Generating positive outcomes by Years 5 to 8 priority learners in writing: An inquiry into effective teacher practice

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1. Writing: The issue to be addressed

Writing is a demanding, multidimensional process that is, cognitively and socially, highly complex. Success in writing is vital to success in education and in the workforce (Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, & Morphy, 2014). Writing is increasingly used to demonstrate learning through schooling and has the potential to contribute toward understanding and learning in the content areas (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson, 2004). Beyond school, it is an integral part of students' everyday lives as they participate in the world of texting, blogging, and social networking. In the workplace, it is a threshold skill for hiring and promotion amongst many workers.

New Zealand-based data on success in writing over recent years have suggested some significant levels of underachievement, indicating an urgent need to raise writing achievement for many primary-age students in order to help them prepare for secondary school learning and beyond. This is especially the case for Years 5 to 8 students where, in 2016, 69.5% met national expectations; less than in reading or maths. The need has been recognised as particularly urgent amongst some groups of learners, especially boys, Māori students, and Pasifika learners who score roughly 10–20 points lower on average than other groups (http://www. educationcounts.govt.nz/topics/121981/122072).

Addressing low achievement in writing and, in particular, this inequity within the New Zealand context, was the principal purpose of the project.[1] The approach to addressing the issue was underpinned by two major concepts: first, that what teachers do makes the most difference to student achievement (Alton-Lee, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1999) and second, that student progress and achievement can best be sustained when teachers inquire iteratively into the impact of their instructional strategies on students. We (two principal investigators and a group of teachers) set out in this project primarily to investigate what particular aspects of teacher instruction are most closely associated with stronger engagement, accelerated progress, and higher achievement in writing by Years 5 to 8 students, particularly by boys, Māori students, and Pasifika students.

Existing research in the focus area

Much is now known about effective literacy pedagogy for upper-primary-age students but the focus of most of these studies is reading. Writing is still the neglected "R" within the knowledge set of reading, writing, and mathematics (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Gilbert & Graham, 2010), and the low level of writing performance internationally and in New Zealand likely reflects this.

There is an emerging research base in New Zealand of effective practices in teaching writing to upper-primary-age students. This research, synthesised in Parr and Jesson's (2016) article on mapping the landscape of writing instruction in New Zealand primary classrooms, has begun identifying a set of broad effective practice dimensions and related instructional strategies that appear to be associated with enhanced progress in writing. The New Zealand-based research suggests that effective teachers of writing:

· hold a good knowledge of their students as developing writers (Parr & Limbrick, 2010)
· understand their students as unique and culturally-centred learners (Fletcher, Parkhill, & Fa'afoi, 2005; Si'ilata, 2014)
· develop learning goals with and for students that are closely aligned to strategically selected writing tasks (Gadd & Parr, 2016, 2017; Parr & Limbrick, 2010; Timperley & Parr, 2009)
· provide quality feedback to students (Parr & Timperley, 2010)
· provide targeted and direct instruction at the time of need (Dix & Cawkwell, 2011; Gadd & Parr, 2017; Ward & Dix, 2004)
· differentiate instruction according to the needs of students (Gadd & Parr, 2017)
· scaffold self-regulation and independence for writers (Gadd & Parr, 2017; Parr & Timperley, 2010).

These research-informed dimensions, together with the instructional strategies that sit within them, underpinned many of the research decisions made for the operationalisation of this project. They especially guided our decisions about what we would expect to observe in an effective writing classroom and during an effective writing lesson.

There are, however, two significant areas that we believed could enhance this body of research. One relates to illustrative work around the pedagogy of typically performing (rather than exemplary) teachers of writing—for much of the research cited above was undertaken with exemplary teachers. The other relates to identifying "what works best?" for priority learners (especially boys, Māori, and Pasifika students) in New Zealand writing classrooms. We considered how both of these areas could be addressed.

Regarding the first area, participants were not specifically selected but were typically performing teachers who volunteered. Research findings from the practice of exemplary teachers give us sound information on "where we want to be" but we recognised that we need more information about typical practice to work out "how best to get there".

With respect to the second area, we noted that significant in-depth research has been undertaken in New Zealand on ways of raising the achievement levels of priority students. This includes raising the achievement of boys (e.g., Gibb & Fergusson, 2008; Wilkinson, 1998), Māori students (e.g., Bishop & Berryman, 2009; Glynn, 2013), and Pasifika students (e.g., Chu, Glasgow, Rimoni, Hodis, & Meyer, 2013; Fletcher et al., 2005; Si'ilata, 2014; Si'ilata, Dreaver, Parr, Timperley, & Meissel, 2012). Even though some of this research is contextualised within literacy teaching and learning (especially the Pasifika research), very little is specifically within writing classrooms or offers precise instructional guidance on what teachers can do to accelerate the progress of priority learners as developing writers.

As such, it is hoped that the project's findings will not only strengthen and nuance but also add to research that others (including the principal investigators) have previously undertaken.

2. The project: The partners and the process

The partners

The project was a partnership between the two principal investigators (PIs) and a group of schools (four in 2016; five in 2017)[2] with their literacy leaders (two of whom acted as emergent researchers) and some of their teachers. Schools were in Auckland and Wellington. Two were contributing schools, two were full primary, and one was an intermediate. One was decile 2; one was decile 5; one was decile 6; one was decile 7; and one was decile 9. The schools were selected deliberately; some had previously been able to demonstrate improvements by their priority learners in student achievement data but all understood that acceleration was required. Most had previous experience of partnership but recognised a need to extend their capacity to engage in systematic, research-informed, evaluative inquiry.

Teachers. In 2016, 13 teachers participated in the project; in 2017, 15 participated. Only five teachers participated in both years with two of these having to withdraw from the project mid-way through 2017 because of promotion to new schools. Teachers' length of service ranged from 2 to 23 years (mean = 9.8 years). Eighteen teachers were female and five were male.

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2 Philanthropic funding from Mainfreight enabled a further low decile school to join the project. The generous support of Mainfreight is gratefully acknowledged.

Students. In 2016, 231 students participated in the project; in 2017, 367 participated. The majority of students were Years 7 and 8 (72.6%), while just 15.9% were Year 5, and 20.1% were Year 6. A slight majority (54.1%) were female. They represented diverse ethnic backgrounds with:

· 34.5% identifying as New Zealand European

· 16.3% identifying as Māori

· 14.9% identifying as Pasifika

· 34.3% identifying as "Other" (mainly Indian).

A significant minority (42.8%) stated that they could speak a language other than English with reasonable fluency.

The partnership was collaborative. While teachers and their leaders/emergent researchers led the decision-making processes about areas of focus and changes to be made to their writing teaching practices, they were guided and supported by the PIs' knowledge and experience of research-established, effective writing pedagogy and inquiry methodology. Teachers were also increasingly guided by the emergent researchers as their knowledge and skills increased. As well as working with the PIs and emergent researchers, teachers also worked in collaboration with each other in intra-school and inter-school groupings.

The design, tools, and procedure

This project could be loosely termed "design research", based around the notion of intervening, iteratively, to hone individual teacher practice. We employed dual-function tools, meaning that tools were used for systematic investigation in terms of research, but also for teacher learning. Such tools are often referred to as "smart tools" (Norman, 1988).

We employed a range of data-collection tools, some of which we designed (Teacher Practice Classroom Observation tool, see Appendix A; Teacher Reflection Journal, see Appendix B) and some of which exist (e-asTTle writing assessment). In addition, we also designed an online Student Survey about Writing (see Appendix C) so as to incorporate student voice in our findings. These tools are further explained when we present the data obtained from them. Note that in designing all tools we drew on the research related to dimensions and strategies of effective practice cited above.

As part of the data-collection process, we also planned to interview teachers (individually and in groups) and the selected underachieving students (whom we referred to as "touchstone students") throughout the project.

Using multiple data-collection methods, we employed a similar cycle in each year of the project. Note that differences in 2017 from the actions in 2016 are italicised.

	2016	2017
Term 1	Orientation to Project Day. This included: - establishing the goals of the project and what the literature tells us "makes a difference" - gauging teachers' levels of pedagogical knowledge through surveys - introducing teachers to the Teacher Practice Classroom Observation tool. Training teachers (through use of an external expert) in the administration of e-asTTle writing and gathering writing performance data through implementation of the tool (T1). This involved having selected texts externally moderated (by the same external expert) and analysing generated data by year level, gender, and ethnicity. This process assisted teachers in identifying touchstone students. Administration of the Student Survey about Writing tool (T1) and analysis of generated data by year level, gender, and writing proficiency levels (as indicated by e-asTTle writing results).	Orientation to Project Day. This included: - establishing the goals of the project and what the literature tells us "makes a difference" - gauging teachers' levels of pedagogical knowledge *through focus group discussions* - introducing teachers to the Teacher Practice Classroom Observation tool - *reporting to teachers on the main findings from 2016 and how they could be operationalised in 2017.* Training teachers (through use of an external expert) in the administration of e-asTTle writing and gathering writing performance data through implementation of the tool (T1). This involved having selected texts externally moderated (by the same external expert) and analysing generated data by year level, gender, and ethnicity. This process assisted teachers in identifying touchstone students. Administration of the Student Survey about Writing tool (T1) and analysis of generated data by year level, gender, and writing proficiency levels (as indicated by e-asTTle writing results). *Opportunities for teachers to observe the practice of selected teachers from the 2016 cohort.* *Implementation of Mini Conferences in Auckland and Wellington on 2016 findings and what they mean for effective classroom practice, particularly with priority learners.*
Term 2	Observations of classroom practice followed by practice analysis conversations with all teachers, led by the PIs and school leaders (T1). These generated a list of teaching strengths and needs, particularly when working with priority learners. Half-day workshops for all teachers (led by the PIs) exploring the T1 e-asTTle writing and student survey data and what they mean for their practice. First entries recorded in Teacher Reflection Journals, noting progress made by touchstone students and reflecting on practice that might be associated with progress.	Observations of classroom practice followed by practice analysis conversations with all teachers, led by the PIs and school leaders (T1). These generated a list of teaching strengths and needs, particularly when working with priority learners. Half-day workshops for all teachers (led by the PIs) exploring the T1 e-asTTle writing and student survey data and what they mean for their practice. First entries recorded in Teacher Reflection Journals, noting progress made by touchstone students and reflecting on practice that might be associated with progress.

| Term 3 | Observations of classroom practice followed by practice analysis conversations with all teachers led by school leaders. This process included interviews with touchstone students.

After-school group learning meetings (led by PIs) for all teachers to share information on what they believe is working with their touchstone students. This was followed up by individual interviews with all teachers on the details of their work with touchstone students.

Full-day workshops for all teachers led by one of the PIs (MG) on what implementation of findings from the e-asTTle writing and student survey data might look like in terms of classroom practice. This included the PI demonstrating what an open-ended instructional lesson might look like with touchstone students.

Follow-up entries recorded in Teacher Reflection Journals. | Observations of classroom practice followed by practice analysis conversations with all teachers led by school leaders. This process included interviews with touchstone students.

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Follow-up entries recorded in Teacher Reflection Journals. |
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| Term 4 | Observations of classroom practice followed by practice analysis conversations with all teachers led by the PIs and school leaders (T2). This generated an analysis of T1–T2 comparative data.

Administration of the Student Survey about Writing tool (T2). This generated an analysis of T1–T2 comparative data.

Final entries recorded in Teacher Reflection Journals.

Analysis of all data collected during 2016 by PIs and school leaders to seek points of association between progress made by students (particularly touchstone students) and practices employed by teachers. Emphasis was placed on seeking illustrations of what effective practice looked like. | Observations of classroom practice followed by practice analysis conversations with all teachers led by the PIs and school leaders (T2). This generated an analysis of T1–T2 comparative data.

Administration of the Student Survey about Writing tool (T2). This generated an analysis of T1–T2 comparative data.

Final entries recorded in Teacher Reflection Journals.

Analysis of all data collected during 2017 by PIs and school leaders to seek points of association between progress made by students (particularly touchstone students) and practices employed by teachers. Emphasis was placed on seeking illustrations of what effective practice looked like. *This generated an analysis of 2016–2017 comparative data and a compilation of data from all sources to inform "big picture" conclusions.* |

3. Summary of findings

This is a selective summary and is, of necessity, abbreviated. We present, in Part A, data about teachers: first the data concerning "what works" for touchstone students and those these students typify; then the data showing trends in the teacher practice from the observations. In Part B, the focus is on students: a brief summary of the student achievement data and then major findings from data about student views of writing and what teachers did.

Part A: Focus on teachers

1. Practices effective with touchstone students

In this section, we present responses to the question, "What practices worked, in the teachers' view, with respect to accelerating progress for touchstone students and below-expectation students more generally?"[3] There were three main sources of data provided by teachers that allowed us to examine the question. The first was from the 90-minute learning meeting discussions amongst participants, held in Term 3 each year, facilitated by one of the PIs. The second was a 30–40-minute individual interview between each teacher and a PI, and the third data source was entries in a year-long Teacher Reflective Journal (see Appendix B). The following descriptions draw largely from the learning meetings and interviews. The data provided by the teachers have been grouped thematically, using theory and research literature to name the themes. There are eight themes (the underlined headings) and examples are given under each theme; the bolded parts of the text are main areas within a theme, a sub-theme. Importantly, words in *italics* are direct quotes, the teachers' actual words.

(i) Focusing systematically on individual needs in writing

Getting to know the students well, especially touchstone. Teachers emphasised relationships as important with these students, as well as getting to know them as writers. *It's funny when we chose the <touchstone> kids at the beginning of the year we didn't really know them and as the year progresses you see the things that are influencing factors for them.* The ideal was to get to know them early on in the year and to *notice* their attitudes and writing-related behaviours: *watching, sitting alongside, talking about writing and what they think about it.* The words *talking with* were frequently mentioned *to find out more about them and what works for them.* The word *humour* was also often mentioned.

Keeping track of individual needs is an area that is acknowledged as a part and parcel of New Zealand teachers' practice; it is assumed to happen but often is not implemented systematically or consistently. As one interviewee candidly admitted: *… really only just end of last term it's become something that I get. I could see objectively this was a good idea, but I just didn't quite, I don't know why, it hadn't quite gelled for me.* Others were now deliberate in this: *I think I am keeping a real track of who I'm seeing … I have actually been using a document I've devised for this.*

Some commented on the diversity amongst these touchstone students. Although all were underachieving, each had different needs, strengths, and interests. The teacher journals yielded evidence that teachers had specific individual learning goals for these students and, for most, these changed over time. And teachers reported that they made sure that the *students knew what they were working on/needed to work on.*

Touching base often was frequently mentioned: *checking in more often, daily or four out of five days*, with these students about their writing. The check-in may be part of a *conference, a small group session, or involve planned questions and feedback/feed-forward.* Or, this action may be brief: *Where are you up to? Do you want help with anything? What do you like best in your writing today?* Teachers were aware of *not being too much on top of them <underachieving students>.*

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3 This section is amplified in a manuscript submitted for publication.

(ii) Encouraging student initiation and contribution about writing

Often this theme of encouraging students to contribute related to **talking about their writing** with the teacher. An apt observation from one teacher concerned *making talk about writing accessible for these students* by limiting jargon. In relation to encouraging contribution from these touchstone students, the need to observe **wait time (or think time)** was mentioned. An aspect of student input frequently mentioned was **selecting own topics**. Sometimes the selection was guided. Teachers noted that it was important that students **saw a purpose, a reason for the writing**; that they *felt they had something to say*, so often teachers based the activity around personal experience or events. Others mentioned coming up with topics that allowed student voice to come through: *their views, their inquiry*.

To encourage students to contribute by choosing to write and what to write, teachers spoke of *lightning writing* or *quick writes* where students write for a short time on anything they want to. This, teachers observed, seemed to be *more fun* than normal writing time and was *a confidence builder* especially for touchstone students. Some of these, teachers noted, did not want to make mistakes so often wrote little, normally. *Well, they've got a quick write tab in their book. So whenever they come in from lunch time they can choose to either read or do a quick write and with my touchstone kids I've encouraged them to do a quick write just so they get that balance of writing whatever they want and then rereading.*

A few teachers also mentioned *involving the students in deciding on their goals and on what the success criteria for their writing were.*

(iii) Working with other writers

The theme of working with others was in relation to students being in **small groups**, based on **needs**, not ability. Often, while needs were similar, they were at different levels, so students were in **diverse groups**, learning from others. *But within that <diverse/mixed> group I've been using more tuakana–teina style of teaching to support those kids ... having a mixture of more able they have kind of a common need but they are at different levels.*

For some teachers, touchstone students formed their own group as well as being part of more *fluid groupings*. Basically, teachers talked about organising opportunities for students to *work with peers, to share ideas about what to write or to share their writing to elicit responses.* Teachers talked about having *lots of sharing*; of making sharing writing *a cool thing to do*, an *expectation that this is what we do in this class*. One teacher described a practice called a *quick share*, where students just shared a part of their writing. Other teachers noted that, although touchstone students were often reluctant to share their writing, they would let the teacher share it for them with others. And listening to others share enabled these students to appreciate that even seemingly capable writers struggle. *Also the ones that are maybe less confident writers know that they actually do achieve some good stuff and that they can see how the ones they think of as being the good writers, they struggle with aspects of writing too*. Creating a culture where there was encouragement and support for others as writers and where feedback was not personal but focused on the writing were aspects of classroom climate described by several teachers in different words. When working with others took place, teachers noted that they would frequently provide *frameworks, for example to respond to the writing of peers or structured tasks for the small group such as a planning template to complete.*

(iv) Modelling writing

Modelling that is active (**co-constructing texts or writing together** with students) was often mentioned by teachers. Sometimes this is whole class so is not specifically focused on touchstone students but, in other cases, it is with small groups. Risk taking by the teacher when modelling writing was noted by more than one teacher as an important characteristic to show to students. Active modelling also involves **teacher think alouds** to introduce, teach, and/or reinforce new concepts. *I think if you are saying you need to do these things when they see you modelling that thinking ... it just feels more accessible to them <touchstone students>.*

Models or exemplars were employed to *demonstrate elements of a quality performance* and to show how authors achieved their purposes through various effects. *I find that using exemplars is really powerful. It gives them a really good idea of expectations and we work through it together ...* These exemplars were drawn from multiple

sources including class readings and *students' own writing,* the latter often mentioned in relation to explicit instruction. *What we'll do is we will look at things that they're doing right but things to work on as well and that is so that they know that they are actually part of the writing community.* Here the emphasis was on building a writing community as well as examining what the student did well or could work on next. An important consideration was to use *examples that are engaging and will motivate* students to write but to use them judiciously with touchstone students.

(v) Breaking the writing task or process down into manageable components

It is overwhelming <for these touchstone students> to think of completing a whole piece of writing was a common sentiment. The responses to this included, for example, *I make sure I chunk the task down to* **achievable bites**. This meant, for example, breaking up the brainstorming associated with planning. *I am trying to structure planning … by chunking it, by having brainstorms for each specific bit of it rather than just one big brainstorm.* Another means of breaking down the writing task was to **focus on some things rather than everything at once** *… I very much limit what we are looking at and try to stick to what I said we were focusing on.* **Limiting** the number of success criteria; then *adding "challenges"* as teachers felt students could cope was mentioned. Another consideration factored in for touchstone students was planning *short "breaks" between chunks.*

(vi) Scaffolds for writing processes

One teacher summed up what scaffolds are—*temporary support: … So hopefully they won't need that graphic organiser in the end.* For some, these supports took the form of a **graphic organiser/mnemonic** *like PEEL: what is your point, expand and elaborate on that point, and provide some evidence and make links to the other three sections in your summary.*

Other examples were: **Google docs slides for sequence, building word banks, a "bank-it" book** *of words and phrases that intrigue students,* **frameworks for peer response** *(what do you like?; what might you change?),* **a planning template** *or* **sentence starters** *or re-starters, because otherwise if they don't have that starting point they can't get on a roll.*

Perhaps most often mentioned was **talk** as a support; the well-known adage from James Britton, that "writing floats on a sea of talk". Talk helps cue what they have learnt and it serves to *generate content and vocabulary*.

(vii) Supporting self-regulation as a writer

There were several aspects mentioned with respect to encouraging, guiding, and supporting self-regulation. A basic concern was **helping students to manage their time better**, particularly vital in a complex cognitive process like writing … *because her time management around writing is really problematic, I've been doing that quite specifically with her. So what is your goal for today, what part are you …, where are you going to get up to?* Arguably, an important step in building self-regulation is that students take **ownership of writing**. Taking ownership may involve students going beyond their comfort zone. A small number of teachers mentioned the significance of **encouraging risk taking** in developing self-regulation but, at the same time, **holding high expectations**. *That is one of the <issues with> risk taking isn't it, you know, if you don't set your class up at the beginning of the year for that risk taking, then …* For touchstone students this might be sanctioning mistakes and enabling them to be comfortable with them. Teachers noted that touchstone students often needed to have their attention drawn to the available resources to support independence/self-monitoring. *But we also need to make sure that they are becoming more independent with asking themselves, "Ok I've had that repeated back to me … what are the clues in the classroom, where can I check that I'm on task?"*

A key part of self-regulation in writing is learning to self-evaluate. Teachers spoke of their efforts to encourage **peer and self-assessment of writing**. *So every piece of work they have to peer assess … to have at least one other student like have a go at editing it and then leaving a comment.* And, to gain value from the peer process, students need to be able to say what they want feedback about. This is seen as the first step towards self-assessment. *So when their buddy comes to them and says "oh can you have a look?" they need to be clear about what they want that person to look for and that person needs to be clear about how they're getting their feedback.* A teacher talked of extending the students' notions of peer feedback and its function … *You need to be critical friends. You can't just*

go *"that's my friend so I'm going to say that is a nice piece of writing"*. Self-assessment is more difficult than peer assessment and when a teacher reported that a touchstone student had begun to do this, it was important to ask why the teacher thought this student's critique had developed.

Good question! Possibly because we've done more talking about it with her about her writing. Whether she is more aware or she is more focused on her writing and is being more critical of herself because she knows she is part of the writing programme ...

A key component of self-assessment is for a writer to *"see/diagnose" a reader's likely difficulty with the writing.* Here teachers often emphasised talking about what the students are *trying to get across in their writing and* whether they have achieved this. One teacher mentioned the importance of students *reading their piece of work together because I want them to actually hear what they've written to see if they can identify the errors ... not actually giving them the answer ... I try to question them in a way that they go "Oh no, I meant to say this" or "Oh that doesn't make sense".*

(viii) Linking reading and writing

A minority of teachers talked specifically of making deliberate links between reading and writing, mostly for **making students more aware of audience**. In talking of linking reading and writing specifically, teachers extended how they used exemplars as models by **reading a text together and identifying author actions**. *We talk a lot about what the author has done so we are noticing that, as readers, we are trying to take that into what we are trying to do as writers ... in our novel and guided reading and then in writing and we link across.*

2. The observations of practice

The Teacher Practice Classroom Observation Schedule (see Appendix A) was used for all classroom observations of instructional writing lessons. It consisted of seven practice dimensions and detailed descriptors were provided for each dimension to exemplify the type of practices associated with that dimension. The dimensions and descriptors were drawn from previously cited New Zealand and also international research findings.

Each teacher was observed on at least three occasions in a year and, prior to the observation, the teacher responded to some key questions about the class or group and the lesson. At the beginning and end of year (T1 and T2), both the PI and the school leader observed each teacher (and discussed and presented their consensus view to the teacher). For each dimension, the observers and the teacher him/herself rated the practice on a scale of 1 to 4, ranging from 1: *some limited evidence of a few of the descriptors* to 4: *a significant amount of evidence covering all aspects of the dimension to a high level*, meaning there was *evidence of strong, consistent practice*. See Appendix A for full scale descriptors. Everyone, of course, noted evidence in support of their ratings to use in the feedback session that followed the observation.

As noted, there were two, year-long cohorts of teachers, with little overlap. In both cohorts, the average total ratings score for all teachers increased from T1 to T2, over the year, although it was noticeable that the scores at both T1 and T2 were considerably higher in 2017 than in 2016. There was a pattern of lower rating by teachers of themselves (as opposed to observers' ratings of teachers) apparent in both cohorts across dimensions. Table 1 shows, for simplicity, observers' average ratings for each of the seven dimensions.

There was considerable similarity in the high-scoring dimensions in both cohorts of teachers. The dimension for which teachers scored highest at T2 was *direct instruction*, with means of 3.08 and 3.25 in 2016 and 2017, respectively. Next highest for the 2016 cohort was *using learning goals and tasks effectively* (3.0) while it was *knowledge of writers* for 2017 teachers (3.14). *Promoting differentiation* and *knowledge of writers* (both 2.54) were next-highest ranked in 2016 with *learning goals and tasks and differentiation* (3.11) next highest in 2017.

Table 1: Observer mean ratings by dimension T1–T2 in 2016 and 2017

	Mean T1 2016	Mean T2 2016	Mean T1 2017	Mean T2 2017
Dimension 1: *knowledge of writers*	2.23	2.54	2.96	3.14
Dimension 2: *cultural awareness*	2.15	2.27	2.68	3.0
Dimension 3: *learning goals and tasks*	2.85	3.00	2.75	3.11
Dimension 4: *feedback*	2.08	2.35	2.29	2.86
Dimension 5: *self-regulation*	2.46	2.27	2.71	3.04
Dimension 6: *direct instruction*	2.69	3.08	2.68	3.25
Dimension 7: *differentiation*	2.46	2.54	2.71	3.11
ALL DIMENSIONS	2.42	2.58	2.68	3.07

Mean gains shown across both cohorts of teachers from T1 to T2 ranged from .46 to .96. *Direct instruction* (.96) and *feedback* (.84) were the dimensions on which these teachers made the greatest progress although *feedback* remained amongst the lowest-scoring dimensions for both cohorts. It seemed that, for the 2016 cohort, *direct instruction* and *learning goals and tasks* could be considered dimensions of higher proficiency by the end of the year, while, for the 2017 cohort, *direct instruction*, *learning goals and tasks*, and *knowledge of writers* could be considered as dimensions of higher proficiency by the end of the year. For the 2016 cohort, *feedback* and *self-regulation* might be considered dimensions of lower proficiency, while, for the 2017 group, it was *feedback* and *cultural awareness*.

Part B: Focus on students

1. The bottom line: Student achievement

We collected achievement data using e-asTTle: Writing, still a new tool for most teachers. So we organised professionally run workshops in Auckland and Wellington at which participants and other colleagues from their schools attended. In addition, there was an opportunity at the time of the first data collection of the year for teachers to have a sample of scored scripts moderated by an external expert and to receive detailed feedback on their own scoring.

There are a number of ways to consider gains in writing achievement using e-asTTle data. For simplicity, we present here the percentage of students achieving at different levels (*above*, *at*, *below*, and *well below*) in relation to the expected curriculum level and sub-level at the beginning (T1) and end (T2) of a school year when data for project analysis were collected. These data were available by class, year level, and school for use by the project participants. Where numbers in priority groups are sufficiently large (in 2017, recruiting of an additional school lifted numbers in these groups markedly), we report their data separately.

The picture at the beginning of both years of the project is best captured by the fact that more students across the schools were in the *well below* band of achievement in relation to expectations in writing than in any of the other bands. Perhaps the most notable change in each of the 2 years was to move students from this very low level of achievement. The second year of the project showed greater gains overall for students than in the first year. However, as noted above, only five teachers from the first year of the project were teaching eligible classes in the partner schools in the second year. And, given the loss at the end of 2016 of Year 8 and of most Year 6 students, and students leaving the schools, only a minority of the 2017 cohort of students were part of the project for the 2 years.

The first year 2016: The overall positive aspect of the data in 2016 was the modest increase over the year in the percentage of all students in the *above/at* achievement band. However, despite the progress, the percentage below expectations remained high. At the end of the year this percentage, by year levels, ranged

from 63.9% (Year 7) to 37.2% (Year 6); in relation to gender, it ranged from 79.1% (Year 5 boys) to 40% (Year 6 boys) and from 55.8% (Year 7 girls) to 35.5% (Year 6 girls); in relation to ethnicity, it ranged from 74.1% (all Pasifika students) to 47.9% (all Māori students). At beginning and end of year, more "Other" than New Zealand European students were in the *at/above* band (49.2%, compared with 39.2%). This is particularly commendable in that around 42% of "Other" students (mainly Indian) did not have English as their mother tongue and we knew from our student survey data that, across participating schools, students reported speaking around 60 different languages.

Most marked, however, was a large decrease in the proportion in the *well below* band over the year; it almost halved, from 34.9% to 18.2%—a trend evident to varying degrees for all year-level cohorts, both genders, and all ethnic groups. For example, for Year 5 it decreased from 45.3% to 22.4% and for Year 8 from 39.9% to 18.1%. Regarding groups of interest to the project, the proportion of boys in the *well below* band fell from 45.3% to 22.4%; the drop was particularly noticeable for Year 5 boys (from 52% to 8.3%) and for Year 8 boys (from 55.8% to 26.2%). Despite achievement increases by boys, the achievement gap between boys and girls (20.7%) barely decreased. In the year groups where boys' achievement moved significantly from the *well below* band, the gap still remained wide: for the Year 5 cohort (39.1%) and for the Year 8 cohort (27.5%). The proportion of Pasifika students in the *well below* band decreased from 53.1% to 25.9%.

Just over three-quarters of all students in the project in 2016 made either "expected progress" (45.4%) or "accelerated progress" (30%) between T1 and T2. Expected progress is upward movement by one to two curriculum sub-levels in a year; accelerated progress is upward movement by three or more curriculum sub-levels in a year. Only 14.1% of students achieved at the same sub-level at both T1 and T2. It was difficult in the first year to draw reliable conclusions about progress by Māori and Pasifika students because of the relatively low number of students in these cohorts.

The second year 2017: Again the data show an increase over the year in the percentage of all students in the *above* achievement band, from 27.5% to 40.8%. The proportion was slightly more than double that in the *above* band at the end of 2016. This pattern was evident to varying degrees for year-level cohorts, both genders, and all ethnic groups. Years 7 and 8 made notable progress (from 30.2% to 43.6% and from 31.3% to 45.1%, respectively). The proportion of boys in the *above* band increased from 20.5% to 33.7% and this proportion is much greater than at the end of 2016. The proportion of Māori students in the *above* band increased from 18.4% to 44.8%.

There was a decrease, double that of 2016, in the proportion in the *well below* band; it decreased almost three-fold to end the year at only 10.9%. This pattern was evident to varying degrees for all year-level cohorts, both genders, and all ethnic groups. As examples: Year 8 decreased from 28.7% to 8.5%; the proportion of boys decreased by a similar amount (from 35.2% to 14.4%) and this was particularly noticeable for Year 8 boys (from 36.6% 10.8%). The proportion of all Māori students in the *well below* band decreased from 44.7% to 8.6%.

Similar to 2016, around three-quarters of the students made accelerated (33%) or expected (39.8%) progress during the year; a similar percentage to 2016 made no progress (in that their score/sub-level remained much the same). However, the 2017 cohort started at a higher level, on average. Particularly important to note was that more than half (56.4%) of underachieving students (students who began at level 3B and below) made accelerated progress and about a third (31.6%) made expected progress. Although these shifts did not move them much closer to their peers (who also experienced expected or accelerated gains), the data clearly showed a greater rate of progress than previously achieved by these students.

2. What were students telling us: The survey?

As interesting as the Student Survey on Writing data were when the four data-gathering points across the 2 years were added together, we believed that these data assisted only somewhat in responding to our key research goal of what particular aspects of teacher instruction are most closely associated with stronger engagement, accelerated progress, and higher achievement in writing by Years 5 to 8 priority learners. Hence, they are not reported in full here. Key findings included that a significant minority of students (41.3%) professed that they did not like writing; an even greater proportion (61.2%) professed that they did not like it outside

of instructional writing time. There was a significant gap (15.7%) between boys' reasonably negative and girls' reasonably positive attitudes to writing. Attitude did not seem to relate directly to proficiency in writing. And attitudes did not change much over time. However, some changes made to teacher practice were possibly influenced by student attitudes, like students' view that "choice of topic" is the most important factor in influencing their attitude to writing. The full survey findings will be available in Gadd and Parr's to-be-published article entitled *Portrait of the student as a young writer: Some student survey findings about writing*.

3. Conclusion: What did we learn for practice?

The value of focusing on touchstone students

We learnt that, with a particular focus on some students, who act as "touchstone" for thinking about practice, teachers are able to help students to improve at or beyond expectations/normative gains. The idea is that the act of "focusing" on a group of underachievers will not only benefit them but also effect gains across the board—all students will profit. Some of our results may seem quite modest. But, it is important to note that more students were in the *well below* band at the beginning of the project than in any of the other bands and we moved most out of this band. Over three-quarters of underachieving students made expected or accelerated progress. We noted the success of some of the priority groups: the gain for Māori students and for boys was about double that of the average gain.

The importance of focusing on key effective practices

We sought to incorporate sound theory in our data-collection tools; for example, we ascertained from the research literature, the dimensions of effective practice that appear to "make a difference", and developed the teacher observation tool around these. The dimensions and their associated descriptors were presented to teachers in workshops early in the year in 2016; and, in 2017, we were able to use detailed examples of how some dimensions had been operationalised in the classrooms of the previous cohort of teachers.

Our observations of teacher practice indicated gains in expertise across almost all dimensions in both cohorts of teachers. While the 2017 cohort of students was much more diverse, teacher participants began at a higher level of proficiency regarding the dimensions of effective practice we focused on and their average progress was also greater. In 2017, teachers showed relatively high proficiency, particularly in four dimensions—*learning goals/tasks* and *direct instruction* (same as for 2016) plus *knowledge of the writer* and *differentiation*.

Two factors reiterate for us the key nature of these practices, particularly how they were operationalised with underachieving students. First, we moved a large proportion of students out of the lowest achievement band and a high percentage of the underachieving students made expected and beyond expectations progress in both years. Second is the fact that, with higher scoring teachers on the dimensions of effective practice, the 2017 student cohort, a much more diverse student cohort than the previous year, performed considerably better than the 2016 cohort.

The need to contextualise "what works" through teacher input

We argue that effective practice is what works in a particular context with particular students. As noted above, in 2017, we were able to describe in more detail what the dimensions of effective practice looked like in the classrooms of teachers on the project. In both years, from the interviews with teachers and the analysis of teacher reflection journal notes about what they thought worked for touchstone students, we were able to contextualise these dimensions further. The results suggest teachers believed that actions related mainly to four dimensions make the difference for advancing the engagement and progress of underachieving/ touchstone students:

- *knowledge of students*: getting to know the students really well, knowing individual needs and keeping track of them, using humour/fun as a relationship tool;
- *learning goals/learning tasks*: encouraging student initiation and contribution, especially in topic selection;
- *direct instruction*: using active modelling and receptive modelling, breaking tasks into more manageable components, and making links between reading and writing;

- *differentiation*: touching base often with touchstone students, working with touchstone students in small groups based on needs not ability, using a tuakana–teina approach and using different scaffolds according to student needs.

In addition, actions related to *self-regulation* appear, from teacher reports, to be very important: helping students to manage their time better, seeking resources to support independence/self-monitoring, and encouraging self- and peer assessment although evidence of this dimension was often not seen in practice.

Afterword

This project was underpinned by a research-based belief that "what teachers do makes the difference" (Alton-Lee, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1999). The teacher practice dimensions represented in the observation tool, amplified and illustrated by those practices reported by teachers as particularly effective for their touchstone students, appear to represent some of the critical pedagogical actions needed to enable accelerated progress, especially for underachieving students.

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