

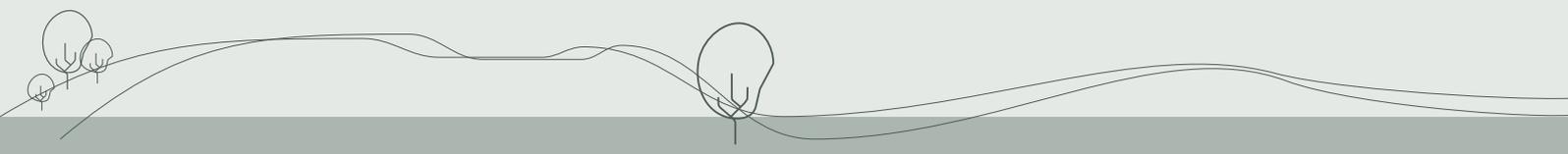
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Measuring classroom practice in literacy: A summary

To date, much of the information we have about classroom practice has come from teacher self-reporting with data gathered through surveys, logs, diaries, and/or interviews (Burstein, McDonnell, Van Winkle, Ormseth, Mirocha, & Guitton, 1995). There are in New Zealand few, if any, widely used and proven instruments for gathering information about teachers' literacy practice, yet, in order to plan for and explain patterns of student achievement, we need systematic evidence of what is happening in classrooms.

The two-year study outlined in this summary was conducted in partnership with three schools. The first year involved developing and trialling an instrument (Observation Guide) that captured critical elements of teachers' literacy practice. Part A of the full report *Measuring Classroom Practice in Literacy* (Parr & Hawe, 2008), outlines and discusses the processes and challenges associated with this. It also addresses the challenges encountered during a prolonged period of implementation and outlines the subsequent changes made to the Guide.

Part B of the report examines use of the Guide as a tool to support more effective teacher practice through the process of peer observation and discussion. With an increasing focus internationally on enhancing the quality of teaching in order to raise student achievement, the ongoing professional learning of teachers is a significant subject. Professional growth is complex; there are multiple patterns of learning and learning is ongoing, and the need is to understand the complex processes by which learning is created and shared (Gravani, 2007). There is limited evidence that traditional delivery models of professional development have a positive impact on teaching quality or student learning (Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008). Delivery models fail to bridge the theory–practice divide. Alternative professional learning opportunities, grounded in practice, are a viable option. In the current study, guided peer observation and associated learning conversations were a planned and supported professional learning activity. Such facilitated collegial interaction provides teachers with the opportunity to engage in observation, reflection, exchange of professional ideas and shared problem solving in an integrated form.





Aims and objectives

The aim of the study was to utilise joint expertise from school and university partners to design a dependable instrument capable of capturing the critical elements of teachers' literacy practice. Integral to this aim was an evaluation of the properties of the instrument and its effectiveness with reference to practice-based and research contexts. The practice-based context in which it was used was peer observation and feedback of literacy (writing) practice.

Research questions

- What are the critical, observable indicators of teachers' literacy practice in Years 1–8 classrooms?
- What type of approach and what instrument best capture these elements, with reference to practice-based and research contexts?
- How effective is the instrument developed at capturing the critical elements of teachers' literacy practice in Years 1–8 classrooms?
- How effectively does the instrument facilitate the processes of peer observation and feedback?
- How does engaging in peer observation of literacy practice and the providing and receiving of feedback impact upon teachers' literacy practice?
- What is the relationship between professional learning—including the process of peer observation and the providing and receiving of feedback—and students' writing achievement?

Research design and methodology

The study was carried out in two phases. Phase one (2006) involved teachers from two Auckland-based schools working with the university team to develop and trial an instrument that captured the critical elements of teachers' literacy practice. Data regarding these elements were gathered by the university team through a focused search and review of international and national literature. In addition, a methodological search of the literature was carried out to identify the strengths and drawbacks of existing approaches and instruments. Once an initial draft of the Observation Guide was developed it underwent a series of trials and revisions until the "final" (eleventh) version was constructed. As part of this process, a series of short video exemplars that highlighted a number of "typical" pedagogical and literacy practices was assembled and viewed. Data regarding the efficacy and effectiveness of the Guide were gathered throughout phase one by means of field notes, oral and written feedback from observers using the Guide with the video exemplars, and through feedback from three literacy experts.

Phase two (2007) involved the university team working with all teaching staff from a Hamilton-based middle school. Teacher pairs from this school used the Guide to undertake reciprocal peer observation and discussion of the teaching of writing on seven occasions throughout a year. This was supported by professional learning opportunities concerned with both content regarding writing and the teaching of writing, and about the process of learning conversations. On each of the seven occasions on which the reciprocal peer observations occurred, a record was made using the Observation Guide, together with responses to a brief questionnaire by both the giver and receiver of feedback. Additional data were obtained through four questionnaires and a series of semistructured exit interviews with a purposive selection of staff to examine the nature of the observation and feedback process and the reported outcomes. Student achievement results for writing as the focus of the professional learning were obtained at the beginning and end of the year using aTTle: Writing.

Summary of findings

The first stage of phase one was focused on gaining a reasonable degree of consensus from all parties about what constituted the elements of effective literacy practice and how these could best be captured for use in practice-based and research contexts. Once agreement was reached on these matters, the major challenges for those involved were to translate the agreed elements into readily understood behavioural indicators that were neither overly prescriptive nor fragmented, and to develop an appropriate and manageable tool (Observation Guide) for use in classroom settings. A formal trial near the end of phase one, to determine levels of agreement between independent observers who used the Guide to observe two videotaped lessons, indicated that, while observers could reach high levels of agreement when observing and making judgements about some elements of the Guide (e.g., 91 percent agreement regarding the presence and quality of the learning aim and success criteria), there were other elements where much lower levels of agreement were noted (e.g., 33 percent agreement regarding the presence and quality of achievement related feedback). Feedback from this trial and from three acknowledged literacy experts resulted in further revisions of the Guide prior to its eleventh and "final" iteration.

Use of the Guide during phase two highlighted two related challenges: the development of shared understandings among teachers regarding the observation categories and their associated descriptors; and the development of consistency when using the Guide to observe and make judgements about peers' practice. Teachers involved in phase two reported



that using the Guide made them more aware of, and knowledgeable about, specific aspects of effective literacy practice. It gave them a point of reference when observing their peer's teaching and providing feedback, and indicated the next step(s) to be taken in the development of their teaching practice. Moreover, use of the Guide opened the way for these teachers to gather rich descriptions of practice and attend to evidence as the basis for critical and thoughtful conversations about the particulars of teaching and learning.

The findings reported in Part B suggest that while teachers found focused observation and evidence gathering challenging, they found the giving of feedback more so. Teachers were reluctant to don an evaluative hat and accept the maxim that *all* practice can be improved (unless *all* students are achieving to the levels you would want for them). The act of using the Guide to categorise an element or sub element of practice in terms of its nature and quality was somewhat problematic. However, the requirement for a decision served to focus observation and underscored the need to gather evidence on which to base and justify a judgement. The Guide made teachers more aware of the level of pedagogical content knowledge required to make detailed observations and give challenging and helpful feedback. It was clear that this form of professional enquiry into practice needed to be accompanied by learning more about writing itself, content knowledge, and the most effective ways to teach writing.

Despite the challenges, the data showed that the majority of the teachers adopted the principles of learning conversations such as contracting, making clear their notions of effective practice, and using evidence to support feedback statements. Moreover, there was evidence that feedback had been assimilated and that changes in practice could be observed. The student achievement gains in writing were considerable. However, the cycles of peer observation and feedback were complemented by other professional development with respect to teaching writing. While it is possible to attribute accelerated progress in writing achievement to enhanced practice, the extent to which changes in practice were the result of the successive iterations of peer observation and feedback is not able to be determined.

The limitations of the project

As noted above, the project was only able to conclude that a professional learning focus on writing that included, as a major component, peer observation and discussion, was associated with well above average achievement gains in writing. While the notion of

peer learning through observation and discussion of practice is intuitively appealing as a form of job-embedded learning within a community of learners, it is time and resource intensive to conduct successfully. Teachers require release time to observe one another and also some time to discuss the observations. They require a high level of content and pedagogical content knowledge.

How the project contributed to capacity and capability

This project contributed to building teacher capacity in terms of knowledge of and application of known effective practice in teaching writing. The design and use of the Guide to focus the process of observing practice helped build increased knowledge of the practices to be observed and how to observe them. In specifying what practice might look like at different levels of effectiveness with respect to central aspects of teaching, the Guide operationalised for teachers complex acts such as feedback. It cued teachers as to the significant, specific features of practice, making clear the links between theory and practice. Participants in this project had reinforced the importance of enquiry into practice and, in particular, finding specific evidence to make judgements about practice and to support feedback offered. In addition, teachers in phase two built the capability to conduct and engage in learning conversations with colleagues around particulars of teaching and learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2001) and their effect on student achievement—conversations that have the potential to enhance teacher learning and practice.

Conclusion

Teachers report that they value observing the practice of others; observing practice in an evaluative way would seem to be a useful way of helping teachers to enhance their practice. While appearing straightforward, observation is deceptive in its complexity. Attention needs to be focused on specific features of practice indicating what such practice might look like as expertise develops. While the school involved in phase two (the paired observations and feedback part of the project) succeeded in raising student achievement in writing well beyond normal expectations of growth during the year of this study, they engaged a consultant to help develop teachers' practice in teaching writing. To use the Observation Guide most fruitfully, and for the Guide to operate within the context of peer coaching as a "smart tool" to enhance both teacher knowledge and practice, support is needed to build teacher professional expertise in two areas. The first area is that of pedagogical content knowledge. The second area is that of the process of



conducting professional talk that is evidence based and challenges assumptions and practices that impede effectiveness. These areas of professional learning need to be built concurrently within a professional climate that supports disclosure and deprivatisation while concurrently reinforcing collective responsibility for teacher learning and student achievement.

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The full reports of all TLRI projects are published on the TLRI website (www.tlri.org.nz).

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Research partners

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