

Generating positive outcomes by Year 5 to 8 priority learners in writing: An inquiry into effective teacher practice

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Intro/Project description

The project identifies the most important elements for the effective teaching of writing for Year 5-8 priority learners. We worked with five diverse schools in Auckland and Wellington. In 2016, 13 teachers participated in the project; in 2017, 15 participated. All were typically performing teachers. They inquired into their practice for its impact on student engagement, progress and achievement. We used the information collected from assessment data, observations and teacher reflection to identify what leads to positive movement. Our aim was to identify the key elements for effective teaching of writing for priority learners. To do this we needed to identify the levers for making a real difference to engagement and achievement levels for all learners in writing, but particularly for boys, Māori students and Pasifika students.

Why is this research important?

Writing is an area of concern for New Zealand teachers and schools. It is vital to success in education and the workforce, but New Zealand students are underachieving, especially in comparison with achievement in reading and maths. This research identifies what elements of teaching writing actually make a difference. It addresses two gaps in the current research. One is looking at what a *typically performing* rather than an *exemplary* teacher does in the classroom and what they need to focus on for good learning to happen. The other gap concerns priority learners in New Zealand writing classrooms. Little work on raising the writing achievement levels of priority learners has been done.

What we did

We worked closely with our teacher-researchers throughout the project and regularly share our experiences and learning. Using previous research, we determined likely elements of a successful writing programme. The teachers chose three priority learners as their touchstone students for a year. They kept a [reflective journal](#) that contained analysis of the students' writing, the students' goals, the teachers' strategies, what the teacher learned about the students' writing, next steps, what the teacher has learned about their teaching and the students' voice about the teaching. Analysis of practice was undertaken in relation to seven dimensions of effective practice identified from research: knowledge of the writer; connections with cultural funds of knowledge; clear related learning goals and tasks; feedback; self-regulation; direct instruction at the point of need; differentiating instruction. We assessed the students using e-asTTle twice a year to identify progress made. The teacher-researchers were observed four times a year using our [observation tool](#) that focused on the seven dimensions of an effective writing programme. The teachers also used the observation tool to self-reflect on their own performance. The observations, alongside the e-asTTle assessment, allowed us to form tentative points of association between effective practice and student achievement. The students filled in an online [engagement survey](#) twice a year to see what they thought about writing and the teaching of writing and how that changed over the course of the year.

Key findings

Teacher proficiency appeared to strengthen over the two years:

Observations of teacher practice in 2016 indicated relatively high proficiency in two dimensions (learning goals/tasks and direct instruction) over other dimensions. Scores for these dimensions were significantly above the median for 'all scores'. This seemed to indicate that particular proficiency around these two dimensions might be associated with 5% student progress, as long as some proficiency in other dimensions was evident as well.

Observations of teacher practice in 2017 indicated relatively high proficiency in four dimensions – learning goals/tasks and direct instruction (same as for 2016), knowledge of the writer and differentiation. In addition, some teacher actions related to self-regulation appear to make a difference.

The quality of teaching appears to have a direct impact on the measured improvement of writing over the course of 2016 and 2017. Measurement of student progress between T1 and T2 2016 (using e-asTTle writing) indicated progress of approximately 5% across year level, gender and ethnic cohorts. Measurement of student progress between T1 and T2 2017 (using e-asTTle writing) indicated greater progress than in 2016 – approximately 10% across year levels, but approximately 20% amongst boys and Māori students. This is particularly good in that the 2017 student cohort was much more diverse than the 2016 cohort.

Implications for practice - What can a general classroom teacher take away from all of this?

Actions related mainly to the operationalisation of four critical dimensions that make the difference for advancing the engagement and progress of under-achieving/touchstone students:

- *Knowledge of Students* – getting to know the students really well; knowing individual needs and keeping track of them; using humour/fun as a relationship tool.
- *Learning Goals/Learning Tasks* – encouraging student initiation and contribution, especially in topic selection.
- *Direct Instruction* – using active modelling and receptive modelling; breaking tasks into more manageable components; using diverse scaffolds according to student needs; making links between reading and writing.
- *Differentiation* – touching base often with touchstone students; working with touchstone students in small groups based on needs, not ability; using a tuakana-teina approach. In addition, some actions related to:
- *Self-Regulation* appears to make a difference: helping students to manage their time better; seeking resources to support independence/self-monitoring; encouraging self and peer assessment). There are, of course, cross-overs between operationalisation of these dimensions.

Recommendations

- Monitor one's practice in relation to the four dimensions;
- Gather valuable student voice and get a picture of writers' attitudes, beliefs, interests and increase learner agency;
- Self-reflect on one's own practice and keep an inquiry journal.

Our partners:

The partners are teacher-researchers from five primary and intermediate schools (Balmoral School, Fergusson Intermediate, Marshall Laing School, Mt Cook School, Clayton Park School).

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