



Education Review Office
Te Tari Arotake Mātauranga

EAST TAIERI SCHOOL

Exemplar Review

1. Keeping children engaged and achieving in writing

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Background

Introduction

Under Part 28 of the Education Act, 1989, the Chief Review Officer has the power to administer reviews either general or relating to particular matters, of the performance of applicable (pre-tertiary) organisations in relation to the applicable services they provide, and prepare reports on the undertaking and results of such reviews.

An exemplar report may be produced when ERO finds an organisation demonstrates effective practice in relation to specific aspects of performance.

1. Effective Practice: Keeping children engaged and achieving in writing

ERO reviewed East Taieri School to investigate the teaching approaches and strategies that have led to considerable improvements in children's writing in Years 5 and 6. In particular, we wanted to learn more about any short-term interventions or long-term strategies that the school had implemented which may have been influential in bringing about these positive achievement trajectories.

East Taieri School was selected from a database of 129 schools, with rolls over 200. The school was chosen because increased numbers of students were achieving at or above standards as they moved through Year 4 to Year 6. The school's achievement levels were also higher than the average for their decile.

Before the review, we sent the school a set of discussion points and questions for leaders to consider. We asked leaders what they saw as the reasons for their positive achievement trajectory. We then looked for evidence of the approaches and strategies used, and the outcomes, by:

- talking with children, parents, teachers, leaders and, where possible, trustees
- observing in classrooms
- looking at documentation, student work, class displays and the school environment.

Context: Progress and achievement in writing Years 5 to 8

Writing is important part of life, whether in the workplace or school, as a hobby or in personal communication. Writing proficiency provides a doorway into the world by helping the writer express their ideas, beliefs and personality. Children's success in all learning is largely the consequence of effective literacy teaching. Literacy learning builds cumulatively on each learner's existing proficiency.

Why ERO focused on writing programmes

National data shows that while many New Zealand children make good progress during their first three to four years at primary school, the rate of progress slows during Years 5 to 8. Generally, New Zealand students are underperforming in writing.

The 2012 National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMSSA) study, English: Writing reported many more Year 4 than Year 8 students were achieving at the expected curriculum level. That NMSSA report found 65% of Year 4 students achieved at or above the expected curriculum level (Level 2). However in Year 8, 65% of students were achieving below curriculum expectations (Level 4). Findings reported by the National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) in 1998, 2002 and 2006 indicate ongoing disparities in achievement in writing related to gender, ethnicity and school decile over this period.

The NMSSA study also showed student attitudes to writing decline between Year 4 and Year 8. Girls were generally more positive than boys at both year levels, and the difference was similar at both year levels.

The lack of progress in writing from Year 4 to Year 8 could not be attributed to limited access to professional development. The 2012 NMSSA report indicated over 80 percent of Year 4 teachers and 75 percent of Year 8 teachers were involved in professional development and learning focused on writing in the previous 12 months.

This narrative shares the successful strategies and approaches one school discovered, trialled and implemented that improve children's writing in the upper primary years.

Exemplar: Using a structured process to teach non-fiction writing

Leaders and teachers at East Taieri School had worked on giving children a purpose for writing as part of the considerable emphasis they placed on improving writing during recent years. Some of the recent developments had included:

- working with groups of target students as part of an Accelerating Literacy Learning (ALL) project
- providing opportunities for the whole staff to learn about high quality writing features
- establishing clear expectations about what children should achieve in writing at each year level
- introducing assessment processes teachers, children and their parents could use to track a child's progress and identify their next learning steps.

The improvements contributed to success with writing for many children.

The most recent developments began when the leaders and teachers sought further strategies to improve writing for some of the boys who were not as motivated to write as others. During a professional development visit to another local school they learnt about a non-fiction writing model that had been successful with struggling readers and writers. Leaders decided to work with the literacy facilitator to explore new non-fiction writing strategies to use with their children.

The non-fiction writing programme combined reading and writing to provide specific literacy instruction in content areas. It was originally developed for secondary students by identifying the characteristics of good readers and writers compared to less able readers and writers. The programme determined that successful readers and writers know:

- reading and writing changes according to the text and task
- text structure changes according to content area, knowledge construction and author's intent
- how to identify language features and use these to deepen their understanding
- reading and writing require regular reflection on the process according to the task and experience

- how to research using multiple texts, categories, synthesis and new understandings.

The process teachers applied and modified used the following nine stages for children in Years 5 and 6. Children in Years 1 to 4 used some of the stages as they developed confidence with all aspects of the process.

1. identify the text form
2. look at the text features to gather as much information as possible about the content of the text
3. discuss prior knowledge of the text type and topic
4. read the text, focusing on specific language elements such as the topic and main idea, the topic sentence, captions and other features
5. break down the task and write key questions
6. set up a graphic organiser to begin note taking
7. read the text and make notes
8. write paragraphs/report
9. reflect.

ERO observed writing instruction at three different year levels and saw how children were motivated to write and build on their previous learning through a focus on non-fiction.

Year 1 writers

Children in Year 1 had a balance of informal writing opportunities and more formal writing instruction where they learned how to discover and write about different content areas. During play-based learning, children often independently chose to write lists, menus, books and records of games they played. Their teacher told ERO the non-fiction writing process had helped children to write a lot more and use more complex sentences because their ideas had been fully discussed before they wrote.

ERO observed formal writing instruction during which the Year 1 children were learning and writing about things in space. Children were able to suggest the topic that interested them. Earlier in the term they had written about pirates and now their interests had shifted to a focus on space. The day before, children had read and written about the moon.

All the children were enthusiastically involved in the pre-writing activity. They started by sharing their prior knowledge of the sun. Their teacher wrote down in a big book some of the key words they could use. Soon children started to ask questions about the sun and the teacher also wrote these down. Their questions included:

- How big is it?
- How bright is it?
- How heavy is it?
- If you touched it, would you die?
- How hot is it?

The teacher then read a small booklet about the sun and the children discussed whether the text was imaginary or true. The children recalled the words they had noticed in the booklet and the teacher wrote the key words and also identified interesting words. The teacher read another small booklet and repeated the activity to include more key words about the sun. Finally, the children watched a very brief video clip to further extend their prior knowledge and revisit the list of key words.

Before the children went away to write, the teacher checked to see how much the children knew about the sun that they could use in their writing. The children sat in a circle and looked at the key words again. They were then asked to think of a sentence that included some of the interesting words and tell their neighbour their sentence.

Each child was given their writing book and went away to write. Some chose to stay near the big book where the teacher had written the key words. The teacher also reminded a few children of their personal writing goals to think about when writing.

Every child excitedly began writing. They were all able to tell ERO the writing goals they were working on. Some were practising identifying the words they weren't sure of by underlining them, and said they could go back to the teacher's book to check them later. They confidently wrote about the sun.

Writing in Years 3 and 4

Children in Years 3 and 4 also did a variety of writing activities. One of the most popular activities was *Quick Writes*. They selected a picture provided by the teacher and wrote about an aspect of the picture. They all had writing pathways sheets that outlined the skills they should master by the end of the year. Children coloured the skill they had mastered in yellow and identified their next learning step. Each Friday, children met with their teacher to show which of the new skills they had mastered. They showed the piece of work that illustrated the skill. Each time they demonstrated the skill, they coloured one side of the relevant hexagon. Once the skill was demonstrated six times, the hexagon displaying each skill was completely coloured in.

Children in Years 3 and 4 used more parts of the non-fiction writing process than the Year 1 children. When ERO visited the class they were involved in the second day of their focus on sharks. The day before the children had looked at, and discussed, the task and the features they were to include in their writing as learning intentions.

- hook the reader in
- group ideas into categories
- include a range of punctuation
- have a conclusion.

The previous day the teacher had also shown a video clip about sharks and the children added more key words into their own mind maps. The video was regularly paused to allow discussion and the recording of key words in their mindmaps.

Children were also reminded of their individual writing goals taken directly from the writing pathway of skills. Finally, children discussed the interesting words they might include in their writing. Children had identified the things about sharks they wanted to know more about. These queries were then displayed on the whiteboard as the beginning of a mindmap. The teacher worked with the children to agree on five topics in the mind maps to help them focus their thinking when planning their writing.

During the writing instruction ERO observed children using their mindmaps to write an introduction. They had to introduce three facts they were interested in and try to use the interesting words. Children were highly focused and many were crossing the interesting words off the list when they had used them. The teachers worked with a small group of children that had a similar writing goal, while the other children wrote independently. All children were highly motivated and on task.

Before the end of the lesson, the children were brought together and invited to share their introduction with their peers. Their enthusiasm for the task was evident, as most the children had

their hand up asking to share their work. Children shared their initial sentences that clearly highlighted how they had hooked their readers. The sharing part of the lesson identified that the non-fiction writing had particular benefits for boys. ERO saw they were just as keen to share their high quality examples as the girls were and were enthusiastic rather than reluctant writers.

Although the complexity of the writing the children shared varied considerably, some were able to go well beyond the learning intentions for the task, and included imagery and other features they had learnt in creative writing tasks.

At the end of the lesson, the teachers shared what they would focus on the next day. The children were going to:

- concentrate on using conjunctions
- undertake some self checks of the work they had already completed
- work with a peer to help them upgrade at least one word or sentence.

Years 5 and 6 writers

Children in Years 5 and 6 participated in many of the same writing activities and self assessments as those in Years 3 and 4. However, they were able to confidently engage with all parts of the non-fiction writing process in groups and independently. Recently, children had used the process to investigate their chosen topics and write speeches related to a piece of persuasive writing. Children had presented speeches about topics such as banning zoos, dangerous dogs and poultry farms; saving endangered species; and the damage plastic caused. Their teacher had selected the topic they were to read and write about, in the lesson observed, because of the high numbers of children who were interested in the impacts of plastic.

The lesson ERO observed occurred on the second day the children had engaged with the content. The day before, they had each contributed to a glossary of the complex terms and key words identified in bold in the article. Each child had read the article, and then researched one of the words and then written a simple definition that was then distributed to each child.

The children were well supported so they could fully understand what they were expected to write about. The teacher shared a blank graphic organiser that outlined the task to complete. The children identified and highlighted the key words in the task outline (as shown below). Next, the children suggested, refined and then agreed the wording for two focus questions that would help them complete the task. The questions were also recorded in the graphic organiser the teacher and the children were able to record their questions and notes in.

The process children used next helped them fully engage with the text and order their own ideas into paragraphs to include in their writing. Children were asked to read the first paragraph of the article and share facts that might answer the questions in their own words. They highlighted key words, rather than whole sentences, to make sure they thought deeply about what information was in the text. When they shared a fact they were asked to decide which of the two questions the fact would answer. The first three facts were recorded on the graphic organiser and then the children filled in more of their own facts independently as they read more of the paragraphs. The teacher reminded them to use their own filters to make sure their key facts actually answered the questions and ignored aspects not related to the specific questions.

The children explained that doing this not only helped them stick to the relevant facts when writing reports, but also helped them order their paragraphs. The notes in each cell usually formed one paragraph and the question usually helped them write a topic sentence. They also pointed out that doing this, and learning about topic sentences, had also helped them organise their ideas and paragraphs in their creative writing.

The next day's lesson was to involve children in:

- creating a topic sentence
- discussing the order of their notes for a paragraph
- modelling, discussing and recording notes into full sentences
- discussing linking of sentences to the sentence before
- writing paragraphs.

Benefits of the process

Leaders identified considerably increased enthusiasm for writing particularly from the boys, and attributed the difference to having the structure that helped them decide what to write.

“They have the security of knowing where they are heading and what they can do to get there”.

Leader

The children wrote about contexts interesting to them. Teachers acknowledge that while the topics were often highly interesting to the boys, they were just as appealing to the girls. The texts, videos and discussions children engaged in helped them practise applying different writing skills through contexts they knew a lot about. Their writing was not blocked by trying to work out what to write about. Instead they could practise using conjunctions, interesting sentence starters, and many other learning intentions by writing about contexts they understood. Teachers also acknowledged the children were developing high-quality research and writing skills they would confidently use in their future education and learning.

Why is this exemplar important?

It is vital all schools have organisational structures, processes and practices that enable and sustain collaborative learning and decision making designed to continuously improve student achievement. ERO found that in some schools, despite leaders and teachers focusing on improving writing for considerable time, progress was minimal or not sustained. Leaders in those schools acknowledged the professional learning and development (PLD) had encouraged teachers to concentrate on improving their own practice when children were not achieving well. However, their literacy leaders were unable to find and implement strategies that made significant improvements for children below or well below expectations in writing.

Leaders at East Taieri School had actively sought PLD that targeted the writing aspects they wanted to improve. They had a clear understanding of what was already working for their children and what needed to change. Literacy leaders had rejected PLD focused on strategies already evident in the school, and instead sought PLD that provided new strategies, and evidence, that children would make accelerated progress.

Teachers successfully changed their practices to use new teaching of writing strategies. They emphasised the craft and structure of language and writing through contexts children were familiar with and interested in. This meant dropping some of their previous practices and assumptions, and learning more about what makes a successful writer. Leaders carefully made improvements across the year levels to make sure children were supported to enjoy and succeed in writing. It was not about doing more in writing; it was about evaluating what was working, and discarding things that demotivated children and got in the way of their learning.

Recommendations for system improvement

ERO recommends that school leaders continue their improvements and share with other schools their approaches related to:

- leadership for excellence and equity
- responsive curriculum, effective teaching and opportunities to learn
- professional capability and collective capacity
- evaluation, inquiry and knowledge building for improvement and innovation.

ERO also recommends that school advisers and PLD providers share this exemplar with other schools to improve their performance.

Diana Anderson

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Diana Anderson', with a stylized, cursive script.

Deputy Chief Executive Review and Improvement

On behalf of the Chief Executive/ Chief Review Officer

May 2019