FOCUS

The levels of expectation for achievement in Written Language in Decile 3/4 schools.

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Please note that the views and opinions in this report are those as perceived by the writer.

PURPOSE

To ascertain the levels of expectation for achievement in Written Language in other Decile 3/4 schools to ensure that our own students are writing at an appropriate level. From this, it was hoped that the identification of key issues and successful pedagogical practices would emerge, which could then be used for professional development, both school- and cluster-wide.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 2004 Riverina School (Decile 3) began a two-year Assessment for Learning Contract with Evaluation Associates, with the chosen curriculum focus area being Written Language. As any teacher involved in the assessment of Written Language knows, this area, like e.g. Visual Arts, can be very subjective. So let alone wanting to know more about formative assessment, a corresponding deeper knowledge about Written Language was needed.

On both fronts the Contract met these needs, and was without doubt the most successful contract undertaken at Riverina. The staff and students (and community!) learnt about formative assessment, and outstanding changes in teaching practice happened, with consequent improved learning and achievement in Written Language by the students. A before- and after-contract marking of every student's writing by an

external marker showed a marked increase in Written Language achievement when compared against the national progress indicators.

However, in subsequent years both an ERO reviewer (2006) and a Literacy Development Officer (2006) commented that they thought our expectations for Written Language were too high. This somewhat dumbfounded our staff. "How could expectations be too high? Weren't we always being told to raise achievement especially in lower decile schools?" So the end of year writing sample in 2006 by all students was sent out for external marking as it had been when doing the initial contract. When the results came back they were generally higher than what our teachers would have levelled them at, so it finally dawned on us that the comments had basically been meaning we were "marking" too hard!

Hence the interest in what other Decile 3/4 schools' expectations for Written Language were.

METHODOLOGY

The Approach
Decile 3/4 schools in Auckland were approached by a personal phone call. It says much about collegiality in the Auckland area when ALL schools approached agreed to participate, even when Written Language had not been a focus in some schools for some time. A questionnaire was designed and emailed ahead of personal school visits. This meant that even if the questionnaire had not been completed, it was obvious that thought had been given to the topics raised, which included:

- ❖ Targets for Written Language
- ❖ Monitoring/levelling/assessment of targets
- ❖ Achievement of targets
- ❖ Reporting against the targets to those concerned (i.e. students, families, BOT)
- ❖ Professional development for Written Language

Discussions were held with the Principal and/or Literacy Leader at all schools.

Schools
All were contributing schools, except for 1 full primary; all were Decile 3, except for 2 Decile 4 schools.

Roll
U4 $\Rightarrow$ U6

Ethnicity Make-Up
Significant roll numbers in order of ethnicity percentages were Pasifika, NZ European, Maori, and Indian students.

FINDINGS

SETTING SCHOOL TARGETS

All schools stated that their targets in Written Language were for all students to show progress across the New Zealand curriculum-based achievement objectives, as illustrated by the matrices of the progress indicators. Therefore the broad expectations were that most students would be working at Level 1 and towards Level 2 achievement objectives by the end of Year 2, working at Level 2 and towards Level 3 achievement objectives by the end of Year 4, and so on. For those schools who had broken the levels into 3 sub-levels i.e. basic, proficient, advanced, the prediction was that it would take most students 8 months to work through a sub-level, resulting in progression through a level in two years. One school had developed its own benchmarks, determined from samples collected school-wide over two years and moderated against the Ministry of Education achievement objectives at each level.

Many schools had the Ministry of Education exemplars on display for the students to readily see examples of what they were trying to achieve. Some schools commented that they were planning to develop a bank of their own students' exemplars in various genre at various levels in order to present more authentic exemplars. Versions of the progress indicators in child-speak were also seen on display in some classrooms, but more often they were seen in the students' actual writing books.

Many schools stated that they focussed progress being seen in the deeper features, especially structure and language. Many focussed on particular writing functions for two years e.g. transactional writing for two years, then poetic writing for two years. Some commented that it was easier for the students to reach the targets in recounts and expressive writing, that transactional and report writing standards were satisfactory, but aspects of narrative and poetic writing were harder for the students to achieve. No schools set different benchmarks in the actual Levels expected for these different writing functions, though some commented that there was a fall-off in achievement with their older students' writing generally. (This has been evidenced by some of the schools involved in the recent national Literacy Professional Development Project February 2006 – November 2007 where the proportion of students achieving below expectation increased from Year 4 $\Rightarrow$ Year 8.)

Often the different syndicate teams within a school reported having different goals e.g. Juniors concentrating on personal experiences while the students were learning how to actually write, while further up in the school, the writing was often according to the topic as the students were by then writing to consolidate learning and to share this learning with an audience.

Internet research of New Zealand schools (not limited to Decile 3/4), who have published their targets for Written Language, shows that their targets range from aiming for each child to progress at least 1 sub-level for a year as measured by the national progress indicators, to 90% of students in all year levels displaying written skills which meet the national norms as measured against the English exemplars. Most of these schools seem to aim at 50% - 70% of the students achieving writing levels at/above the cohort expectation illustrated by the exemplars.

For most schools in this survey, whether they were aiming for their students to meet school-developed progress indicators or the national norms, except for those children with special needs, an acceptable percentage of students on a certain stage/level seemed to mean "like the bell curve." Very few schools had percentages written as a target for each year level, but like schools throughout New Zealand, they appeared to think that anywhere from 50% - 75% was acceptable. One school stated that they aimed for probably about 75% - 80% achieving at or above the norms.

The schools were more interested in setting targets that they felt were appropriate to the particular student / group of students. Several schools looked back at the previous year's targets and the consequent student achievement, and then set the targets according to what that particular cohort of students could be reasonably expected to achieve in the coming year.

MONITORING OF TARGETS

In many schools the learning intentions for Written language were reported to be as per the curriculum exemplars and progress indicators, and formed the basis of teachers' planning for class/group/individual learning. Long-term planning was usually overseen by the syndicate team leaders and then passed on to the Principal for further oversight/monitoring. In some schools the students' Written Language books were seen by the Principal/Team Leader once or twice a year. One Principal recounted how each student came at this time to talk about what they were learning.

Within classrooms, many variations of 'I Can' sheets either laminated or pasted inside each student's Written Language book were seen, reflecting the curriculum progress indicators but written in child-speak. At the emergent level, teachers often physically highlighted these when conferencing with the students, but all other age groups were encouraged to check these off themselves, usually during on-going teacher or peer conferences. At such times the next learning steps of "Where to next?" were discussed also.

Almost all schools visited followed the same process of formally monitoring progress two / three times per year, often in (March), July and November. Within the syndicate teams there would be standardized procedures with the students being given e.g. the same motivation, the same topic, the same genre and sometimes even the same piece of paper. In some schools the writing was marked "blind" i.e. the student's name was on the back of the paper so that the marker was not prejudiced by knowledge of the writer.

Usually the writing samples were marked by the class teachers, after which all schools had a system of moderating together, either in syndicate teams or school-wide, using either the national or school-based exemplars and matrices of progress indicators. In one school the Senior Management Team moderated this moderation. Some schools felt that there was benefit in cross-moderated school-wide to ensure that data could be trusted e.g. that a Level 2 piece of writing met the same criteria, be it written by a Year 2 or a Year 6 student. Some schools moderated only a sample from each class, asking every class teacher to bring a selection of samples that they considered to be

levelled below, at or above expectation, or any other writing that they themselves wished to query.

Professional discussions on the levelling of both surface and deeper features resulted from the collaborative moderation sessions. A few schools delegated specific teachers to assess specific aspects of all samples e.g. a surface or a deeper feature, and at the end the specific levels or marks were collated and the 'best fit' level given. 'Best fit' was only Level 1, 2, 3, … in some schools as it was felt that labelling e.g. Level 2b (basic), 2p (proficient), 2a (advanced) as done in several schools, was too lock-step.

A few schools were using asTTle writing for Year 4 $\Rightarrow$ Year 6 students, and the Ministry of Education progress indicators for the younger students. Another school was using asTTle writing twice a year (March and November) for Year 4 $\Rightarrow$ Year 6 students, looking at whatever was the target focus e.g. structure / language, and this was found useful for comparison. The asTTle topic was made simpler for the Juniors $\Rightarrow$ Year 3 students, so, as with other schools, all were writing on the same topic, in the same genre.

ACHIEVEMENT OF TARGETS

Teachers (and students at most schools) knew what the targets were, and taught to these according to the student needs. All but one school felt their targets were appropriate and generally being met. However, comments were made that the range of scores increased over the students' years at school, with some students making more limited progress as they moved up the Year levels.

To assess whether the targets set were being achieved, a variety of assessment strategies reportedly took place. Most schools assessed students' writing samples two or three times per year in (March), July and November. A few schools used asTTle writing in March and November. Groups/children at risk had their writing samples assessed and moderated more regularly. Some schools used on-going ipsative assessment, with students working on individualised learning intentions, or having class learning intentions with the success criteria differentiated to each students' stages. One Junior School team compared the students' writing samples to the targets and highlighted the evidence of what the children could do. (Older children could do this themselves.)

Two schools had lowered/amended their targets when they were not met. The other schools had kept the targets as they were and had instead undertaken a variety of strategies:
Teacher Support focussed on the effectiveness of day-to-day teaching e.g.
- ❖ Regular in-class work with a consultant, including modelling, coaching, in-class observation
- ❖ Regular modelling by the Literacy Leader, either with his/her own class or in the teacher's class
- ❖ Consistent use of Assessment for Learning strategies encouraged
- ❖ Professional development targeted to particular syndicate team needs / teacher needs.

<u>Student Support</u> focussed on individual students e.g.
- ❖ Teacher aide support for students who need it (regular rotation basis for each class to have this help)
- ❖ Specially trained teacher aide for language support
- ❖ Widening of the genre to catch student interest
- ❖ Reinforcement of the learning intentions and the next steps

REPORTING ABOUT TARGETS

Reporting of achievement against the expected targets is recorded on the students' personalized sheets in many schools, either by the students or the teachers or both, depending on a student's age and stage.

In many schools, student achievement data is collated and graphed against their school levels of expectation. Often the data is also analysed in to gender and ethnicity trends as well. Of the schools who produce end of year student achievement data reports almost all include new students or Year 0 students. One school states how many new children/Year 0 students there are, and sometimes leave out certain children with special needs who may skew the results disproportionately.

The school that has developed its own benchmark indicators, reports against these in the students' reports, but the Ministry of Education levels are recorded on their computerized Student Management System. A couple of schools have employed outside consultants to report on the standards of Written Language.

A few schools have not yet reported Written Language achievement data against their targets but have plans to do so. These schools want to e.g. be able to graph their data; learn how to put data on their new School Management System.

Information about student achievement data in Written Language is reported in a variety of ways:
<u>Board of Trustees</u>
About half the schools report to their BoT annually about Written Language e.g. the school's targets, exemplars, Ministry of Education levels, student 'I Can' sheets, as well as actual student achievement data e.g. asTTLe "speedometer." However, in some of these schools, copies of information about achievement did not appear to be given out freely to the Boards, or even to staff.
<u>Staff</u>
In the schools where Written Language data is reported against targets, the Literacy Leader was instrumental in the collation and analysis of achievement data. This was then discussed with the Principal prior to sharing with the rest of the staff. Staff worked as a professional group to discuss these findings and try to problem-solve together any issues e.g. if there was an underachieving group of students, to question and articulate practices as well as brainstorming some new ideas or strategies to try.
<u>Community</u>
One school presents findings about Written Language at their Maori and Pasifika Community Meetings.

All schools inform parents/whanau about their child's Written Language achievement, mainly:

a) through portfolios containing samples of their child's work, including written language, sometimes alongside an exemplar for that particular level.

b) as part of face-to-face interviews, particularly if the child is working above/below expectation. The format of the interviews ranged from not having the students present to all students attending and playing a large part in discussing their learning e.g. looking at a piece of their writing and discussing it against expectations.

c) in the students' written report(s). Both summative and formative comments are written about the child's progress/achievement, with schools seldom noting the actual Level achieved or commenting on below expectation achievement. Some schools have a continuum of basically surface features to tick, while the comment usually focusses on the deeper features.

Occasionally a teacher would contact the family/whanau outside formal reporting times if there was a particular concern.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

All schools had undertaken some form of professional development in Written Language in the past three years. The majority had had all staff participating. Professional development included: participation in Assessment for Learning Contracts (Evaluation Associates, Team Solutions); outside consultant in school (Margaret Mooney); courses (Harry Hood, Jill Eggleton, Stephen Graham, Gaye Byers); Teachers Only Day; whole school staff meetings; meetings with groups of teachers/ syndicates; Quality Learning Circles: professional discussions.

Found to be most effective ("stunningly" "way beyond expectation") by all the schools who had been involved, were the Assessment For Learning Contracts run by Evaluation Associates, in changing teachers' classroom practice and raising achievement in Written Language through e.g.

- ❖ more explicit teaching
- ❖ the more skilled teachers "running" with formative assessment
- ❖ professional around-the-table discussions
- ❖ more emphasis on students using whatever genre helps achieve the benchmark
- ❖ the use of Learning Intentions by the students for the specifics and the bigger picture of where they are heading to
- ❖ teachers and students following up on feedback ⇒ feed-forward

Evidence was seen by the schools in the before- and after-professional development Written Language data, and also backed up by the asTTLe writing assessment by the school that used it.

One school commented that Harry Hood's ideas had been most effective for the "basics." Another school commented that the Spelling levels had gone up markedly, particularly at the Yr 5/6 level, after a focus on Written Language.

SCHOOLS' GENERAL COMMENTS

At the conclusion of the questionnaire, schools were asked if they had any general comments about strengths and areas for development in the teaching of Written language, especially in achieving expected targets. Some strategies and resources

given by the Principals or Literacy Leaders as being useful in aiding Written Language achievement were:

- ❖ Hearing and recording sounds, as in Reading Recovery "methodology," from a very early age/stage
- ❖ Explicit teaching such as teacher modelling or via the use of an interactive whiteboard
- ❖ Using digital photography during a shared experience, especially for vocabulary and sequencing
- ❖ Cameo writing
- ❖ Feeding in the vocabulary constantly
- ❖ Topic-based writing
- ❖ Editing writing on Mondays feeds in to the week's Spelling words
- ❖ Writing daily
- ❖ Having high expectations
- ❖ Understanding the links between Reading and Writing
- ❖ Having very firm benchmarks as teachers aim for them to be taught
- ❖ Having a shared understanding of what each exemplar/indicator specifically means e.g. deeper features can be subjective
- ❖ Checking student progress regularly against the benchmarks
- ❖ "Links between Reading and Writing Across the Levels" – Margaret Mooney
- ❖ Collins Junior Dictionary – great for Yr 2
- ❖ "A Blueprint for Literacy Success" – Sandra Iversen (now out of print)

CONSIDERATIONS/CHALLENGES

TARGETS

- ❖ Decile 3/4 schools are aiming for the national norms in Written Language and generally are achieving them.
- ❖ The Ministry of Education curriculum-based progress indicators and exemplars for Written Language are accepted as reasonable expectations and have been used by all schools at all year levels, probably more than any other curriculum area. Some schools have moved on further by:
    1. teasing out progress indicators at Levels $2 \Rightarrow$ in to sub-sections such as 2b, 2p, 2a, as similar to Level 1. This refines expectations and keeps teachers and students alike focussed on the journey ahead. (Perhaps lack of definition may account for some of the reported "fall-off" in achievement from the older students.)
    2. using their own students' work as exemplars for role models instead of the unknown writers of the Ministry of Education exemplars.
- ❖ Teachers and students need to know exactly what
    1. the expectations for progress and achievement are for that year level or that student and be aiming for them.
    2. the achievement looks like i.e. have a very clear and shared understanding of what the expectations for specific indicators are e.g. what does "Uses mainly simple and some compound sentences" actually look like at Level 1ii)?
- ❖ Increasing numbers of teachers are actively involving the students in their own learning.

- ❖ Gathering data two/three times a year on all students rather than samples enables a better picture to be seen of what various sub-groups are achieving e.g. boys, Maori
- ❖ Schools are aware of the potential for data interpretation to be unduly influenced by individual's scores at either end of the spectrum (usually very low!).
- ❖ asTTle writing was not yet widely used by the schools visited. Some schools mentioned technical difficulties experienced with asTTle generally; one mentioned inconsistencies in the indicators.
- ❖ Teachers need to work together in the collection of data and any other monitoring that occurs through the learning process, and its accurate interpretation, so they can take ownership of the results and make informed decisions consistent with pedagogical principles to
  1. adjust their teaching e.g. differentiation of tasks, according to the evidence and implications
  2. critique the effectiveness of their teaching practice and interventions.
- ❖ Moderation is widely used to aid the reliability and validity in Written Language data.
- ❖ Collaborative meetings for planning and moderation of writing samples are essential and often lead to fruitful professional discussions and teacher learning.
- ❖ Schools report in a variety of forms depending on the audience.
- ❖ Reporting to families can create a shared responsibility for student's learning between home and school, with working together being one of the most powerful ways of improving achievement.
- ❖ An ethical dilemma has long been faced by teachers of how to report the achievement of those students who are not making appropriate progress constructively and positively, while still being accurate.
- ❖ The emphasis for reporting can change from one that resembles a public relations exercise to one that promotes teachers', parents' and students' learning when schools create opportunities for ALL parties involved to discuss together exactly
  1. how well each student is achieving relative to the national norms
  2. the specific expectations to be set
  3. what any problems are / may be
  4. what is needed to improve the situation for the student's future progress and achievement
  5. what each party needs to do to reach the mutually agreed goals

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- ❖ School-wide professional development, especially when tailored to meet the needs of the school i.e. not just following a "formula" appears to be the most effective at changing teaching practice and raising student achievement, especially if coupled with a capable, credible facilitator. (The Assessment for Learning contracts run by Evaluation Associates were mentioned as exemplary.)
- ❖ Emphasis on classroom practice is vital, as the greatest influences on student learning are the quality of the teacher and the quality of his/her feedback to the students.

- ❖ Teachers need to base their professional discussions on real evidence and hold high expectations for both themselves and their students.
- ❖ Team/whole staff meetings where teachers share information about the students they teach, report on the things that have the greatest impact on student achievement in Written Language, and work with their colleagues to find ways to raise achievement can provide professional learning for all involved.
- ❖ Staff meetings each term to introduce/build/extend e.g. Written Language content knowledge/expectations, followed by a regular schedule of observations and feedback, aid the embedding and sustainability of principles and practice to enhance student achievement.
- ❖ Having a credible school-based key person e.g. Lead Teacher, Literacy Leader, is vital to facilitate and sustain progress and achievement in Written Language teaching and learning, providing on the spot mentoring for teachers and increasing in-depth content knowledge and practice.
- ❖ Videoing (parts) of Written Language lessons, though disliked by many teachers, does support improvement of practice, particularly if undertaken in a climate in which the teachers are encouraged to think and share reflectively.
- ❖ Reviews of Written Language data and the actions to follow must be systematic, and not left up to an individual teacher's judgement.
- ❖ Professional capability throughout the system must be high so that all play their part in ensuring that what happens between the teacher and the student/s is as effective as possible.
- ❖ The Senior Management teams in schools need to identify not only which students need support, but also which teachers are teaching more/less effectively, and give support accordingly.
- ❖ Teachers need to be particularly explicit about the links between Reading and Writing so that students transfer the learning from one area to the other.
- ❖ Written Language is only one aspect of literacy, and the most appropriate and effective programmes for most students are the everyday classroom ones that purposefully integrate ALL aspects of literacy learning.

Other areas in Written Language arose incidentally during this particular study which were not a focus but which could be further explored in the future include:
- ❖ ways of engaging in educative dialogue with, and developing the capability of, families/whanau to actively assist their children in areas of concern in Written Language
- ❖ the achievement of older students, especially in Years $6 \Rightarrow 8$, to investigate whether they are making limited progress compared to their earlier years
- ❖ how teachers use the results from their collection of data

Within the primary and intermediate schools of our Pakuranga West Cluster, although ranging from Deciles $3 \Rightarrow 7$ and U3 $\Rightarrow 5$, it would also be interesting to cross-moderate writing samples to compare achievement for students of the same year levels.

CONCLUSION

The adequacy of the achievement in Written Language at Riverina School was the focus of this study, and it seems that Riverina School students <u>are</u> writing at appropriate levels generally when compared to students in other Decile 3/4 schools

and when compared to the national profiles of achievement. Thanks to the schools visited during this sabbatical, specific ideas have been gained to further refine or extend our current practice, and these will be shared during school- and cluster-wide professional development.

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