

Principal's Sabbatical Report

Accelerating Student Achievement in Writing

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Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to acknowledge the **Ministry of Education** and their provision of the principal sabbatical scheme. I have found the opportunity to engage in professional reading, visit schools and converse with other principals, and reflect on new learning to be valuable for my professional growth and the growth of our school. This has also been immensely valuable in terms of a time of rejuvenation, time with family and rest. I applaud the Ministry of Education for the benefit this scheme provides for principal professional learning and well-being.

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I would like to thank our amazing team of **leaders, teachers, and staff** for so capably keeping our school moving forward in my absence. Leadership opportunities are another valuable result of the sabbatical scheme.

Finally, I would like to thank our **students, parents, and community** for your acceptance and support of my sabbatical. I have honestly missed our wonderful students and look forward to being back with you all next term.

Executive Summary

This report explores effective strategies to accelerate the learning of students who are achieving below expectation in writing. It considers key elements of an effective writing classroom and the cross-pollination of these pedagogies across the school. This report investigates the role of feedback in teaching and learning of writing, this is the importance of feedback both from leaders to teachers and teachers to students. A key premise of my research has been to consider how leaders best support teachers to raise achievement in writing, then consider consistency of effective practice in every classroom.

Background and Rationale

I am in my third year of principalship at Te Pahu School where we have approximately 130 wonderful students. We are a decile 10, U3 school twenty minutes west of Hamilton.

Over the past two years we have been part of the Ministry of Education's 'Accelerating Literacy Learning' initiative. We have focused our journey around writing as our data shows this is the area of greatest need in our school. The 'Accelerating Literacy Learning' initiative has provided an opportunity for reflection for leaders, input into our implementation plan through support of a mentor and opportunities to collaborate and share practice with other school leaders.

During Year One of the initiative we targeted a group of students achieving below expectation through targeted teaching within a withdrawal group. This had a positive effect on student engagement, confidence and achievement during the intervention. We cannot say that the effects were so significant twelve months later. During Year Two we decided to adopt a 'whole school' approach with a focus on supporting teachers to target a small group of under-achievers in each class. Literacy leaders then worked with teachers through a coaching model to support and accelerate learning.

The approach during Year Two was much more effective with good practice being developed across the school. We extended our impact from a single withdrawal group to between fifteen and twenty students across the school. This was also an opportunity to review our expectations at each year level in writing and develop a set of criteria in both 'child speak' and 'teacher speak' for use in the classroom.

However data continues to show significant need across the school, with many students who are below expectation being those who have been included in 'target groups'. We have been accepted for 'Accelerating Literacy Learning' Year Three in 2017 and look forward to extending our impact and consolidating effective writing practice across the school.

Purpose

Therefore, the purpose of my sabbatical has been to investigate how leaders create a culture of urgency at multiple levels around the acceleration of writing. I have discovered 'capability building' has taken place with leaders and teachers to 'cross-pollinate' new learning across the school. I have specifically researched the strategies schools are using to accelerate student achievement in writing.

In summary the purpose of my sabbatical is to grow my capacity to lead a team to accelerate student achievement in writing.

Methodology

The methodology I used was a mixture of research from recommended readings—see references. These included texts from the Ministry of Education, ERO, Writing experts—New Zealand and International, John Hattie and in particular the Visible Learning series. Some of this research was 'tried and true' and has stood the test of time, other research is 'hot off the press' with new ideas and concepts to consider for implementation.

I designated time to visit colleagues in schools that have made a difference in writing or were recommended by the 'Accelerating Literacy Learning' team. Time was taken coordinating these visits, engaging in conversations with leaders, and visiting classrooms.

Another significant aspect of my professional learning has been reflecting on research and school visits and compiling my thinking as I consider implications for future practice at Te Pahu School.

Findings

Clarity of Teaching:

Emphasised strongly both within my research and school visits was the importance of the clarity of learning. We are familiar with the concept of 'deliberate acts of teaching' but these are only as effective as the clarity the teacher has around those 'acts'. Teachers must have strong knowledge of the writing progressions and be able to skilfully analyse student writing to ascertain next steps, prioritising their importance for the individual student. These 'deliberate acts of teaching' then must translate into very clear lessons for classes, groups and individual students. It is essential that the lesson is not only crystal clear for the

teacher, but also for the students, hence the importance of the learning intention and even more importantly the success criteria. It is not until students have clarity about what they are learning and what this learning will look like that teaching will translate into learning.

Schools with very clear clarity of learning had evidence of exemplars and progressions on classroom walls and/or in student books. These students were aware of both the 'slice of learning they were biting into' as well as the 'whole cake'. Learning intentions were clear in teacher planning, modelling books and in excerpts pasted into student's writing books.

This was a significant factor in 'Unlocking Formative Assessment' Chapters 1 and 2 and also the main premise behind the 'Visible Learning' concept, that learning should be visible for both teacher and student.

Feedback to students:

Following on from clarity of teaching, but by no means inferior is feedback. This was portrayed strongly within my research and school visits. When the clarity of learning is crystal clear for both teacher and students, it only makes sense to let students know how they are going in relation to their learning. This feedback to students must also be clear and unambiguous, related to their learning focus. It matters less whether the feedback is written or oral, in fact a combination of both would be advantageous.

Hattie (2009) discusses three key feedback questions: Where are you going?, How are you going? and Where to next? When students are familiar with the language of learning and receiving feedback from teachers they are well on their way to being engaged in their learning.

Confident students, familiar with the learning progressions and success criteria for a lesson can then be coached to give constructive feedback to peers and indeed themselves. Hence we talk about the concepts of 'learner in the driver's seat' and 'student agency'.

This might all sound ridiculously simple, but it is only possible with teachers who are crystal clear about learning in writing who have nurtured students who are as clear about their learning. Within a safe climate of respect for one another students may then support each other through effective feedback.

Student Goal Setting:

Strongly linked to clarity of teaching and feedback is goal setting. This has occurred in many schools over many years with greater success in some settings than others. Goals must be relevant, achievable and 'owned' by both teacher and student.

For goals to be relevant they will be based on assessment of what a student can do and prioritise next learning. Students should be able to see the link between the goal and the

writing progressions. The goal needs to be lofty enough to excite students by the challenge of the goal, but not so high or broad that it is unachievable.

Schools used a variety of techniques for ensuring these goals were readily visible to students, strategies included having the goal written at the top of the page (on a flap) or on a goal sheet at the front or back of the writing book.

Parent/whanau engagement should be sought relating to the goals. Hattie expounds the importance of parents understanding the 'language of schooling' this can be an example of positive parental support for learning in writing. Goals can be shared during learning conferences and discussed in reporting to parents.

The goal may be different to the learning intention for the lesson. The learning intention will pertain to a class or group focus, but the learning goal relates individually to a student. The goal will be a focus of writing for that student and the teacher may conference, or prepare a mini-lesson with the student around their goal.

Strong teacher Knowledge and Skill:

Colleagues whom I visited acknowledged that writing is an area that teachers are not well prepared to teach upon leaving initial teacher education programmes. To build teacher capacity these schools have engaged the support of outside experts. While no school that I visited was implementing a set programme, one used Gaye Byers' training course as a base for developing teacher capability, another engaged Gail Loane to work alongside teachers, and two others had been part of the 'Accelerating Literacy Learning' initiative. All schools had used experts within and outside of the school to support their writing development.

Two schools talked about building teacher capability through either a team teaching approach or teachers observing each other in the classroom. This collaborative practice was seen as a key lever to developing teacher capability across the school.

Literacy Leadership:

According to the 'Best Evidence Synthesis' (2009) the impact of pedagogical leadership has almost four times the effect that transformative leadership has. While the strategies in a leader's tool kit must be varied, time spent participating in professional learning, visiting classrooms and giving feedback to teachers, and being leader of learning is our CORE business as school leaders. BES asserts that the closer educational leaders get to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to have a positive impact on student achievement.

Routman devotes a chapter to leadership of literacy. It gives strategies for leaders to develop practice of giving feedback to teachers. Routman (2014) suggests that it is still

uncommon for teachers to receive regular feedback from their school leaders on how to improve instruction. If we are placing such a great emphasis on students receiving quality feedback from their teachers to improve learning, then it makes sense that it is just as important for teachers to also receive quality feedback of the effects of their teaching.

Two schools I visited showed evidence of the outside expert giving quality feedback to teachers. One school had a robust system linked with their teacher inquiry where the school leader completed an observation and left the teacher with some reflective questions to ponder, before having a conversation. This model ensured that teachers have their voice heard in the observation process.

As leaders it is imperative that we establish a climate of collaboration with our teaching team. Teachers must feel like they have the freedom to make mistakes, sharing learning successes as well as failures. This climate of safety and respect is foundational to higher levels of collaboration.

Purposeful and Authentic Contexts:

If our goal is to have students who are motivated and engaged in the writing process then teachers must ensure that students are writing for purposeful, authentic contexts. Writing about the weekend because it is a Monday morning may light some students' fire, but many students are left in a pile of ashes and dead wood.

'I've Got Something to Say' by Gail Loane and Sally Muir (2013) is full of examples of writing contexts that students can connect with. These include universal experiences, memoirs, and observing and noticing. The effective writing teacher will expertly lead their students into contexts that will inspire and motivate them, even when students previously thought they did not care about a certain topic.

We are seeing students writing across the curriculum in a range of genre as they hypothesize, notice, respond, explain and argue. These contexts may be related to the class inquiry or a science or social science lesson. It may be a response to a shared text, current event or political opinion. The options for writing are limitless, and it is the effective teacher of writing that 'lights their students' fire' as articulated by Jill Eggleton.

Audience:

The purpose of writing is communication. Therefore, if books are put back in desks and no one reads their writing, students very quickly learn that it is a pointless exercise to appease their teacher. The writing we do as adults is always for an audience, albeit a shopping list, email, note to a loved one etc. Students will be motivated when they know that someone is going to read their writing and respond to it.

This may simply be to share with a partner or the teacher, but it could be to inform on a blog, write a letter to someone or a persuasive speech to argue a perspective. The use of the writing wall was observed during one of my school visits where every student in the school had a piece of writing published in their writing pocket on the wall. Another example of audience was linked to feedback, where students were encouraged to read each other's writing during a reading session and leave feedback for the author.

Implications

I have developed a set of questions in this section for leaders to review where their school is at on the continuum of effective writing pedagogy. Many of these aspects are not 'rocket science', probably things that many teachers and leaders would say they are well aware of. My wondering is how consistently these are developed across our schools to make a difference for every student. Happy pondering!

- Does every student have an understanding of the writing criteria at their level, know their individual learning goal, and know what it will look like when they have achieved this goal?
- Are teachers crystal clear about the learning intention and success criteria that have been developed with students?
- Are students crystal clear about the learning intention (not the activity) and what the success criteria look like?
- Can students constructively self and peer evaluate based on the success criteria, self-evaluation sheets, or helping circle?
- Is there progress evident for every student when student writing books are examined, regardless of whether the student is below, at or above expectation?
- Is teacher planning based on students' needs and clear about the learning for the lesson?
- Are teacher aides trained in effective writing pedagogies and working with teachers to support student learning in writing?
- Do we have a learning culture in our school, evident in every classroom, that mistakes and the learning dip are part of the learning process?
- Does our appraisal process give regular, clear feedback to teachers about the effectiveness of their teaching of writing?
- Does teacher inquiry have student needs at its heart with reflections of teaching practice and the difference this is making to student outcomes?
- As teachers and leaders are we aware of the progress every student is making in our schools in writing, regardless of where they are on the learning continuum?

Benefits

Chief among the many benefits of ensuring that we are effective schools in the teaching of writing must be **student achievement**. We must no longer settle with a she'll be right attitude, or blame the student or home environment or the previous teacher or school. We must put a stake in the ground, take responsibility and create a climate of URGENCY around student learning. These students only get one chance at an education—the power is in our hands!

Alongside achievement in writing is **motivated, engaged and confident writers**. Don't settle for anything less than students who are passionate authors--those that jot down great words, noticings and wonderings and can be found writing in their own time. I knew we were on the right path last year when one of our 'out-doors, rugby boys' had chosen to use part of his lunch time to complete a piece of writing he was particularly engaged in.

Teachers who are effective teachers of writing will be bursting with **enthusiasm**. Their confidence and passion will be contagious. These are teachers who avidly read professional learning texts in their own time, bring pieces of student writing to the staffroom to share, and share their passion as authors on a daily basis.

Another benefit of the effective writing school is **parent/whanau engagement**. Imagine a place where this is led by students themselves, through sharing writing, blogs, and learning goals. Let's coach our parents so that they have an understanding of the language of schooling and can respond to their child's writing, rather than focus on spelling and handwriting.

The result of an effective writing school will permeate beyond the teaching of writing across curriculum areas. Why? because it is good practice, not rocket science, just good practice. Let's foster **communities of learning** where mistakes are encouraged and we support each other.

Conclusion

This process has been like tidying up the attic. Among the business and clutter of school life some precious treasures have been discarded to one side. I have literally blown dust off some wonderful texts and rediscovered some valuable truths. It has made me reflect on some of the strategies and techniques that I thought were important and have found to be little more than distractions that are taking up valuable time and space. Many treasures have been polished off, taken down from the attic and now sit centre stage on the mantel piece.

This process has been invaluable for my learning and I look forward to going back to school with greater clarity about the journey ahead.

References

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