

A MARKED IMPROVEMENT

Being consistent in your approach to marking isn't enough, says **Chris Quigley**. A more targeted method of giving feedback is needed to advance children's learning...



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Sometime in the 1990s a marking revolution took place. Red pens were abolished in favour of a less threatening green! Ticks and crosses, symbols of the menacing red pen, were replaced by comments designed to motivate and move pupils on. Surprisingly, standards did not rise and another revolution was needed. In the early 2000s, the next big thing was marking to the objective. This has now become firmly accepted by many as the definition of quality marking. The problem is that although many schools have adopted this strategy and some pupils have benefited, others have not. Increasingly, schools are judged upon their consistency of approach to marking and this may prevent teachers from experimenting with other marking strategies.

The view that a consistent marking method raises standards is untrue. Whilst many argue that it is important to have a consistent method, common sense tells us that the way we give feedback to a five year old should be different to that of an eleven year old. They are, after all, at very different developmental stages. Consistency of method leads to conformity and standardisation. Some call it a one-size

approach to teaching. One size often just fits one, not all, and it is this that may be stopping us from raising standards.

Consistency of strategy is not what we require. It is consistency of principle.

In order to move away from standardised feedback approaches to those more customised to the needs of children, we need first to agree some principles. It is these principles that give us a framework for feedback but do not require a particular method. Armed with a framework, teachers can then develop customised methods to suit the situation and the age of the children. Establishing the principles is not as difficult as it may seem. Most people know them already:

Principle 1: Help children to see what they have done well

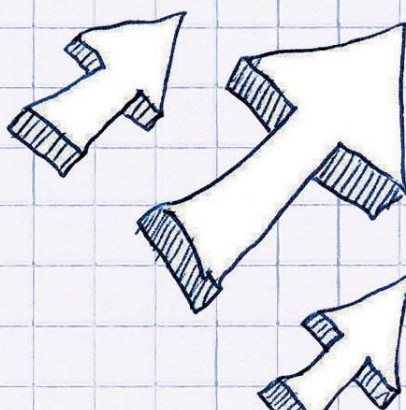
Principle 2: Give clear and specific guidance on how the work can be improved

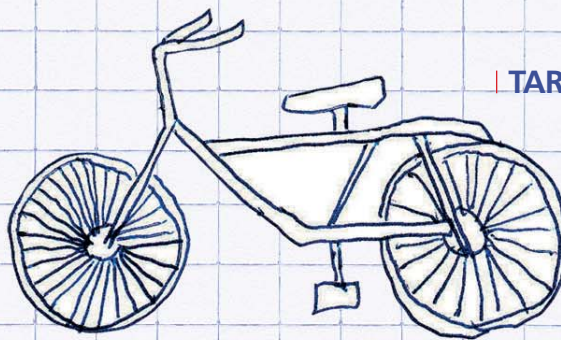
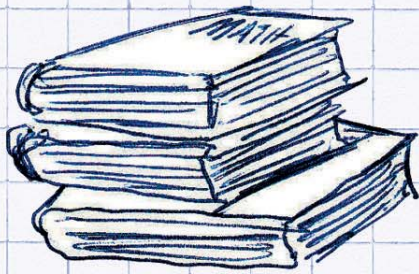
Principle 3: Give time to act on the feedback.

Three benefits arise from these principles. First, they allow teachers to develop a range of methods. Second, they can be used for any age group. Third, they can be used for written or verbal feedback, by teachers or by pupils.

Principle 1
Help children to see what they have done well

We all need encouragement, and this principle ensures that we give it to children. This is not the same as giving praise. Praise is usually about cheering children on or offering motivating advice – a bit like someone shouting, 'Come on, you can do it!' However, this only works for a short time. When children do not believe the words of support, they stop listening. Encouragement is much more useful. It is about showing children what they have done, pointing out what is good





about it and helping them to understand why. It is specific and real. Imagine helping someone to climb a hill. Instead of shouting, 'Come on, you can do it!' try 'Stop and look back. See what you have done?' Watch how motivated we all become once we can see what we have already accomplished. The task ahead seems more manageable.

Depending on the task children are given, the method for encouragement may vary. Sometimes verbal feedback is most appropriate, whilst for others it is marking a book with a clear indication of what is good. This could be a star, a tick, underlining, a sticker, a stamp, a dot or anything else that you can think of. The important thing is to experiment with ways that help children to understand what they have done well so that they feel encouraged.

Consider at this point the use of stickers, smiley faces and other motivational ideas. If they do not show children what they have done well and instead just give a summative 'well done', then there is very little value in the method.

Principle 2
Give specific guidance on how to improve work

As with any guidance, the more specific it is, the better. It also needs to be given in a way that differing abilities of children understand. That is why a standardised approach does not always work. Often, the guidance points we give children are too general and put across in a way that they do not understand. Generally speaking, there are three ways that we can effectively prompt children.

1) REMINDER PROMPTS

These work best for children who you are absolutely sure can do something, they have just forgotten.

Remember to use some colourful adjectives in your writing.

Of course, there is little point in reminding children to do this if they have not previously shown any mastery of using adjectives. Whilst this seems obvious, 'remember to' is the most used prompt teachers give. It is, however, best used for the most able pupils.

Reminder prompts may also take the form of questions.

Child's work: *He was very angry.*

Teacher's prompt: *Can you say more about why he was angry?*

In this example, the teacher is reminding the pupil to say a little more. Again it assumes that they are capable of answering this without any further help.

2) PROCESS PROMPTS

This involves giving a series of steps to help children improve their work. If, for example, letter formation of the letter 'd' is incorrect, try:

First, form a letter c. Start at the top and finish on the line. Then put in the upright.

This type of prompt is best used when it is clear that pupils do not know how to do something. A reminder prompt is unsuitable in this situation. These types of prompt are best given verbally, along with a demonstration.

This approach is also useful for giving feedback in mathematics. Teachers often struggle with the marking of calculations, as they are

either right or wrong. However, telling a child that a calculation is wrong does not help them to improve. The reason they are wrong is often as a result of missing out a step in the process:

Child's work: $76 + 16$

$$70 + 10 + 6 = 86$$

Teacher's prompt: *First, check you have partitioned 76 correctly and then have another go.*

Another reason children often get calculations wrong is because they have forgotten number facts.

Child's work: $84 + 17$

$$80 + 4 + 10 + 7 = 100$$

Teacher's prompt: *Check your addition of 7 and 4, then have another go.*



What did I say?



PROVIDE PROOF OF VERBAL FEEDBACK TO OFSTED AND OTHER AUDIENCES...

As far as inspectors are concerned, feedback is of high quality if it helps to move children on. By responding to feedback an obvious improvement should be apparent. This is, however, harder to demonstrate when feedback is verbal. Many teachers indicate that verbal feedback has been given, but it is often unclear as to how this has helped to secure any improvement in the child's work. It is also difficult for teachers to remember the feedback they give to all of their pupils and therefore difficult to know if it has been effective.

The answer is not to write down the feedback, as this defeats the object of verbal prompts. Instead try key word marking. This involves simply writing a key word or a code children understand next to where you gave verbal feedback. This helps the child to remember what you have said, helps teachers to remember what they have said and gives a focus for checking whether it has been acted upon. Some teachers return to a child later in a lesson and ask them to show how they have acted on the feedback. The pupil and the teacher can then tick the key word, to show they have successfully improved their work.

3) EXAMPLE PROMPTS

This involves giving one or two examples as to how to improve work. If a child has been asked to write three sentences containing an adverb and they have not included adverbs, an example of what you mean may be useful.

Child's work: *I walked down the street.*

Teacher's Prompt: *Put one of these adverbs into your sentence: quickly, hurriedly.*

When given examples, most pupils actually think of one of their own, but the examples help them to understand what you require.

Showing a child another pupil's work is another form of example prompt. Sometimes it is a good way to help them understand what you are looking for. Be careful not to dishearten a child though. They may feel they could never attain that standard, in which case try to get a close ability match.

All of these prompts are specific and by choosing the right one, children understand what they need to do to improve their work.

verbal feedback, which may be acted upon immediately. This is not always possible; in which case time should be given in the next lesson, or as soon as possible after the task has been completed. An expectation that all feedback is acted upon is essential. For this reason it may be worth considering how to begin your feedback prompts.

Many teachers write next time, but when will the next time be? Instead, try rephrasing this to now. This conveys an expectation that it will be done. It is also important to follow up and check children's work to see that an improvement has been made. If not, further input, or a different type of prompt may be needed.

Lesson structure

Often review sessions involve a summary of what has been covered or completed. Sometimes, pupils think about their strategies and how they overcame problems. The best review sessions, however, help pupils to follow the three principles of feedback and then allow time for

them to go and make some final improvements. This is because review sessions are usually whole class and verbal. Written review sessions conducted in groups, followed by children improving their own work are a great way to secure high standards.

Beyond the objective

For marking or verbal feedback to be of high quality we need to think beyond the lesson objective. Learning is not just about the present moment. Children are taught many things but it is not until they learn to apply them consistently that they actually learn. Marking to the objective alone means that basic errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling and so on are ignored. Some dismiss these as 'secretarial' marking. Instead, think about the big picture of a child's progress, and make comment on anything they have done well, anything they need to improve and give them time to act upon it.

Principle 3

Give time to make improvements

If we were giving feedback to an audience other than the child, the steps we have gone through so far might suffice. We are, however, giving feedback for children. This means it is vital to give them time to respond to the feedback so that they are able to improve their work.

The easiest way to do this is by giving



Chris Quigley is an inspirational, international speaker on educational issues. He provides training courses for the teaching profession as well as publications which are widely used in schools. Chris has trained OFSTED inspectors and OFSTED called him an inspirational leader with exceptional vision. Visit chrisquigley.co.uk for more information.

