

TEACHERS LEARNING FROM STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT DATA IN WRITING

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This paper is a report of work in progress on a study intended to ascertain teachers' perceptions of their confidence and competence in knowledge about writing, and about writing instruction, through participation in a professional learning community. These teachers were participating in a writing professional development initiative focused on raising student achievement across a cluster of schools. In this report teachers' perceptions following the initial collection of students' writing to establish a baseline for the initiative are discussed. The project will continue in 2005 as the professional development and dialogue continues.

ESTABLISHMENT OF OTARA: THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

A group of seven schools, part of the Otago The Learning Community (O:TLC), affiliated to the Otago Boards Forum in South Auckland, have examined student achievement data in writing to establish a baseline for facilitator led programmes in writing. Most of the schools had previously worked on the School Improvement Initiative, Analysis and Use of Student Achievement Data (AUSAD 2001-2003). Within this initiative some schools had worked collaboratively in clusters that were managed by a facilitator, while others were self managing.

This new initiative has built on and extended the AUSAD project, continuing the collegial relationships but with a specific focus on writing. The broad goals of the O:TLC writing cluster are to :

- To raise student achievement and progress in writing.
- To develop strategies that focus on raising the achievement of boys and Maori and Pasifika students.
- To develop teacher content and pedagogical knowledge in the teaching of writing.

- To help teachers become more confident and competent in analysing, interpreting and using student achievement data.
- To use student achievement data to inform the writing programme.
- To inform the parent community of student achievement in writing.
- To up skill and inform Otara Board Forum members in the teaching of writing.

In the latter part of 2003, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education's School Monitoring and Support programme for Otara, schools negotiated the specific focus for professional development to raise student achievement for the following year. The decision to focus on writing was based on awareness that writing achievement may be low in the area schools. The recently disseminated Ministry of Education English exemplars had caused some concern amongst teachers due to the apparent disparity between students' writing levels and the national expectations of the exemplars. Hattie (2002) has observed there is a disparity between reading and writing achievement nationally.

Writing was also deemed to be an appropriate focus for professional development as reading comprehension and mathematics were already being targeted in the area. A professional development programme focusing on writing would also provide an opportunity to gather comparative writing samples from schools to establish a current baseline on which to base future targets for student achievement.

A 'contract of collaboration' was agreed between each school and the facilitators employed under O:TLC to undertake a writing professional development initiative. These varied somewhat between the schools. The following is an example of the collaborative contract agreed to by one school.

1. *To participate in the O:TLC Writing project.*
2. *To improve teacher knowledge in the teaching of written language focusing on the recount and argument genre.*
3. *To monitor classroom programmes and practices that enhances student achievement.*
4. *To ensure that resources are available to support writing programmes.*
5. *To provide parent support in developing their children's abilities as writers.*

In Term one 2004, schools obtained writing samples from all children: a recount topic (blowing bubbles) for Years one and two and an argument topic (Should the school day finish later?) for Years three to eight. Administration processes were established to ensure consistency across schools. For the Year one to six classes, The New Zealand Curriculum English Exemplars were used to level the writing, and for Years seven and eight the writing was assessed using the Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning (asTTLe).

The New Zealand Curriculum English Exemplars framework classifies writing samples into levels but not sub levels with the exception of level one which is subdivided into 1 (i), 1(ii), and 1(iii). However after considerable debate amongst teachers it was decided to report achievement in sublevels as well, as the difference in achievement between levels was considered too great to recognize development over the period of the writing initiative. In asTTLe writing, each level, with seven aspects of writing, is classified into Basic, Advanced and Proficient (B, A, and P). These sublevels were adopted in classifying writing at all levels. (the i, ii and iii of the exemplars were translated into B,A, and P respectively). A further challenge was how to classify writing that, according to the exemplar criteria, did not reach level 1. In the English Exemplars there is no 'pre-level 1' Nonetheless, the teachers in the cluster schools, after intense discussion, advocated that any samples that were not recognizably 'writing' should be classified as 'pre-level 1'.

Writing samples were analysed by teachers, leveled within each school and then moderated within the cluster of schools to ensure consistency in leveling. This enabled the cluster to establish baseline data for recount writing for years one and two and argument writing for Years three to eight. The process of analysis of student writing achievement has been guided by the initiative facilitators. The facilitators, contracted by the Schools Monitoring project, are Natalie Kirton and Sally McCaulay, TEAM Solutions, Faculty of Education, University of Auckland, who are led by Nicky Knight from Massey University's Institute for Professional Development and Educational Research The data analysis has been further supported by Dr Mei Lai, Faculty of Education , University of Auckland .

According to the English in the New Zealand Curriculum (1994) there are broad bands expected for student achievement. These are reported in Table 1

Table 1. Curriculum levels to be achieved by each year level.

Curriculum Level	Years in which it is expected level should be achieved.
1	Years 1,2 and 3 with some students still achieving at this level in Year 4 and 5
2	Year 3,4,5 with some students still achieving a this level in Years 6 and 7
3	Level 3 Years5, 6 and 7 with some students still achieving at this level in Year 8 and 9 .
4	Years 7,8, and 9 with some still achieving at this level in Year 10

Analysis of the baseline samples showed a disproportionate number of students achieving within the Level 1 subgroups at all year groups for recount writing (Years one and two) and argument writing (Years three to eight).

Table 2. Mean levels achieved in baseline data: recounts for years one and two, argument for years three to eight.

	Year 0/1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8
Median baseline	1B	1B	1P	1A	1A	2B	3A	4P

Further analysis of the samples examining the surface and deeper features of the writing samples suggested that achievement of surface features was markedly higher than that of deeper features.

Surveys of teachers' and students' attitudes to writing were also collected by each school. The surveys suggested that at the outset of the professional development, teachers were fairly satisfied with their programmes and felt reasonably confident about teaching writing. In the area of assessment of writing, however, levels of confidence were lower and especially in using the English exemplars to assess writing. Relatively few teachers said that they undertook formal assessment of writing. In the student responses to the survey, the positive attitude to writing in the early years was notable, but there was a marked decrease

in positive responses by year six. The survey questions asked about enjoyment and ability as perceived by themselves, what they thought their teachers and parents thought about their writing and whether their teacher told them what to do to improve.

These surveys and the analysis of writing were the basis for determining the direction of school based professional development during Term two. An action plan for each school for professional development programme was devised, and implemented during Term three. Professional development varied both in amount and in how it was provided (by facilitators or organized independently by the school). As part of the action plan, expectations for writing levels to be achieved by the end of 2004 were negotiated. Initially schools had very diverse expectations of what could, and should, be achieved. However after robust discussion the following levels were agreed as the benchmarks for all schools. These are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Writing achievement levels targeted for the end of 2004

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8
OTLC Standard	1P	1A	2B	2P	3B	3P	3A	4P

A decision to enter data on an Excel spreadsheet so that Dr Mei Lai could undertake statistical analysis to enable comparison of data across schools and over time led to delays in the data to being returned schools. As a result some schools did not implement the action plan immediately.

At the end of Term 3 further student writing samples were obtained. Once again Years one and two wrote a recount (of an experience with balloons) and Years three to eight an argument (on the use of playground equipment). Schools again leveled internally and then moderated in school clusters.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Purpose of research

The focus of the OTLC writing initiative has been specifically on raising student achievement in writing with professional development of teachers viewed as being complementary to the process.

The aim of this research, therefore, is to investigate the role of professional discussion, focused on student achievement in writing, in enhancing teacher knowledge about the writing process and writing pedagogy. This study will focus on the outcomes of intensive and collaborative examination of students' writing during the process of negotiating and justifying achievement levels and sub-levels of writing on specific text forms.

Specifically the research will focus on:

- teachers' perceptions of the role of a professional learning community, focused on student achievement data, to enhance their own professional knowledge and practice in the teaching of writing and outcomes for students will be investigated;
- teachers' perceptions of their own confidence and competence in teaching writing as a result of participation in a profession learning community.

Reference will be made to data on students' writing achievement and to students' and teachers attitudes to writing over the period in which the research undertaken to provide some indication of generalization of any changes in teacher beliefs. However this data has not been collected as part of this research project.

Justification for the research project

This research project is premised on the understanding that professional development is most effective when it is evidence based, closely related to practice, and enhanced through collegial discussion (Robinson, 2003). Robinson asserts teachers need to intensively investigate their own teaching in relation to student achievement. She gives three reasons why teachers need to become researchers on their own practice. These can be summarized as:

- a) The ethical obligation of teachers to continually review the decisions they make about how and what to teach in order strengthen the connection between quality teaching and the level and quality of student achievement;
- b) The contextualized nature of teaching requires teachers to be skilled inquirers. Teachers need to make evidence based decisions about how to adapt 'best practice' to their own context.
- c) Teacher research is a highly effective form of professional development. Professional development is most effective when it is job embedded evidence based and collegial. Research skills developed to conduct research on one's own and others' practice provides can provide effective professional development. (Robinson, 2003, p 28).

Kincheloe (2003) also argues for teachers to be seen as researchers and knowledge workers. H states that teachers should be skilled inquirers and researchers and see their practice as evidence based. They need to collaboratively reflect on their professional needs and current understandings. However, as Robinson (op.cit.) observes most teachers are unaccustomed to providing evidence as the basis of their teaching or discussing such evidence with colleagues.

Relevancy and a sense ownership have been identified as a critical factors for teacher professional development (Hill, Hawk and Taylor 2002; Poskitt 2001). For the teachers in this study, focusing investigation and discussion on the writing achievement of their own class goes some way to meet the criteria of 'relevancy and ownership'. This suggests that they will more likely challenge and extend their own learning as they collaborate within established, and mutually supportive, collegial relationships. Professional learning communities within which teachers have shared understandings and collegially developed goals have been demonstrated to result in improved student achievement (Timperley, 2003, Timperley 2004).

Lovett (2002) however, proposes that trust must be established if teachers are to move beyond their comfort zones to enable essential risk taking in order that professional discussions will become professional development.

Through a focus on, and a discussion of, students' writing achievement, it is anticipated that teachers in this study will have the opportunity to investigate their own practice and deepen their understanding of the writing process. This approach to professional development seeks to further develop the capabilities of teachers as practitioner-researchers. Timperley (2003) has also shown that practice is improved when teachers focus on student achievement, test the effectiveness of their teaching against student achievement data and modify their practice accordingly.

In the professional development, at the heart of this study, decisions about the levels and sublevels of the writing samples were negotiated by class teachers working at the same year level. Subsequently moderation meetings were held by the schools in the OTLC cluster. In addition, there were many informal discussions as well. This process established would appear to meet Robinson's challenges that contribute to teachers become skilled enquirers who can become "catalysts for an evidence-based teacher learning culture." (Robinson 2003, p28). The professional development initiative meets these through (i) providing teachers with enough high quality opportunities to learn the skills required to collect, interpret and use evidence about the links between their teaching and the learning of their students, and (ii) developing a teacher culture in which evidence-based discussion of the quality of teaching and learning is an expected part of professional life.

Although there is now a considerable focus on professional development in writing this is fairly recent. Aikman (1999) interviewed four teachers on what they believed were influences on their writing programmes. All four stated that they had not been involved in professional development work on writing in the last fifteen years. Neither had they had many opportunities for professional discussions on the issues surrounding the teaching of writing, either formally or informally.

Yet professional development for teachers is essential if students are to become successful readers and writers (Literacy Taskforce Report, 1999). In order to teach the strategies and understandings students need to be able to write effectively in a range of text forms, teachers need to have an explicit knowledge of grammar and structures of language Exploring Language (1996). Furthermore teachers need a meta-language in order to describe and discuss language and be able to include it as a natural part of their teaching. As stated in Exploring Language "*the ability to describe language in terms of text and*

grammatical features is invaluable because it enables them to focus precisely on the means by which writers shape and manipulate our thoughts and feelings”. (p165).

Smith and Elley (1997) argue for the importance of teachers underpinning writing programmes with research and yet as they state there is a paucity of research on teaching of writing, especially in New Zealand. However, two recent studies provided further justification for the professional development writing programme, and for this study which investigates one aspect of it. One study (Symes, Jefferies, Timperley & Lai, 2001) evaluated a professional development programme in literacy in a South Auckland school. The authors maintain that effective professional development has three essential elements: be ‘on site’, incorporate a balance of support and challenge, and have a consistent focus on student achievement. The O:TLC writing professional development incorporates all three of these elements. The second study demonstrated the importance of schools aggregating and collating writing data in order to inform programme review, and of using externally referenced benchmarks against which to evaluate student achievement (Millward, Neal, Kofoed, Parr, Lai, & Robinson, 2001). Aggregating data and evaluating against externally reference benchmarks and establishing short-term local goals as benchmarks, too has been a focus of the initiative and of the professional dialogues that are the basis for the focus group discussion.

The focus of this study is the development of teacher knowledge about writing and of a meta-language for writing. It examines the power of professional discussion to extend teachers’ understanding of writing and of writing instruction when focused on student writing.

Methodology

Six schools agreed to participate in the research. The principal of the seventh school in the O: TLC felt that teachers in the school were fully committed to another research study on reading. Twenty nine teachers from six schools participated: six teachers from each of the three larger schools, four from two schools and three from the smallest school. The information about the purpose and process of the research was detailed in a letter distributed to all participating teachers and the principals of the schools and agreement obtained.

Focus groups of teachers from schools in the writing initiative were established. To ensure consistency a set of questions were devised by the research team to guide the discussion. A focus groups approach was used as focus groups provide “a powerful technique for gaining an insight into the opinions, beliefs, and values of a particular segment of the population” (Waldegrave, 1999, p 123). Focus groups also produce “considerable and often complex information in a comparatively short space of time” (op.cit, p 64) an important consideration as the researchers are sensitive to the extra time pressures that participating in a research project may put on teachers. Participants are also more likely to challenge alternating viewpoints in a focus group than through individual interviews (op.cit.,).

Further data using the same questions will be administered in early 2005 and again later in 2005 to identify any trends in attitudes and teachers’ perceptions.

Validity and reliability of data was ensured through a triangulation process. Two researchers were present at each focus group discussion. All focus group meetings were audio taped. Reliability has been maximised through inter observer ratings of records, cross checked against tapes where necessary. Validity will be enhanced through referral of the group discussion summaries to the participants for host verification. In addition the inclusion of two senior teachers from the participating schools in the research team enhanced the potential validity of the interpretation of the data.

Analysis of the data is guided by Le Compte’s (1993) ‘seven steps of analysis’: perceiving, comparing, contrasting, aggregating, ordering, establishing linkages and relationships and speculating.

Data on students’ achievement and attitudes to writing, and teachers’ perceptions of their teaching of writing have already been collected by the schools before this study began. These were analysed quantitatively by the schools.

The teachers’ responses to the perceptions survey provide a further perspective on the validity of the data over time.

Results

The focus groups were conducted over the first two weeks of Term four at the six schools which had agreed to participate. It was emphasized that teachers need not feel constrained by the order of the questions

Analysis of transcripts of the discussions shows that responses could be grouped primarily in relation to the outcomes in relation to personal knowledge about writing and the writing process and perceptions of the process the moderation of student writing . The topics discussed were partly influenced by the guiding questions which were related to the questions investigated in the study, that is

- teachers confidence and perceptions of their competence in teaching writing as a result of participation in a professional learning community;
- teachers perceptions of their own knowledge of writing that developed through these discussions;
- teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities in which discussion is focused on student achievement data.

In addition considerable discussion focused on the challenges of leveling writing samples, the overall writing initiative and perceived ongoing needs and preferences for professional development.

1. Learning about writing and the writing process

Much of the discussion in the focus groups centred on teachers' knowledge of writing and specifically on the characteristics of writing described by the English exemplars.

A common theme that arose was that of frustration and confusion about the process of interpreting the writing indicators established from the English exemplars in order to agree on the baseline levels of writing. For some schools this was the first opportunity for professional discussions focussed on students' writing samples. Although one school had previously been engaged in writing research that included assessment of writing, the teachers had not examined and assessed the writing samples themselves. Few teachers had

undertaken the process of applying one's knowledge of writing to establish curriculum writing levels using the indicators of the English Exemplars or the asTTle rubrics. Consequently the feelings of confusion were both about the writing itself and the process of establishing writing levels. But as one teacher noted this was a first time of moderating in the cluster and

"The second time round it will be clearer what the aims and purposes are" (Teacher 3).

It was evident however that although at times the discussions were frustrating, the focussed discussion became an opportunity to clarify understandings about language terms and how they should be applied to determine achievement levels of writing.

Terms such as 'beginning to', 'experiments' and 'attempts ..' caused problems of interpretation . A number of teachers commented that the indicators are not clear and the analysis and levelling of the writing samples felt too subjective.

Nonetheless most teachers commented on the value of discussion to develop and extend understandings

"And things we didn't understand on the levelling sheets, before we went to those meetings, became a lot clearer because you can disagree about whether the child has included everything they needed to achieve that..... when you've got a consensus of a big group, you kind of think yeah, that's what it is, that's what we go with ." (Teacher 8)

Clarifying what was meant by the characteristics of the deeper features was very challenging for many of the teachers. Consensus in interpreting surface features such as spelling and punctuation appeared to be more straight forward. However deeper features concepts such as 'voice', audience, and distinguishing between simple, compound and complex sentences were seen as significant challenges by most of the participating teachers.

"Before I didn't know a lot about the deeper features like what an auxiliary verb is.. I didn't know how to mark it because I wasn't exactly sure what it was myself... I know now." (Teacher 10)...

This process of clarification of the concepts in the performance indicators emerged as an important contributor to increased teacher metacognitive knowledge. Despite the confusions and frustrations noted, several commented that it provided the opportunity to:

“Bring(ing) up points and fine tuning them back at school “(Teacher 6)

Others identified specific aspects about language that were clarified.

“Something that I found really helpful were those definitions of personal voice” (Teacher 8)

Facilitators had provided definitions of key language terms and features which were referred to during the moderation discussions.

All teachers at some stage in the focus group discussions alluded to a deeper understanding of writing developing. In most cases comments were made in relation to knowledge about language structures and features. Many of the comments can be summed up by Teacher 6, who said

“For me the whole process has been really beneficial because it’s given me a lot more knowledge about writing but also some practical tools to use in terms of even just, you know, those marking sheets and boxes, just having that is really helpful because what you’re picking (up things to use) in your classroom, you kind of have those things in the back of your mind and think.. have they got this?...and it helps you to plan for what is missing”

Or as another teacher noted, referring to the writing initiative in general:

“Last year was not much, but this year all our teachers now know the exemplars, know what to expect from their classrooms. Teachers have a much better knowledge of the structure of language and helping children to critique” (Teacher 24)...

Both the initiative in general, and the professional discussions more specifically were developing teacher knowledge of, and confidence in using, the meta-linguistic knowledge required to be able to discuss writing and writing instruction.

“a metaphor... a simile. .you know they’re (teachers and the students) are using those words. Teachers are more confident in writing now.” (Teacher 24)”

Or as Teacher 4 commented *“Conversations around writing have increased amongst us.*

And as one teacher noted

“I’m pleased we’re doing this because writing isn’t one of my strongest areas. It’s good to hear what other people are doing and to keep specialists involved.” (Teacher 10)...

It would appear that the growth in knowledge and confidence particularly applies to understandings about the deeper structures of writing, rather than the surface features. A number of teachers made comments such as

“Knowing the importance of audience and purpose. At beginning I had little knowledge of deeper features and language features. I’m more confident now transferring things from one genre to another” (Teacher 2)...

“Levelling surface features was okay but going beyond the surface features was my difficulty... I didn’t really know what you’re supposed to focus on.” (Teacher 7)...

and

“Knowing what level our children are at, exactly what level, and what they need to achieve before going on to the next level”.

“Before we just really used surface features whereas now we focus more on deeper features”. (Teacher 11)...

In establishing a baseline for writing, the O:TLC writing professional development initiative selected specific text forms to establish consistency. This has meant that in analysis and moderating the writing samples teachers have been focusing on either a recount (Years one and two) and argument (Years three to eight). This emphasis appears to be reflected in both the teachers’ perception about their knowledge of text forms and their confidence in the meta-linguistic aspects of text forms.

“I have a greater understanding of genre¹ ... characteristics and when and how to teach”
(Teacher 3)...

“Before we knew a recount was about something that had happened .. but now we know what we must include in our teaching” (Teacher8)

One school in the cluster, which had previously had a focus on teaching of writing, indicated that prior to the moderation meetings they had felt quite confident about teaching writing. Even so all six teachers in focus group made comments such as.

“I’ve come a distance from seeing ‘Personal voice’ from just having ‘I’ (in the writing).”
(Teacher 17)

“I think the whole process is having things like the examples of what we’re looking for of deeper features and surface features for me has crystallized a lot of that sort of stuff. It helps you break it down and realize..... what should I concentrate on.., so it does help you with your planning and what you’re looking for.” (Teacher 19)

All teachers in the focus groups intimated that one of the positive outcomes of the moderation process was their increased confidence in being able to talk about writing. That is they were extending both their knowledge of the writing process and the meta-language with which to discuss it.

2. Learning about the teaching of writing

Not only did teachers talk about how the process of an intensive examination of students’ writing led to a greater knowledge of writing and of a meta-language for writing, they also indicated a greater confidence in their ability to teach effective writing programmes. While this appeared to be largely a direct result of facilitators modelling good practice in the teaching of writing, comments from focus group members suggested that the opportunity to talk to colleagues about their teaching practice in relation to the writing samples led to productive sharing of pedagogical knowledge.

¹ The English Exemplars describes these as text forms

One teacher said

“It was good to talk about how others taught... what expectations were set. Increased awareness of teaching structures etc.. and how the event (the experience on which a recount is based) is important to young children.” (Teacher 4)

Another commented

“It was good to learn from other professionals..(for example) Increased feedback to children by teacher at the time instead of taking writing home to mark..... I thought this was a great idea.” (Teacher 3)

Sharing pedagogical knowledge and approaches to teaching writing affirmed some practices but fifteen teachers made comments that suggested that assumptions were challenged.

For example one teacher said

“For me personally I’ve always thought that writing was one of my strong areas. but now I’ve extended my own knowledge base a bit more and I can look at the indicators..... before I was just..oh ..you need to do that, that and that , now I can say alright you need to go the next level ..you need to use more rhetorical questions or you need to” (Teacher 14)

And another commented that

“I used to just get them to put ideas down but now I know the importance of explicit teaching.” (Teacher 4)

For a number of the teachers the teaching of writing had tended to focus on surface features especially punctuation and spelling. This was an area that several commented on. For example one teacher admitted that:

“I never consciously thought about the deeper features in my children’s writing” (Teacher 22)

Bring any group of teachers together and the conversation will inevitably focus on sharing ideas about what happens in their classrooms. These focus groups were no exception. However within these groups the sharing of pedagogical information was directly focused on the students' writing achievement and teaching practices that could lead to higher achievement

3. The moderation process

Teachers' comments suggested that the process of moderation of the writing samples and professional discussion to establish a benchmark for O:TLC was satisfying but challenging. Although more than half the teachers made comments on the positive experience of focussing on and discussing students' work, a number identified a range of factors that impeded the process.

A common view was that it gave a starting point to identify students need and as one teacher put it:

“It has helped heaps because we’ve looked deeply at exactly what the genre we’re doing should included in it and exactly what the children need to do or be able to do to get that genre right.” (Teacher 8)

The role of the facilitators was important and the use of indicators sheets helped the moderation process.

“Things we didn’t understand on the leveling sheets before we went to those meetings became clearer because you can disagree about whether the child has included everything they needed to achieve.” (Teacher 8)

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Others commented on the value of meeting other professionals with a focus on a common objective outside one's classroom and school.

Frustration and tension were also common themes that emerged. Six teachers intimated that they felt the process was competitive and was neither cooperative nor a process of negotiating common understandings.

“I felt there was competition....it was how good is our school doing rather than what can the children do.” (Teacher 5)

“With some schools it seemed if you tried to discuss or debate a point with them it would be like a personal attack on them. You can’t go into this process with that attitude.. that’s going to reflect personally on you or your children.”

(Teacher 27)

“..but then I looked at other schools work and thought oh wow our kids are doing well.”

(Teacher 17)

A competitive element was also evident in the comments by two teachers who felt that there was bias in the writing samples because some teachers had taught to the assessment so that comparison between the schools was skewed.

“The people at our meeting were really vocal. There were a few there that just thought that they knew about absolutely everything about anything and their opinion was written law and that was hard because I felt the same way. I didn’t know all of those things. They had them up on the board which was good but as you’re talking about it and you’re trying to find the bit that you’re looking for, you don’t feel as confident against some of those other people.. and it puts you on the back foot from the start.” (Teacher 7)

Some group members behaviours were seen as aggressive and their views non negotiable.

“I got frustrated with a couple of guys. I had level one with one of my children’s work that I know what they’re capable of and I marked it from what I know she’s capable of and then some other guy marked and it came back and I just had huge big massively ‘ this is wrong, why in the world did you put this on’ so I took it to heart. I took it personally because I thought who the heck are you.” (Teacher 9)

Confusion over expectations about the process of moderation caused frustrations for some teachers, reducing the opportunities for productive dialogue over the writing samples.

“One of the other things that happened was that one teacher came with their whole syndicate’s writing samples but their teachers didn’t come so we ended up marking their whole syndicate’s writing samples and not getting hardly any of ours done as well.”
(Teacher 8)

Characteristics of the group was a factor noted in relation to the effectiveness of the moderation, with the size and constitution of the group mentioned several times. Some teachers felt that the groups at the moderation meetings were too big and others commented that discussion was more productive when the group members knew each other.

“Easier with a small group...you can listen to each other... big groups often meant no discussion. (Cluster) meetings are really good because you got to know the other teachers well enough to feel comfortable,because you built up a degree of trust because you met so often and you also save time because you didn’t have to explain your situation every time you meet because you would remember.”(Teacher 3)

Trust and knowing the group members emerged as a factor that facilitated effective moderation but was one teacher commented *“with teachers from other schools I was bit shy with my opinions, but I learnt a lot”*(Teacher 14)

These discussions were focused on a process which was a new experience for both the teachers and the facilitators. There were evidently some challenges but also a developing awareness of what is needed to ensure that outcomes are productive for all participants. These will be issues that the facilitators will be able to address during the moderation for the second sample of students’ writing.

DISCUSSION

There are strong suggestions (Timperley,2004) that a focus on student achievement data, negotiating decisions about achievement levels, establishing shared understandings of the process, and developing the language to talk about writing can contribute to a sense of teacher self efficacy. Sharing one’s practice and the outcomes of one’s practice, however, has not been a common feature of teacher practice, and as Lovett (2002) suggests requires

considerable trust and a commitment to honesty and collegiality. For these teachers, indeed, the opportunity to examine their students' writing samples with colleagues produced mixed responses.

Timperley (op.cit.) identifies six issues that contribute to establishing professional learning communities. Three are evident in outcomes of these focus discussions. They are the need for Professional Trust (p 17) in the process of establishing benchmarks and reporting to these, as well as a shared commitment to students' learning within the community. Timperley refers also to Personal Trust and Respect. This too was a theme that emerged. Teachers reported that when they were in small groups, based in their own schools, or with schools with whom they had already developed a relationship, that the process was less frustrating and more productive. The third, Professional Confidence appeared an issue. Where respect and trust were not as evident teachers indicated that there feelings of defensiveness and in one case a teacher said she was made to feel 'dumb'.

Another theme that emerged from the discussions was that of the difficulty of assessing writing. Assessment of writing, and the use of the English exemplars was as aspect of writing instruction of which teachers had generally indicated little experience or confidence. The English exemplars have provided an immense support to teachers and helped with insights into the writing process. However the challenge of consensus on exactly what is meant by the terminology, and the qualifiers, for example 'attempts', exacerbated the difficulty of agreeing on what constitutes specific levels of achievement. These are not problems experienced just by the schools in the O:TLC. These are issues that all teachers are grappling with as they coming to terms the English exemplars.

That focusing on student achievement and considering implications for practice and future achievement can lead to an increase in teacher professional pedagogical knowledge is clearly evident in the outcomes of these discussions. Of course the real evidence of teacher knowledge will come from increased student achievement. Only time and further investigation of cohorts of students in these schools will tell. What is evident, however, is that teachers' ability to talk about writing in a way that enables them to investigate, share and reflect on their knowledge base has developed. That is that they are acquiring a meta-language for writing, which, as the authors of *Exploring Language* assert, is essential for the effective teaching of writing. Teachers acknowledged an increased confidence in applying

new knowledge within their classroom writing practices. This may well lead to greater informed risk taking which will enable their students to broaden experiences and their enhance belief in the purposefulness of writing.

A deepening of understanding about what constitutes a 'good piece of writing' emerged as a strong theme throughout the focus group discussions. Variable teacher knowledge of the characteristics of writing in particular text forms was evident. Confidence about identifying and responding to surface features was articulated, but knowledge about the deeper features of writing, and attention to these aspects in instructional writing programme was problematic. This is not uncommon. Teachers find such aspects of writing abstract and subjective unlike the surface features such as punctuation and spelling which are easier to identify. As Romano (2004) writes

“What is voice, anyway? Writer Ralph Fletcher says that "writing with voice has the same quirky cadence that makes human speech so impossible to resist listening to" (1993, p. 68). Columnist Donald Murray calls voice "the magical heard quality of writing" (1998, p. 151). Researcher Donald Graves maintains that "voice is the imprint of ourselves on our writing" (1983, p. 227).

However, what is important, in relation to professional development, was the teachers' awareness that they needed to clarify these concepts for themselves in order to include them within their writing programmes. It was evident that this was beginning within these professional learning communities.

Greater confidence and knowledge about writing appeared to be influencing classroom practice. For example, teachers commented on how they were using knowledge of key language terms and features, introduced by the facilitators and clarified during the moderation process, when working with children. This, they noted, was assisting them to make writing instruction more explicit for their students through increased awareness of what they and students need to know.

From the discussion of the moderation process arose some implications for this writing professional development initiative in the future. The outcomes of this study suggest that programme facilitators need to look carefully at the organization of the professional

discussions for moderation of achievement levels. Working within smaller groups and taking time to develop clear guidelines may lead to greater mutual trust and professional respect. Opportunities not only to reach shared consensus about student achievement, but also to examine student achievement data in terms of implications for classroom practice need to be part of the professional development contexts. These should include time to articulate and challenge new understandings, and to establish personal goals to extend and deepen their own knowledge about writing and writing pedagogy. It was evident, through the focus group discussions that the action plans developed as part of the writing professional development were not shared throughout all schools. If student achievement and teacher knowledge are to be enhanced consistently, this needs to be an expectation in all schools.

Timperley (2004) suggests that working together on small tasks is a way to build collegial trust as a basis for professional learning. These focus groups followed the first analysis and moderation of writing samples. The process of building trust and establishing a shared vision of students' writing achievement has started from a strong beginning which as one teacher said, *'was a hard task at the beginning but now we're beginning to get used to it and so it's becoming familiar'*.

Or as Timperley, (2004 p 20) comments, "The greatest difficulty is getting started..."

These teachers are also beginning to see themselves as teacher researchers (Robinson 2003, Kincheloe, 2003) investigating their own practice. Although not articulated as such, the process being developed in this writing professional development is one of action research. The reflection on practice and collaborative planning is extending knowledge about language and empowering these teachers to make a difference to their students writing.

Discussing another teacher professional development initiative Fleischer claimed that

A final step in this blueprint for professional development is for teachers to reflect on what they have learned and to articulate their tentative knowledge--both for themselves and for others in their community of learners. (Fleischer, 2004).

This statement could well be applied to this process of professional development as it progresses towards the next phase focused on student achievement.

CONCLUSION

This work in progress supports the concept that a professional learning community has the potential to enhance professional knowledge and confidence about writing and writing instruction. It also concurs with other literature that for this to happen an environment of mutual personal and professional trust must be established. The participants' comments provide suggestions that can strengthen the process.

The writing professional development initiative will continue next year with further opportunities for teachers to collaborate with a focus on student achievement data and with the potential for extending and consolidating teacher knowledge.

Finally the process of bringing teachers together within focus groups is valuable. As one teacher observed, *"Thank you for the opportunity to talk about our practice. It has been a great experience. It makes me feel really valued"*.

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