

“The pay is not worth it but it is excellent PD”: Australian teachers’ perspectives on doing large-scale marking

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Anecdotally, teachers take up opportunities to mark large-scale assessments because they are told by colleagues that it is ‘good PD’. Assertions about the value of marking are passed along with little question. However, research into the benefits of participating as a marker in large-scale marking has not been conducted in the Australian context. This paper reports the results of an online survey of Australian teachers (N=43) about their participation in large-scale marking in order to examine whether the research that has been conducted internationally is likely to be generalisable to Australia. The responses to the survey are described and then compared with four main areas of benefit identified in the literature. It found that Australian teachers’ views of large-scale marking are similar to those of their international colleagues, and that teachers report a broad and varied range of benefits. Additionally, it was found that survey respondents identified a range of costs and drawbacks of marking that have not been reported in the literature, but that in spite of these the respondents would still recommend the experience to other teachers.

Introduction

The ability to make reliable judgements about the quality of student work is a core skill of a proficient teacher (AITSL, 2011). This professional competency is often relied upon in large-scale marking operations that employ teachers with relevant experience as markers. One of the justifications commonly expressed as to why teachers should apply to be markers is because it is held to be valuable professional development (PD), or more colloquially, because it is “good PD”. The question that naturally arises from this assertion, though, is what specific professional skills and/or knowledge do teachers report developing?

As The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2011) acknowledge, the ability to make reliable judgements about the quality of student work is a core skill of a proficient teacher. This is evident particularly in Standard 5 “Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning”, focus areas 5.1 “Assess student learning” and 5.3 “Make consistent and comparable judgments” (AITSL, 2011). This professional competency of proficient teachers is recognised by organisations that administer large-scale assessments; these organisations and curriculum and standards authorities, in Australia and overseas, make recruitment claims about how marking benefits teachers. These organisations often present these claims as incentives over and above the financial remuneration. For example, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) says that, “Assessing VCE [Victorian Certificate of Education] external assessments provides a valuable professional development and learning experience.” (VCAA, 2018).

Despite these explicit claims of benefit for teachers, there is little research in Australia that has sought to examine more precisely the benefits of marking. The next section of this paper surveys the literature for relevant findings.

Large-scale marking as PD

The PD benefits teachers gain from participating in large-scale marking have been investigated in many contexts, but the data are mainly anecdotal or self-reported through interviews. This qualitative approach – interviewing teacher-markers and recording their reflections about where they felt they had benefitted – has been pursued by several of the researchers in this field (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 2013; Falk & Ort, 1998; Gambell & Hunter, 2004; Gilmore, 2002; Goldberg & Roswell, 2000). Additionally, there was a more recent research study into teachers' motivations, beliefs and values around participating in large-scale assessment as a form of PD, in the US (Palermo & Thomson, 2019).

In international contexts, teachers see participation in large-scale marking in a positive light, and report gaining awareness of students' literacy behaviours and confirming their confidence in their ability to judge the quality of student work (Gambell & Hunter, 2004). Other reported benefits include validation of teachers' expertise and a "greater understanding of teaching and assessing practices and processes" (Gilmore, 2002) as well as teachers becoming "more reflective, critical and deliberate" (Goldberg & Roswell, 2000). Reported intrinsic motivations for participating include professional growth, better supporting students' learning outcomes, and refining assessment practice (Palermo & Thomson, 2019). Falk and Ort (1998) identified four areas in which scoring provided teachers with professional learning: clarifying their goals and expectations; deepening their discipline knowledge; learning more about students and their work; and developing insights that support their professional practice. Additionally, they reported that the marking experience strengthened teachers' sense of professionalism. Darling-Hammond and Falk (2013) built on this earlier work to argue for greater utilisation of scoring as PD, asserting benefits such as deepening teachers' understandings of skills contained in curricula, reinforcing common standards across jurisdictions, building communities of practice, shifting testing culture in schools, and ultimately improving teaching and learning. All these benefits are alluded to in other research, including Falk and Ort (1998). Palermo and Thomson (2019) reported that their findings continued to align with the findings of Falk and Ort (1998).

In contrast to the four main areas identified by Falk and Ort (1998), Goldberg (2012) asserted that, "What teachers report learning from scoring has tended to center around the assessment itself [...], rather than on broader implications for instructional practice." (p. 44). Such contrasting views are not uncommon in the literature on this topic, which indicates the lack of consensus as to what teachers learn from participating in marking. The probable reason for such contradictory views is that there is a lack of evidence to suggest that the knowledge and skills an individual gains from a marking session can be generalised, not just across different assessment programs, but across all participants in the same marking session. For example, Goldberg (2012) went on to state that, "Until now the assertion that scoring serves (or can serve) as professional development has tended to get passed along without considering the great variety of experiences through which teacher engagement in scoring is filtered" (p. 44). The experience of scoring, and the benefits derived from it, may be quite personal or may differ from one experience to the next. The benefits gained by one participant may not be shared by all participants, and

the benefits gained from one style or type of marking may not be shared among different marking designs or contexts.

Nevertheless, that there are benefits from participation in marking and that teachers do learn from the experience seems to be well accepted in the international context, by all participants and researchers. However, there is little or no Australian research that establishes whether the benefits found in international research are generalisable to the Australian context, nor if there are any unique benefits that may arise from the Australian context that are not documented in the international literature.

Aim

It stands to reason that large-scale marking participation in an Australian context would have similar impacts on teachers and be viewed similarly by those teachers, especially given the reported sources of benefit are conversations with colleagues about student work and exposure to a wide range of student work of varying quality (Gambell & Hunter, 2004; Goldberg & Roswell, 2000; Masters & Forster, 2000). That said, the extent to which these themes might be able to be generalised to the Australian context has not been established in the literature.

So, the primary aim of the research reported in this paper was to survey teachers who had previously participated in large-scale marking about their experience, seeking to identify benefits, drawbacks, and opinions about the experience. These perceptions were then analysed with the aim of investigating whether there were grounds for an argument about Australian teachers having generally the same beliefs about participating in large-scale marking as those the literature reports their international colleagues as having.

There were four guiding questions for this research, and these are reflected in the questions contained in the survey which will be described in greater detail in the next section. The guiding questions were:

- What are the general benefits of marking perceived by markers?
- Why do markers pursue and take up opportunities to mark?
- What expectations do markers have of a marking experience?
- Do markers, on the whole, see marking experiences as beneficial for teachers?

In addition to informing the development of the questionnaire, these guiding questions, broadly, are used later in this paper to structure the reporting of the results of the analysis.

Methods

There is no necessary or fundamental connection between surveys and questionnaires (De Vaus, 2013). However, in this research a questionnaire provided the most efficient means of data collection. An online questionnaire was designed and delivered through the *Qualtrics* platform. The following sections describe participant recruitment, questionnaire design and the data analysis methods. All research activities in this research were approved

by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee prior to the activities taking place.

Participant recruitment

Initial participant recruitment was carried out locally, through social media posts on the *Facebook* page of the English Teachers Association of Western Australia, the English Teachers WA *Facebook* group, and personal invitations through professional networks. As a result of low response numbers, a decision was made to broaden the recruitment. Accordingly, a summary of the interim results, based on 20 responses, was published in an online magazine with a national readership, accompanied by a link inviting participation from interested readers (Reinertsen, 2018). In total, 62 valid responses were recorded, 43 of these being from teachers who had participated in large-scale marking.

Questionnaire design

For a questionnaire to engage the maximum number of participants, it must be relatively brief, engaging, and simple to access and answer (Sue & Ritter, 2012). These priorities formed the design principles for the questionnaire. The questionnaire first gathered some background information about the respondent, namely number of years of teaching experience, and subject specialisation. Geographic location and gender were not recorded.

A screening question was asked about whether the respondent had participated in large-scale marking, and the answer to this question determined whether the survey-taker proceeded to the main survey or was directed to a different set of questions. The analysis of the non-markers' responses is not presented in this paper, as they are tangential to its aim.

After the screening question, respondents were directed to a question asking how many times they had marked, and whether they intended to mark again. These items were intended to gauge the markers' experience with marking. From there, markers were presented with a checklist of impacts identified from the literature review and instructed to identify those that they agree with. This question was intended to collect data relevant to the first guiding question: "What are the general benefits of marking perceived by markers?" Two plausible distractors were included in the list, primarily intended to be a means of gauging whether respondents were attentive and thoughtful in their responses. The implications of participants selecting these distractors will be discussed later.

The final part of the questionnaire contained two retrospective questions and one general, reflective question in the form of a hypothetical. The two retrospective questions asked respondents to consider an earlier time in their career before they had any large-scale marking experience. It asked them to identify which reasons they remember having for choosing to participate in large-scale marking, and what they expected to experience. These two questions were designed to elicit data relevant to the second and third guiding questions. The final question asked markers what advice they would give to a colleague who was considering whether to mark, and in doing so sought to collect data about

markers' general perceptions of the benefit (or lack thereof) of marking experiences for teachers generally – the fourth guiding question.

Data analysis

The questionnaire collected data through both closed and open-ended questions. The item-level data were pre-processed in Microsoft *Excel*. In the pre-processing, unneeded data were removed, such as starting and finishing and time. The responses to closed-ended questions were summarised by totalling the responses to each option. The responses to the open-ended questions were coded by the researcher. Coding was done iteratively, in accordance with the interactive model (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014), in *NVivo*.

Results

General characteristics of respondents

Of the 43 markers who responded to the survey, 39 identified as secondary teachers: three former teachers, and 36 current teachers. In addition to the secondary teachers, there were two primary teachers (one current, one former) and one former early childhood teacher. The number of years of teaching experience ranged from 2 to 48, with a median and mode of 20, and a mean of 20.67 years with a standard deviation of 9.63. The respondents were asked how many times they had marked. The range of the number of times respondents had participated in large-scale marking was 1-90. Excluding one outlier (a response of 90), the mean was 8.85 with a standard deviation of 9.18.

On the whole, it would be fair to characterise the survey respondents as being mainly experienced secondary teachers, who had participated in large-scale marking several times. This ought to be borne in mind as primary teachers and inexperienced teachers are under-represented in the sample.

Agreement with general statements about the effects of large-scale marking

All 43 respondents answered a complex multiple-choice question that asked them to select which statements they agreed with from a set of nine statements about how large-scale marking affects teachers. Of the nine statements presented, seven had been derived from the literature and two were developed to be plausible distracters: statements that had not been identified in the literature and that were not intended to be true. These statements are presented in Table 1, arranged according to the number of times they were selected by respondents.

No statement was selected by all respondents, and so there is no consensus as to how markers are affected by participation in large-scale marking. However, 90% or more of the respondents agreed with statements about improving judgment, deepening knowledge about the assessment itself, and supporting professional practice. All of the other statements derived from the literature were selected by more than half of respondents

(three of them by more than three-quarters of respondents). This is a reasonably strong indication that what is true of the reports about the PD benefits of marking in other contexts might correspond very well with the beliefs of Australian teachers.

Table 1: Statements about the effects of participating in large-scale marking

| Marking a large-scale assessment ... | No. times selected |
|--|--------------------|
| increased your confidence in your ability to judge the quality of student work | 40 |
| deepened your knowledge of the assessment itself. | 40 |
| supported your professional practice. | 39 |
| clarified the learning goals and expectations you have of your students. | 38 |
| raised your awareness of students' literacy behaviours. | 33 |
| taught you more about students and their work | 29 |
| deepened your discipline knowledge. | 26 |
| [distractor] developed your sense of professionalism | 17 |
| [distractor] increased your repertoire of teaching strategies | 14 |

Nine respondents indicated that they agreed with all of the statements including the distractors. No question in the survey was compulsory, and so if respondents had not wished to answer, they could have simply 'clicked through' to the next question. Thus, the nine respondents who selected all statements may have actually agreed with all. Alternatively, it is also possible that the respondents who agreed with all statements might agree with any positive statement about large-scale marking, believing it to be beneficial in very many ways.

Distractors aside, there was a high proportion of respondents who indicated that they agreed with statements about large-scale marking increasing their confidence in making judgments, their knowledge of the assessment itself, and their professional practice in general. These three areas in particular should be kept in mind as the results from the open-ended questions are presented because they provide a broad overview of the benefits reported by markers from the marking experience.

Reasons for becoming a marker

The first of the open-ended questions asked teachers, "Why did you decide to apply to be a marker?" All 43 respondents answered, some with only a single word and some with a few sentences. The most frequently given responses are summarised in Table 2. Some responses were coded to more than one code where multiple ideas were presented in the response.

Table 2: Reasons for becoming a marker

| Reasons for becoming a marker | No. references |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Professional development | 23 |
| Gain an insider's perspective | 11 |
| Money | 11 |
| Gain a wider perspective | 8 |

Professional development

The most-referenced reason for becoming a marker was 'professional development'. Some responses were simple statements like "PD" (MR25) or "professional development" (MR32). In these cases, it is unclear what aspects of professional practice the respondents believe to be augmented by participation in marking, but they are clear and direct indications nonetheless of a belief that PD is a reason for marking. Other straightforward expressions of PD benefit were those teachers who made statements such as, "I believed the experience would benefit my role as a classroom teacher." (MR29), or, "to become a better teacher" (MR4). These blunt statements lie at the core of why any teacher pursues PD opportunities. All of the responses coded as 'Professional development' contain this idea that these markers chose to participate in marking because they were looking to improve one or more aspects of their teaching practice, or just generally become more effective teachers.

Some teachers sought to understand their subjects better. One of the respondents wrote, "To learn how to be a better [Year 12 course] teacher by gaining a deeper understanding of the syllabus." (MR24). One science teacher wrote that they "wanted to understand more about the assessment and hierarchical nature of science skills" (MR10). Four markers wrote about becoming more skilful or expert. One wrote that they chose to participate in large-scale marking to "develop my expertise when marking my own students' work" (MR23), while another expressed a desire to "improve professional competence in assessment" (MR9). One focused on specific skills, wanting to "become better at marking and improve my marking speed" (MR21) with another expressing a much broader desire: "I was looking for anything to help me develop some skills and knowledge." (MR41).

A single respondent wrote that their reason for participating in marking was to deepen their understanding of their students, writing that they wanted to "learn more about the students so I could teach more explicitly" (MR30). Another hinted that validation of their judgment was a priority, saying they wanted the marking experience to "give me confidence in my own marking" (MR16). A third respondent was more general: "broaden my experience and knowledge" (MR22). All of these three responses express an idea about developing professional skills. All of these were coded as 'Professional development' because of their connection to teachers' professional work or identity.

Gain an insider's perspective

Eleven responses referred to gaining insight into the processes or content of the particular assessment being marked. It seemed the respondents were expressing a desire to see how the assessment, or its marking operation, worked. One respondent felt that one way to understand the marking of the assessment was to participate in it: "I'd tried to prepare students for the test in the past without really understanding how it's marked." (MR7). This is an idea also expressed in saying that that one wants "to see the exam from a marker's perspective" (MR6). The reason, perhaps, for wanting the insider's perspective is, as one respondent put it, "to improve my own students' final scores and understand what the examiners wanted to read in the answers" (MR37).

The researcher considered whether there was overlap between this specific knowledge of an assessment and the types of knowledge that fall under the 'Professional development' code. It was decided to keep these types of knowing separate, as the specifics of the marking process, rubric, and also what is valued by markers may not be generalisable to more generic professional competencies.

Money

This code was clear and unambiguous: 11 references were directly made to money. Some responses were quite minimal: "Money" (MR17). A few mentioned the idea in conjunction with other benefits, "Money but also the opportunity to further my skills" (MR2), or "Money and professional development" (MR32). Still others mentioned it after explaining other reasons, adding it as a parenthetical comment: "(and the extra \$\$\$)" (MR34). Some of the respondents specifically referred to the income as supplemental to their other income, mentioning it explicitly as "extra money" (MR27). The general indication from the respondents appears to be that the income is not the sole reason for participating in large-scale marking.

The title for this paper also presents an idea about the relationship between payment and marking, but that specific response was not given as a reason for becoming a marker. Rather, it was given in response to a later question about advice to potential markers.

Gain a wider perspective

Some of the differences between large-scale marking and the types of marking a teacher does within a school are because of the scope of the assessment. The variation in student ability within a class or school is likely to be much more constrained than the variation across a whole population, and so some teachers write that they took up marking opportunities in order to "gain first-hand knowledge of the standards across the state, and where my own students might sit." (MR1), or similarly to "to gain better sense of teaching and learning across the state" (MR18). Another respondent, who also wrote about gaining an insider's perspective, wrote of learning about the range of ability across the full spectrum of schooling:

I was also interested in reading work by students in year 3 and 5, as I've never taught primary school students. It was very interesting to see how their writing starts out. Since I mostly mark essays by students in years 11 and 12, it was useful to be reminded of just how far they come during their schooling! (MR7)

This idea of seeing a range of ability in student work is relevant to a point raised earlier in 'Professional development', where a marker explicitly mentioned "the hierarchical nature of science skills" (MR10). It is a slightly different idea, but related. This contributes to an observation that even though these ideas have been coded to different nodes in this analysis, the reasons teachers choose to mark are not necessarily independent of each other, nor rigid in their boundaries. It is likely that there are layers of reasoning and a network of interconnectedness in the benefits anticipated by those teachers who pursue marking opportunities.

Expectations of marking

The second open-ended question asked teachers, “Did you have any expectations of the marking experience?” This was the second of the retrospective questionnaire items, asking markers to reflect back on the first time they marked. All 43 respondents who saw this question answered it. Eight codes emerged from the responses, and the number of references for each code are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Expectations of marking

| Expectations of marking | No. references |
|------------------------------|----------------|
| Time consuming | 11 |
| Challenging and hard work | 10 |
| No expectations | 9 |
| Negative emotional reactions | 8 |
| Beneficial | 8 |
| Networking opportunity | 2 |

Time consuming

The most common response to this question was that markers expected, before having marked for the first time, that participating in marking would be quite time consuming. Some respondents stated this simply, writing “I knew it would be time consuming” (MR37), or “demanding of time” (MR26). Others wrote about the difficulty of balancing the additional work against other commitments, writing “that it would be difficult to balance my marking/planning at work, with my external marking” (MR13), or that it would be “time consuming by the sheer volume you were expected to mark above and beyond your day job” (MR21).

The idea that marking is time consuming is not particularly surprising. That a good portion of markers expected it to be so, and yet still chose to participate in marking speaks to this particular drawback being outweighed by those markers’ reasons for marking. The difficulty of balancing marking against other commitments is an idea that occurs in other responses, particularly in the advice to potential markers, and so it will be returned to later. For now it is worth pointing out that these markers took this difficulty into account when deciding to become markers.

Challenging and hard work

Three respondents referred to marking being challenging, two quite briefly, and one with slightly more explanation: “I knew that it would be challenging due to the moderation procedures, judging against exemplars and consistency.” (MR31). A further seven markers’ comments included variations of expecting the marking operation to be ‘hard work’. The reason this code was not re-categorised under ‘negative emotional responses’ was because none of the responses appears to be particularly negative about the challenge or difficulty. The challenge being referred to is, perhaps, an intellectual one, though it is difficult to gauge sentiment responses like, “Challenging; interesting; demanding of time & expertise” (MR26), because there is little indication of the strength of the sentiment, and one must be cautious about over interpreting such responses.

No expectations

The second most common response type was one of the simplest to recognise and code. These respondents had no expectations of what the marking experience would be before participating. There were eight single word responses: seven wrote “no”, and one more wrote “none”. Another wrote, “I had no expectations” (MR14).

Negative emotional reactions

Some respondents expressed being “nervous and unsure what to expect” (MR4), while others emphasised the stress involved in participating in large-scale marking for the first time, using uncompromisingly negative language: “Stress/professional lack of confidence/dreaded the comparability session/stressed about moderation” (MR5). It is interesting to note that the respondent who wrote that comment indicated in responses to other questions in the questionnaire, that he or she had participated in large-scale marking 90 times and intended to mark again.

The source of negative emotional reactions to the prospect of marking appear to be comparisons between the markers and their peers, or not meeting a standard; as one respondent put it: “I was very nervous that I would be 'wrong' or not good enough” (MR28). This idea of being anxious about comparing the quality of one’s professional judgment with a standard or with one’s peers is understandable. Some of these negative emotions appear to stem from what might, in other circumstances, be described as ‘peer pressure’. In evaluating these responses, one ought to bear in mind that these were reports of expectations of the marking experience, not of the marking experience itself – it may be the case that these fears, this nervousness and feeling of stress did not persist once marking had commenced.

Beneficial

Eight responses were coded as referring to benefits or value. All of the references were interpreted as referring to PD benefits. Sometimes the reference to PD was explicit; for example, one marker wrote, “That it would be very useful professionally” (MR16), and another that “it would be effective PD for me” (MR10). Another marker was more specific in anticipating that marking would help in “Building collegiate understandings of my subject area.” (MR3). In a few, though, the reference was not explicit about the type of benefit, though an inference was made that it implies professional benefit: “That it would be time consuming but valuable (and it was both)” (MR2), and a very similar response in, “I expected it would be very time consuming but valuable.” (MR38).

One marker wrote, “I only wanted to do it once, just for the experience.” (MR6). That marker also responded that they had only marked once, and their advice to potential markers was also “Do it once.” (MR6). It is likely that this teacher still perceived the experience as having some benefit, given the recommendation to others.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the most commonly referenced reason for marking (PD), is also a theme in expectations for marking. In fact, the seven respondents who referred to benefit as an expectation, had also given PD as one of their reasons for marking. These

individuals in particular, perhaps, more strongly hold an opinion that marking is beneficial for markers.

Networking opportunity

Two respondents indicated that they expected to “be able to connect with a range of other markers who could provide a wealth of knowledge” (MR36) and have “Opportunities to network with other teachers” (MR22). This code is noteworthy in that it is another one that overlaps with a code in ‘reasons for marking’ and highlights again that there is a connection for some teachers between why they chose to mark and what they expected to get out of marking.

Advice to potential markers

The third open-ended question asked: “Finally, if another teacher asked you whether he or she should apply to be a marker, what advice would you give?” All 43 respondents who saw this question answered it. This question is different to the ones preceding it, in that it was intended in the design of the questionnaire that the first questions were retrospective, reflecting on what the marker thought before marking, while this question’s answers were intended to gather responses that reflect the markers’ current beliefs about marking. In this respect, the responses to this question ought to be evaluated differently because memory is not a confounding factor. The question is not asking for respondents to remember back any amount of time; it is asking them for their current opinion of marking, framed as advice for a hypothetical colleague, and encourages respondents to provide reasons for why other people should mark.

Sentiment

Prior to the thematic coding, four sentiment codes were created: ‘Emphatically positive’, ‘Affirmative’, ‘Neutral’, and ‘Negative’. The first three codes had 14, 21, and 8 references respectively. There were no responses coded to ‘Negative’. This already gives an indication about the general sentiment expressed in the responses.

The 14 responses coded as ‘Emphatically positive’ were those where the respondent strongly expressed positive encouragement through word choice and/or punctuation. There are short responses like, “I would strongly recommend it” (MR37), and longer ones where only the first sentence of the response referred to this code, and the rest of the response was coded to another: “I think it should be part of every single teacher's professional development, especially English teachers.” (MR11). In one case, the response began with an undeniably emphatic statement, but went on to offer a caution or warning: “Yes, yes, yes! But be aware of the time commitment, it can be a crazy 2 weeks with little or no downtime, as well as making it difficult to stay on top of things at main job, so it may not suit those with young children etc.” (MR22). The first part was still coded as ‘Emphatically positive’, while the warning or caution was coded separately.

A further 21 references were identified where respondents expressed support for the hypothetical potential marker taking up a marking opportunity, but not in a way that was interpreted as emphatic. Many of the references were short responses, for example, “Yes”

(MR41), “Do it” (MR17), and “Give it a go!” (MR23). Others were a little longer: “I would encourage them to participate, even if only for the professional development.” (MR15). Even if the response then went on to offer other ideas or even cautions, the first part was coded as affirmative.

There were eight references that were not explicitly affirmative, but neither were they advising against marking. Some responses were equivocal, “Be prepared for three intense weeks. However, I feel that as PD it is invaluable.” (MR1). Warnings about time were, again, a common occurrence for example, “Only apply if you have extra time or not teaching anymore, otherwise it will negatively impact your teaching.” (MR42).

On the whole, the responses can be generally described as being in favour of recommending marking to other teachers.

Thematic coding

Responses to this question about advice to potential markers were also coded thematically. Two codes were created: ‘Professional development benefits’ (20 references) and ‘Warning about time’ (10 references).

Professional development benefits

The major theme in the advice to potential markers is the PD benefits of participating in large-scale marking. Nine of the references explicitly mentioned professional benefit or PD, but without being specific about the aspects of professional practice that are involved, for example “I feel that as PD it is invaluable” (MR1), “It is worthwhile professionally” (MR29), and the title quote used in this paper: “The pay is not worth it but it is excellent PD” (MR19). Even though the responses were nonspecific, some expressed quite clearly a positive sentiment about marking: “it was some of the best PD that I have ever done” (MR39), or “these marking experiences have value added skills and are excellent PD opportunities” (MR10).

Five responses referred to the marking experience clarifying curriculum, syllabus or subject expectations, writing responses like, “It allows you to understand exactly what the curriculum wants” (MR11), and “Gives better knowledge and depth of understanding of the syllabus - good professional learning” (MR24). These responses have obvious similarities to some of the responses in ‘Reasons for marking’.

Two respondents wrote about how marking allowed them to improve their own assessments. One of them wrote: “Second major benefit is that large-scale marking helps to improve consistency in your own development and marking of school based assessments” (MR14), and the other: “It has helped me see exactly what students need to do to achieve in there exams and tasks which I have then been allowed to pass on to my students” (MR40). These teachers are offering potential markers reasons to become markers, and it is interesting that this reason for becoming a marker is absent from the responses about why these teachers chose to mark in the first place. This may be a benefit of marking that was unexpected.

Warning about time

There were 10 responses where markers included a caution about the time-consuming nature of marking, such as: “I would say yes, as long as you could commit to it properly - planned around it so you can make it a priority whilst involved.” (MR16). As mentioned before, the warnings about time often collocated with positive statements: seven of the responses began with an affirmative, and one with an emphatic affirmative. In one case, there was an affirmative, a caution, and then a positive: “Do it, takes time but is enormously beneficial” (MR33). Perhaps the respondent wanted the advice to be overall quite positive, while acknowledging the time it takes as a serious drawback. One of the reasons that time is a factor in choosing to become a marker was explained by one marker who wrote, “I would say yes, as long as you could commit to it properly - planned around it so you can make it a priority whilst involved” (MR16). The idea of balancing one’s commitments to work, family and marking appeared in seven of the ten references, with parts of the responses expressing ideas like, “I was a day marker and not juggling any other work or family commitments at the time. I think it would be very draining to do in the evenings after teaching during the day” (MR7), and “Yes but the work load is huge and it impacts greatly on yourself-tiredness, stress, interferes with family life” (MR34). The warning about time being equated with stress occurs in one other response, as well: “Know your reasons for applying to mark, as it can be a big time commitment and contribute to additional stress.” (MR36)

The responses that contained a warning about time are clear in expressing it as a major drawback to being a marker. Their cautions are partly moderated by their clear encouragement to the hypothetical potential marker despite the drawback, but it would be wrong to assume that these markers think that marking is a good idea for every teacher, and see participation being contingent upon there being the right circumstances and mindset with regards to balancing competing demands of ‘regular’ life.

Discussion

As shown in the literature review, a range of potential benefits of participation in large-scale marking has been described in research from the United States, Canada and New Zealand. The benefits reported in the literature include gaining awareness of literacy behaviours of students (Gambell & Hunter, 2004), validation of teachers’ expertise (Gilmore, 2002) as well as making teachers “more reflective, critical and deliberate” (Goldberg & Roswell, 2000). One article (Falk & Ort, 1998) identified four broad areas of professional learning from marking, though not necessarily large-scale marking: clarifying goals and expectations; deepening discipline knowledge; learning more about students and their work; and developing insights that support professional practice. The majority of the research that has been done in this area reports benefits that mostly align with these four broad areas, though not all areas are reported in all studies. The variability of the reported benefits may be due to scoring experiences being unique in some respects, due to who the participants are, which assessment is being marked, or the characteristics and knowledge of the trainer. In other words, the variability in experience is a result of variability in the contextual factors of the marking experience (Goldberg, 2012).

The aim of this research was to examine whether the PD benefits of large-scale marking identified in international contexts are likely to be applicable in the Australian context. The four broad areas of professional learning from marking identified by Falk and Ort (1998) provided a structure for examining the results from this survey. The themes that emerged from the survey are reviewed in light of the four broader categories of benefit identified by Falk and Ort. In addition, there is a brief discussion of the negative aspects of marking, which were not identified in the literature but were evident in the responses to the questionnaire.

Clarifying goals and expectations

The complex multiple-choice question presented to markers contained two statements that are directly relevant to this area of professional learning: “clarified the learning goals and expectations you have of your students”, and, “deepened your knowledge of the assessment itself”. Thirty-eight and 40 teachers, respectively, agreed with these statements. In addition, the code ‘Gain an insider’s perspective’ in ‘Reasons for marking’ contains references to understanding the expectations of the exam, curriculum, or syllabus. So, it is clear that this is a theme present in the survey results.

In the research reported by Falk & Ort (1998), this theme was reported by “an overwhelming majority” (p. 61) of respondents to their survey, as well as in later interviews and observations. Gilmore (2002) reported that her research in New Zealand also broadly aligned with the findings of Falk & Ort (1998), as did Palermo and Thomson (2019) in the United States. With regards to clarifying goals and expectations specifically there are responses from teacher-markers in Gilmore’s research about the value of seeing the standard-setting process. Goldberg (2012) also reported on teachers reporting that, in the specific context being investigated, marking “increased understanding of the standards and objectives” (p. 43).

Deepening discipline knowledge

In the complex multiple-choice question presented to markers, 26 respondents indicated agreement with “deepened discipline knowledge”. This is much less than the level of agreement with some of the other statements, but it still represents more than half of the respondents to the question. Additionally, within the ‘Professional development’ code in ‘Reasons for marking’, there were five references to ‘Deepen understanding of their subject’. This theme is discussed only briefly by Falk and Ort (1998), with no indication of the prevalence of theme in the responses to their survey. It is not explicitly reported by Goldberg (2012), and also escapes specific comment from Gilmore (2002), though as said previously, Gilmore reported a broad alignment with Falk and Ort. In this light, perhaps it is less surprising that this theme was less prevalent in this present research than the other themes identified – perhaps it is not a widely shared perspective.

Learning more about students and their work

Twenty-nine teachers agreed with the statement, “taught you more about students and their work”, and 33 agreed with “raised your awareness of students’ literacy behaviours.”

when presented with these statements in the complex multiple-choice question. Additionally, the 'Gain a wider perspective' code in 'Reasons for marking' can be taken as referring to learning about students and their work. On the whole, it is a moderately strong theme in the data that teachers see marking as a way of learning more about their students.

There is also, perhaps, an argument to be made for overlap between this area of learning and the clarification of goals and expectations, given that the exposure to a wide range of quality in student work is one of the ways in which expectations are set. The literature examining the benefits of marking in large-scale assessment programs all discuss and present learning more about students and their work as a benefit of participation in large-scale marking (Falk & Ort, 1998; Gilmore, 2002; Goldberg, 2012), and in that regard, the results of this present research are aligned with the literature.

Developing insights that support professional practice

The strongest theme by far in all of the open-ended questions asked of teachers was PD, and in many ways it cuts across the areas of learning discussed so far. PD was frequently referred to as a reason for marking, an expectation of marking, and also in the advice that markers had to offer to a prospective marker. Additional support for the theme was found in two statements from the complex multiple-choice question: 40 respondents selected "increased your confidence in your ability to judge the quality of student work" and 39 selected, "supported your professional practice".

This was very much the strongest theme to emerge in this research, but within it were many and varied responses about which parts of professional practice were enhanced or developed. It seems likely that 'professional development' as a term is used for a very wide variety of learning, all of which may have varying levels of relevance and impacts, but all of which are believed by teachers to ultimately be of benefit to their professional practice. In this respect, the findings of this survey correlate well with the reports of teacher experiences of large-scale marking in the literature in that the very large majority of markers report believing marking to be good PD (Falk & Ort, 1998; Gambell & Hunter, 2004; Gilmore, 2002; Goldberg & Roswell, 2000; Goldberg, 2012).

The downsides of marking

There is little attention paid to the negative aspects of large-scale marking in the literature, which can be explained by the literature focusing on what teachers gain from marking. This research identified time and negative emotions as two of the downsides to large-scale marking.

The time-consuming nature of marking was a very strong theme in both the expectations for marking and in the advice to hypothetical colleagues. In particular, balancing the time needed against work and family commitments was a prominent concern. It is not wholly unsurprising that teachers who take on marking as 'extra' work above and beyond their teaching loads find it difficult to keep work and life balanced.

In addition, there were several responses to questions that referred to stress, lack of confidence, difficulty, monotony, pressure or feelings of nervousness. The high-stakes nature of many large-scale assessments (e.g. final-year exams), as well as the duration of the marking operation compared to the high number of pieces of work to be marked does contribute to a stressful environment, and so the negative emotions reported are not unsurprising. That markers report these feelings about the experience yet were mainly in favour of recommending the experience to others does, perhaps, alleviate some concerns about the potential for more lasting negative impacts of participating in large-scale marking.

Conclusion

This research aimed to confirm that Australian teachers hold similar ideas about participating in large-scale marking as their international colleagues. To do so, it analysed responses from 43 Australian teachers to an online questionnaire, and then compared the responses to four major themes identified by Falk and Ort (1998) that have been explicitly identified by Gilmore (2002) in New Zealand and Palermo and Thomson (2019) in the United States, to generally agree with their research into what teachers report about participation in large-scale marking in their respective contexts. The results of this research indicate that, broadly speaking, the responses of the teachers surveyed also match with Falk and Ort's four areas of learning.

However, over and above those four areas of learning, this research also identified negative aspects of participation (time pressures and negative emotions) that are largely absent from the literature on teacher participation in large-scale marking. These findings are tempered by the overall positive recommendation of survey respondents that other teachers ought to take up marking opportunities despite the negative aspects of participation. Nonetheless, there is potentially more investigation needed into the stresses and anxiety that are encountered by markers in these operations, as well as for teachers who take on marking as additional to their teaching load. Potentially, the ways that markers deal with these stressors may yield findings that could benefit teachers dealing with heavy marking loads in their day-to-day duties.

An avenue for future research stemming from the findings of this research is how the benefits of marking could be extended to more teachers. Given that markers have reported that time pressure is a significant issue, it seems plausible that there are many teachers who would derive benefit from large-scale marking, but who cannot take-up marking opportunities simply because they do not have the time. Developing interventions and experiences that could deliver the same, or similar, benefits of marking for more teachers is likely to be a worthwhile endeavour.

Taken all together, notwithstanding the small sample, it can be asserted that the findings of research into teacher participation in large-scale marking operations in international contexts are very likely to be generalisable to the Australian context. Participation in marking is seen by Australian teachers and their international colleagues as a means to

clarify the goals and expectations of the assessment, deepen teachers' discipline knowledge, learn more about students and their work, and to develop insights that support professional practice. The pay might not be worth it, but it is seen as great PD.

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