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Contextualising practice: Hallmarks of effective teachers of writing

Judy M. Parr*, Libby Limbrick

School of Arts, Languages, and Literacies, Faculty of Education, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92601 Symonds Street, Auckland, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies practices of effective teachers of writing. Three schools with significantly higher achievement in an area that underperforms nationally were identified and within them teachers whose students exhibited superior progress were selected. Multiple data collection methods included lesson observation, analysis of the classroom environment, teacher and student interviews and teacher documentation. Common was a commitment to formative assessment practices and classroom environments supportive of student literacy learning. Hallmarks of teachers whose students showed a greater awareness of their learning were a sense of purpose and meaningfulness; of coherence or connectedness and of being consistent and systematic. This paper argues that student achievement in writing is likely to be higher when teachers exhibit strength s in these hallmarks.

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1. Introduction

Given the current consensus that teachers, as the largest single source of influence, contribute significantly to variance in student achievement (Alton-Lee, 2003; Duffy & Hoffman, 2002; Hattie, 2003; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Rowan, Correnti, & Millar, 2002), the best way to raise student achievement is to enhance the quality of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Recognition of the importance of what teachers know and do has led to numerous recent studies of effective practice. What constitutes effective literacy practice or what effective practitioners of literacy know or do has been expressed in slightly different terms in numerous publications (e.g. Alexander & Fives, 2000; Allington, Johnson, & Day, 2002; Block & Mangieri, 2003; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001; Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996; Wray, Medwell, Fox, & Poulson, 2000). These descriptions have been obtained through different means. For example, Block and Mangieri (2003) used a Delphi point-by-point analysis, a procedure whereby a group of individuals as a whole can describe a complex phenomenon by providing professional judgement and feedback to the development of descriptions of agreed upon practices. Other methods to identify effective practice include selecting expert literacy teachers in order to find out about their practice. These expert teachers are obtained mostly on the basis of nomination largely from more than one source. Sometimes, often as an added criterion, expert teachers are selected on the achievement outcomes of their students.

These descriptions of the practices of those nominated as effective practitioners have largely come from self-report. Surveys of expert practice are limited by the fact that they rely on this often inaccurate self-report (Mayer, 1999; Palmer, Stough, Burdenski, & Gonzales, 2005; Spillane & Zuelli, 1999; Taylor, Pressley, & Pearson, 2002; Topping & Ferguson, 2005). While classroom observations are the most direct way to describe features of quality instruction, they are both time consuming and expensive to conduct. Artefacts like plans, resource materials and student work can provide supplementary information. For example, there are efforts to measure the quality of classroom assignments and there is some evidence of a link between students receiving quality assignments that require higher levels of cognitive processing, and higher performance on tests in language arts (Matsumura, Garnier, Pascal, & Valdes, 2002).

What effective literacy teachers do can be described but not prescribed (Mazzoni & Gambrell, 2003). In specifying any such actions there is the risk that, in deconstructing an activity like teaching, the true complexity of expert activity is oversimplified as well as the importance of context overlooked. Effective practice is not something absolute; it varies with context. In New Zealand, literacy instruction is effective for many, as witnessed by consistently superior mean performance on international tests of reading and, in particular, by the performance of top students. But, variability in achievement is considerable. As in many countries, performance tends to be socio-economically and ethnically stratified (OECD, 2001, 2005; Ogle et al., 2003). The variance in the New Zealand data is amongst the highest in the developed world;

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: jm.parr@auckland.ac.nz (J.M. Parr), l.limbrick@auckland.ac.nz (L. Limbrick).

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in particular there is a long tail in the achievement distribution that has persisted over time. Alton-Lee (2003) contends that the most valid indicator of quality teaching is student achievement outcomes of a high standard across heterogeneous groups of students. The New Zealand data suggest a need to re-examine ideas of quality teaching practice in literacy. Recent national literacy interventions that aim to support quality teaching through the identification of specific learning needs established through collecting and considering evidence of learning, have shown that explicit, targeted teaching can raise the achievement of the lowest 20 percent, markedly (Parr, Timperley, Reddish, Jesson, & Adams, 2006; Timperley & Parr 2007). This reinforces the idea that effective practice is not something absolute but is achieved by knowledgeable, committed teachers who tailor and adapt their practices to the ongoing needs of all of the students in their classes. This effectiveness, however, may be characterised by hallmarks able to be identified in the practice of teachers whose students achieve consistently.

This study sought to investigate the hallmarks of the teaching of writing of those teachers who were more effective than others within their region that includes a high percentage of indigenous students who tend to be represented disproportionally in the tail of the achievement distribution.

2. Method

The study took place in a geographical area of New Zealand with a high proportion of Maori (the indigenous or first nations people of New Zealand) students and many small, rural schools, an area that underperforms in national terms. Rural schools often serve a geographically isolated community and may be one or two teacher primary schools or they may be area schools that teach students from entry at age 5 to the end of secondary school. New Zealand is a small country with an educational system the size of a Scotland or a US state like Vermont. It is one educational jurisdiction and schools are essentially self governing, responsible for most operational decisions while the central Ministry deals with funding and policy. The national curriculum in English (which includes writing) is a broad, framing document and schools are required now to interpret it and tailor it to the particular need of their students. There is no national testing until students are aged about 16 or over; schools report to the Ministry against their own devised targets for student achievement.

The research design aimed to allow a description of the characteristics of practice of effective teachers of writing and utilised multiple 'best' cases. The selection of cases was made with student achievement data in writing as a major selection criterion. Given that the effect of teachers and of schools is confounded, three schools were selected whose student achievement results in writing were significantly better than the other schools in the region. Then, within those schools, teachers were selected on the basis that their classes had made superior progress in writing, relative to national average rates of progress, in the two years prior to the study. All of the schools identified were full primary schools and taught students aged from 5 to 13 years (this covers years 1–8 of schooling). They were located in rural service centres and had rolls ranging from about 70 students to around 300 with between 50 and 90 percent Maori. Before commencing the research, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee.

2.1. Participants

As indicated above, the selection of effective teachers of writing was made largely on the basis of the past rate of progress in writing of classes they had taught, cross checked with an outside literacy consultant who works closely with the schools. The teachers currently had to be teaching students in years 4–8 of schooling (as national normative data in writing are available for these years) and to have taught classes for whom writing data were available in one, or preferably, two years prior to the study. There had to be evidence from these data that students in their classes made progress at above-average levels both for the region and in terms of the average national rate. Six teachers met these eligibility criteria. The Board of Trustees of each school were agreed that we could conduct research in their schools and approach the teaching staff to invite them to participate. All six eligible teachers were invited and agreed to participate. They each gave written consent to participate and to have their interviews and classroom practice recorded.

Data about school and class performance were obtained, with permission, from a regional co-ordinator of literacy. Given that the researchers had not monitored scoring and moderating procedures for these data, the data were not used to make fine distinctions as to the relative success of the six teachers, two from each school, who met the eligibility criteria. The participating teachers were generally very experienced. Four of them had taught for about 20 years; one for around 10 years while the sixth was less experienced having taught for just four years. They had all been in their present school for two years or more prior to the research.

In each classroom three students were interviewed. The teacher had been asked to nominate a student from a low writing/reading group; one from a middle group and one from a high group. All had signed parental consent to participate. However, students were also asked if it was alright to talk with them and they completed an assent form to this effect.

2.2. Data collection procedures

Multiple data collection methods were used to document the beliefs and practices of these teachers on each of two, day-long visits to the schools. The visits were about four months apart. Both authors observed on each occasion. Teachers were observed; details of their classroom recorded and a sample of their students was interviewed each time. The teachers themselves were interviewed on the first occasion. Where there was a literacy leader at the school, and this person was not one of the teachers observed, s/he was also interviewed. Student achievement data in writing at a school and class level were obtained in the form of scores from the data held at a regional level or from the school directly.

2.2.1. Classroom observations

Observation was our prime source of information about practice as it allows a study of the phenomenon in depth and detail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prior to each visit, the teacher to be observed was asked to complete a brief questionnaire to place the lesson to be observed in context. This asked about the intended aim for the lesson; where the lesson fitted in the overall programme; how students would be organised or grouped and what they would be doing. On each visit, the identified teachers were observed as they taught a writing lesson for between 45 min and an hour. Teachers wore small microphones to record their interactions with the class. This was considered a useful strategy given the complexity of verbal interactions and the fact that an individual's ability to reconstruct such is a near impossible task (Psathas, 1995).

The first two authors were both present for all observations and made field notes to assist the later analysis and interpretation of the transcripts. These field notes were organised in a common template for recording comments in relation to the major aspects represented in the classroom observation schedule that was subsequently used to analyse the transcripts of the lessons (see below).

For example, details relating to the teachers' use of and reference to learning intentions, success criteria and any writing exemplars or other supports were recorded as was students' use of resources. This information was used to cross check when the transcript analysis was undertaken.

Both researchers also recorded details of the classroom environment using a classroom environment schedule that had been devised for the purpose. This considered available classroom environmental artefacts in the categories of (i) authentic student work, (ii) learning foci and success criteria, including individual learning goals or assessment profiles (iii) supports or scaffolds, procedural charts etc and (iv) more formal materials for learning like related books, cameos etc. Both the extent of evidence of such material and the nature of the material were evaluated.

2.2.2. Student interviews

Towards the end of the writing session, three students were interviewed, mostly as a group. Basically they were asked, by way of a warm up, to tell us what they had been doing in the lesson. Then they were asked what they were learning about writing and what a good piece of writing for the purpose for which they were writing, say a report or a recount, looked like. We were also interested in their views about whom the writing was intended for. To give some indication of the focus and form of feedback given to them by the teacher, we asked what sort of things the teacher told them to work on in their writing. Students were encouraged to have their draft books there and to look back. Finally, students were asked to talk about what it meant to be a good writer.

2.2.3. Teacher interviews

The interview allows access to what is "inside" a participant's head (Tuckman, 1972). It was our means to access information about knowledge, attitudes and beliefs that writing teachers hold. We used a semi structured interview to allow some flexibility for the teachers to follow their line of thought in order to better understand their subjective meanings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The teachers observed were interviewed after the observation on the first visit to gain a fuller understanding of their views about and knowledge of writing and teaching writing. They were asked about writing they personally undertake; opportunities for professional learning in writing; how confident they were with respect to various aspects of teaching writing; their knowledge and practice with regard to assessing writing; their ability to give feedback to pieces of writing; their knowledge of how texts work; their theory of how students best learn to write; their view of the influence of the teacher in students' achievement, and their views on the characteristics of effective teachers of writing. The interviews took between an hour and an hour and a half.

Where there was a literacy leader in the school, additional information was sought through a briefer interview on professional development in the school. Questions were asked about specific opportunities to learn about writing, and school collection and use of assessment data.

2.2.4. Student achievement data

Data about achievement in writing were obtained from Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning: Writing (asTTle)[1] (Glasswell, Parr, & Aikman, 2001), a curriculum referenced test with associated national norms for each of years 4–12 of schooling. In the tool, writing is seen as serving seven major purposes, a core set of generic processes that encapsulate what the text is doing (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). There are detailed scoring rubrics for each of these different communicative purposes for writing and appropriate tasks are encapsulated in 60 prompts.

2.3. Data analysis

The transcripts of the lessons were analysed by an experienced teacher, who rated teacher actions in terms of a number of the dimensions identified and described in a literacy teaching classroom observation schedule (Parr & Hawe, 2008). This observation guide is organised around central acts of teaching. The teaching acts include evidence of an informed and shared learning intention; developing students' understanding of the learning aim and of the success criteria associated with it; explicit links to prior knowledge, both real world and that of language and texts; purposeful and aligned learning activities; feedback and an appropriate balance of talk. Each is described on a continuum with a series of criteria to assist in evaluating what is taking place. Teaching acts on the classroom observation schedule are categorised in ordinal categories (that is a hierarchy is implied in the categorisation) or, in some cases, rated. The use of criteria enables satisfactory levels of inter-rater reliability to be obtained for most dimensions when observing. These levels were over 75 percent except for the dimensions of differentiation and links to prior knowledge. These dimensions were difficult to rate from transcripts of the lesson and were subsequently examined largely using the interview data.

With regard to the classroom environment, both the extent of evidence of supportive and illustrative material and the nature of this material were evaluated in the four categories using a three and a four point ordinal scale, respectively, yielding an overall score. Both authors did this scoring independently then, subsequently discussed any discrepancies to reach a consensus decision.

The self-report data from the teachers in response to interview questions were treated in several ways, depending on the response format. Questions such as those about confidence in carrying out various aspects of writing pedagogy asked for a rating on a six point scale (from definitely lacking confidence to highly confident). Others, like the estimated relative influence (as a proportion of 100) they felt that as a teacher they had on student achievement, also yielded numerical data. In analysing the responses to open ended questions, some were coded into categories, informed by a consideration of theory, empirical literature and from considering the responses of the teachers. This involved a mixture of inductive and deductive approaches (Ezzy, 2002). Other responses such as to the question regarding the type of writing they generally do or the opportunities for professional learning in writing, were simply summarised in narrative form.

Students' responses to the questions about the purpose of the lesson were transcribed and subsequently categorised by the authors according to the extent to which they suggested that the students understood the learning aims and the meaning of the success criteria. That is, concepts considered central to students becoming self-regulating learners and able to engage in self assessment, became categories used to investigate the data (Neuman, 2003). What it was that the students, personally, were to work on was categorised according to whether it referred to a surface or deep feature of writing. It was hypothesized that the more specific the students' responses, the more likely there was potential for learning to occur. It could be thus inferred whether a relationship existed between the explicitness of learning aims (both as recorded beforehand and as explained in class), together

[1] The writing tool is part of Project asTTle (Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning) which provides detailed assessment against curriculum objectives in reading, writing and mathematics for Years 4–12 (a full description of this project along with technical reports and publications is available at http://www.tki.org.nz/r/asttle). It is a CD Rom-based/web based assessment suite which gives teachers choice in the design and timing of assessments and access to a range of reporting formats, including comparisons to norms.

with how these and the associated success criteria were shared with students, and students' subsequent understanding.

When analyses were complete, a preliminary report was sent to teacher participants and a visit made to all three schools to discuss the interpretations, a form of the strategy of participant confirmation (Carr & Kemmis, 1983).

3. Findings and discussion

A rich picture of practice emerges from the case studies of the six teachers. The focus is on the classroom observations which were, for pragmatic reasons, a very limited snapshot of what was happening in the six classrooms. However, even a limited time in classrooms allows a far richer and potentially more valid picture than relying entirely on teacher report. For example, the teachers were all equally confident from their reports in constructing learning aims and success criteria but this was not necessarily congruent with what we observed. Self-report data from the interviews are included as appropriate both to supplement the observations and to provide contrast.

As teaching quality is central in student achievement, key acts of teaching were the focus of the observations of classroom practice. However, we were also interested in teacher beliefs about their role and asked about this directly and indirectly. In the direct question, teachers were asked to estimate their influence on student achievement. Interestingly, none of these teachers thought that their influence exceeded 50 percent. However, only one gave a response suggesting that the combined effect of child and family were more important in influencing achievement than the teacher and school. In responding to the question of how students best learn to write, teachers identified creating a purposeful, supportive classroom environment that encouraged risk taking; of students having lots of experiences; students seeing both writing modeled and models of writing and the importance of regular writing as key factors. Few of the teachers mentioned, let alone emphasized, their personal agency in relation to students learning to write.

These teachers had definite ideas of what characterizes the practice of an effective teacher of writing. While two teachers painted a multi-dimensional picture, most mentioned three or four points. Two teachers made reference to letting students know what they were learning and what it would look like when they attained it. Three of the teachers mentioned feedback, including that designed to move a student forward. These responses possibly reflect the influence of recent professional development projects like Assess to Learn (in other countries referred to as assessment for learning). This is a professional development project that focuses on helping teachers to use in a diagnostic way to inform teaching and learning, formative assessment information regarding learning. Teachers clearly recognized the central importance of feedback and formative assessment although the writing classroom observations and student interviews suggest it is an area that requires enhanced skill. All teachers identified a rich classroom environment that included examples of student work and supports for students as characteristic of an effective teacher. Notably, only one teacher had in mind judging effectiveness by the yardstick of student progress or achievement and she did not specifically mention *all* students.

3.1. Learning aims for the lessons

Teachers had been asked to record their aims in a brief questionnaire prior to the lessons. For each of the observed lessons these were focussed mainly on the deeper features of writing. Some learning aims were somewhat global, for example, ' To write a limerick' and 'Making things better in recount writing', while others were more narrowly focussed, 'To write an orientation to an imaginative narrative' and 'Use words that describe what we think and feel about text characters' performance'. Five of the six teachers (Bronwyn, Sandy, Denise, Elaine and Georgina) were observed to share explicitly the purpose of the lesson with students during both classroom visits (the sixth teacher did on one occasion). They clearly articulated the learning aims orally and supported these by recording them in written form (either prior to or during the lesson) so that they could be referred to easily by the students. All teachers reported high levels of confidence in constructing learning aims and allied success criteria, perhaps a reflection of recent professional learning all had engaged in as a result of national professional development projects like Assess to Learn. However, student understanding of the learning aims for the lesson was the litmus test of the extent to which the learning aims for the lessons have been effectively shared.

An analysis of the relationship between the learning aims as stated by the teacher prior to the observation of the lesson, how these were shared with the students and the students' apparent awareness of the purpose of the lesson suggests that sharing a learning aim explicitly with students orally, and presenting it in written form, is a predictor of students' awareness of the purpose of the lesson. Most of the students interviewed in two teachers' classes during the first visit and in three at the second visit were able to identify the purpose of the lesson with reasonable specificity. It appeared that they understood the intention and focus of the lesson. This was shown through comments such as, "*We learned how to write orientations*." Further questioning suggested student understanding went beyond reiteration of terminology or a parroting of what may have been recorded in the classroom. A student from Georgina's class stated that they were "*learning to identify and find the purpose for a limerick poem*". This was added to by other students who identified further things they were learning such as "*writing to entertain*", and to find "*different way to express our thoughts*".

For the two teachers, Denise and Elaine, whose students were consistently able to identify the specific aims of the lesson, there were notable features of their practice in this regard. These teachers allowed students time to explore the aim, for example: "*We are going to be doing response writing. Now before I even tell you what the intentions of the unit are, I want you to talk to a partner and decide what a response is. What is a response?"* This elicitation of students' prior knowledge was followed by clarification of students' comments through discussion. Students in this class, when asked what the lesson was about, noted that they were learning to write their "*opinions, feelings and judgements*" about events or books for specific audiences. Throughout the interviews with these students, they made frequent reference to an awareness of writing for an audience. When asked who would read their writing they responded: themselves, friends, parents, and people in other schools. One student even identified, with a laugh, '*my children*!"

3.2. Success criteria: explicitness and clarification for students

Almost all teachers referred explicitly to what would constitute success criteria for the learning from the lesson. In some cases, these were elicited from the students and recorded on a whiteboard visible to the students. Students were cued to refer to them, "*So you've given me your success criteria straight away for when you get to go away and write your recount. So you can look up here and say 'Oh! I need to write in the past tense.' So number one, that's a clue. You need to …etc*" (Elaine). Denise, Elaine and Georgina all revisited the criteria consistently throughout the lesson. At times this was by getting students to find evidence of meeting the criteria in their own or in peers' writing, or through identification of examples in

text models used in the lesson. "*Your job is to go and find the 'who, where and when' with your partner, with your highlighters*" (Elaine).

Those students who had been able to articulate the learning aim of lesson were most likely to be able to describe the criteria that would indicate mastery. Specificity, or lack thereof, was paralleled by the students' ability, or inability, to demonstrate some understanding of the features of the writing on which the lesson was focussed. Of the 12 lessons observed, one teacher in both lessons had most students able to identify specific success criteria. At the other end of the spectrum, students of one teacher could only identify generic aspects of writing as descriptions of what they were aiming to achieve. This teacher was less specific in identifying and explaining the learning aim and did not describe or exemplify the criteria by which the learning would be judged. For the other four teachers there were mixed results.

Students could identify the success criteria with greater specificity at the later observation. At the first observation there was some mention of specific criteria although most students in the classes talked of generic aspects of writing. At the second observation in two classes specific criteria were mentioned by some of students while, in the other two classes, most students could identify specific success criteria in responses.

Students were also asked what they had learned to help them become a better writer. The question was not asked specifically in relation to the stated learning aim and success criteria. Nonetheless, students in five of the six classes included some reference to the deeper features of writing like audience or structure, related to the learning aim of the lesson.

3.3. Alignment of learning activities with learning aims

The degree to which the planned activities, for both the class and group work, were purposefully aligned to the learning aims and success criteria was analysed, using both transcripts and field notes of classroom observations. In all instances alignment was evident, although for two teachers this was more tenuous, at both observation times.

3.4. Deliberate acts of teaching

Purposeful teaching which makes explicit or visible what readers and/or writers need to know and do to achieve specific outcomes have come to be known as deliberate acts of teaching (Ministry of Education, 2003[2]). These include modeling, prompting, questioning, giving feedback, telling, explaining and directing (giving specific instructions). For three of the teachers (Amanda, Bronwyn, and Elaine) there were frequent occurrences of these instructional strategies observed at both visits and for the other three teachers they were observed to occur frequently on one of the visits. The particular lesson context may have meant that a deliberate act of teaching was not observed. For example, while all teachers reported writing themselves, no-one was observed modeling writing in front of students. However, modeling writing for students was reported in the interviews; three teachers mentioned writing in order to generate models for their class. Moreover, there were examples from teacher modeling of writing stapled together to make a book that could be consulted by students. Teachers also reported that they wrote with the class during the 10 min 'dash' or 'instant' writing time and students were able to read what they had written. During observations, one teacher shared writing that s/he had produced for a real world purpose, namely, a disagreement with a neighbour over some trees on a shared boundary, and sought student comment and input.

3.5. Feedback

Feedback is a significant deliberate act of teaching. Teachers' feedback about students' productive activity was analysed in terms of feedback related to achievement; feedback related to improvement; prompts to student to employ self regulation; encouragement and guidance in giving peer feedback and encouragement and guidance for self assessment. Teachers reported feeling confident in their ability to give feedback about writing although one teacher felt less confident about giving feed-forward to help students close the gap (Sadler, 1989) between current and desired performance. However, in practice, five out of the six teachers' feedback relating to achievement referred only in a general way to either success criteria or aspects of literacy learning. One teacher, Bronwyn, was more specific. That is, she provided feedback to the student on the way in which the student had met the success criteria, saying, "*you've got some direct speech here, direct speech using thoughts. Excellent*" This pattern was repeated when giving feedback related to improvement. Prompts to students to use self regulation strategies were evident in four of the teachers' interactions with students (Bronwyn, Elaine, Sandy and Georgina).

3.6. Student awareness of purpose of lessons

When interviewed, students were asked what their teachers told them to work on and how this advice was given to them. Students in all classes stated that their teachers told them how to improve their writing by giving them feedback orally, and through "*ticks and comments*" in their draft writing books. The students in Amanda, Bronwyn, and Sandy's classrooms reported that their teachers' feedback, and guidance on what to work on, was mainly about surface features, whereas Georgina, Denise and Elaine's students made reference to their teacher giving them feedback on their goals for writing. From the students' comments and examples in their draft books, the feedback by Georgina and Elaine appeared to be more specific and focussed than feedback by the other teachers. In three classrooms (Denise, Elaine and Georgina) it was evident that the criteria from the asTTLe Writing Matrix (the scoring rubric from the tool used in the assessment) were being used to focus students' attention on expectations for writing. Students in these classrooms talked about comparing their writing to criteria or standards, and that a goal for their writing was to improve "*their level*" <on the asTTle test>.

3.7. Peer and self assessment

There was little evidence of encouragement and guidance by the teachers for peer and self assessment other than telling the students to evaluate their own work, or to talk to a peer about their work. Only one teacher (Sandy) provided guidance on how to provide feedback to a peer although in total three teachers (Bronwyn, Sandy and Georgina) prompted students to use success criteria to evaluate their own work during at least one of the observations.

[2] Research-based book, *Effective Literacy Practice*, was commissioned by the Ministry as a resource for teachers and professional developers. Like other resources (e.g. School Journals, Guided Reading videos, Literacy Learning Progressions etc), schools and teachers are free to choose to utilise or not and, in no way, do such resources constitute a defined programme.

3.8. Prompting

Prompting is an important deliberate act of teaching, particularly in relation to cueing the students to make links to what they already know. Students learn better if new learning is related to prior knowledge so they have a schema into which to slot the new learning. They also are more likely to retain learning if they see the links between current learning and past learning so that they can generalize some of their previous learning and extend it. So, at interview, we asked teachers to think about how they made links, for example links between reading and writing. All of these teachers were able to identify ways in which they helped students make links to prior knowledge.

A very basic way in which some teachers saw connections occurring for their learners was through a topic based approach that may include making links to other curriculum areas. There was evidence in one classroom of model kites made in technology and written explanations of how to make them. Another way was through using the same type of genre in reading as in writing. An example of this offered by one teacher was "*when we were doing writing of instructions, they were reading instruction texts as part of reading*". Two teachers reported calling attention to something students had read previously. This might be a word from a particular story or to something students had previously learnt about language. Sometimes this occurred in shared reading as students identified features they were focusing on in their writing; at other times students found such in their own reading and would talk about it with others. This employment of examples of previous learning also happened in terms of using known reading exemplars to illustrate a particular purpose for writing, "*We looked at different reports and how they are presented… what the structure was*" (Georgina). One teacher mentioned using "*a language < connected to the texts being constructed > they knew*" (Denise) when introducing a new writing function.

3.9. Differentiation

Differentiation of teaching to meet students' specific learning has been identified as a characteristic of effective teaching practice. In the interviews, teachers nominated a number of ways in which they catered for individual needs in the classroom including ongoing monitoring, checking and re-teaching. They also identified individual teaching and grouping. One teacher at interview, discussing students' patterns of strengths and weaknesses obtained from the recent asTTle writing test, explained how she had used the diagnostic information to develop groupings that allowed her to target instruction to a particular need. Another, who also documented, in writing, the asTTle data for the class, had developed a "*whole series of lessons*" on the basis of identified need of individuals or small groups of students and was able to give examples of them. But, more tellingly, this teacher reported making further informal checks as to whether these lessons were having an impact and when it appeared that a small group of students were still not making progress, made adjustments like teaching in a different way, using new examples etc. These adjustments often involved taking steps like making the reason for learning salient and clear to ensure more ownership of the learning on the part of the students. This was an unsolicited reporting of something akin to an enquiry cycle (Timperley & Parr, 2007) happening within a classroom.

There was ample evidence that teachers planned for, and taught, a balance of whole class, group and individual sessions with students, suggesting that the teachers were cognisant that students learn differently. In Georgina's class, for example, students worked in groups that related to their current assessed level in writing. These groups were fluid and changed over time. At times students who were not confident, or ready, to initiate the writing task on their own, for example when writing a limerick, were encouraged to work collaboratively, sometimes across groups.

During the observation of these teachers' classrooms an attempt was made to record the manner in which the teacher interacted differentially with students in relation to the use of resources, learning activities, the degree of scaffolding and the way in which the success criteria applied. The resulting descriptions involve generalised acts like working with individuals but also more specific instances of differentiation like in Sandy's class where the success criteria varied for students according to the asTTle level at which they were working and students were reminded to use their individual success criteria. There was evidence in Denise's class and also in Elaine's of students having individual written goals that related specifically to identified gaps in their learning.

There were instances observed when scaffolding was provided for the individual. One such time occurred in Bronwyn's class during conferencing with students. With a focus on the learning aim, which was 'to put thoughts into writing', the teacher prompted the student to record his thinking about specific events. *"I'm just going to put a little star here and I want you to put in…. write some thoughts. This is a perfect place to put your thoughts in. What were you thinking inside your head as you were………… Put yourself back to your game of soccer…."*

3.10. Classroom environment

At interview, all of these six teachers nominated a rich classroom environment as characteristic of an effective teacher of writing. The two researchers independently noted resources and student support material in each classroom. These were organised into the categories of authentic student and teacher writing; a focus for learning (e.g. Learning Intentions and Success Criteria, 'What are we Learning Today/WALTS); supports and scaffolds for writing (e.g. teacher made and commercial charts on written language, word charts/displays, examples of features of different text types and cameos (mini examples of a specific writing purpose or feature)) and formal resources for learning (e.g. dictionaries, thesaurus, books displays). It is acknowledged that there may have been other artefacts for student support, and records of student work in the classroom which were not immediately evident. For example, in subsequent discussion with teachers at the point when we were discussing our draft findings we uncovered instances overlooked like clear files of student work in the library corner that were probably hidden under books (Amanda).

Total scores for the extent of evidence of material and the nature of the material were calculated by averaging the independently arrived at scores of the two observers across both visits. There was a range in scores from 16 to 28. The classrooms of three teachers (Georgina, Denise and Elaine) were rated very highly on both occasions. These classrooms were characterised by many examples of students' work, hand written and word-processed. Students' writing was clearly valued in these classrooms. It was 'published' for an audience and extracts celebrated on Writing Walls or in collections of 'outstanding writing'. From the displays it was not possible to ascertain if the writing represented a range of writers, or whether only 'good' writers were so published. However, from the number of student names noted it appeared that most had their work displayed either on the walls or in class 'books'. Elaine's students, furthermore, told us during the interviews, that, in their class, everyone's writing was published. Students who had met criteria or who excelled themselves in their efforts to meet the criteria were eligible to be selected as a 'Star Writer'.

Lesson aims were displayed on a whiteboard in Elaine, Denise and Georgina's classrooms. Longer term, more global, learning

intentions were visible and were, in some cases, laminated. Examples of writing for a range of purposes were displayed clearly in the classroom of these three teachers, together with charts noting criteria to be considered when writing for a particular purpose. There were other charts of sentences, topic vocabulary, word types, punctuation and its purpose, displayed in most cases at a level visible to the students. Many of these charts were teacher made and appeared to be the result of collaborative work with students. In each of the classrooms there were also charts of prompts for learning, for example questions to self evaluate and identify next learning. Samples of students' writing, annotated using the models of the English Writing Exemplars (Ministry of Education, 2003), were displayed. Elaine, Denise and Georgina referred to many of these charts throughout the lessons and students were observed to consult them. Resource collections of dictionaries, thesauri, reference books, topic books and a classroom library for students' independent reading were available and accessible to the students in all three classrooms. In each case the display had changed between visits to reflect the current learning focus.

The three classrooms that were not rated as highly for their learning environment, nonetheless, displayed evidence of a range of print and were welcoming for students. The student work was more limited, especially in terms of visibility, than in the higher rated environments. Evident and explicitly stated foci for the lessons were less apparent in these classrooms, although learning intentions were on the whiteboard and discussed during the introduction to the lesson by Amanda. In Bronwyn and Sandy's classrooms, on the first visit, learning intentions and success criteria were on the walls, and on banners in the classroom, but little reference was made to these during the observed lesson although they may well have been referred to previously or subsequently. There were also student learning scaffolds in each of these classrooms, but they were not displayed for easy student reference in all cases.

In Amanda's, Bronwyn's and Sandy's classroom there were a number of new resources on the second visit and their scores were higher on this occasion. A number of 'We are learning to…" charts related to writing, with criteria for the specific purpose of the writing and steps to consider when writing were on the walls in Amanda's classroom. On the second visit, in Sandy's classroom, the amount and quality of student learning scaffolds, overall, was greater than during the first visit. These included charts of structures and language features of texts and prompts for students' learning. A focus on persuasive writing was evident with the features of persuasive writing on the white board and annotated models of persuasive texts on display. Resources such as dictionaries were available and a classroom library had been developed. In Bronwyn's classroom, student writing was more apparent and included examples of planning (brainstorms), selected samples of highly rated students work and clear file collections for future reference.

In summary, all classrooms were visually interesting and supportive of students' learning. However, in three of the classrooms (those of Elaine, Denise and Georgina) the focus of learning appeared to be expressed more explicitly and with greater consistency, than in the other three classrooms. The resources to support student learning, in the first three mentioned classrooms, also appeared more relevant to current learning foci and were more accessible to the students than in the second grouping of classrooms. The rating of the classroom environments is similar in rank order to that of the students' awareness of the learning aims and understanding of the success criteria for the particular focus of lessons. There appeared to be a relationship between the classroom environments, as rated according specific criteria, and the students' awareness of the purpose of the lesson and the features of the writing that was the focus for the lesson.

4. Conclusions

The six effective teachers were not a homogeneous group in terms of their practices. There are common patterns but also some instances where only some of the teachers consistently demonstrate practices. It cannot be discounted that this variability was a function of the snapshot nature of the visits. For example, although they had all embraced the discourse of formative assessment and shared learning intentions and success criteria with their students, they varied in the extent to which their students both demonstrated an understanding of these and were actually involved in assessing their learning during the observations. This difference in student response was seen as related to the extent to which the learning aims and associated criteria reflected the teacher's detailed knowledge of how language works to achieve its purpose. Being specific about what students are learning about writing requires such knowledge and teachers varied in their reported knowledge of linguistic features of text, for example. Likewise, although all classrooms were visually interesting and supportive of students' learning in writing, some had scaffolds or support that appeared more targeted to current learning and were more obviously known, valued and accessed by students.

The practice of two teachers (Elaine and Georgina), however, stood out. A close analysis of the practice of these teachers yielded some common hallmarks, namely, a sense of purpose and meaningfulness; of coherence or connectedness and of being consistent, systematic and specific. These hallmarks may appear generic to good teaching but they were applied in the context of learning about writing. Regarding purpose, there was evidence of careful planning. Lessons had an arrived at learning aim that was clearly articulated, shared with the students and demonstrably understood by the students. Learning intentions were shared visually and orally and were constantly revisited throughout the lesson in an accessible way. They were meaningful in the sense of being substantive and clearly relevant to the learning required by each student. Explicit outcomes were elaborated on with the students and clarified and exemplified iteratively throughout the lesson.

The connectedness of elements of their practice was also apparent, notably in relation to links made with previous literacy learning and students' prior experience. There was also a demonstrable connectedness in terms of the iterative nature of explicit teaching, scaffolding of students' learning, checking and revisiting. Further, there was evidence of efforts to connect with students and to build productive and caring relationships.

Practice was also systematic, notably in relation to monitoring of student understanding and ongoing learning but also in relation to record-keeping and organisation of classroom resources. For both of these teachers there was evidence that not only did each have a detailed knowledge of their students but that their students were aware how much their teachers knew about them as writers and appreciated this.

This study of a small number of teachers effective in their context, adds to the literature on quality teaching and effective practice regarding what teachers know and do to enhance the achievement of their students. It shows that although all six teachers had enabled their students to make progress in writing at a rate greater than that of similar students in nearby schools, and although there were common features, they, like their students, had different patterns of relative strengths and weaknesses. This emphasises the fact that practice can always be improved and honed. The nature of the writing data makes it difficult to establish definitively whose students achieved best but the data suggest that

the two teachers whose practice seemed to stand out were more effective. In essence, it seems that achievement of students is likely to be higher when teachers exhibit consistency and strength in what were termed key hallmarks.

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