ merely reiterates the learning goal of ‘Write a descriptive story opening’. Better advice would be that which focuses on how to improve the description (e.g. ‘What was the prince wearing?’, ‘Could you describe just the prince’s face?’). Such advice helps the student understand ‘Where to next?’

Time management is, of course, of prime concern in getting children to read marking comments then act on them — but a personal anecdote perhaps emphasises the importance for learning:

Shirley sings in a choir. Some time ago, the choir stumbled over two bars and the conductor stopped them and sang the two bars to them. They listened carefully. He then said, ‘OK? Everyone turn to page 167.’ The next time they arrived at the passage they stumbled again. The conductor was cross, accusing them of not listening and yet again sang it to them. It was not unusual for this to happen three or four times, with the same passage, before a concert.

What he should have done, of course, after singing it to
them, was to have asked them to sing it back to him. He would have learnt two things from this: (a) whether they now knew the passage, and (b) if they didn’t, where they were going wrong. So why doesn’t he do this? Because he feels that he doesn’t have time. Every week he places an A4 sheet on his stand of all the numbers they need to get through. He then spends the entire evening looking between his list and the clock. His measure of success is that he has reached the end of his list. If he only had the courage to leave one or two numbers out, over time, they would know the piece better.

There are some powerful parallels here with lessons today, with teachers often feeling they are on a conveyor belt, aiming to cover the curriculum. If learning is our prime concern, then we cannot afford not to give children time to read and act on our feedback. It is one of the most significant aspects of learning. Often, a student needs to experience and interact with the same materials or ideas in three or four different ways before they attain the learning intention.

It is important also to recognise that feedback can occur at four levels.

1 Feedback about the self, which is too often unrelated to the student’s performance on the task (e.g. ‘You are a great student’).

2 Feedback at the motivation level, which includes information that leads to increased effort, greater skill in self-evaluation, or confidence to engage further on the task.

3 Feedback can be aimed at the manner in which, or process by which, the task is performed. This kind of feedback is more directly aimed at the strategic levels of understanding, the processing of information, or learning processes required to have success on the task or activity.

4 Feedback can be about the task, usually in terms of directions to acquire more, different, or correct information.
When a student begins working on a new learning intention, feedback often has to start at the task level, and as they get more and more fluent, feedback needs to move up the levels — with the teacher providing more feedback about 'how to' do the task, and then about how the student can gain confidence and mastery of the task.

As we will see in Chapter 8, feedback information at the self level can be counterproductive to attaining the learning intention. Such 'self' feedback (often given as praise, reward or punishment) can divert attention from the learning needed to attain the success criteria.

A practical strategy for 'closing the gap' in marking

We need to give feedback about the learning intention: indicating success and improvement needs. Marking can be more accessible for children if we introduce codes to show these elements, as follows.

1 Highlight (with a highlighter pen) three places where the child has written the best aspects against the learning intention, and indicate with an arrow/asterisk where some improvement can be made.

In Targeting Assessment in the Primary Classroom (Clarke, 1998), this strategy was in its early stages. The initial findings were that children loved the highlights, but hated the arrows! Their reasons were that they did not know how to make the improvement.

2 The next stage of trialling was for the teacher to extend the arrow to the nearest white space and write a 'closing the gap' prompt for the child, to help them to close the gap and be able to make a small improvement.

This was the start of a great deal of interest by teachers, because now subsequent alterations made by children showed real improvement. The following illustrations show examples of this strategy in action, with the child's subsequent improvement at the end. In the first, the
Learning Intention

To select important events and write them in an essay my readers will find interesting.

June 11th
Age 15
At the age of 16 weeks ago on the 28th of October, Hawes, Saturday, started a new school year which we were all excited about. We had just left the home of our school and were ready to pick up books, buy lunch, and have breakfast. As usual, we all got onto the bus, there were 2 buses, a double decker, and a bus right onto the main street, right near the college. For the long ride was very enjoyable. By nine in the morning we were all there, where the ride was very quiet and boring. The bus then started to go, it was almost quarter to 12 and it started to pour, we noticed the rain. But I'll tell you more about how I made it more interesting.

I was freezing cold and wanted to have a hot drink. We were all wrapping up in a coat and felt comfortable.

Figure 4.1 Trip up Rangitoto.

Learning Intention

To complain in a way that gets your money back.

Dear Chapshades,

On the 10th of November, my son bought a skateboard and trucks from your store. He was told that he should be good quality. He was told to look at the skateboard twice and to check for any imperfections. He opened the middle end of the truck, and one of the trucks was broken. He took it to the store and asked for a refund. He was given the skateboard and asked why that was the cheapest and best skateboard. He then asked for another and was given a new skateboard or a refund please.

Figure 4.2 A letter of complaint.
highlights indicate the child’s use of interesting language. The teacher gave a prompt to make the account more interesting to the reader. In the second example, the teacher has highlighted the appropriate elements of a letter of complaint and has prompted the child to use a more appropriate tone.

Over time, it has been possible to categorise the different types of ‘closing the gap’ comments teachers have written, which has, in turn, given teachers more support in finding the right words with which to effectively ‘close the gap’ for each child.

‘Closing the gap’ prompt categories

A practical example helps to illustrate the different types of responses:

Learning intention: To effectively introduce a character at the start of a story.

Activity: The children have to choose someone they know, who the class will not know, to describe.

We are learning to: Write about people’s characters effectively in our stories.

How will we know we’ve done this? (created with the class): We will have said something about their appearance, their likes and dislikes (including hobbies), their general personality, their attitude to others, anything else.

Aside: This is important because it helps the reader to really feel they know the person, rather than just knowing what they look like.

After highlighting three success phrases, (or perhaps just one for younger children), imagine the teacher has placed the arrow at the line written by the child: ‘This person is a good friend.’ The following ‘closing the gap’ prompts are possible:

1 A reminder prompt
   This simply reminds the child of what could be improved:
   Say more about how you feel about this person.
   Interestingly, many teachers write this kind of prompt for all
children, but most children need more support than a reminder prompt. Often they just reflect the work back to the student (think again).

2 A scaffolded prompt
Most suitable for children who need more structure than a simple reminder, this prompt provides some support, or constructively helps the student understand how something can be done.

- Can you describe how this person is 'a good friend'?
  A question
- or
- Describe something that happened which showed you they were a good friend.
  A directive
- or
- He showed me he was a good friend when . . .
  An unfinished sentence (finish this sentence).

3 An example prompt
Extremely successful with all children, but especially with average or below-average children, this prompt gives the child a choice of actual words or phrases.

- Choose one of these or your own:
  He is a good friend because he never says unkind things about me to other people.
  My friend is a friend because he is always nice to me and laughs at my jokes.

Many children, given the example prompt, choose their own improvement instead. Perhaps we have been rather too concerned in the past with marking comments being open-ended and questioning. Giving a choice of actual
Science

Learning Intention: To find out how electricity is conducted.

We did the experiment and found out that the electricity flowed through the metal wire but not the plastic one. We knew this because the light lit up.

Justin - You have told me what you observed. Why do you think this happened? Do you remember how electricity is transferred?

The metal bar had electrons that can move, and the plastic one didn't. The moving electrons carry the electricity.
Learning intention
To select and describe features of the movie that would convince others that it would be worthwhile to watch.

Review
Lily
19/11/02

Movie, Disney Cinderella
A classic fairy-tale about a servant girl, a prince, mice, slipper, glass slipper, and of course a kindly godmother. Cinderella is one of Walt Disney's first movies and in my opinion the brothers' original songs like Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo, which won an Emmy award, have a special place in our hearts. Cinderella
Great starting line for second paragraph
Is it good to be repaired a lot in nature or is it the best movie ever?

Figure 4.5 Learning intention: to select and describe features of the movie that would convince others that it would be worthwhile to watch.

Learning Intention
To summarise the main features of the book and to give my views in a way that would help others decide whether to read it.

Title - Hidden Jewel
Author - Virginia Andrews

Summary-
Pearl has lived in a mansion her whole life, and grown up with a loving family. Pearl is 18 years old and is about to start college to fulfill her dream of becoming a doctor. Yet meanwhile, she has an affair with her best friend's boyfriend. Her mother tries to help her with the problem, but Pearl breaks up with the boy. Pearl is on a journey to find her father to bring her mother out of his critical state.

Question: What do you think about the book?
Critical think-
I found the book very enjoyable, but however, some parts are very predictable. Chapters 6-8 which guilt the whole plot describing her brother's critical state, which would be of great interest if cut. Overall, it's quite a short read other than that I think it lives up to the high standards that other Virginia Andrews novels have.

Figure 4.6 Learning intention: to summarise the main features of the book and to give my views in a way that would help others decide whether to read it.
words or phrases acts like the beginning of a brainstorm. Children invariably think of a better or different way of writing this themselves.

The examples of work on pages 68, 71 and 72 show the strategy in action in a range of classes across the country. In all cases, the improvement took no more than five minutes, often less, which was amazing to the teachers. Children appear to be highly motivated by the personal element of the 'closing the gap' prompt and the helpful structure of the comment.

The children’s development over time is, in part, a product of the marking. Without the chance to make an improvement on the same piece of work, we will never know what children are capable of. When one piece of work is followed by a new piece of work, we are not capitalising on their ability to develop. This strategy provides a single, specific focus, rather than a general instruction to redraft.

Making the strategy work effectively

1 Begin by telling the class that you will be changing the way you mark their writing because you realise this way will help them to progress. With older children you could even talk about the research about spelling and so on.

2 Introduce it to the whole class with a piece of work on acetate with an overhead projector, demonstrating exactly what will happen.

3 At the beginning, go round the class, checking that they all understand what they should be doing. If they don’t understand the ‘closing the gap’ prompt, it was the wrong one for them or they still need face-to-face marking. Remember, this strategy is designed for distance marking.

4 Some children sometimes simply answer the question you write, rather than replacing the arrowed phrase (e.g. ‘closing the gap’ prompt: Could you compare the price difference in a clearer way? Child’s improvement: If Fairy was $2, mine would be $1.50). To stop this happening, include the words ‘Replace this phrase’ or similar, or simply explain to the child.
The teacher needs to read the work all the way through first, or the highlights can be ill-considered and/or there is a temptation to start correcting spellings! If it seems difficult to find three highlights, this is a cue for face-to-face discussion with the child. The work was probably either inappropriate for that child or not enough was generated in the time, or distance marking is inappropriate.

If the ‘improvement’ is not actually an improvement, the problem nearly always lies with the quality of the ‘closing the gap’ prompt.

**Developing the strategy**

Teachers using this strategy for even a short time (two weeks) have described a variety of spin-offs. The coded marking lends itself to self- and paired-marking. Children start to guess which highlights the teacher would choose, presenting a clear opportunity for the child to choose their own highlights. Paired marking with this strategy produces high-quality dialogue, especially if the children work together on each other’s work.

Teachers find themselves using this strategy when marking children’s work face-to-face. The ‘closing the gap’ prompt might be oral with younger children, but the strategy is equally effective with face-to-face marking.

Teachers have found it useful in other subject areas whenever writing takes place, as was illustrated by the science writing (Figures 4.3 and 4.4).

With closed tasks, where there are right or wrong answers — such as in a comprehension or spelling exercise — there is no advantage or sense in using three highlights. Ticks and crosses are still appropriate. However, teachers have found that it can still be useful to use the arrow and a ‘closing the gap’ prompt for one of the mistakes.

Mathematics has been less successful with coded marking, because sometimes children get all the answers right. Clearly the coded marking would apply well to open-ended
problem solving, but with 'closed' tasks it is more limiting. When all the answers are right, some teachers have used an arrow and an 'extending the gap' prompt — an extension idea.

Finding time to do this

Firstly, you have to believe that this is a vital aspect of children's learning and development, in order to make the time. Teachers have mainly taken the first five to 10 minutes in the morning or afternoon or before the children start the particular lesson. The closer to the lesson the work is returned, the better it is for the child, but teachers have found that children refocus relatively easily when they are reminded of the work. While most children are dealing with their improvement, there is an opportunity to speak to those children who need face-to-face intervention.

Whether this strategy is more or less demanding than current marking practice depends of course on the teacher's current practice. For many teachers it is less work, because they have been marking so many aspects, but for some it might mean more. However, the benefits make it worthwhile even if this is the case. Clearly, it would be unmanageable to mark every piece of writing in this way, so schools have tended to agree on a minimum number to receive this kind of quality marking.

The impact of focused marking

The impact on children

- Self-esteem increases as a result of children's more visible improvements. This is because they come to understand and even be more in control over 'how to' improve and attain the learning intention.
- Children like the system and are very motivated to make their improvement.
- Children are eager to look at their marked work and enjoy looking back at previous comments.
- In one class, every child came in before school to do their 'closing the gap' improvements and talk about them. The teacher said, 'This is a miracle. They usually
wander around the playground before school.

- Children's writing improves, as well as the quality of their oral comments about their work.
- More able children are able to suggest 'closing the gap' comments.
- Children find it more useful than previous marking.
- Children keep looking up at the success criteria when they know the work will be marked in this way.
- Children make better connections between their work and the learning intention.
- By focusing on one thing at a time, children improve their repertoire of skills.

The impact on teachers

- Teachers who have applied this marking system consistently say that it is one of the most useful of the formative assessment strategies in enabling the teacher to see tangible results of change and in providing evidence of improvement. Other common remarks are that marking is 'much less stressful'; the strategy is 'liberating' and the whole thing is 'exciting'.
- The quality of the child's improvement depends on the quality of the 'closing the gap' comment. As one teacher said, 'If you've hit that well, it works like a dream.'
- There is a clearer purpose in marking, so teachers feel more confident and satisfied about spending time on it.
- The strategy again focuses the teacher on the learning intention of the task.
- Looking for the three highlights challenges teachers' knowledge of the learning intention and can lead to learning intentions being broken down or made clearer in planning sheets.

Comments made by teachers include the following:

'Creating the "closing the gap" comment is the hardest part — it makes you really feel like you're being a teacher, and you do gradually improve.'

'It has noticeably improved children's progress.'
It was hard to ignore spellings after so many years of marking them every time.

It was much quicker to mark in this way, focusing only on the learning intention.

Higher-achieving children are asking for more “closing the gap” comments.

Wider implications and effects

The marking strategy, as with all other formative assessment strategies, needs to be the subject of a whole-school focus, taking parents and boards of trustees with you over a set period of time. Parents, especially, need clear communication about marking, because they have certain expectations based on their own experiences of school. We need to tell them about the research findings and explain how spelling is actually learnt, and so on. The marking had been particularly useful for parents to see in their children’s portfolios, because the child’s improvement and what is being learnt are clearly visible. Stephanie Anich from Gladstone Primary School explained how they helped parents with the new approach:

There is a lot of pressure from colleagues and parents to mark and correct everything a child does. You feel that you aren’t doing your job properly if you don’t. Children’s workbooks need a disclaimer on the front — “Dear Parents, Not all pieces of work in this book will be marked or corrected. Most pieces are an opportunity for your child to practise what they have been taught. Written feedback will only be given if it is related to their current goals. Most feedback will be given orally. Signed, the Classroom Teacher”.

Of all the formative assessment strategies, focused marking is probably the most challenging for teachers, because it gets right to the heart of teaching. Children’s responses to the teacher’s oral focus and marking focus inspires teachers to persist. The purpose of marking has, for many years, been
clowned by the perception — and often the reality — of parents' and others' expectations, but these teachers felt realigned to the real purpose of marking: to provide feedback to children about their successes and improvement needs against the learning intention — a real tool for learning and improvement. As with the other formative assessment strategies, teachers using this strategy feel that they cannot go back, that their practice is now fundamentally imbued with these processes.

Marking and feedback documentation

The following approach was created by teachers on a number of 'Marking and Feedback' courses. It could serve as a starting point for developing your own school approach to marking.

MARKING AND FEEDBACK APPROACH

MISSION STATEMENT
We believe feedback and marking should provide constructive information to every child, focusing on success and improvement needs against learning intentions; enabling children to become reflective learners and helping them close the gap between current and desired performance, and be partners in deciding 'Where to next'?

PRINCIPLES
Marking and feedback should:
- be manageable for teachers;
- relate to learning intentions, which need to be shared with children — students need to understand 'Where they are going' and 'How they would know when they attained the learning intention';
- involve all adults working with children in the classroom;
- give children opportunities to become aware of and reflect on their learning needs;
- give recognition and appropriate encouragement for achievement;
- give clear strategies for improvement;
- allow specific time for children to read, reflect and respond to marking;
involve children in the same process (whether oral or written), to ensure equity across subjects and abilities;
- take an ipsative approach (where success is based on that person's actual attainment) within the context of marking towards the learning intention (and less on comparison to other students' achievements);
- respond to individual learning needs, marking face-to-face with some and at a distance for others;
- inform future planning and individual target setting;
- teach students the skills of help-seeking;
- ensure a climate where recognising and learning from errors is welcomed;
- be accessible to children;
- use consistent messages throughout the school;
- ultimately be seen by children as positive in improving their learning;
- encourage and teach children to self-mark wherever possible.

STRATEGIES

Quality marking

Not all pieces of work can be 'quality marked'. Teachers need to decide whether work will simply be acknowledged or will be given detailed attention.

Wherever the task is open or narrative, feedback should focus first and foremost on the learning intention of the task. The emphasis in marking should be on both success against the learning intention and improvement needs against the learning intention. Focused comment should help the child in 'closing the gap' between what they have achieved and what they could have achieved (e.g. 'What else could you say about the prince?', 'Say something about the prince's personality', 'Try one of these words: handsome, elegant, arrogant'). With English narrative writing, codes can save time and make the feedback more accessible to the child: highlight three things (maybe two or even one per child with younger children) which are best against the learning intention and put an arrow where improvement against the learning intention could take place, including a 'closing the gap' comment. Where codes are inappropriate, success and improvement should be pointed out verbally or in written form. Useful 'closing the gap' comments are:

- A reminder prompt (e.g. 'What else could you say here?').
- A scaffolded prompt (e.g. 'What was the dog's tail doing?', 'The dog was angry so he . . .', 'Describe the expression on the dog's face').
- An example prompt (e.g. 'Choose one of these or your own: He ran around in circles looking for the rabbit/The dog couldn't believe his eyes').
Secretarial features
Correct spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc., should not be asked for in every piece of narrative writing, because children cannot effectively focus on too many things at one time. When work is finished, ask children to check for things they know are wrong in their work when they read it through. They should not be told to correct all spellings, or they are likely to write further misspellings or waste time looking words up.

Only give children feedback about those things you have asked them to pay attention to. This will mean that some aspects of writing are unmarked, but over time will be marked.

Self-marking
Children should self-evaluate wherever possible. Children can identify their own three successes and look for improvement points. The whole-class session can then focus on this process as a way of analysing the learning.

Shared marking
Using one piece of work from a child in another class to mark as a class, using OHP, at regular intervals, models the marking process and teaches particular points at the same time.

Another strategy is to show two pieces of levelled work, with the same title, and discuss their differences.

Paired marking
Before ends of lessons, children should sometimes be asked to mark narrative work in pairs. The following points are important:

- Paired marking should not be introduced until Level 2, unless teachers feel younger children are ready for this.
- Children need to be trained to do this, through modelling with the whole class, watching the paired marking in action.
- Ground rules (e.g. listening, interruptions, confidentiality, etc.) should be decided, then put up as a poster.
- Children should, alternately, point out what they like first, perhaps using a highlighter pen, and then suggest ways to improve the piece, but only against the learning intention and not spellings, etc. The 3:1 success-to-improvement ratio should be followed, to avoid over-criticism.
- Pairings need to be based on someone you trust — best decided by teacher.
Pairings should be achievement-based, of two middle, two higher, or one middle and one lower together.

Encourage a dialogue between children rather than taking turns to be the ‘teacher’: they should discuss each other’s work together (e.g. ‘I think this bit really shows how that character feels. What do you think?’).

Organisation

- The first 5–10 minutes of a lesson should, wherever possible, be used to get around the class to establish understanding and act on it where the work is too easy or too difficult.
- Where possible, children should be encouraged to self-mark.
- Set less work, especially in literacy and mathematics, so that time can be allowed to go through work and for class feedback on work.
- Wherever class discussion takes place, feedback is given orally. Notes might also be necessary to inform future planning as a result of the discussion findings.
- Children need to have some feedback about their work, but flexibility is important, depending on the nature of the task and the time available.
- Distance marking should be accessible to children and manageable for teachers. Use codes against learning intentions wherever possible.
- When work has been distance marked, time should be given for children to read the comments, and then make one focused improvement based on the improvement suggestion (linked with the arrow when codes are used). In order for the marking to be formative, the information must be used and acted on by the children.

Date agreed:
Date reviewed:
Professional development ideas

1. Inform teachers, parents and boards of trustees about the research findings on feedback. Use sections from this book for quotes and make bullet points.

2. Take oral feedback first and get teachers to try this in the classroom, with a feedback meeting to share findings.

3. At a staff meeting, introduce the focused, coded marking strategy, showing the examples of children's work from this chapter. Look carefully at each one, discussing the highlights, arrows, 'closing the gap' prompts and children's improvements.

4. In the same meeting ask teachers, in pairs, to mark some work in the same way, firstly given photocopies of the same piece of work and secondly with work they have brought to the meeting. Share highlights and 'closing the gap' prompts and discuss and work on these together.

5. Get teachers to trial the approach for half a term, before holding a feedback meeting to discuss issues. Bring work to the feedback meeting to share examples of children's improvements.

6. Collect all the ways in which spelling is taught and learnt in school as evidence for disbelievers!

7. Video your own, or observe a colleague's, class and take a transcript of everything the teacher says. Discuss how much, and which statements provided feedback — what type of feedback is it? How did the student use this feedback?

8. Talk to some students about what they consider is useful feedback that they received from a recent lesson — and discuss how you could provide different, more and/or better feedback.

9. Draw up a list of all the different kinds of feedback you use, and see if your colleagues can add to this list, then use these types in class. Do the students notice the difference?

10. After school, ask your child not what did you learn today, but what feedback did you get about your work today?