Rethinking Class Size

Blatchford, Peter, Russell, Anthony

Published by University College London

Blatchford, Peter and Anthony Russell.
Rethinking Class Size: The complex story of impact on teaching and learning.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/81855.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81855

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2777529
Class size and classroom processes: Administrative aspects of teaching

In the last chapter we extended our analysis of class size and classroom processes by adding tasks and the curriculum. We now add one final classroom process. As well as aspects of teaching, often realised or enacted through interactions with pupils, there are also a number of more administrative aspects of the role, including assessments of pupil work, marking work, record keeping and planning for lessons. In this chapter we present our findings on the relationship between these administrative aspects of teaching and class size.

It seems to us that the administrative consequences of larger classes are all too easily taken for granted and have not received the attention they deserve. To preview what is clear from the results presented in this chapter: a large class can put enormous administrative burdens on teachers, and this can in turn adversely affect their morale and their teaching.

Research on class size and administrative aspects of teaching

As far as we know, the connection between class size and administrative aspects of teaching has not been studied in any detail before. Even Cahen et al. (1983), in their otherwise wide-ranging examination of class size and teaching, do not include administrative aspects in their summary of the three main processes affected by class size.
Looking back over the extensive publications that we published from the KS1 (5–7 years) stage of the class size project (CSPAR) (for example, Blatchford et al. 2003a and b) shows that we also had little to say about the administrative consequences of class size, focusing much more on the interactive aspects of teaching. This may reflect an unintended omission on our part, or it may be that the administrative aspects of teaching are more prevalent as children move beyond the earlier years of schooling. It is also likely that the administrative burdens on teaching have increased over time – this is probably something with which teachers will agree. A UK YouGov survey reported in November 2018 asked nearly 1000 teachers to highlight up to three areas which caused them stress (Neale 2018). The most common answer was the workload resulting from marking (60 per cent), followed by changing education policy (42 per cent) and the Ofsted inspection regime (40 per cent). If it is the case – as seems likely – that larger classes add to marking loads, then it follows from this survey at least that class size is involved in increasing teachers’ stress.

Berliner and Glass, two senior US educationalists, provide a powerful rebuttal of, in their view, 50 myths and lies that threaten America’s Public Schools (Berliner and Glass 2014). They take on what they classify as Myth 17 – the view that class size does not matter and that reducing class sizes will not result in more learning. They make the point that the debate over class size in many ways ‘can be better understood from the perspective of teacher workload’ (Berliner and Glass 2014, 90) and, of direct relevance for this chapter, say that with a larger class there are added burdens and responsibilities, including assessments of children’s learning and tests and essays, the creation of lesson plans, monitoring student progress, and attending parent–teacher consultations. They make the strong point that: ‘The more students a teacher is responsible for, the greater the demand on the teacher’s time in school, and this inevitably impacts his or her life outside school’ (90).

In this chapter we look at whether class size adds to the amount of marking and assessment. There is a huge literature on assessment in its many guises, and we do not have the space to deal with it here. In general terms there has been much debate about the value of assessment done outside the lesson and the immediate context of instruction, compared to assessments as part of the lesson, offering more immediate feedback to students. Broadly speaking there is agreement that the latter, more
formative form of assessment, is more likely to aid pupils’ understanding and learning. Black and Wiliam (2009) (also, Wiliam 2011) have written widely on assessment and have been concerned with the way some forms of assessment are an unprofitable use of teacher’s time. They point out that we tend to place too much emphasis on the grading function of evaluation and too little on its role in helping pupils to learn. We think the results in this chapter have important implications for assessment practices in schools, and we return to this at the end of the chapter.

Drawing on the responses from teachers themselves, we therefore describe in detail the way class size affects administrative aspects in terms of marking/assessment, reports and planning. Our general expectation was that extra children in the class would add to administrative burdens for teachers, but it is fair to say that we did not appreciate just how heavy the burden had become, from the teacher’s perspective, nor how significant the administrative aspects of teaching seem to be in seeking to understand class size effects.

Results on class size and administrative aspects of teaching

There were three main types of analyses conducted for this chapter. The first came from the analysis of TQ responses to the question about class size and teaching, as discussed in Chapter 4. As we said there, we moved to this chapter those answers that were categorised as being about the administrative side of teaching – marking, assessment and record keeping.

The second form of analyses collated headteachers’ and teachers’ questionnaire responses to two questions about their perceptions of any links between class size and assessment, and class size and record keeping.

Third, additional data came from the questionnaire surveys in which a question was included which asked for ‘any further comments’. There were numerous responses, and those making reference to assessment and record keeping were analysed for this chapter.

In addition, the case study teacher interviews included questions about stress and enthusiasm, and some responses to these cited issues connected to assessment, marking and record keeping.
Each of these forms of data collection were analysed in terms of main themes and examination of the main commonalities across all forms of data collection highlighted three main themes:

1. Marking/assessments  
2. Paperwork/reports  
3. Planning/preparing, for example, lessons/target setting

Unless stated otherwise, the quotations below are from teachers with classes of 30 pupils or more in Years 4 to 6.

**Marking/assessments**

We first look at responses from teachers to the open question in the KS2 TQ question on class size and teaching (see Chapter 4). As outlined above, this chapter addresses the analysis of those responses relating to administrative aspects of teaching.

The most frequent of the subcategories of administrative burdens concerns marking and assessment. Quoting verbatim from the responses one can sense the cry of anguish from teachers who feel that a large class of over 30 pupils means their marking load is too heavy and in consequence they are forced to make compromises.

Too many children … Too heavy a marking load, that is, $32 \times$ maths, $32 \times$ literacy, $32 \times$ other subject/s per night. (Year 4)

… it is difficult to ensure depth of learning for all the children – many are having to finish at home or during breaks. The marking and feedback generated by this creates a massive workload for evenings and weekends, especially the marking of so many science books and writing books. (Year 5)

Having 32 books per subject to mark is quite daunting and exhausting! (Year 5)

The large number of pupils has made marking arduous, and individual feedback very time consuming. (Year 6)

Worryingly, the problems of marking with a large class can in turn affect the quality of both the feedback given to individual students and, as
we saw in the previous chapter, the nature and quality of the work the teacher sets the pupils.

I began the year with 34 children in the class. ... – to mark, let alone assess 3 pieces of work from each child each day is difficult (although obviously I use self-marking and priority marking) – and writing lengthy (4 page) reports on each child is a nightmare. (Year 5)

It takes a long time to mark homework (3 hours’ worth per week) and extended writing. It means I do a lot of whole class marking/discussing answers and then check their work quickly later. I try to mark one piece of writing in depth every couple of weeks but can run out of time. (Year 5)

This increase in marking with a large class can mean there are negative consequences for other aspects of teaching.

The marking load has meant less time for preparation of differentiated work. (Year 5)

We now report on other sources of data, namely, headteachers’ and teachers’ questionnaire (TQ) responses on the two questions about their perceptions of any link between class size and assessment; references to assessment from further questions which asked for ‘any further comments’; and responses in case study teacher interview questions about stress and enthusiasm.

Responses in the TQ showed that there were two different contexts for pupil assessments: in class during lessons and out of class, often done at home in the evenings and weekends.

Looking first at within-class assessments, large classes created problems for teachers when they attempted to carry them out in lessons. They faced a dilemma – whether to shorten each assessment and maintain the frequency, or to keep the time for each assessment unchanged and reduce the number or amount carried out per pupil.

Obviously, a smaller class would be better in terms of workload and the time spent with individual children. Larger classes are much more demanding on time ... (Year 4)
The teachers’ responses revealed their feelings of dissatisfaction, as they felt pushed into the use of less than ideal strategies for assessing pupils’ work.

Assessments take time – there is only a limited amount available – therefore the time spent on each pupil is reduced. I would prefer to spend longer on each child. (Year 4)

In the previous chapter on tasks and curriculum we saw that class size could adversely affect the provision of practical activities. There was also the accompanying difficulty of assessing children in practical activities:

Summative assessment has been unaffected. However, to assess skills and practical work has been difficult with so many children. Most practical activity lessons occur in the afternoon when I'm alone with 35 children, so to observe carefully takes time and means I can't cover as much assessment as usual. (Year 4)

Practical activities in science and IT need to be observed by teachers, as they proceed, in order to assess pupils’ skills and understanding. Likewise, ongoing processes in maths, geography and music are also important for pupils to carry out and for teachers to assess, since they reveal learning needs.

I strongly believe that smaller KS2 classes would have a positive effect on teaching and learning at KS2. The obvious reasons are improved practice with regard to daily assessment and therefore better target setting for individuals. (Year 5)

This type of formative assessment was clearly viewed by teachers as vital to their attempts to meet the learning needs of every individual. It also shows how the processes discussed in this and the last chapter are interconnected. In the teachers’ minds, a direct link exists between the quantity and quality of their in-class assessments and their preparation of well-matched tasks for use in subsequent lessons and the setting of targets for individuals. From their point of view, weakening the formative assessments in any of the ways reported above, threatened the quality of their lesson preparation.

In Key Stage 2 a class teacher endeavours to acquaint herself/himself with the pupils as individuals, getting to know the ‘whole’
child and making appropriate assessments on their progress at the end of the year. This is difficult enough with classes of 28 or 30 children but with over 30 children in a class it is inevitable that teachers’ time is spread too thinly. It’s more difficult to get to know your pupils. (Teacher with 32 pupils in class)

Obviously, smaller classes give – increased adult:pupil contact; more precision targeted teaching; lighter workload, e.g. Assessment … (Primary headteacher)

There was for some a trade-off between assessments and teaching:

Obviously if you have a large class you either do less assessments per child or do less teaching while doing a set number of assessments. (Year 4 teacher)

In line with what we saw in Chapter 4, teachers reported feeling that they knew and understood their pupils less well in a large class and this had the effect of adversely affecting the matching of tasks they prepared for them, because of what they felt was an inadequate assessment of attainments and needs. A smaller class, on the other hand, allowed them more time per pupil and a more strategic approach to assessment, as we see in the two following comments from teachers with class sizes of 25 or less.

To me it seems obvious that the smaller the class the more time each child will receive in individual support from the class teacher. It also helps the teacher assess children more easily and plan their future learning.

A smaller class size undoubtedly releases more time for detailed assessment to inform future planning – individual responses from children can be gleaned and misconceptions rectified in greater depth.

Turning now to out-of-class assessments, headteachers and teachers were conscious of the impact large classes had on teachers’ workload after lessons had finished:

Comparing having a class of 30 last year and 35 this year has made a great difference in all aspects. I am too tired due to extra marking
and preparation. 5 extra children completing at least 4 pieces of work a day means 20 or more pieces to mark at the end of a very tiring day. (Year 4 teacher)

Just as the in-class assessment was seen as building up a picture of a pupil's learning successes and needs, so the same view was taken of marking out of class. Marking helps the teacher see what has been achieved and, just as importantly, what has not been understood, learned, remembered and applied.

Overall presentation is greatly improved in smaller classes because time to make comment and pursue better standards in this area. Marking is also not such a daunting task and it can be done in much greater detail. (Year 4 teacher)

A large class almost inevitably generates more marking. For the marking to be valuable to pupils and teachers alike, it has to be done with care and with formative intentions in mind. Such marking is very time consuming and teachers and headteachers reported how stressful and tiring it was to deal with the work of large classes.

Having started this year with a class of 35 and reducing after Christmas to 30, I have noticed a considerable change not only with resources, but the extra marking made quite a difference to my time. (Year 4 teacher)

Some headteachers felt that tiredness and a lack of ‘work/life balance’ were damaging the work of their teachers and large classes were seen as a main reason for the problem. This is because large quantities of marking at night and at weekends could undermine teachers’ morale and threaten their effectiveness in the classroom.

Marking is a nightmare for large classes. Paperwork implications e.g. assessment files, SEN files, etc. make me want to find an alternative job to that of teaching large classes. (Year 4 teacher)

The amount of marking I have had to do this year has been overwhelming (plus) having to then plan the next day’s activities on top of this. (Teacher of 35)
Young children need above all to be listened to. I regret very much that some details it would be useful to know have taken ages to find out about. I am far tireder this year than last year because evening marking has meant I rarely get to bed before midnight and I hardly ever see my friends. (Teacher of 34)

Last year with 33 Year 5/6 I was exhausted most nights. This year with 22 I am only exhausted Wednesday, Thursday and Friday nights! (Teacher of 22)

If the marking is done superficially, it adversely affects the link between the assessment of each pupil’s needs and the preparation of well-matched tasks, differentiated to meet those learning needs.

Marking of work in a large class especially for demanding subjects like English can lead to less quality marking. (Year 6 – headteacher questionnaire)

The volume of marking and record keeping increases with both size of class and the ability of the children. The work presented by KS2 children requires close, regular scrutiny for it to be purposeful for the development of children. Staff need to be able to manage their workload to suit the ability of the children, therefore I feel the KS2 teachers require either smaller classes or greater periods of non-contact to enable effective marking. (Teacher of 29)

Paperwork/reports

Many times we heard from teachers that although they are committed to – and love – teaching, the increases over time in administrative burdens, like writing reports on individual pupils, have become more onerous, and were affecting their commitment to teaching. It’s a simple matter of logic, though also realised experientially in the accounts from teachers, that as class size goes up so does the number of these reports and the amount of other written documentation on pupils. As with marking, the extra burdens can have negative consequences on other aspects of teaching, as well as teachers’ own well-being.

Here are responses from teachers with large classes to the question in the TQ about class size and teaching:
The classroom is crowded … Additional time taken to write reports adds to tiredness. (Year 4)

All of our classes are 30/29 and they have been this size for many years. I have taught classes of 24 at A … many years ago and this made a difference. … fewer reports/records to keep and quality of time with children is better. (Year 4)

Writing individual programmes onerous – at least 2 hours extra work. (Year 5)

… report writing take(s) an enormous amount of time to complete. (Year 5)

Turning now to the other sources of data (that is, headteachers’ and teachers’ responses in the questionnaires asking for their views on class size and record keeping, the question which asked for ‘any further comments’ and the case study teacher interviews) we found that teachers are obliged to complete record keeping which could often be lengthy and time consuming, and that this increased with the size of the class.

More children: more work, increased amount of time needed to assess and report, more marking and filling in forms and marksheets. More reporting (3 x yearly – 2 x for parents evenings because of setting for maths, English and science. (Teacher of 31)

Some teachers had clearly developed little belief in the worth of this laborious work, implying that it was bureaucratic and contributed little or nothing to the education of the pupils in their classes. One can sense the disillusionment in the two following quotations.

I am leaving teaching after 31 years to go on supply because the pressure of paperwork, endless planning and record keeping, etc., etc. (Year 4 teacher of 30)

I should be planning the forthcoming weeks lessons, which I feel I will teach better if fewer children turn up and half the curriculum is removed with no SATs in 3 weeks (over 2 age groups for me) followed by Reports which no-one really reads or understands. (Year 5 teacher of 34)
Smaller classes = Less pointless paperwork. (Year 6 teacher)

The most frequent response from Year 4 teachers referred to the record keeping for large classes being ‘more time consuming’ and more than two-thirds reported that having large classes had affected their record keeping.

Obviously the larger the class the more time is spent on marking, assessments, record keeping and writing reports. (Year 4 teacher)

Some teachers admitted that they resorted to briefer records, which they knew would not be so useful later:

It takes much longer! As marking so many pieces of work takes so long it means filling in records has to be done in a briefer way. Much work in record keeping has been done at home at weekends and late into the night – after other marking has been completed and preparation for the next day done. (Year 4 teacher)

It takes a long time to record, so I only record essential details which can be unclear when I look back. (Year 4 teacher)

One tends to rush over records as there are so many, that is 36 reports. (Year 4 teacher of 36)

In addition, some teachers remarked that because there were so many demands on them in a large class, they did not use their records as much as they should for their planning:

Record systems become almost impossible to manage and therefore do not have a valuable influence on planning for future development. (Year 4 teacher of large class)

Very time consuming with a large number of children (35 in maths) – no time to use them usefully as an assessment tool. (Year 4 teacher)

Record keeping is much more easily applied to a smaller class and therefore becomes much more valuable to inform teaching decisions which ensure the progression of the child. Less paperwork
means more quality teaching time can be devoted to the individual needs of the children. (Year 4 teacher)

In UK primary schools there is very little non-teaching time in the school day and hence most record keeping was done out of class, after lessons and at home in the evenings and weekends.

Pupil progress reports for example took me an average of 2 hours per pupil – it's hard enough to find an extra 60 hours for the normal 30 children, but how does one find more than that? – Answers on a postcard please to….! (Teacher of 31)

Time – it is difficult to spend enough time really getting to know exactly what the children do know in order to update records. (Year 4 teacher)

The fact that large classes demanded so much more time added to some teachers' negative feelings, not helped by the sense that this was not time well spent, so far as their pupils' learning was concerned.

Large classes mean lots more paperwork, marking, e.g. reports, assessments. You are not able to give as much time to teaching the children due to continuous workload. (Teacher of 27)

Large class sizes and poor funding are making the teaching role almost impossible. I have 100 books to mark each night (not one or two lines but pages!) and in addition I have my planning and record keeping. I want more time to ‘teach’ – that’s what I trained as a teacher for. I’m sorry that it is rushed – time is limited! (Year 6 teacher of 32)

Planning/preparing – for example, lessons/target setting

An allied administrative task affected by class size is the everyday planning and preparation for teaching. Again, this is rather too easily overlooked by those who feel that class size is unimportant; it is yet another illustration of how there is more to teaching than simply delivering a presentation or interacting with pupils.

Here are some responses from the TQ question on class size and teaching, all from teachers with classes larger than 30:
Mixed year group, 9 special needs, very little help, huge amounts of marking, planning, preparation for different ability groups. No release time for any of this. (Year 4)

Time spent marking instead of preparation for future lessons. (Year 5)

Less time spent on planning … more of this work taken home as a lot more time spent on marking. (Year 5)

Great stress! … Cannot keep up with target setting and assessment records/tasks. (Year 5)

As there are 36 children I do find it hard to spend quality time with individuals. … There is less time to set individual targets, to discuss these and their work with them. (Year 5)

Contrast the above with this response from a Year 5 teacher with a small class:

Having only 19 children enables me to teach and plan!

The other sources of data indicated that with smaller classes, teachers could spend less time marking and had more time and energy to devote to careful planning of subsequent lessons.

I have worked in a school with classes of less than 20 before (for 2 years). I felt that children greatly benefited from the extra attention they could receive. Furthermore, the reduced record keeping/assessment/marketing meant I actually had adequate time to prepare and deliver consistently decent lessons. Also significant, were the reduced ‘out of class’ demands, which I feel greatly helped my own teaching practice and hence children’s learning. (Teacher of 29)

Too much to do and too little professional time to do it in puts a strain upon the staff. As a result, in order to survive some lessons must suffer through rushed preparation. We rely heavily upon the ‘goodwill’ of the workforce who spend many hours making sure that the quality of lessons planning is high. (Year 6 headteacher survey)
Conclusions

Key Themes
Teaching: Administrative

- Marking/assessment
- Reports
- Planning

In this chapter we have looked at the relationship between class size and what we have called the administrative side of teaching. The Key Themes box above summarises the three main subcategories. We argue that the administrative aspects of teaching can be taken for granted but can be a particular burden for teachers in the UK, with its heavy emphasis on regular assessments and individual reports. It seems very clear from the majority of teachers we have heard from or spoken with that as the numbers of pupils in a class increase, the more demanding becomes marking, assessments and report writing. The accounts from teachers show how much these extra demands can have a negative impact on their teaching, well-being and satisfaction with their job.

The connection is a logical one of quantity: the size of the class determines how much school work teachers have to read, assess and give feedback on. With 30 or more pupils and, say, three subjects to be assessed, this can amount to over 90 books to address, perhaps in one session – a very time-consuming task! As we discuss below, it might be possible to conceive of alternative ways of handling feedback on student work, for example, in groups or by pupils themselves, but as things stand it is difficult to see how the numbers of pupils in a class can increase without also meaning more marking, assessments, reports etc. – a point seemingly overlooked by those who argue that class size is not important.

The results presented in this chapter are largely dependent on the views of teachers in schools. While their evidence is important in developing insights into administrative responsibilities, and the effect they have on teachers, the teachers’ views on the links to class size, though instructive, cannot be taken as conclusive without more research. The findings are, though, consistent with the strong argument of Berliner and Glass (2014), which we discussed earlier in this chapter, that the debate over class size in many ways is best understood from the perspective of teacher workload. Very much in line with the results in this chapter, they argue that with a larger class there are added burdens.
on real-time assessments of children’s learning, student assessments in terms of tests and essays, creating lesson plans, monitoring student progress and attending parent–teacher consultations.

The results in this chapter can be seen alongside the results from the UK YouGov poll reported earlier in this chapter. This shows that marking is the main factor causing teachers stress, and if we are right that larger classes add to the marking load then we can directly implicate class size in increasing teachers’ stress.

One thing to emerge from this chapter is therefore a strong suggestion that the effects of class size can be seen to operate in areas of classroom life away from the pupil academic test scores which are the usual measure of how class size effects are assessed. It seems that class size can indirectly affect pupils through effects on teachers, in particular in terms of teachers’ morale and stress, but also more directly affect pupils, for example, through the types of tasks set to pupils. This adds to our explanation for the second of our class size conundrums (CSC2).

We have no exact test of this claim, but it seems to us likely that the excessive administrative demands resulting from a large class may be one contributory factor in the relatively low retention rate of teachers and high levels of teacher dissatisfaction in the UK. Again this is in agreement with Berliner and Glass who argue that with larger class sizes: ‘Teachers are less likely to remain in the profession, leading to higher rates of turnover by experienced teachers and, in the end, fewer highly trained, qualified, and experienced teachers in schools educating our nation’s children.’ (2014, 90–91). If correct, then here is another important outcome of class size, not captured in pupil test scores.

Interconnectedness

By now the reader will be very aware of the point we make at the end of each chapter concerning the interconnectedness of class size and classroom processes. In this chapter we have seen that when we look in detail at how class size affects one factor – here the administrative aspects of teaching – we also see an overlap with other processes at the same time. Perhaps the two most obvious overlapping factors in the case of administrative aspects of teaching are differentiation and individualisation. Both rely heavily on teachers providing the kind of individual support, planning and instruction they feel is essential, but which is so hard to provide effectively with large numbers of pupils. Marking, assessments, record keeping and planning are essential to high-quality differentiation and individualisation, but it seems clear this is more
difficult with more pupils. We see again how understanding how class size effects work requires an understanding of the interconnected nature of classroom processes.

Class size and administrative aspects of teaching: Pedagogical implications

In this chapter we have seen repeatedly that a large class can add to the amount of marking, assessment and record keeping. We believe the situation is troubling and it is important to think about what steps can be taken to help. If it is the case that class sizes and the curriculum are ‘givens’ and difficult to change, then it seems to us we need to go back to basics and ask fundamental questions about the purpose and need for marking, assessments and record keeping.

As we said earlier in the chapter, there has been a general debate about the value of assessment done outside the lesson and the context of instruction, compared to assessments as part of the lesson, offering more immediate feedback to students, and in general there is agreement that the latter, more formative form of assessment, is more likely to aid pupils’ learning. Araceli Ruiz-Primo (2011) argued that effective feedback should help students to attend to the quality of what they have produced, and enable them to monitor themselves during their work. Wiliam (2011) makes the point that we tend to place too much emphasis on the grading function of evaluation and too little on its role in helping pupils to learn. Wiliam cites Crooks (1988) to make the point that an over-emphasis on the grading function can actually be counter-productive, because it can lead to a reduction in pupil motivation and self-efficacy, especially for weaker students, as well as a reduced use and effectiveness of feedback to improved learning.

The research literature therefore leans towards the view that marking pupil ‘products’, after the event, has limited formative value for the pupils. It may help teachers to identify the learning needs of individuals and for them to use this to help in planning subsequent lessons, tasks and approaches, but potentially more valuable formative assessment opportunities arise in the moment by moment informal interactions between teachers and their pupils. The benefit of a more informal interactive and formative assessment approach is the chance it affords for immediate, focused, detailed feedback which pupils see in context and which relates more directly to what they had written, said or done. Feedback which is delivered a day or more later is that much harder to use effectively to monitor pupils’ learning and to develop it.
Concerns about the excessive workloads resulting from large classes may therefore force us to rethink the type of assessments and record keeping common in schools, which teachers with large classes struggle with. Paul Black (2007) has shown how whole school change is needed. As suggested in Webster et al. (2016), with regard to the use of TAs in schools, one starting point would be to conduct a school level ‘audit’ of the existing record keeping, assessments and marking that takes place, and for this to then be examined critically by a group of teachers within the school, who then report to the school leadership for possible change in practice and policy. Sometimes it helps to take a fresh and overarching look at everyday practice. So schools can ask: Why are we marking this pupil product? What use will be made of the grades we award? Does it have any value for the pupils, or is it just an administrative task? What can we do to bring the processes of pupil learning, the assessment of their work and the formative feedback to those pupils, closer together in time and space? Taking stacks of books home does not seem to be the correct answer to those questions.

We have witnessed this fundamental rethink in action in one primary school where a rethink of National Curriculum levels of attainment acted as the spur to go back and ask the kind of questions set out above. Three specific questions formed the starting point of work in this school:

• What is the purpose of the marking?
• What impact does it have on pupils’ learning?
• What impact does it have on teachers’ workload?

The conclusion was that verbal feedback, to individuals and groups in the process of carrying out a task, was more valuable to the pupils, helping them to reflect on their work and make changes where necessary. At the same time, this reduced the teachers’ workload. In addition, record keeping was reduced to termly teacher assessments against two criteria, using the school database to store the information. Pupils books have no grades or marks.

Echoing the comment by Paul Black above, the staff at this school needed to be trained to abandon the summative assessment model and move to this radically different approach. The whole school was involved in the change, and naturally some teachers found the change easier than others. It is the school policy that teachers do not take books home to mark. Significantly, discussions with pupils conducted by the school
have shown that the ‘new’ approach is preferred by them and seen as more useful and helpful. Given this example, we suggest a rebalancing from summative to in-class formative forms of assessment may be one way of approaching the problems of large class sizes, while at the same time introducing more effective pedagogical practices. Another school we are in touch with has written a comprehensive school policy on marking. Readers may also be interested in a recent helpful report on reducing teacher workload by Richardson et al. (2018) which summarises initiatives in schools designed to reduce teacher workloads, including marking and assessments. Drawing on the findings and evidence from the Independent Teacher Workload Review Group Report Eliminating unnecessary workload around marking (2016), the University of Oxford/Education Endowment Foundation report A marked Improvement (Elliott et al. 2016) and Hattie’s work on feedback from Visible Learning into Action (Hattie et al. 2016), the report covers a trial of six different approaches to reduce marking workload within 16 schools over an average of one term. The approaches used were: Marking in the Moment; Visible Learning into Action; Minimal Marking; Self-Assessment; Symbols; and Marking Conferences.

Such initiatives are welcome, although the overarching problem is unlikely to be adequately handled by the actions of individual teachers or schools. It seems to be an area where a more general initiative is required. Unfortunately, with the decline of support from the traditional middle level tier of local authorities in England, which provided a valuable source of expert guidance, it often falls to individual schools to work out a strategy, or the responsibility passes to other more recently created, but more fragmented, middle tier structures like multi-academy trusts. One wonders whether a more government-led initiative is required. At the time of writing, recognition of the effects of excessive workloads on teacher retention prompted one Education minister to suggest a reduction in the number of emails to teachers. Though no doubt well meant, we can see from the teachers’ experiences as expressed in this chapter that this is going to do little more than scratch the surface of what is required.

It seems likely that attention to how assessments, marking and record keeping are dealt with in other countries would be valuable, though it needs to be remembered that the OECD figures reported in Chapter 1 indicate that most OECD countries have smaller primary class sizes than in the UK.
But any change to assessment practices is at best only a partial solution to the problems teachers have as a result of large class sizes. It seems clear that a class size of over 30 will inevitably lead to excessive administrative demands, which we have argued are not factored into the common view that class size is not important.