

## Accelerating Learning in Writing: Strategies that Make a Difference

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*“Words empower us. They enable us to define reality, or create it. In retelling our experiences or listening to others, in writing experience down or reading others’ words, we enlarge our lives, cross frontiers of knowledge.” (Dancing with the Pen, 1992)*

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### Executive Summary

There are many tools in a teacher’s toolbox. What I mean by tools in this context is a range of good teaching practices and strategies. The trick is finding the right tools for the right jobs. I saw and read about many of these during my sabbatical, as I found out about what works well when the job is to accelerate children’s abilities and skills in written language.

The common denominator for all accelerated progress outcomes was *learner engagement*. Children who made accelerated progress invariably underwent some sort of attitude change, so that their engagement increased. Teacher strategies were underpinned by knowing their learners. This doesn’t just mean knowing what they can and can’t do when they write, but what appeals to them, what interests they have, experiences they like to talk about, etc. When these were factored in their learning activities, children were engaged, more confident, and skill development came with the increased mileage and motivation.

Tools I found out about which were used to this end:

- Use of ICT – Digital learning
- Experience writing – A ‘do, talk, and write’ approach
- Type and constructiveness of teacher feedback
- Purpose-based writing
- Writing ‘for, with and by’ children – Modelled, shared, independent
- Sorting the surface features

## **Purpose**

During 2013 at Lumsden School, we implemented an Accelerated Literacy Learning (ALL) programme for students through the Ministry of Education. This involvement was the catalyst for a strong interest in undertaking further investigation and study about, to use Jill Eggleton's term, "Lighting the Literacy Fire."

Recent professional development as part of our school's ALL involvement, facilitated by Lynelle Woods, Raewyn Green and Chris Hendersen, provided a very useful starting point into exploring key levers for improved literacy learning. Following on from this, we designed and implemented a supplementary programme for twelve priority learners in the school – Children not achieving at cohort expectation.

While evaluation and subsequent modification of this programme is ongoing, a 'learning fire' has been kindled for me as a literacy leader in the school in terms of further knowledge building about how to provide children with the motivation, tools and skills to become successful lifelong writers.

Questions I wished to investigate included: What's the hold-up for these children? What are the barriers for them? What strategies can be targeted to help them overcome these various barriers? How can these be implemented and managed sustainably? What do researchers say and what do other schools do about successfully accelerating priority learners in Writing?

My professional learning to address these questions involved visiting schools throughout Southland to find out what works well for them. I will took time for professional reading to build up a knowledge pool of best practice, including: Relevant ERO National Reports; Previous ALL reports which have a Writing focus;; MOE publications such as Effective Literacy Practice, Dancing With the Pen, and Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum.

## **Rationale**

Finding *real* examples of *real* interventions in *real* classrooms was my rationale for my school visits – To talk to teachers and principals at the 'coal face' about the barriers, challenges, strategies, successes and sustainability factors.

There are many publications out there which purport to provide a solution for accelerating learning. What I have become increasingly aware of is that plenty of these are based on a 'product' or a 'resource' rather than, simply, good teaching practice. The ministry publications are pedagogically sound, written by experts, and highly relevant to New Zealand schools. This was my rationale for professional reading selection.

## **Methodology**

The scope of my 'Finding Out' information is qualitative in nature, based on discussions with teachers and principals about what works, and sound pedagogical information in relevant publications. However, the information given to me has been based either on schools' own

quantitative data (e.g. their National Standards achievement information), or founded on educational research.

Activities undertaken were a blend of professional reading, school visits and reflections (making connections between theory and action).

## **Findings**

Fundamentally, accelerated learning in Writing is able to occur when:

- writing experiences have purpose and meaning, and are 'child centred'
- learning activities are enjoyable and rewarding
- there are lots of opportunities to write
- there is a highly supportive environment
- teacher feedback is timely and constructive
- new learning is revised and maintained
- children are aware of what they're learning
- writing activity is supported by oral language experiences and by focused teaching about language
- teachers have clear, high expectations for students
- there are effective home-school partnerships

Examples of how this 'looked' in schools visited:

### *Use of ICT*

One school had every Year 5 and 6 student in the school working on individual 'Learning Pathways' using a digital device. This included writing tasks, given clear expectations and individual learning steps within a high-interest context. Two teachers were co-teaching the 2 classes within shared spaces. One teacher would oversee the independent activity in a 'roving' role giving support and feedback, while the other teacher worked with groups on focussed guided instruction. All children were fully engaged and motivated.

All schools visited made use of iPads to support learning and engage students in developing written language skills. A variety of apps were being used aimed at reinforcing spelling skills and phonemic awareness. Writing apps such as 'Book Creator' and 'Notability' were being used has highly engaging tools to support learning.

### *Experience Writing – 'Do, Talk, Write' Approach*

A group of students (Year 4 & 5 boys who had a common interest in sports) was observed learning and playing a new short ball game, and then (followed by lots of talk) wrote instructions to teach younger members of the school the game. Interestingly this was a group of reluctant writers, but their enthusiasm was testament to the effectiveness of this approach.

### *Type and Constructiveness of Teacher Feedback*

Good teacher practice was observed in terms of responding to children's writing, in line with Gail Loane's and Sally Muir's guidelines for effective feedback (NZRA conference 2001) – Specific to the message (e.g. "The adjectives you've used create a really good picture in my

mind”); the structure (e.g. “I like the way you’ve used time words such as later, finally to help the reader follow the sequence of your writing”); editing (e.g. “Well done for finding some more interesting words and phrases”). Teacher responses included ‘feed forward’ for children to maintain learning momentum.

### *Purpose-based Writing*

Schools are moving away from genre-driven to purpose-driven writing programmes. First there is the purpose, and then the text type follows, not vice versa. ‘Purposes’ arise from largely from integrated contexts and perceived needs. E.g. Letter writing to grandparents to ask them about school life when they were children; News articles to inform parents about school happenings on blog sites or in the school newsletter. One school had a tracking system to ensure over time that children were experiencing use of a wide range of text types.

### *Writing ‘for, with and by’ children – Modelled, Shared, Independent*

Practice was observed directly aligned with page 79 of **Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 to 4** i.e. Instructional strategies used based on well-founded understandings of how children learn – They imitate, so teachers model and demonstrate; they practise, so teachers provide guided practice opportunities (shared writing) and independent practice opportunities (independent writing). Within this structure there is connection-making, feedback, transfer and application of learning to new contexts. Modelling does not just apply to showing children ‘how it is done’, but the rub-off effect of the teacher’s demeanour, enthusiasm and sense of ‘fun’ which they bring to writing is sometimes underestimated.

### *Sorting the Surface Features*

Sounds and Words, on TKI, has been used as an effective professional development tool for schools, helping teachers understand what their students should be able to do in terms of grammar, phonological awareness, spelling, and vocabulary, and pointing them to useful resources and teaching strategies.

The experience of some children is that their writing is ‘judged’ on the merits of its accuracy (spelling and punctuation) more than its ideas, quashing motivation, creativity and confidence. So teachers, while there is the necessity to help children develop good surface feature skills, need to take care that these skills are nurtured, not drilled. An example of good practice observed (and which is commonly used) was the use of the news board to target punctuation awareness and skill. In this case the teacher involved the children in editing and revising her sentences, not only to include more interesting detail but also correct punctuation. Each item of punctuation was assigned a certain sound effect, and these were used to draw attention to the punctuation marks as the class read the news board back.

Pages 60-70 of **Dancing with the Pen** gives excellent guidelines for correcting and proof-reading guidelines for teachers with regard to the learner’s role and the teacher’s role and expectations regarding spelling development. Schools I observed included specific surface feature goals which children could refer to and self monitor (e.g bookmark for writing book with checklist); Spelling, grammar and punctuation games and activities were

also included within Literacy Rotation activities.

## **Implications**

The biggest implication I can suggest from what I've observed, experienced and read is that schools which successfully accelerate priority learners' progress in Writing always come back to the same questions: What do/can we know about these learners? How can we best meet their needs through strategies that are pedagogically sound? Where learning flourishes, there are deliberate acts of teaching which instil confidence, provide a sense of purpose and direction, and fully engage the learners.

The best advice I can give schools looking for direction is to dedicate whole-staff learning time to discussions around good teaching practice based on reference to various excellent MOE resources which I've mentioned, and visiting each other's and other schools' classrooms to help make real connections.

## **Conclusion**

There is plenty of research that highlights the extent to which effective teaching practice influences learning outcomes. Within the context of accelerating children's learning in Writing, my school visits and professional reading presented me with a range of pictures about what such effective teaching practice looks like. In all such 'pictures', there were engaged, motivated learners, supported by enthusiastic educators. This doesn't happen by accident. It happens when teachers know their learners, understand how children learn and line up their practices accordingly. Such are the conditions for "lighting the literacy fire".

## **References**

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