

FOCUS: WRITTEN LANGUAGE OF SELECTED SCHOOLS.

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Apanui School Term 3 2006.

PURPOSE:

To compare the effectiveness of Apanui school's written language programme using data from selected schools in Whangarei, Dargaville, Gisborne and Whakatane. The selected schools all had one thing in common, the use of a consultant in some form or other. My intention was to discuss with principals and literacy leaders the strengths and weaknesses of their programmes to ascertain how best to improve the programme at our school. At the same time to identify commonality in development.

INTRODUCTION:

As a teacher with 40 years experience, 27 of these years as a principal, my commitment to written language has always had special significance. My more recent involvement in written language began in 2000 when the Ministry of Education decided to change the title and function of the resource teachers' of reading to resource teachers of literacy. The implication of this move was to take emphasis away from reading to other facets of literacy – most importantly writing.

At that time I was principal of Selwyn Park School in Dargaville. In the wash-up and clustering of schools the Ministry in their infinite wisdom decided to place the 21 schools of the Northern Wairoa district under the umbrella of the Whangarei clusters domiciled in Whau Valley School.

To me the situation was untenable as Dargaville was a 50 minute drive to Whangarei and for the outer schools in the Northern Wairoa meant a further minimum 50 minute drive.

For our schools to receive service we would have had to compete with the Whangarei schools, our RT Lits would have a round trip of roughly three hours travel, clearly not good enough.

Together with my colleague John Houston principal of Dargaville Primary we began negotiations with senior Ministry officials. After much discussion it was agreed that instead of an RT Lit service we would have a two year development in literacy using a specialist consultant/facilitator.

Secretly we hoped that after the two year contract the Ministry would see sense and decide to make a new cluster for the Northern Wairoa centred in Dargaville. Sadly, to this day, the schools do not have reasonable access to a Resource Teacher of Literacy.

The Ministry offered this two year contract to Mrs Gaye Byers. Mrs Byers had, for a number of years, worked as an adviser in English to Auckland College of Education. She had recently decided to become an independent educational consultant in literacy.

She was well- known in the North for her unrivalled knowledge, enthusiasm and passion for literacy. She had taken many in-service days on the development of reading programmes with an emphasis on guided reading and had begun holding three-day writing courses for teachers during term breaks.

We were fortunate to have a person of such calibre to direct our development in written language, being the preferred development of the local principals.

As the guiding principal of the programme I was immediately hooked on Mrs Byers's approach, as I saw the positive results of her work through both the staff and pupils of my school. Teacher knowledge was enhanced, with improved teacher delivery, but more importantly the students became motivated to write and the quality of their work lifted quite remarkably.

The rest to me is history.

BACKGROUND:

To understand the findings of my recent sabbatical on writing you need to appreciate what has gone before.

My appointment in 2002 to Apanui School Whakatane, (a U.5 with 15 teachers and a roll of 410) in the Eastern Bay of Plenty, continued my written language journey.

Before I arrived I asked senior management to give me a sample of every pupil's work as summer holiday reading. My observations concluded that the writing of these decile 5 pupils could be much better given the right learning strategies. I soon learnt that an established staff is often resistant to change. 2002 and 2003 were not years to embark on a major shake up of teaching through a new pedagogical approach. During these years there were a number of staff changes and by the end of 2003 I had convinced most of the staff the need for major change in the way, we as a staff, were teaching written language.

I employed Mrs Byers as our independent consultant to drive this initiative. She was domiciled in Kaikohe. I budgeted for each year of our three year development. In the process Rob Shaw the principal of Taneatua School, came on board as did members of advisory staff from Gisborne schools, and some of our local R.T.L.B's.

Our first step was to complete a three-day writing course at the start of the 2004 school year. I was not surprised to find some staff very enthusiastic, some sceptical and a small minority resistant, this probably being typical in any whole school development. At this time I have to say that the Board of Trustees involvement was minimal, but they agreed that I, as professional leader, knew what development was best for the school. Knowing they supported me was a huge factor in driving change.

Writing was now the main focus of the school. All teachers were expected to take the new approach on board and give a 100% effort to its implementation.

What was abundantly clear was the lack of knowledge generally that teachers had about writing conventions, the use of grammar and effective teaching strategies.

Our first task was to try out these new methods centred around “cameos”. Cameos are extracts of writing that clearly illustrate some feature of writing that the teacher knows the class need to use in their personal work. Students are encouraged to plagiarise the writer’s idea, structures, or words, for their own work.

I knew that if anyone could make the shift in teachers’ thinking and practice, Mrs Byers could.

At the end of February 2004 all pupils produced an exemplar. The teachers levelled their work using the Northland indicators, these were developed by Mrs Byers and some teachers in the north. Any piece of work teachers found difficult to level was moderated. No doubt during these early times we made many mistakes, but we were learning. My main job in this was to provide statistical data for the staff and through this, drive the programme. Our initial results were disappointing, with only 49% of our pupils falling within the chronological age band. (see app.1)

My contract with Mrs Byers was for three years with a visit by her for two days each term. Mrs Byers completed a classroom observation for each teacher lasting up to 45minutes. During the breaks she discussed aspects of the lesson and provided each teacher with an observation sheet and up to six goals for the next visit. Mrs Byers was quite forthright in her observations, giving credit where credit was due, but also letting teachers know if they were not performing to her expectation.

I sat in on these discussions to get first hand feedback. This feedback to teachers was vital to the success of the programme, especially the goals and the next steps in the teaching strategies. At times I had some upset teachers, criticism was not personal, merely stating where teachers were at. At the meetings it was very obvious which of the staff were fully committed to the programme and those who weren’t. Reality checks did have their advantages. At a staff meeting that year I made the comment that pupil standards would show who had given their best as every year pupils are mixed up and successive teachers would know which teachers had been successful and effective.

Our August exemplars indicated that progress was being made, and the programme was working. Those pupils at C.A had risen to 57%.

During Mrs Gaye Byers’s visit we had intense staff meetings where she fed in important learning for teachers. Her classroom observations generally indicated where teachers were at and what the next steps in development were.

On reflection these were stressful times for staff because of these factors:

- Raised expectations of pupil progress.
- Raised expectations of teacher effectiveness.
- Commitment to the programme.
- The demands of planning and preparation.
- Learning new ways of teaching.
- Accuracy in levelling work.
- Language saturated class environment.

- Everyone working under pressure.

I likened Mrs Gaye Byers's visits for teachers, to E.R.O visits for me.

By the end of the November when the last visit had been concluded the last exemplar of the year had been completed, work levelled and recorded on sheets, results were collated.

The results were surprising, but extremely pleasing, as those at C.A had leapt to 82%. I had difficulty in believing these results, so I did extensive moderating of random samples from each class. My conclusion was that the results were an accurate reflection of progress.

The results convinced those sceptics on the staff of the effectiveness of the programme.

Both 2005 and 2006 followed the same pattern, November results reaching the low 80s percentage. No matter what strategies we used our results have not improved passed the 80s which is frustrating, but staff have still maintained specific teaching for those students on the at risk register.

Late in term four 2005 I learnt that my application for sabbatical leave was successful. It meant that I could look in some detail what was happening in other selected schools on writing and make some comparisons between our programme and others.

FINDINGS:

It must be understood that I only visited fifteen schools and they all centred around provincial towns, Whangarei, Gisborne, Dargaville and Whakatane. Furthermore I only visited schools which had used Mrs Byers in some way. Therefore my sampling is very selective and in no way represents what is happening across the country. My findings are merely a snapshot that may have a bearing on overall development in writing.

In order to develop the idea of professional development in writing there were aspects that I wanted to examine in some detail. These are listed as:-

- Impact of a specialist consultant.
- Notion of whole school development.
- The process of change.
- Teacher development and knowledge.
- Hooking students into writing.
- The emphasis on pupil expectation.
- The raising of teacher expectation.
- The process of levelling student writing.
- Place of statistical data.

The selection of a specialist consultant was of paramount importance. This person must have in depth knowledge of the subject. There must be a logical and well-ordered sequence of development in order to maximise teacher learning. Following on

from this there needs to be an acute understanding of where a teacher is at and where the next steps in their learning are.

A specialist is more able to identify teachers that display exemplary practice. These teachers can be nurtured and groomed within a staff to act as mentors by providing support and encouragement to those teachers who need assistance in some way.

To ensure that the programme is sustainable it is important that selected members of staff are identified in a school and appointed as literacy leaders. These teachers must have an in depth knowledge and have a clear understanding of how the English language works. If teachers don't know about the deeper features of writing how will they recognise them and teach them to their students?

There is no doubt in my own mind that the whole school development is the best form. Firstly all teachers are on board with the new initiative regardless of the curriculum area being improved. All staff get the same message, albeit the interpretations may differ due to personal experience. Discussions on strategies are more clearly understood and from this consistency of approach are more likely to take place. Teachers are more able to provide mentor support with other staff and suggestions provided can be used or experimented by a number of teachers. Regular slots in staff meetings where individual teachers provide feedback on things being tried, their successes noted and failures (with reasons) explained. Craig McKernan of St. Xavier School, Whangarei stated that this approach was very worthwhile in the development of their school's writing programme. With the right climate in a school teachers can feel free to experiment with new ideas or approaches, and not be restricted by possible criticism.

Having used whole school development successfully, I can't imagine myself going back to individual teacher professional development, as it only affects one and the teacher involved has no one else to bounce ideas off.

Tony Hamilton principal of Maungaturoto School commented that whole school development was by far the best professional development. With all staff on board it allowed staff to observe each other and provide collegial support, which provided a significant lift in achievement in student writing and also provided a consistent approach. Principals I visited consistently noted that whole school development in writing was the best way to go.

Because the teaching of writing is complex and often difficult to teach effectively, I have found our three year journey absolutely necessary. I am critical of the one year contract in literacy initiated by Ministry. I believe change is superficial and is not embedded into practice for this length of time. It is so easy for teachers to slip back into old habits and methods. All development is about permanently changing teacher practice.

This idea is best summarised by an American Thomas Guskey who stated in 1986 that a successful model of teacher change was:-

Professional development → change in teachers classroom practices → change in student learning outcomes → change in teachers beliefs and attitudes.

Ian Hunter, principal of Mangapapa school, Gisborne was quite emphatic that the best way to affect teacher change was for the teacher to see the progress in students work. Teachers need time to adjust and make change. To maintain desired and lasting

change in teacher practice and effectiveness, I believe, major development needs to be at least three years. As part of school culture it is important that teachers are used to having class observational visits. Most teachers also look forward to receiving constructive feedback on how they are progressing. I have also found it meaningful to include professional development goals as part of the annual appraisal of staff.

The question of sustainability of development becomes a real issue. To ask teachers on your staff to lead a professional development programme is often unrealistic unless they are in a non-teaching position. The value of an outside independent consultant certainly helped to maintain progress with enthusiasm and passion. However, the principal and literacy leader are the driving force in development and are critical for maintaining the direction and vitality of the programme.

The process of change was very influential on our staff. A really important factor in change was the teachers saw an improved performance in student work. The best way to consolidate change and provide attitudinal shift in teachers thinking and practice is for them to see improvement in student outcomes (teacher satisfaction). Our statistical data showed how students were improving and this finally made those more reluctant staff, see the worth of our development in writing.

Teacher knowledge of the acquisition of writing strategies improves significantly. Judy Nicol, Principal of Makauri School, Gisborne found that with improved teacher knowledge, the teachers' confidence in their own ability grew considerably, which in turn prompted them to become more adventurous in their own teaching. Effective teaching resulted in enhanced student understanding of how writing works and a lift in the quality of work was seen by the student themselves.

Success breeds success and students were increasingly becoming hooked into writing. I didn't have the opportunity to talk to students in other schools, but I can only assume their attitudes would be the same as students from my own school. Most of my students are more enthusiastic about writing because they have a clear structure in which to write, they have identified learning intentions, ideas from other works can be used, they are encouraged to use a variety of conventions and are taught how to use parts of speech, adjectives, etc. Vern Stevens, Principal of Selwyn Park School Dargaville noted that those students who saw their work improving found that this became a huge self-motivational tool. This, in reality, raised their personal expectation of what they could achieve, especially if this was supported by their teacher.

In term four 2006 my school produced a publication of students' writing, professionally formatted and printed. Students and parents alike were very enthusiastic to see their work in print, a great motivator.

An area of my study that was difficult to gauge was teacher expectation, as this is often a personal and private concern. Regardless of teacher attitude, all principals concurred that teacher expectation of what a student can achieve was raised. The difficulty was to recognise what each individual student could achieve, and how teachers work towards this standard. How can potential be reached? Rob Shaw principal of Taneatua School, Whakatane, noted during his school's development, that teacher expectations of their students' achievement levels were conservative, as failure of students to meet an expectation put teacher credibility at risk. Rob has

consistently encouraged his teachers to “raise the bar”, without the fear of recrimination. Accepting that teachers will make mistakes is a very important part in principals supporting their teachers. There can be no doubt that without high expectations from teachers, students will not rise to the required standard that has been set.

An area of real interest to me was the way in which students work is levelled. Accuracy of levelling makes school statistical data reliable, which in turn gives validity to overall school progress. In reality the levelling of students work by teachers can be fraught with difficulties. The overriding factor has to be teacher objectivity.

It is very important that with each school sample taken a series of moderating sessions by teachers is completed to ensure consistency of levelling. Often teachers use their knowledge of their students to determine where a student is performing. This may distort results because a student’s performance may not be as high as they can achieve, and the writing has been influenced by external factors. Levelling is a constant challenge for teachers, but school statistics rely on their accuracy.

I believe that putting students at a particular level from 1 to 4 needs to be closely examined in relation to their age. As each level spans two years a distorted view can often be gauged of a student’s level of achievement. From my point of view each level needs to be broken up into three phases, (see app. 2), each equalling 8 months, to more accurately place a student at any given time. If a student was eight months behind in C.A. in reading, we, as principals, would be concerned, yet the implication is not the same for writing. To explain this concept, see the bar graph (app.3).

The place of school wide data cannot be overstated. From my observations it was clear that school wide data was collected for a range of reasons, in differing formats, and for different purposes. Rex Morris, principal of Kamo primary, Whangarei had collated detailed information in class levels and school wide. Through graphing the school’s data, he had a clear picture of where the school was at, and he was able to track the progress of students in the school in previous years and make comparisons. Rex commented that it was much easier to set realistic targets in writing for the school strategic plan.

Lee Anderson, principal Te Kopuru school, Dargaville, also had wide ranging information on school levels in writing. She found that reporting to the board on school progress was easier, and graphs and tables presented made it easier for the board to understand the progress the school was making.

A real benefit in having sound defined and clearly set out data, allows principals to give a clear picture of writing achievement across the school. It also identifies those students at risk, at what level, simplifying remediation if applicable.

In whatever form data is used, it is vital that principals compile initial baseline data as a starting point. Todd Warmington, principal Ruawai school noted that baseline data from which to show progress, was essential. From that point on principals are able to comment with confidence on progress, identify areas of student strengths and

also areas of need. One area of collating data that causes some dilemma is new students to the school who have not participated in a school's programme. This really applies to students from year three upwards, and they usually have a negative effect on school results. Younger students are too young to have slipped to one level below, even though they may still be at risk, so their inclusion does not skew the results. Our local Ministry literacy officer has recommended that new students are not included, a rational decision, though I personally include them, as they are part of our school and are a reflection of our actual levels.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

Schools have traditionally had strong reading programmes. The natural progression in literacy enhancement is to move onto development in writing. Writing has lagged behind in our education system, because English is a complex subject to teach.

I believe the teaching of writing will continue to be below par because it is not a compulsory subject for training teachers to learn. Many of our current teaching force grew up when the mechanics of writing were not taught. I have no doubt that there are big gaps in teacher knowledge on how to teach writing. Our future generations will be short changed until this issue is addressed. Evidence I have gathered suggests we will continue to have national levels of student achievement that could be significantly improved, with the right teacher development.

This may be a somewhat sweeping statement, but principals I spoke to were emphatic that concentrated professional development in writing has made a huge difference to the quality and effectiveness of teachers' programmes.

If the Ministry placed the same emphasis for the teaching of writing, as they are currently doing for I.C.T. our students would more likely achieve at higher levels. I ask the question, what is more important, to use modern technology, or to be able to write, record information accurately, and with understanding. To me literacy comes before I.C.T. Unless we, as a profession, make waves, nothing will change the thinking of our bureaucrats. I believe, we as principals, need to rethink our priorities as far as what are the most important skills our students will need in the future. I am not suggesting that I.C.T. is not important, rather that writing should have funding attached on the same level.

Whole school development is more likely to result in positive long term benefits for student learning. Whole school professional development assists team building, teachers are able to share their successes (and failures), there is a consistency of approach, collegial support, and teachers can "walk the talk".

To maintain the programme is hard work and it takes dedication from principals and literacy leaders to keep up the momentum.

The fundamental change resulting from this professional development has been the change in teacher practice, their attitudes and beliefs. It has been vital to allocate time for these changes to occur.

The real value in Apanui school's journey in writing has been the raising of achievement in our students. That's why we are teachers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I am most grateful to my colleagues who willingly shared their knowledge and information of their schools. Their insights into the teaching of writing helped clarify my own thinking and judgements. My thanks to you all.

DARGAVILLE

Vern Stevens	Selwyn Park.
Lee Anderson	Te Kopuru
Todd Warmington	Ruawai
Tony Hamilton	Maungaturoto

GISBORNE

Ian Hunter	Mangapapa
Judy Nicol	Makauri
David Langford	Awapuni

OPOTIKI

Graham Gandy	Ashbrook
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WHAKATANE

Rob Shaw	Taneatua
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WHANGAREI

Craig McKernan	St. Xavier
Paul Shepherd	Glenbervie
Rick Sayers	Ngunguru
Geoff Skudder	Whangarei
Dave Prchal	Morningside
Rex Morris	Kamo

My thanks to the committee who select principals for sabbatical leave. It has been a very rewarding experience and I recommend to my colleagues, if you are eligible, apply for this opportunity.

If any principal would like to discuss with me any aspect of my report I can be contacted by email principal@apanui.school.nz

Brian Robinson
Principal Apanui Primary
December 2006.

APPENDICES:

1. Levels as used nationally

Level 1 5.0 - 6.11

Level 2 7.0 – 8.11

Level 3 9.0 - 10.11

Level 4 11.0 – 12.11

As each level equates to 2 years they have been divided into 3 phases each of 8 months. For a student to perform outside their level for their age they must be either 2 years below or 2 years above their C.A.

The level phases for level 1 would be:-

1 begin(1i) 5.0 – 5.8, 1develop (1ii) 5.9 – 6.4, 1 consolidated (1iii) 6.5 – 6.11.

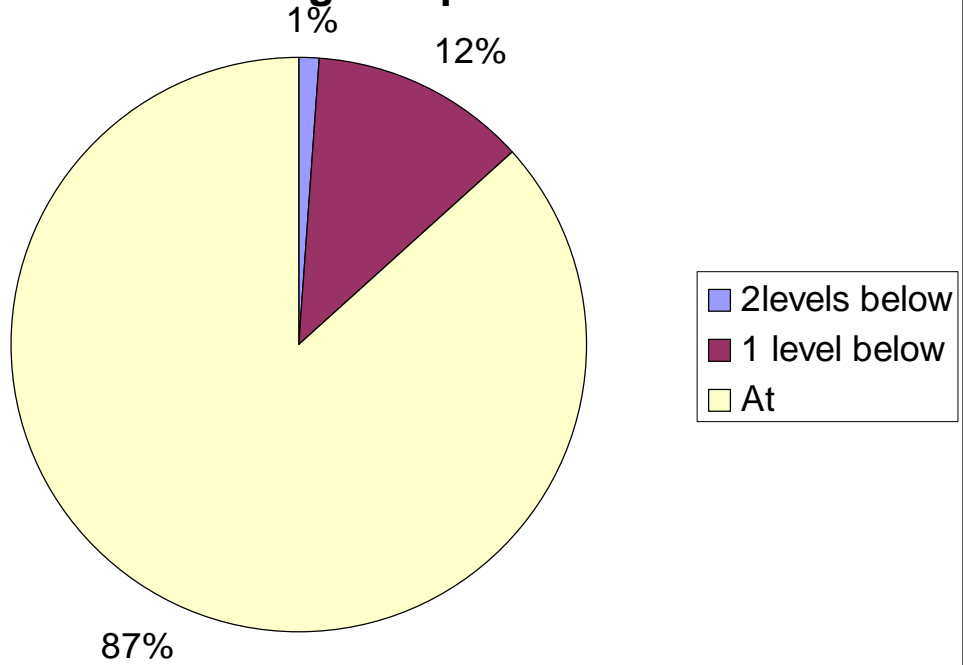
Each level is arranged in the same manner.

If a student is aged 8.0 and is performing at 2 developing, he/she is at C.A. If the performing level is 2beginning he is one phase below his expected level. On the other hand if his actual level is 2 consolidated he is 1phase above.

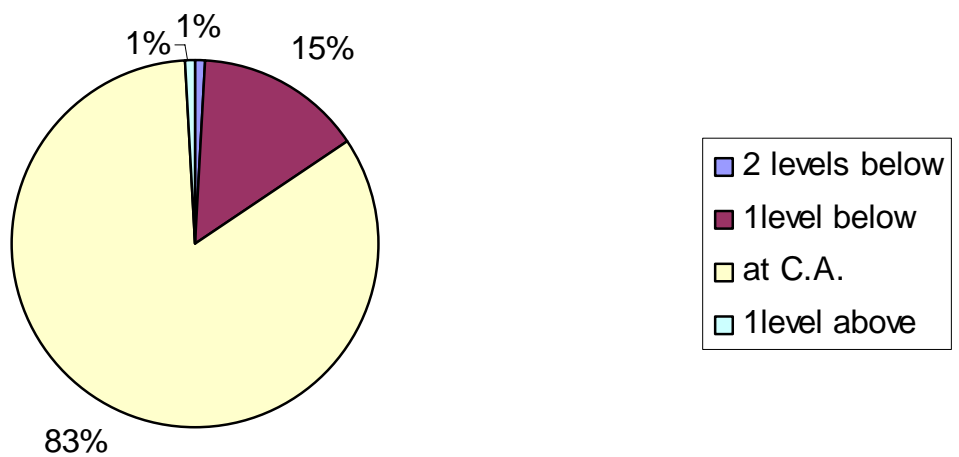
Thus for determining students within the C.A. band they will fall from negative 2 phases to positive 2 phases. If they are negative 3 phases they are one level below, and positive 3 phases they are one level above. Those students who are negative 6 phases are 2 levels below. I have not come across a student who is 2 levels above.

The following graphs are examples of how our school reports on the data collected.

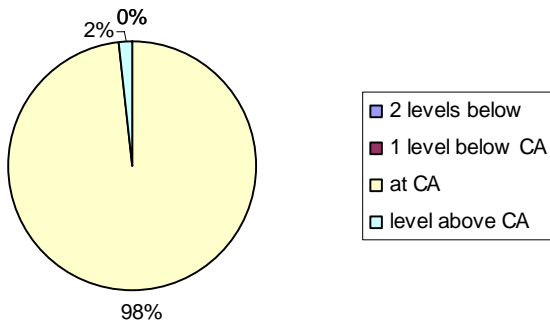
Maori Writing Samples March 2006



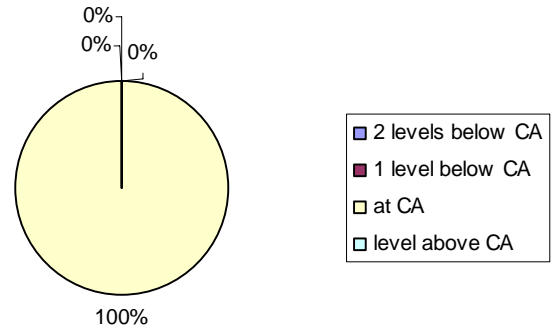
School writing samples July 2006



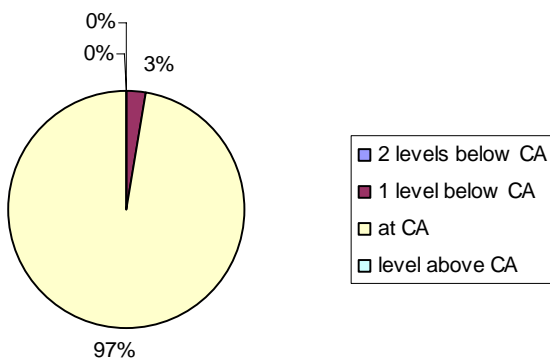
Year 1 Writing July 2006



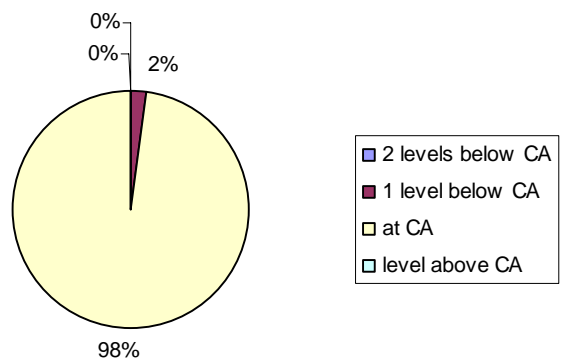
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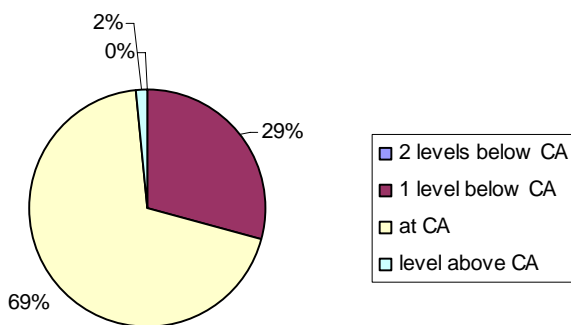
Year 3 Writing July 2006



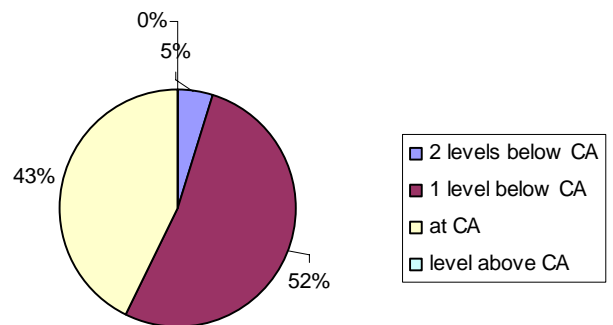
Year 4 Writing July 2006



Year 5 Writing July 2006



Year 6 Writing July 2006



Apanui Writing Sample: July 2006

