

## **Close reading of students' writing: What teachers learn about writing**

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*ABSTRACT: A professional development initiative in writing provided a context in which teachers could be researchers their own knowledge about writing, writing assessment and writing instruction. Through close attention to student writing samples, and debate in ascertaining writing levels using the English Exemplars, teachers articulated growing confidence in their knowledge of language and the writing process. This was reflected in an increased confidence in, and ability to articulate beliefs about, writing instruction. The moderation process for ascribing levels to the student samples took place within professional learning communities. The paper identifies some problems in establishing these as productive and positive contexts for teachers as researchers.*

*KEYWORDS: Teacher researchers, writing, professional learning communities, English writing exemplars.*

The authors would like to acknowledge the significant contribution that Natalie Kirton and Sally McCauley, literacy facilitators, and Jill Evans and Angela Funaki, teachers, made to this study.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Analysing and assessing students' writing has always been challenging for even the most experienced teachers. In New Zealand, until the development of the English exemplars and asTTle there have not been the assessment tools to provide a framework for analysing writing or providing indications of achievement against levels of English in the New Zealand Curriculum. Many teachers have lacked confidence in their own knowledge of the components of written language and criteria for evaluating writing other than surface features, especially those teachers whose own schooling and teacher education was during the years during in which there was minimal emphasis on the structure of language (Danielson, 2000).

In this paper we report on a study which has investigated whether, through the close reading of students' writing using the English Exemplars, teachers have developed greater confidence and perceived competence in knowledge about writing, and about writing instruction. The teachers were participating in a writing professional development initiative focused on raising student achievement across a cluster of schools. A key aspect of the professional development in which they were engaged was discussion of the writing samples in order to moderate the ascribed levels against the English Exemplars' criteria. The within-school and the cross-school cluster discussions, through which the negotiation and establishment of the levels was undertaken, constituted a professional learning community focused on writing.

In this article teachers' perceptions, as they have researched and reflected on their practice following the initial phase of the project during 2004, are discussed. The project has continued during 2005 as the professional development and dialogue continues.

## **BACKGROUND: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF OTARA: THE LEARNING COMMUNITY**

During 2004 a group of seven schools, part of the Otago: The Learning Community (O:TLC), affiliated to the Otago Boards Forum in South Auckland, examined student achievement data in writing to establish a baseline for facilitator led programmes in writing. Most of the schools had previously worked on the School Improvement Initiative, Analysis and Use of Student Achievement Data (Timperley, 2004). Within this initiative some schools had worked collaboratively in clusters that were managed by a facilitator, while others were self managing. This new initiative has built on and extended the AUSAD project, continuing the collegial relationships but with a specific focus on writing.

The broad goals of the O:TLC writing cluster are to:

- To raise student achievement and progress in writing.
- To develop strategies that focus on raising the achievement of boys and Maori and Pasifika students.
- To develop teacher content and pedagogical knowledge in the teaching of writing.
- To help teachers become more confident and competent in analysing, interpreting and using student achievement data.
- To use student achievement data to inform the writing programme.
- To inform the parent community of student achievement in writing.
- To up skill and inform Otago Board Forum members in the teaching of writing.

In the latter part of 2003, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education's School Monitoring and Support programme for Otago, schools negotiated the specific focus for professional development to raise student achievement for the following year. The decision to focus on writing was based on awareness that writing achievement may be low in the area schools. The recently disseminated Ministry of Education English exemplars had caused some concern amongst teachers due to the apparent disparity between students' writing levels and the national expectations of the exemplars. In addition Hattie (2002) observed a disparity between reading and writing achievement nationally.

Writing was also deemed to be an appropriate focus for professional development as reading comprehension and mathematics were already being targeted in the area. A professional development programme focusing on writing would also provide an opportunity to gather comparative writing samples from schools to establish a current baseline on which to base future targets for student achievement. A "contract of collaboration" was agreed between each school and the facilitators employed under O:TLC to undertake a writing professional development initiative. The following is an example of the collaborative contract agreed to by one school.

1. To participate in the O:TLC Writing project.
2. To improve teacher knowledge in the teaching of written language focusing on the recount and argument genre.
3. To monitor classroom programmes and practices that enhances student achievement.
4. To ensure that resources are available to support writing programmes.
5. To provide parent support in developing their children's abilities as writers.

In Term one 2004, schools obtained writing samples from all children: a recount topic (blowing bubbles) for Years one and two and an argument topic (Should the school day finish later?) for Years three to eight. Administration processes were established to ensure consistency across schools. For the Year one to six classes, The New Zealand Curriculum English Exemplars were used to level the writing, and for Years seven and eight the writing was assessed using the Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning (asTTLe). The New Zealand Curriculum English Exemplars framework classifies writing samples into levels but not sub levels with the exception of level one which is subdivided in to 1 (i), 1(ii), and 1(iii). However after considerable debate amongst teachers it was decided to report achievement in sublevels as well, as the difference in achievement between levels was considered too great to recognize development over the period of the writing initiative. In asTTLe writing, each level, with seven aspects of writing, is classified into Basic, Proficient and Advanced (B, P, and A,). These sublevels were adopted in classifying writing at all levels. (the i, ii and iii of the Level 1 exemplars were translated into B, A, and P respectively ).

A further challenge was how to classify writing that, according to the exemplar criteria, did not reach level 1. In the English Exemplars there is no 'pre- level 1'. Nonetheless, the teachers in the cluster schools, after intense discussion, advocated that any samples that were not recognizably 'writing' should be classified as 'pre-level 1'.

Writing samples were analysed by teachers, levelled within each school and then moderated within the cluster of schools to ensure consistency in levelling. This enabled the cluster to establish baseline data for recount writing for years one and two and argument writing for Years three to eight. The process of analysis of student writing achievement was guided by the initiative facilitators. The data analysis was further supported by a staff member at the Faculty of Education, University of Auckland.

According to the English in the New Zealand Curriculum (1994) there are broad bands expected for student achievement. These are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Curriculum levels to be achieved by each year level

Curriculum level	Years in which it is expected level should be achieved.
1	Years 1,2 and 3 with some students still achieving at this level in Year 4 and 5
2	Year 3,4,5 with some students still achieving a this level in Years 6 and 7
3	Level 3 Years5, 6 and 7 with some students still achieving at this level in Year 8 and 9 .
4	Years 7,8, and 9 with some still achieving at this level in Year 10

Analysis of the baseline samples gathered in early 2004 showed a disproportionate number of students achieving within the Level 1 subgroups at all year groups for recount writing (Years one and two )and argument writing (Years three to eight).

Table 2. Mean levels achieved in baseline data: recounts for years one and two, argument for years three to eight

	Year 0/1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8
Median baseline	1B	1B	1P	1A	1A	2B	N/A	N/A

Further analysis of the samples examining the surface and deeper features of the writing samples suggested that achievement of surface features was markedly higher than that of deeper features.

Surveys of teachers' and students' attitudes to writing were also collected by each school. The surveys suggested that at the outset of the professional development, teachers were fairly satisfied with their programmes and felt reasonably confident about teaching writing. In the area of assessment of writing, however, levels of confidence were lower, especially in using the English exemplars to assess writing. Relatively few teachers said that they undertook formal assessment of writing. In the student responses to the survey, the positive attitude to writing in the early years was notable, but there was a marked decrease in positive responses by year six. The survey questions asked about enjoyment and ability as perceived by themselves, what they thought their teachers and parents thought about their writing and whether their teacher told them what to do to improve. These surveys and the analysis of writing were the basis for determining the direction of school based professional development during Term two.

An action plan for each school for professional development programme was devised, and implemented during Term three. As part of the action plan, expectations for writing levels to be achieved by the end of 2004 were negotiated. Initially schools had very diverse expectations of what could, and should, be achieved. However after robust discussion the following levels were agreed as the benchmarks for all schools. These are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Writing achievement levels targeted for the end of 2004

	Year 0/1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8
OTLC standard	1P	1A	2P	2P	3B	3P	3A	4P

At the end of Term 3, 2004, further student writing samples were obtained. Once again Years one and two wrote a recount (of an experience with balloons) and Years three to eight an argument (on the use of playground equipment). Schools again levelled internally and then moderated in school clusters.

## **THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

### **Purpose of research**

The focus of the OTLC writing initiative has been specifically on raising student achievement in writing with professional development of teachers viewed as being complementary to the process. The aim of this research, however, was to investigate the role of professional discussion in enhancing teacher knowledge about the writing process and writing pedagogy, and in doing so encourage teachers to research and reflect on their own practice. It focused, specifically, on the outcomes of intensive and collaborative examination of students' writing during the process of negotiating and justifying achievement levels and sub- levels of writing on specific text forms.

Specifically the research investigated:

- teachers' perceptions of the role of a professional learning community, focused on student achievement data, to enhance their own professional knowledge and practice in the teaching of writing and outcomes for students;
- teachers' perceptions of their own confidence and competence in teaching writing as a result of participation in a profession learning community;
- teachers as researchers on their own practice.

### **Justification for the research project**

This research project was premised on the understanding that professional development is most effective when it is evidence based, closely related to practice, and enhanced through collegial discussion (Robinson, 2003). Robinson asserts teachers need to intensively investigate their own teaching in relation to student achievement. She gives three reasons why teachers need to become researchers on their own practice. These can be summarised as:

- a) The ethical obligation of teachers to continually review the decisions they make about how and what to teach in order strengthen the connection between quality teaching and the level and quality of student achievement;

- b) The contextualized nature of teaching requires teachers to be skilled inquirers. teachers need to make evidence based decisions about how to adapt 'best practice' to their own context;
- c) Teacher research is a highly effective form of professional development. professional development is most effective when it is job embedded, evidence based and collegial.

Research skills developed to conduct research on one's own and others' practice can provide effective professional development (Robinson, 2003, p. 28). Kincheloe (2003) also argues for teachers to be seen as researchers and knowledge workers. He states that teachers should be skilled inquirers and researchers and see their practice as evidence based. They need to collaboratively reflect on their professional needs and current understandings. However, as Robinson (2003) observes most teachers are unaccustomed to providing evidence as the basis of their teaching or discussing such evidence with colleagues. Relevancy and a sense ownership have been identified as a critical factors for teacher professional development (Hill, Hawk & Taylor 2002; Poskitt 2001). For the teachers in this study, focusing investigation and discussion on the writing achievement of their own class goes some way to meet the criteria of 'relevancy and ownership'. This suggests that they will more likely challenge and extend their own learning as they collaborate within established, and mutually supportive, collegial relationships. Professional learning communities within which teachers have shared understandings and collegially developed goals have been demonstrated to result in improved student achievement (Timperley, 2003; 2004). Lovett (2002), however, proposes that trust must be established if teachers are to move beyond their comfort zones to enable essential risk taking in order that professional discussions will become professional development.

Through a focus on, and a discussion of, students' writing achievement, it was anticipated that teachers in this study would have the opportunity to investigate their own practice and deepen their understanding of the writing process. This approach to professional development sought to further develop the capabilities of teachers as practitioner-researchers. Timperley (2003) has also shown that practice is improved when teachers focus on student achievement, test the effectiveness of their teaching against student achievement data and modify their practice accordingly. In the professional development, at the heart of this study, decisions about the levels and sublevels of the writing samples were negotiated by class teachers working at the same year level. Subsequently moderation meetings were held by the schools in the O: TLC cluster. In addition, there were many informal discussions as well. This process would appear to meet Robinson's challenges that contribute to teachers become skilled enquirers who can become "catalysts for an evidence-based teacher learning culture" (Robinson, 2003, p. 28). Thus the professional development initiative meets these through (i) providing teachers with enough high quality opportunities to learn the skills required to collect, interpret and use evidence about the links between their teaching and the learning of their students, and (ii) developing a teacher culture in which evidence-based discussion of the quality of teaching and learning is an expected part of professional life.

Although there is now a considerable focus on professional development in writing this is fairly recent. Aikman (1999) interviewed four teachers about what they believed were

influences on their writing programmes. All four stated that they had not been involved in professional development work on writing in the last fifteen years. Neither had they had many opportunities for professional discussions on the issues surrounding the teaching of writing, either formally or informally. Yet professional development for teachers is essential if students are to become successful readers and writers (Literacy Taskforce Report, 1999). In order to teach the strategies and understandings students need to be able to write effectively in a range of text forms, teachers need to have an explicit knowledge of grammar and structures of language (Ministry of Education, 1996). Furthermore teachers need a meta-language in order to describe and discuss language and be able to include it as a natural part of their teaching. As stated in *Exploring Language* “*the ability to describe language in terms of text and grammatical features is invaluable because it enables them to focus precisely on the means by which writers shape and manipulate our thoughts and feelings*” (p. 165). Smith and Elley (1997) argue also for the importance of teachers underpinning writing programmes with research and yet, as they state, there is a paucity of research on teaching of writing, especially in New Zealand.

Two recent studies provided further justification for the professional development writing programme, and for this study which investigated one aspect of it. One study (Symes, Jefferies, Timperley & Lai, 2001) evaluated a professional development programme in literacy in a South Auckland school. The authors maintain that effective professional development has three essential elements: be “on site”; incorporate a balance of support and challenge; and have a consistent focus on student achievement. The O: TLC writing professional development incorporated all three of these elements. The second study demonstrated the importance of schools aggregating and collating writing data in order to inform programme review, and of using externally referenced benchmarks against which to evaluate student achievement (Millward, Neal, Kofoed, Parr, Lai, & Robinson, 2001).

Aggregating data and evaluating against externally reference benchmarks and establishing short-term local goals as benchmarks, too, was a focus of this initiative and of the professional dialogues that are the basis for the focus group discussion.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Six schools agreed to participate in the research. Twenty-nine teachers from six schools participated: six teachers from each of the three larger schools, four from two schools and three from the smallest school. The information about the purpose and process of the research was detailed in a letter distributed to all participating teachers and the principals of the schools and agreement obtained. To further encourage the participating teachers to view the research project as an opportunity to investigate and reflect on their own and colleagues' practice, senior teachers from two of the participating schools were included in the research team. These teachers were an integral part of planning, data collection and coordination, analysis of the data, and dissemination of the outcomes.

Data on students' achievement and attitudes to writing, and teachers' perceptions of their

teaching of writing had already been collected by the schools before this study began. These were analysed quantitatively by the schools. The teachers' responses to the perceptions survey, during the course of the study, provided a further perspective on the validity of the data over time.

Focus groups of teachers from schools in the writing initiative were established so that teachers could collaboratively reflect on, and investigate their shared experiences of the moderation process. To ensure consistency a set of questions were devised by the research team to guide the discussion. A focus groups approach was used as focus groups provide "a powerful technique for gaining an insight into the opinions, beliefs, and values of a particular segment of the population" (Waldegrave, 1999, p. 123). Focus groups also produce "considerable and often complex information in a comparatively short space of time" (ibid, p. 64). This was an important consideration as the research team was sensitive to the extra time pressures that participating in a research project may put on teachers. It was also considered that the dialogue generated within a focus group would encourage the teachers to further discuss evidence of reflections on their own practice. Participants are also more likely to challenge alternative viewpoints in a focus group than through individual interviews (ibid). Validity and reliability of data was ensured through a triangulation process. All focus group meetings were audio taped. Reliability has been maximised through inter observer ratings of records, cross-checked against tapes where necessary. Validity will be enhanced through referral of the group discussion summaries to the participants for host verification. In addition the inclusion of two senior teachers from the participating schools in the research team enhanced the potential validity of the interpretation of the data. Analysis of the data is guided by Le Compte's (1993) "seven steps of analysis": perceiving, comparing, contrasting, aggregating, ordering, establishing linkages and relationships, and speculating.

## **RESULTS**

The focus groups were conducted over the first two weeks of Term four, 2004, at the six schools which had agreed to participate. Analysis of transcripts of the discussions shows that responses could be grouped primarily in relation to the outcomes in relation to personal knowledge about writing and the writing process and perceptions of the process the moderation of student writing. The topics discussed were partly influenced by the guiding questions which were related to the questions investigated in the study, that is

- teachers perceptions of their own knowledge of writing that developed through these discussions and reflection on their experiences;
- teachers confidence and perceptions of their competence in teaching writing as a result of participation in a professional learning community;
- teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities in which discussion is focused on student achievement data.

In addition considerable discussion focused on the challenges of levelling writing samples, the overall writing initiative and perceived ongoing needs and preferences for professional development.



## 1. Learning about writing and the writing process

Much of the discussion in the focus groups centred on teachers' knowledge of writing and specifically on the characteristics of writing described by the English exemplars. From some of the comments it was evident that they became aware of their own knowledge, or frequently their own lack of knowledge, about the structure of language, what constituted quality writing and the writing process. They subsequently were aware of their own personal growth through the focus on the English Exemplars, professional development and opportunity to reflect on and discuss writing with colleagues.

A common theme that arose was that of frustration and confusion about the process of interpreting the writing indicators established from the English exemplars in order to agree on the baseline levels of writing. For some schools this was the first opportunity for professional discussions focussed on students' writing samples. Although one school had previously been engaged in writing research that included assessment of writing, the teachers had not examined and assessed the writing samples themselves. Few teachers had used the indicators of the English Exemplars or the asTTle rubrics. There were consequent feelings of confusion over the terminology of writing exemplars and the process of establishing writing levels. But as one teacher noted this was a first time of moderating in the cluster and "*The second time round it will be clearer what the aims and purposes are.*" (Teacher 3)

It was evident however that, although at times the discussions were frustrating, focussed discussion became an opportunity to clarify understandings about language terms and how criteria should be applied to determine achievement levels of writing. Terms such as 'beginning to', 'experiments' and 'attempts ...' caused problems of interpretation. A number of teachers commented that the indicators are not clear and the analysis and the levelling of the writing felt too subjective. Nonetheless most teachers agreed on the value of discussion to develop and extend understandings.

*And things we didn't understand on the levelling sheets, before we went to those meetings, became a lot clearer because you can disagree about whether the child has included everything they needed to achieve that..... when you've got a consensus of a big group, you kind of think yeah, that's what it is, that's what we go with. (Teacher 8)*

Clarifying what was meant by the characteristics of the deeper features was very challenging for many of the teachers. Consensus in interpreting surface features such as spelling and punctuation appeared to be more straight-forward. However deeper feature concepts, such as impact, voice, audience, language features and distinguishing between simple, compound and complex sentences were seen as significant challenges by most of the participating teachers.

*Before I didn't know a lot about the deeper features, or language terms.. like what an auxiliary verb is.. I didn't know how to mark it because I wasn't exactly sure what it was myself... I know now. (Teacher 10)*

This process of clarification of the concepts in the performance indicators emerged as an

important contributor to increased teacher metacognitive knowledge. Despite the confusions and frustrations noted, several teachers commented that it provided the opportunity to:

*Bring(ing) up points and fine tuning them back at school. (Teacher 6)*

Others identified specific aspects about language that were clarified.

*Something that I found really helpful were those definitions of personal voice. (Teacher 8)*

Facilitators had provided definitions of key language terms and features which were referred to during the moderation discussions.

All teachers at some stage in the focus group discussions alluded to a deeper understanding of writing developing. In most cases comments were made in relation to knowledge about language structures and features. Many of the comments can be summed up by Teacher 6, who said

*For me the whole process has been really beneficial because it's given me a lot more knowledge about writing but also some practical tools to use in terms of even just, you know, those marking sheets and boxes, just having that is really helpful because what you're picking (up things to use) in your classroom, you kind of have those things in the back of your mind and think have they got this?...and it helps you to plan for what is missing.*

Or as another teacher noted, referring to the writing initiative in general:

*Last year was not much, but this year all our teachers now know the exemplars, know what to expect from their classrooms. Teachers have a much better knowledge of the structure of language and helping children to critique. (Teacher 24)*

Both the initiative in general, and the professional discussions more specifically, were enabling teachers to develop knowledge about, and confidence in using, the meta-linguistic knowledge required to be able to discuss writing and writing instruction.

*a metaphor... a simile. .you know they're (teachers and the students) are using those words. Teachers are more confident in writing now. (Teacher 24)*

Or as Teacher 4 commented “*Conversations around writing have increased amongst us.*”

And as another teacher noted:

*I'm pleased we're doing this because writing isn't one of my strongest areas. It's good to hear what other people are doing and to keep specialists involved. (Teacher 10)*

It would appear that the growth in knowledge and confidence particularly applied to understandings about the deeper structures of writing, rather than the surface features. A number of teachers made comments such as

*Knowing the importance of audience and purpose. At beginning I had little knowledge of deeper features and language features. I'm more confident now transferring things from one genre to another. (Teacher 2)*

*Levelling surface features was okay but going beyond the surface features was my difficulty... I didn't really know what you're supposed to focus on. (Teacher 7)*

and

*Knowing what level our children are at, exactly what level, and what they need to achieve before going on to the next level. (Teacher 11)*

*Before we just really used surface features whereas now we focus more on deeper features. (Teacher 11)*

In establishing a baseline for writing, the O:TLC writing professional development initiative selected specific text forms to establish consistency. This meant that in analysing and moderating the writing samples teachers have been focusing on either a recount (Years one and two) and argument (Years three to eight). Teachers observed that this focus enabled them to advance their knowledge of text forms and the meta- linguistic aspects of text forms.

*I have a greater understanding of genre... characteristics and when and how to teach. (Teacher 3)*

*Before we knew a recount was about something that had happened .. but now we know what we must include in our teaching. (Teacher 8)*

One school in the cluster, which had previously had a focus on teaching of writing, indicated that prior to the moderation meetings they had felt quite confident about teaching writing. Even so, all six teachers in that focus group made comments such as.

*I've come a distance from seeing 'Personal voice' from just having 'I' ( in the writing).  
(Teacher 17)*

*I think the whole process is having things like the examples of what we're looking for of deeper features and surface features ..... for me has crystallized a lot of that sort of stuff. It helps you break it down and realise..... what should I concentrate on..., so it does help you with your planning and what you're looking for. (Teacher 19)*

All teachers in the focus groups intimated that one of the positive outcomes of the moderation process was their increased confidence in being able to talk about writing. That is they were extending both their knowledge of the writing process and the meta-language with which to discuss it.

## **2. Learning about the teaching of writing**

Not only did teachers talk about how the process of an intensive examination of students'

writing led to a greater knowledge of writing and of a meta-language for writing, they also indicated a greater confidence in their ability to teach effect writing programmes. While this appeared to be largely a direct result of facilitators modelling good practice in the teaching of writing, comments from focus group members suggested that the opportunity to talk to colleagues about their teaching practice, in relation to the writing samples, led to productive sharing of pedagogical knowledge. Their comments suggested that they were intensively examining and reflecting on their own instructional approaches.

One teacher said:

*It was good to talk about how others taught... what expectations were set. Increased awareness of teaching structures etc.. and how the event ( the experience on which a recount is based) is important to young children. (Teacher 4)*

Another commented:

*It was good to learn from other professionals..(for example) Increased feedback to children by teacher at the time instead of taking writing home to mark..... I thought this was a great idea. (Teacher 3)*

Sharing pedagogical knowledge and approaches to teaching writing affirmed some practices but fifteen teachers made comments that suggested that assumptions were challenged. For example one teacher said:

*For me personally I've always thought that writing was one of my strong areas. .... but now I've extended my own knowledge base a bit more and I can look at the indicators..... before I was just..oh ..you need to do that, that and that , now I can say alright you need to go the next level ..you need to use more rhetorical questions or you need to .... (Teacher 14)*

And another commented that:

*I used to just get them to put ideas down but now I know the importance of explicit teaching. (Teacher 4)*

For a number of the teachers, the teaching of writing had tended, previously, to focus on surface features especially punctuation and spelling. This was an area that several commented on. For example one teacher admitted that:

*I never consciously thought about the deeper features in my children's writing. (Teacher 22)*

Bring any group of teachers together and the conversation will inevitably focus on sharing ideas about what happens in their classrooms. These focus groups were no exception. However within these groups the sharing of pedagogical information was directly focused on the students' writing achievement and teaching practices that could lead to higher achievement.

### 3. The moderation process

Teachers' comments suggested that the process of moderation of the writing samples and professional discussion to establish a benchmark for O:TLC was satisfying but challenging. Although more than half the teachers made comments on the positive experience of focussing on and discussing students' work, and the opportunity to share evolving understandings of writing, a number identified a range of factors that impeded the process. There are clearly a number of factors that can inhibit the place of professional learning communities in supporting teachers to be researchers on their own practice.

However, a common view was that it gave a starting point to identify students need, and to review their own practice. As one teacher put it:

*It has helped heaps because we've looked deeply at exactly what the genre we're doing should include in it and exactly what the children need to do or be able to do to get that genre right. (Teacher 8)*

The role of the facilitators was important and the use of indicators sheets helped the moderation process.

*Things we didn't understand on the levelling sheets before we went to those meetings became clearer because you can disagree about whether the child has included everything they needed to achieve. (Teacher 8).*

Others commented on the value of meeting other professionals with a focus on a common objective outside one's classroom and school.

In contrast, frustration and tension were also common themes that emerged. Six teachers intimated that they felt the process was not conducive to collegial discussion.

*I felt there was competition.....it was how good is our school doing rather than what can the children do. (Teacher 5)*

*..but then I looked at other schools work and thought oh wow our kids are doing well. (Teacher 17)*

*With some schools it seemed if you tried to discuss or debate a point with them it would be like a personal attack on them. You can't go into this process with that attitude.. that it's going to reflect personally on you or your children. (Teacher 27)*

Some group members behaviours were seen as aggressive and their views non negotiable.

*I got frustrated with a couple of guys. I had level one with one of my children's work that I know what they're capable of and I marked it from what I know she's capable of and then some other guy marked and it came back and I just had huge big massively 'this is wrong, why in the world did you put this on' so I took it to heart. I took it personally because I thought who the heck are you. (Teacher 9)*

Issues related to collection of the samples also generated tensions. Some teachers felt that there was bias in the writing samples because some teachers had taught to the assessment criteria so that comparison between the schools was skewed.

*The people at our meeting were really vocal. There were a few there that just thought that they knew about absolutely everything about anything and their opinion was written law and that was hard because I felt the same way. I didn't know all of those things. They had them up on the board which was good but as you're talking about it and ..... you're trying to find the bit that you're looking for ....., you don't feel as confident against some of those other people.. and it puts you on the back foot from the start. (Teacher 7)*

Confusion over expectations about the process of moderation also caused frustrations for some teachers, reducing the opportunities for productive dialogue over the writing samples.

*One of the other things that happened was that one teacher came with their whole syndicate's writing samples but their teachers didn't come so we ended up marking their whole syndicate's writing samples and not getting hardly any of ours done as well. (Teacher 8)*

Characteristics of the group affected the effectiveness of the moderation, with the size and constitution of the group mentioned several times. Some teachers felt that the groups at the moderation meetings were too big and others commented that discussion was more productive when the group members knew each other.

*Easier with a small group...you can listen to each other... big groups often meant no discussion. (Cluster) meetings are really good because you got to know the other teachers well enough to feel comfortable, .....because you built up a degree of trust because you met so often and you also save time because you didn't have to explain your situation every time you meet because you would remember. (Teacher 3)*

Trust and knowing the group members emerged as a factor implicated in effective moderation and discussion, but as one teacher commented:

*with teachers from other schools I was bit shy with my opinions, but I learnt a lot. (Teacher 14)*

These discussions were focused on a process which was a new experience for both the teachers and the facilitators. There were evidently some challenges but also a developing awareness of what is needed to ensure that outcomes are productive for all participants.

## DISCUSSION

The teachers in this study were beginning to see themselves as teacher researchers (Robinson, 2003; Kincheloe, 2003) investigating their own knowledge and practice. Although not articulated as such, the process being developed in this writing professional development is one of action research. The discussion of student achievement, reflection on personal knowledge and practice, and collaborative

planning was extending knowledge about language and empowering these teachers to make a difference to their students writing.

There is evidence arising from study that a focus on student achievement data, negotiating decisions about achievement levels, establishing shared understandings of the process, and developing the language to talk about writing can contribute to a sense of teacher self efficacy (Timperley, 2004). Sharing one's practice and the outcomes of one's practice, however, have not been a common feature of teacher practice, and, as Lovett (2002) suggests, requires considerable trust and a commitment to honesty and collegiality. For these teachers, indeed, the opportunity to examine their students' writing samples with colleagues produced mixed responses.

Timperley (2004) identifies six issues that contribute to establishing professional learning communities and contribute to an environment in which teachers feel confident to investigate and reflect on their practice through collegial discussion. Three are evident in the teachers comments. One of these was the need for professional trust in the process of establishing benchmarks and reporting to these with a shared commitment to students' learning within the community. Teachers indicated that they felt that at times some colleagues were more concerned with their own status and that of their school and were not entirely open about the process of moderating the writing samples.

Timperley refers also to personal trust and respect. This too was evident in the teachers' comments. They reported that when they were in small groups, based in their own schools, or with schools with whom they had already developed a relationship, the process was less frustrating and more productive. A third, professional confidence, also appeared an issue. Where respect and trust were not as evident teachers indicated that there feelings of defensiveness and in one case a teacher said she was made to feel 'dumb'. The sense of competitiveness reported by some teachers reflected a lack of personal and professional trust between teachers especially from different schools. If professional learning communities are to enable teachers to feel safe in researching their practice, a commitment to respecting each other as professionals is essential.

Another issue that emerged from the discussions was the difficulty of assessing writing. Teachers generally had indicated little experience or confidence in the assessment of writing, and the use of the English exemplars. The English exemplars have provided an immense support to teachers and helped with insights into the writing process. However, a number of problems associated with their use are evident. The first is that, despite the establishment of indicators which provide criteria for the levels of a piece of writing, ascribing a level requires a judgement which requires a depth of teacher knowledge. Furthermore the levels, with the exception of Level 1 are very broad. A decision to establish sublevels at the higher levels ( Level 2, 3, 4) did provide teachers with a greater feeling of confidence in making decisions based on the criteria. Nonetheless decisions could still be considered subjective. Furthermore, there was some confusion over what is meant, exactly, by the terminology, and the qualifiers, for example 'attempts', or 'is beginning to'. This exacerbated the difficulty of agreeing on what constitutes specific levels of achievement. These are not problems experienced just by the schools in the O:TLC. They are issues all teachers are grappling with as they coming to terms the English exemplars. However, the

debates about the terminology and the criteria, in themselves, were a conduit for debate on the nature of written language.

A deepening of understanding about what constitutes a 'good piece of writing' emerged as a strong theme throughout the focus group discussions. Variable teacher knowledge of the characteristics of writing in particular text forms was evident. Confidence about identifying and responding to surface features was articulated, but knowledge about the deeper features of writing, and attention to these aspects in instructional writing programme was problematic. This is not uncommon. Teachers find such aspects of writing abstract and subjective unlike the surface features such as punctuation and spelling which are easier to identify. As Romano (2004, p. 21) writes:

What is voice, anyway? Writer Ralph Fletcher says that 'writing with voice has the same quirky cadence that makes human speech so impossible to resist listening to' (1993, p. 68). Columnist Donald Murray calls voice 'the magical heard quality of writing' (1998, p. 151). Researcher Donald Graves maintains that 'voice is the imprint of ourselves on our writing' (1983, p. 227).

However, what is important, in relation to professional development, was the teachers' awareness that they needed to clarify these concepts for themselves in order to include them within their writing programmes.

Greater confidence and knowledge about writing appeared to be influencing classroom practice. For example, teachers commented on how they were using knowledge of key language terms and features, introduced by the facilitators and clarified during the moderation process, when working with children. This, they noted, was assisting them to make writing instruction more explicit for their students through increased awareness of what they and students need to know.

From the discussion of the moderation process arose some implications for this professional development initiative in the future. The outcomes of this study suggest that programme facilitators need to look carefully at the organization of the professional discussions for moderation of achievement levels. If teachers are to be enabled to be researchers on, and in, practice, working within smaller groups and taking time to develop clear guidelines may lead to greater mutual trust and professional respect.

Opportunities to examine student achievement data in terms of implications for classroom practice need to be an integral part of the professional development contexts. There should time allocated to articulate and challenge and reflect on new understandings, and to establish personal goals to extend and deepen teachers' own knowledge about writing and writing pedagogy. It was evident, through the focus group discussions that the action plans developed as part of the writing professional development as the teachers researched their practice, were not shared throughout all schools. If teachers are to see themselves as researchers, and if student achievement and teacher knowledge are to be enhanced consistently, this needs to be an expectation in all schools.



However, it is evident from the discussions, that teachers engaging in research into their knowledge and practice, through focusing on student achievement and considering implications for practice, can lead to an increase in teacher professional pedagogical knowledge. Of course, the real evidence of teacher knowledge will come from increased student achievement. Only time and further investigation of cohorts of students in these schools will tell. What is evident, however, is that teachers' ability to talk about writing in a way that enables them to investigate, share and reflect on their knowledge base has developed. That is, they are acquiring a meta-language for writing, which, as the authors of *Exploring Language* assert, is essential for the effective teaching of writing. Teachers acknowledged an increased confidence in applying new knowledge within their classroom writing practices. Increased confidence may well lead to greater informed risk taking which will enable their students to broaden experiences and their enhance belief in the purposefulness of writing.

Despite the concerns identified, the process of being a teacher researcher is underway and an environment of trust with a shared vision of students' writing achievement has started. As one teacher said, '*was a hard task at the beginning but now we're beginning to get used to it and so it's becoming familiar*'. Teachers are beginning to have confidence in their own ability to interrogate student achievement data through a growing confidence in their knowledge about language, the writing process and the teaching of writing.

Discussing another teacher professional development initiative Fleischer claimed that

A final step in this blueprint for professional development is for teachers to reflect on what they have learned and to articulate their tentative knowledge--both for themselves and for others in their community of learners (Fleischer, 2004, p. 27).

This statement could well be applied to this process of professional development as teachers become more confident in interrogating their practice and articulating the outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

This study supports the view that teachers, despite a number of challenges, can begin the process of being researchers on, and in, their own practice. It also suggests that a professional learning community has the potential to be the context within which professional knowledge and confidence about writing and writing instruction can be investigated and teacher knowledge enhanced. However, congruent with other literature, it appears, if this potential is to be realised, that an environment of mutual personal and professional trust must be established.

As one teacher observed,

*Thank you for the opportunity to talk about our practice. It has been a great experience. I have learnt such a lot and it makes me feel really valued.*

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