

2011 (Term 3) Sabbatical Report
“Using Feedback to Improve Learning”
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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the BoT for being really supportive of my sabbatical leave. Thanks, also, to the staff and students for their support. I felt confident that everyone would work together to keep things running as usual, the success for which was evident on my return. It was a fantastic opportunity for Bernard (DP) to lead the school, one that he not only enjoyed but did effectively.

I appreciate the Ministry of Education’s commitment to enabling sabbatical leave; I have no doubt that this investment is great for education. In my case, I was able to have quality time to read, research teaching practices in our school, visit other schools and make plans for our on-going development as a great learning environment.

Executive Summary

The purpose of this research project was to find out how feedback can be used to improve learning, in written language. Throughout the data collecting stage it became clear that focusing on feedback requires a focus on learning, feedback is not a separate entity that can be studied alone. Further to this, developing an understanding of how to use feedback to enhance learning needs to be informed not only by research and teachers’ wisdom but also students’ views on how feedback impacts on them. This is not as straight forward as it may sound. This study highlighted how students’ views will vary from learner to learner and situation to situation. Unless students’ views are sought and used to guide teaching and learning practices, there is a risk of developing classroom cultures that promote a performance rather than a learning oriented focus.

Background Information and Rationale

Te Uku School is a full primary school with a grading roll of 165; it is situated in the small village of Te Uku, 10KM east of Raglan, Waikato. The staff comprises of 8 fulltime teachers, a part time Y7/8 technology teacher, a part-time reading recovery teacher, 2 teacher aides, an office administrator and a caretaker.

In 2010, our school decided to implement a school-wide professional learning programme in written language. The Board of Trustees agreed to commit the 2010 professional learning budget to employing a literacy advisor, Gaye Byers, to work with the teachers for the duration of the year. This involved all of the teachers attending a 3-day written language course, as well as the advisor undertaking classroom observations and running teacher professional learning sessions based on our needs. As we embarked on this professional learning programme and started to make changes to some of our teaching techniques, the teachers experienced both the rewards and challenges of their increasing

use of oral and written feedback to students. On one hand, students were responding well to improved levels and quality of feedback, however on the other hand, teachers were feeling the pressure of providing feedback in a way that is timely, accessible and manageable. This dilemma underpinned our resolve to investigate what types of feedback help students to progress in written language.

Purpose of the Research Project

We decided that we would undertake our investigation using an action research approach. After a previously successful experience of using action research to investigate effective teaching practice, the teachers once again wanted to work together to develop a “practical wisdom” (Elliot, 1991, p. 52) to bring about changes in an area of need for the benefit of everyone in our school. Drawing on our knowledge from recent readings of educational literature on feedback, as well as reflecting on our current situation, we posed the following questions:

- In what situations is feedback a positive/negative influence on learning?
- What is the balance of information these methods provide with their cost in teacher time?
- Are some types of feedback more effective than others (eg evaluative feedback & descriptive feedback)?
- With the introduction of National Standards this year, will our students be able to respond positively to, and benefit from, the feedback about their progress towards meeting the standards in written language, particularly our low progress learners?

Methodology

Over a period of 15 months, I gathered data in the following ways:

June 2010 – interviewed each class about how their teacher helps them improve their written language

July 2010 and December 2010 – reviewed data from unassisted written language samples, all classes

May 2011 – conducted a teacher survey about ‘what is intelligence’ and discussed our findings

June 2011 – interviewed Year 5/6 class about ‘what is intelligence’ and discussed examples of ‘intelligence’ they observe in their class

June 2011 – conducted National Education Monitoring Project survey in Year 5/6 class to gauge their attitude to written language

September 2011 – observed teacher of Year 5/6 class teaching written language

September 2011 – interviewed 2 students (from Year 5/6 class) individually about what type of feedback they experience in their class

September 2011 – visited 4 schools in Gisborne and met with each principal to find out how they are using ‘feedback to improve learning in written language’ in their school (Awapuni School, Wainui Beach School, Mangapapa School and Makauri School).

Findings

As the lead teacher of this research project, I started in June 2010 by asking each class as a whole group, “How does your teacher help you to improve your work? Does your teacher tell you when your work is good/not very good?” The students shared examples of their writing and of their teachers’ oral and written feedback with me. Overall, I found that the students across all of the classes were able to make strong links between feedback and improved results in their writing. They identified the following as effective strategies being used by their teachers:

- written and oral feedback
- use of writing models to exemplify the language features being taught
- specific and regular teaching of new learning
- teachers’ writing of exemplars
- teachers’ clear and explicit demonstration of their pedagogical knowledge
- teachers’ high expectations

At this stage I felt confident that the teaching techniques the teachers were using in giving feedback were having a positive effect on the students and their achievements. During this time, teachers were reporting to me that all students were progressing through the curriculum levels (we were using criteria that indicated achievement at one of three phases within each level – beginning, developing, consolidated). Progress was evident in the data we collated from unassisted writing samples completed at both mid and end of year in 2010. Further to this, the professional learning programme was helping teachers to develop their pedagogical knowledge and a shared understanding of expected learning outcomes from Level 1 to Level 5 of the NZC (Ministry of Education, 2009). Quite clearly this programme was helping us to achieve school-wide improvement in written language.

In the meantime, I was taking all possible opportunities to improve my own knowledge and understanding of ‘effective feedback’. Although I thought that the use of feedback in written language in our school was having positive results, I was concerned the teachers’ ability to sustain their feedback practices was unrealistic. Further to this, students’ written language results in relation to the national standards showed a weakness in their application of writing skills across the curriculum. How could we expect to maintain a high level of student motivation to write when a reasonable percentage of our students were being told that they were ‘below’ or ‘well below’ the national standard? We felt demoralised that in meeting the requirements of government policy, whilst at the same time gaining confidence and increased success in the teaching and learning of written language, some of our students’ self-efficacy as a learner was at risk. Harlen’s view that, “an education system that puts great emphasis on evaluation and selectivity produces students with strong extrinsic orientation towards grades and social status” (2005, p. 211) matched our sentiments. We felt concerned that the good results we were achieving in using feedback to improve learning (with the primary focus being on students making progress and

feeling the benefits of success, thereby being intrinsically motivated to set challenging goals) was in danger of being undone. Rather than dwell on the negative aspects of the national standards policy, we now needed to find ways to help all students maintain and sustain a high level of self efficacy as a learner.

In May 2011, after reading some research on student motivation (Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Dweck, 2008) I wondered if there was a link between achievement and both the teachers' and students' beliefs about the ability to learn. After completing several studies, these researchers concluded that "children praised for intelligence after success chose problems that allowed them to continue to exhibit good performance (representing a performance goal), whereas children praised for hard work chose problems that promised increased learning" (Mueller & Dweck, 1998, p. 48). As a teaching staff, we talked about the notion of intelligence and found that we held a shared belief that intelligence is "malleable" (Dweck, 2007, p.34), able to be grown. After then wondering how students may respond when asked "What does being intelligent mean?" it was agreed that I would work with one teacher and her Year 5/6 class to explore this further.

I met with the whole class and asked this question and found out that collectively they believed that putting an effort into learning is the key to being intelligent. For example, they said that being intelligent is "knowing when to improve", "not getting stuck, moving on" and "never giving up on your dreams". Next I used the National Education Monitoring Project written language survey to gauge the attitude to written language of the students in this class. I noticed that although 33% of the class did not like writing, overall the class was aware of the many ways in which they could improve their results. In particular, they showed an understanding of how using written language features adds quality to their writing and once again they acknowledged that they had a role to play by putting effort into their work. But despite the class knowing how they could improve their written language results, I was still wondering why 33% of the class did not like writing. Did all of the children in the class really believe that they could achieve success through effort? Is there a regular mismatch between the type of feedback received and the type of feedback that will help students to sustain improvement in learning? How could a teacher become aware of such a mismatch? I now felt the need to gain a much richer picture of how feedback was impacting on learning by identifying the type of feedback being used in the class and finding out from individuals how it impacts on them as a learner.

In September 2011, the teacher of this class and I decided that I would observe a written language lesson to see what type of feedback was used. Initially I thought I would use Tunstall & Gipps' (1996) framework for categorising feedback into descriptive and evaluative; negative and positive. However, after attending a Feedback in Schools course in June 2011 (Cognition – Deb Masters) I decided that Hattie's (2011) framework of classifying feedback into 4 levels – task, process, self-regulation and self – would be more useful. Masters described the 4 levels in the following way:

- task level feedback – how well the task is being accomplished or performed
- process level feedback – feedback specific to the processes underlying the tasks or relating and extending tasks
- self-regulation level feedback – the way students monitor, direct and regulate actions towards the learning goal
- self level feedback – feedback specific to the student's behaviour

At first I thought I would observe 2 children but early on in the observation process I quickly changed to observing the teacher (recording the feedback she used). Following the observation, I interviewed two children separately about the impact feedback has on them as a learner (using a survey I had received from the course); I chose one child who likes to write 'heaps' and one who likes to write 'a little' as shown in the attitude survey results.

It was from doing these individual interviews that I gained interesting insights into these children as learners. They were very explicit in their explanations of how they maintain their motivation as a writer. The most significant finding was that they both thought their teacher's feedback is valuable (specific and honest) and well-intentioned; no matter whether its initial impact was positive or negative, they felt that they had a responsibility to improve the quality of their writing. After talking to the 2 children individually, I met with them together to talk about learning in general. After their interviews with me I noticed a contrast from their very specific responses in a 1:1 situation to global non-specific responses when we talked about feedback in a group situation. This was the key to changing from a focus on teachers and teaching to a focus on learners and learning. Some comments they made were:

- *Our teacher doesn't want us to feel bad about ourselves. She has explained to us that feedback is to help us. If we're stuck, we can ask her.*
- *Our teacher needs to be honest. Children at this age (Year 5/6) need to know the truth. They need to know how to improve.*
- *Commenting on receiving constructive feedback, one child said that he resigns himself to the fact that if it is going to help him, he needs to apply it. He said, "If I go 'that is bad feedback' it won't change anything, it won't stop the teacher giving it to me". He did add that the feedback should not only be constructive, but positive feedback is also needed.*
- *One child said the feedback is not useful if "your brain is blurred out" because "you don't take it in". She explained that this could be the case if you are having a bad day.*

In September 2011 I met with the principals from 4 schools in Gisborne to find out what they are doing about using feedback to improve learning in written language. I chose these schools because they have also worked with the same literacy advisor, Gaye Byers, and I have been involved in a professional learning network with them for the last few years. In all of these schools, the principals are implementing deliberate actions to improve the use of feedback. For

example, there is a strong emphasis on developing teachers' pedagogical knowledge and having measures in place to check for the teachers' application and quality of feedback. Their students are engaging successfully in practices of self-regulation through the use of learning intentions, success criteria, goal setting and self-assessment. The schools also embrace student led conferences and interviews where students report on achievement to their parents. Just as the teachers at Te Uku School do, teachers in these schools provide many opportunities for students to be active, contributing partners in learning. Although these practices are an indicator of a strong commitment to student learning, there did seem to be a missing element. The question that came to mind was, do we really know if all (not just most) of the students in our schools benefit from what we do?

I had now reached the conclusion that no matter how strong teachers' pedagogical knowledge and how deep their understanding is of effective feedback, the critical thing we need to investigate is how feedback impacts on individual learners in our classes. Educational theory can inform us how feedback impacts on learners but we need to know about the personal attributes and dispositions each learner brings to their learning. Although the students at Te Uku School obviously value and expect honest feedback from their teachers, there still seemed to be an imbalance between the teacher and student learning relationship. Was this why some students still dislike written language despite their understanding of how to make improvements as a result of receiving teacher's feedback? Were teachers driving the teaching and learning process with students being positioned at the receiving end of it? Were we, despite our best intentions, "privileging passivity" (Absolum, 2006, p.65) whereby students have to comply with the teachers' decisions about what to learn, how to learn it and how to assess it. Students who are actively involved in decisions about their learning have the "desire to develop competence and improve intellectually" (Watkins, Carnell & Lodge, 2007, p. 115). Teachers' and students' beliefs about learning must surely affect the way in which feedback should be used in a classroom. At this point I started wondering:

- Do teachers know if their students feel any sense of control over their academic and social well-being?
- Are teachers driving the practices of self-regulation?
- Do students know what the big picture is (how feedback works)?
- Do students understand their teachers and their own role in giving, receiving and using feedback?
- Do students and teachers know how to be resilient in response to feedback?
- Are students consulted on how feedback can be tailored to meet their needs?
- Are students dependent on teacher feedback?
- Are students confident to give feedback to teachers?
- Do students believe in and value self and peer feedback?

I had now reached the conclusion that to find the answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this research study we needed to explore students' views on learning and their understanding for the purpose and impact on them as learners. Hattie & Timperley (2007, p.101) stated that "students, too often, view feedback as the responsibility of someone else, usually teachers" therefore relying on people other than themselves to make decisions about what their next learning steps are.

Implications

Our school has strong foundations on which to strengthen learning. The teachers are always open to rigorous debate about effective teaching and learning and show a willingness to make changes to their practices. Current school-wide practices of relationship building, learning how to learn (3Rs of resilience, responsibility and relationships), reflection, goal setting and self assessment as well as student led conferences have lead to improved levels of student self-regulation and motivation to learn. But the burning question is, are these practices pre-dominantly driven by the teachers? Do our students feel as though they have a stake in their education? Although at a micro level they are active participants in learning, are they being expected to be passive recipients of policy-makers, education authorities and teachers' decisions? I would be guilty of being idealistic and a dreamer if I thought students could suddenly become equal partners with the other, influential stakeholders in education! However, it is realistic and desirable for teachers to believe that the relationship between teachers and students can be developed so that factors debilitating learning are minimised or even eliminated.

If we take the time to stop and really examine what effective learning in our school is, we will find the way forward. As stated by Hattie, unless teachers' beliefs are "subjected to debate, refutation, and investigation" (Hattie, 2009, p. 240) improvement in student achievement will not be significant. Therefore we have a professional responsibility to challenge our assumptions about effective teaching and learning. We can do this by reading research studies in which children are involved; it is the children who are at the heart of the learning so it is the children who can give us rich insights into what it is really like being a learner in a classroom in our school. If through this process we discover that the dominant teacher and student discourse in the school is on teaching rather than learning, teachers rather than learners, we will know the extent of our teacher-driven practices. Hattie (2011, pp 12 & 13) stated that "research should set out to discover not only how to imbed feedback in instruction but also to assist students to seek feedback, evaluate feedback (especially when provided by peers or the internet), and to use it in their learning. This may require a move from talking less about how we teach to more about how we learn; less about reflective teaching and more about reflective learning; and more research about how to imbed feedback into the learning process" This statement effectively summarises what we need to do in our school.

It is important that the actions undertaken at Te Uku School based on the findings of this research study are developed collaboratively as a whole teaching staff and integrated into what we do well. The actions should develop from a process of reconceptualising and developing a deeper understanding for effective learning. “Top-down innovation tends to disregard the power of teachers to mediate changes, successful innovation is often better achieved through a process of adaptation, combining central impetus with active engagement by practitioner” (Priestly & Sime, 2005, p. 476). Just as students should be central to decisions being made about learning, so should the teachers.

Conclusion

As a result of this action research study so far, our next professional learning focus has become evident. Through the process of viewing learning through the eyes of the students we will be able to focus on what really matters ... learning. In defining effective learning we will then understand how to develop classrooms into collaborative learning environments in which all of the students have a learning-focused relationship with their teacher and one in which students are active participants. As Watkins, Carnell and Lodge (2007, p.48) stated “learning cannot be assumed just because teaching has happened”. Through our investigation to effective learning we will be making a commitment to learning, learners and ultimately improved learning achievement. In this way, I am confident we will be able to address our original inquiry into how to use feedback effectively in written language.

My role as principal will be to continuously espouse and drive our vision for improving learning in our school. This will be achieved by allocating time for on-going professional reading and dialogue, encouraging and supporting teachers and students in the development of classroom practices, reviewing our progress through the eyes of both teachers and students.

Some Ideas and Resources to Explore

- Developing a class learning plan (Absolum, 2006, pp. 25 & 26)
- Checking the quality of current learning relationships (Absolum, 2006, pp. 71 & 72)
- Undertaking a ‘pupil pursuit’ (Watkins, Carnell and Lodge, 2007, p.85)
- Professional Reading – Claxton (learning how to learn); Hattie (feedback); Dweck (motivation).

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