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Enhancing capacity to analyse students' writing: A summary

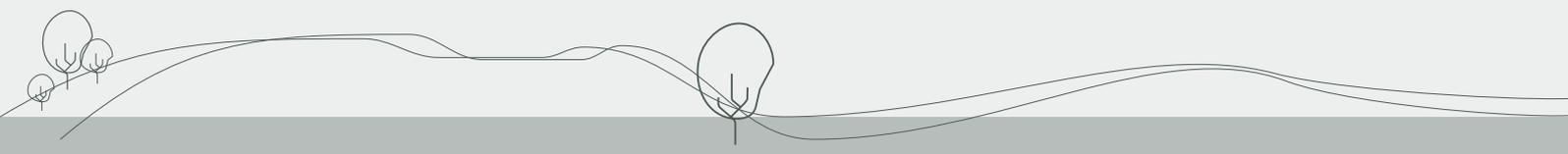
In 2006 and 2007 the teaching of writing was investigated using an action research process in partnership with a cluster of Manurewa schools which has one of the highest concentrations of Māori students in the country: 40 percent identified as Māori and a further 26 percent, Pasifika. A previous study in the area had identified low achievement levels in student writing samples (Limbrick, Buchanan, Goodwin, & Schwarcz, 2005) consistent with the National Educational Monitoring Project reports of Maori and Pasifika students' underachievement in writing. That study had also observed that teachers' confidence in their ability to teach writing, as well as their knowledge of the writing process, was low.

Recent literature has indicated that deliberately targeted teaching based on rigorous, purposeful assessment can raise student achievement (Lai, McNaughton, MacDonald, & Farry, 2004; Symes & Timperley, 2003). These studies also emphasise the importance of teacher knowledge: knowledge about students, about the purpose and practice of assessment, content knowledge of the subject; and how to use this information explicitly and purposefully in teaching.

At the outset of the project, teachers' knowledge of writing and the assessment of writing (e.g., use of asTTle Writing and the English Writing Exemplars) was variable. For many teachers, the use of assessment to inform teaching, and to act as a measure of their own effectiveness, has been neither widespread nor relevant and robust (Timperley, 2007). Recent research (Limbrick, Knight, & McCaulay, 2005) has suggested that a focus on students' writing that provides opportunities to discuss the writing has led to teachers being more knowledgeable about the writing process and also more confident in interrogating their practice.

Research has also suggested that when teachers engage in "learning talk" there can be positive outcomes for student achievement (Annan, Lai, & Robinson, 2003; Ball & Cohen, cited in Robinson, 2003, p. 29). Professional discussion can enhance both teacher knowledge and student achievement. Through such discussions, teachers examine their own pedagogy in relation to student achievement, building on identified sound practice, strengthening weaknesses and overcoming gaps in knowledge (Robinson, 2003). However, Timperley (2007), in her inaugural professorial address, emphatically makes the point that talking is not enough: talk must also transform student achievement.

This is similar to the action research process described by Cardno (2003) which has been influential in encouraging many teachers to adopt an inquiry model as the basis for enhancing their own practice.





Aims of the project

The ultimate aim of the project was to raise student achievement in writing and reduce reported disparity in writing achievement, particularly for Māori and Pasifika students. This was to be done through enhancing teachers' capacity to analyse students' writing using assessment data—in particular using the English Writing Exemplars—and through strengthening teacher practice in using evidence to inform teaching. Teacher-researchers worked in partnership with university researchers, as well as engaging with colleagues in professional discussion, to enhance their knowledge about the principles and practices of effective pedagogy for writing. A further aim, in the second year of the project, was to develop collegial and collaborative peer coaching networks in the schools to support teacher practice. Throughout the project, the overarching aim was to increase both research capacity and professional knowledge through a partnership approach engaging teachers in researching their own practice.

Research questions

- Can teachers working as researchers of their own practice, in partnership with university researchers, develop greater capacity and confidence in teaching writing?
- Will students' low achievement in writing be raised when teachers are using evidence from students' writing to inform their practice?
- Can teachers develop collegial coaching relationships within their schools to consolidate and sustain professional development for the teaching of writing?
- Can a partnership between classroom teachers and university researchers strengthen the research capacity of both partners and further their knowledge about the teaching of writing?

Research design

In the first year (2006) of the project, 25 teachers in eight South Auckland primary and intermediate schools, together with the literacy leaders in the schools, participated in the project. In each school, one teacher at Years 2, 4, 6, and 8 (where applicable) investigated their own practice. In the second year these teachers continued the action research process. They also took on a mentoring role with others to sustain writing achievement within their own school, and to support those others to work as teacher-researchers.

Although not modelled directly on the evidence-informed inquiry model described by Timperley (2007), the design was consistent with it. The iterative model starts with two questions: "What are our students' learning needs?" and, "What are our own learning needs?" As a result of interrogating these questions, teachers established goals

for their own practice or teaching actions (Timperley, 2007). Following implementation of these actions, a third question is asked: "What has been the impact of our changed actions?" The responses to this question lead to the cycle restarting.

Baseline data on student achievement was obtained at the beginning of 2006 and again in 2007, using asTTle Writing for Years 4–8, and the English Writing Exemplars for Years 2–3. These were not the same students over the two years due to staff and student transience.

The Exemplars were used to analyse writing samples in order to establish the students' strengths and needs, and also to identify teachers' own professional strengths and needs in the teaching of writing. Following workshops on using the Exemplars as a diagnostic tool for writing, teacher-researchers met with university researchers to establish action plans targeting aspects of writing pedagogy. The teacher-researchers also met in their schools in quality learning circles to share and examine their progress. Most teacher-researchers established peer observation of teaching and provided feedback. Interschool meetings were held twice a year in both years.

Findings

Student achievement

At the beginning of the project, student achievement in writing was extremely low in relation to national expectations, suggesting that progress for most students had been below national expectations by at least one asTTle sublevel a year. However, there was evidence that participation in the project was reversing this trend. Students were making a gain of one sublevel, on average, during the test period—which was less than a year. In some classes, the teacher-researcher's intensive focus on their writing pedagogy led to quite dramatic gains of up to three asTTle sublevels in less than a year.

Teachers' capacity to use students' writing data to inform teaching

Analysis of teacher-researchers' action plans, reflections on their teaching and the research process, field notes from meetings with university researchers, reports furnished for milestones, and transcripts of focus group discussions provided the data. These were used to evaluate teachers' knowledge about writing assessment and their ability to use student data to inform teaching. From these sources there was clear evidence that by the end of the project teachers were more confident in both assessing and teaching writing. Teacher-researchers were establishing goals for teaching based on evidence of students' strengths and needs through Exemplar assessment. Assessment was becoming more formative instead of merely summative for reporting. Most of the teachers' comments related to their greater confidence in using the Exemplar and asTTle matrices to judge the



quality of writing and to form appropriate expectations for students' writing at different levels of the curriculum. Increasingly, the teachers reported that they were using assessment data formatively. Their strengthened knowledge of the structure and language of different texts, and their recognition of surface and deeper features, was reflected in targeted conversations and their provision of more specific and relevant feedback to students.

Teachers also reported how they were using students' data to inform their teaching, and to interrogate and critique their own teaching practice, providing examples of insights into their own practice.

There has been a continued shift towards teachers—both the writing mentors and the new teachers in 2007—assessing students more consistently and meticulously, and consequently integrating this knowledge about their students into their daily planning and teaching.

Teachers' knowledge about the writing process and pedagogy for writing

Although it was not possible to measure teacher-researchers' pedagogical content knowledge directly, a judgement could be made through analysis of the range of data noted above. They were able to articulate and discuss their knowledge about writing and the teaching of writing. Data suggest that the understandings that they were gaining could be grouped into five categories of knowledge, about:

- the nature of writing and its aspects/components
- the writing process
- the assessment of writing
- pedagogical approaches for teaching writing
- research and resources to support writing.

Explicit knowledge of key elements of the writing process was articulated, such as a greater awareness that organisation is critical to the successful teaching of writing. For example, teaching to specific identified needs required group, rather than whole-class, teaching. Also, many of the teachers identified the positive, motivational impact of purposeful modelling, conferencing, and publication. During the project the teacher-researchers developed a common terminology through their continued study and use of the Exemplars, and there were many reported instances of this metalanguage also being adopted by the students themselves.

Building capacity and capability

As researchers

The strong partnership between the university researchers and the teacher-researchers was a context for developing and strengthening understanding of what it means to be practitioner-researchers. For the

teacher-researchers, the process of interrogating their students' achievement in relation to reflection on their own work has, in most instances, helped them to refine their practice, and to see themselves as integral to students' learning. Robinson and Lai (2006) have drawn the parallel between good teaching and research: both are informed by high quality information, reflection, interpretation, and application. Becoming a practitioner-researcher within a "community of teacher-researchers" appears to have enhanced their sense of personal accountability to their students and to each other. For the university researchers, collaborating in a practice-based research project has not only strengthened their research skills, but deepened their commitment to research-informed teacher education.

As practitioners

For the teacher-researchers, insights into processes of teaching and learning of writing have enabled them to improve their practice to raise student achievement where achievement has been historically low. The teacher-researchers within the project made a commitment to closely analysing students' writing samples to ascertain learning and teaching needs, and to reflect on, and enhance, their own knowledge and skills in order to optimise students' learning. Although the use of evidence of student achievement as the basis of effective teaching and learning is widely known (e.g., McNaughton, Phillips, & MacDonald, 2004; Clarke, Timperley, & Hattie, 2003), it has not been widely implemented in teacher practice (Timperley & Parr, 2004). Nonetheless, the teacher-researchers in this project demonstrated that when the use of evidence was at the heart of their teaching, students' achievement in writing improved. The central role that the teacher plays in student achievement became accentuated.

For the university researchers as teacher educators, there were insights into interrelationships between theory and practice that arose through the emphasis on the "co-construction" of learning about writing, the use of evidence to enhance student achievement outcomes in writing, and the role of applying a research perspective to practice. This project has demonstrated, as Morton and Gordon (2005, p. 99) have stated:

Practitioner research can build a community of shared interests, with researcher and school practitioner working together to make key decisions throughout the research process, and developing programmes of research, including critical dialogue, peer review and dissemination, that are meaningful to all of the participants.

Recommendations

- Teachers need opportunities to improve their knowledge of writing, and the assessment of writing, using available tools such as the English Writing Exemplars and asTTle.



- School-based professional development can enhance teachers' ability to use student data as a basis for refining their teaching and targeting it to students' needs.
- Professional discussion time should be valued by being built into school planning in order to be productive.
- Collegial mentoring to support sustainability of professional development and teachers as researchers is recommended but needs training and time allocation within schools.
- Data collection for school-based research requires clear instruction and support for teachers to optimise student samples.
- Sufficient time needs to be budgeted for university researchers to engage fully with teacher research partnerships, taking account of such issues as locality of schools and travel time.

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