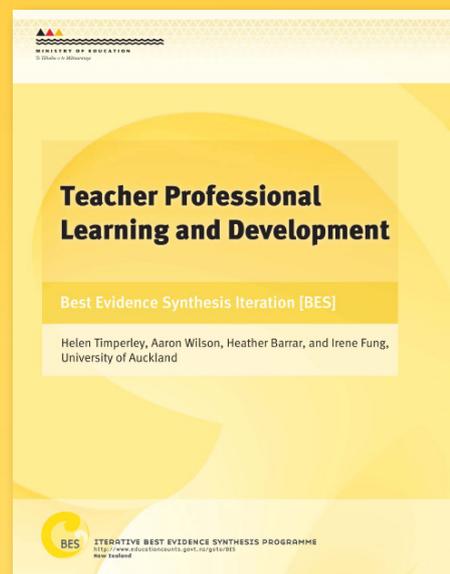# Use student views as a catalyst for improvement

This is one of a series of cases that illustrate the findings of the best evidence syntheses (BESs). Each is designed to support the professional learning of educators, leaders and policy makers.

Teacher Professional Learning and Development

Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]

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BES cases: Insight into what works

The best evidence syntheses (BESs) bring together research evidence about 'what works' for diverse (all) learners in education. Recent BESs each include a number of cases that describe actual examples of professional practice and then analyse the findings. These cases support educators to grasp the big ideas behind effective practice at the same time as they provide vivid insight into their application.

Building as they do on the work of researchers and educators, the cases are trustworthy resources for professional learning.

Using the BES cases

The BES cases overview provides a brief introduction to each of the cases. It is designed to help you quickly decide which case or cases could be helpful in terms of your particular improvement priorities.

Use the cases with colleagues as catalysts for reflecting on your own professional practice and as starting points for delving into other sources of information, including related sections of the BESs. To request copies of the source studies, use the Research Behind the BES link on the BES website.

The conditions for effective professional learning are described in the Teacher Professional Learning and Development BES and condensed into the ten principles found in the associated International Academy of Education summary (Timperley, 2008).

Note that, for the purpose of this series, the cases have been re-titled to more accurately signal their potential usefulness.

Responsiveness to diverse (all) learners

Use the BES cases and the appropriate curriculum documents to design a response that will improve student outcomes
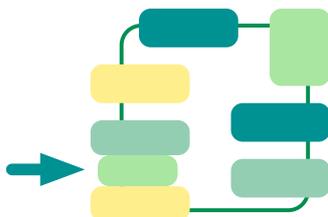
The different BESs consistently find that any educational improvement initiative needs to be responsive to the diverse learners in the specific context. Use the inquiry and knowledge-building cycle tool to design a collaborative approach to improvement that is genuinely responsive to your learners

Use student views as a catalyst for improvement

The writing achievement of New Zealand primary school students has been of concern for some years, lagging as it does behind reading achievement.

This case describes how a years 1–8 rural school began to address its concerns about writing achievement by asking its students three questions: "What are you learning?", "How will you know whether you have succeeded?", and "How does your teacher help?" It explains how the students' responses prompted the teachers to explore the impact of their teaching and enhance their practices and beliefs about writing in ways that led to improved student outcomes.

This case describes some of the highly effective professional learning processes that underpinned the high-impact Literacy Professional Development Project. See also BES Exemplar 3: *Teacher and student use of learning goals.*

A needs analysis approach

Context

Setting

This case was set in a rural, decile 5 school with a roll of 96 (79% European, 14% Māori, and a small percentage of Sāmoan, Indian, and Asian students). The staff comprised a teaching principal, three other full-time teachers, an RTLB, and a part-time reading recovery and ORS-funded teacher. The principal had arrived one term earlier and had initiated a number of professional development activities. Staff, however, were concerned that they were not making enough impact on their students' learning.

Time

Teachers were involved in seven externally facilitated meetings and four staff meetings. Each was observed and received feedback on five occasions over a period of four months.

Focus of PD

The school had applied to Learning Media Limited to be involved in the Literacy Professional Development Project, funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Education. The staff had analysed student writing using the writing exemplars, which indicated low levels of achievement. They decided that this should be their focus for the project. Whole-staff involvement in the PD was mandatory but outcomes from asTTle testing were collected for year 4–6 students only.

Goals

The contract had four outcomes as its aims:

- evidence of improved student achievement;
- evidence of improved teacher content knowledge;
- evidence of improved transfer of understanding of literacy pedagogy to practice;
- evidence of professional learning communities.

Impact on student learners

Prior to PD

Initially, students' asTTle scores were well below national benchmarks. The weakest features were structure and spelling; the strongest was punctuation. The assessments gave teachers direction about where to focus their efforts, as well as confirming their initial suspicion about low writing achievement.

After PD

By the second assessment, student performance was at or well above the national average in most areas. Year 4 and 5 students were slightly below national norms in language resources, content, and spelling. Members of the research team who had no other involvement marked the students' work.

Means for asTTle scores in August and November

	Overall mean	Year 4 mean	Year 5 mean	Year 6 mean
August	399.6	348.6	400.8	422.5
November	476.2	438.8	471	506.3

What was learned and how the learning occurred

Observations and feedback

At the beginning of the project, the facilitator gathered information about the teachers' current practice in writing in three ways: by having staff complete a questionnaire rating their confidence in different aspects of writing practice, by providing a scenario from a hypothetical writing lesson with data where the activities used did not align with student needs, and by observing a 45-minute lesson in each class, which was also audiotaped. Between six and nine students in each class were interviewed about their understanding of what they were supposed to be learning, what a good example of this would look like, and what the teacher expected them to work on. The principal and literacy leaders were also interviewed.

The lesson observations were analysed so that feedback could be given to the teachers on their key teaching practices. Information from these was collated, as all lessons were fairly similar. (They were based on an example used in a seminar that the teachers had attended prior to the commencement of the contract.) A summary of practices was placed on the staffroom refrigerator, under a list of beliefs. Teachers were asked to identify their beliefs after the list of practices was established, because they had to see how beliefs were expressed in practices, and what needed to change.

When the facilitator returned, she presented staff with the findings from the student interviews. Teachers were surprised at the students' limited understanding of the learning aims and success criteria and became concerned about the consequences of their practice. A third list, 'Consequences', was stuck to the refrigerator.
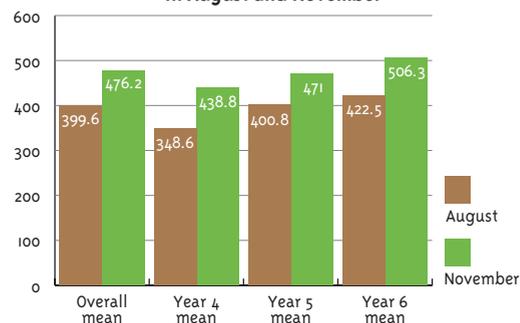
The diagram on the refrigerator

Beliefs
- Children need to be inspired/motivated.
- Children need to share experiences to drive their writing and stimulate others.
- Sharing writing gives other children ideas for their writing.
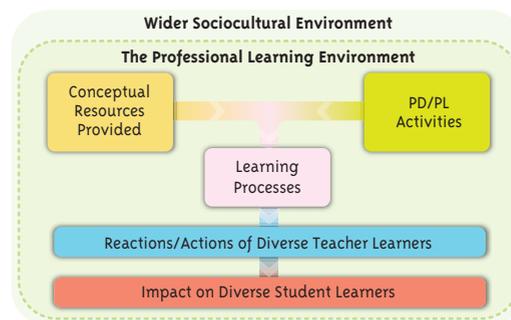- Sharing writing gives children an audience.

Practices
- Children shared experiences;
- Teacher read story for motivation;
- Children wrote for 5-15 minutes;
- Teacher responded positively (to children's efforts).

Consequences
- Teachers concerned about achievement;
- All children wrote something (during the lesson);
- Didn't know the features of a recount;
- Weren't sure whom they were writing for;
- Weren't sure how to improve their writing;
- Weren't sure how the teacher could help them improve their writing.

In response to these unintended consequences (see box above), the teachers decided to undertake some professional reading and seek relevant expertise. They read and discussed *Using Evidence in Teaching Practice* (Timperley & Parr, 2003) and the ten characteristics of quality teaching from the *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students BES* (Alton-Lee, 2003) in a staff meeting and asked the RTLB for help to assess student writing.

Wider Sociocultural Environment

The Professional Learning Environment

Conceptual Resources Provided

PD/PL Activities

Learning Processes

Reactions/Actions of Diverse Teacher Learners

Impact on Diverse Student Learners

At the next meeting, the facilitator presented a summary of teacher responses to the questionnaire and scenario. Staff identified their own strengths and learning needs and decided to develop a professional development action plan for the teaching of writing. The facilitator recommended readings that would help them with this task.

To ensure that the staff had support to implement new pedagogy, the facilitator decided to focus on training the literacy leaders to observe classroom practice and provide feedback. This also helped the school develop a learning community by opening classroom doors and creating a forum for informed discussion of practice. Literacy leaders were given an observation schedule to use and the opportunity to discuss the theory on which it was based. Observers recorded, analysed, and summarised evidence, focusing on the learning goals that had been negotiated with the teacher prior to the observation. During training, the facilitator and literacy leader filled in the observation schedules independently and then compared notes; the emphasis was on improving practice and having evidence to back conclusions. The literacy leader then gave feedback to the teacher. The literacy leader and facilitator later discussed the teacher's reactions.

Why did this work?

The drive was for teachers to analyse the difference between their goals for student learning and their students' actual performance. This was followed by a needs analysis in which teachers identified their own learning needs. An approach was taken in which teachers' theories and beliefs relating to practice were acknowledged and understood (Robinson & Lai, 2005). Given that these beliefs fitted comfortably with teachers' ideal practice, they were unlikely to change them without good reason. The motivation for change came from teachers' concerns about student understanding and achievement. This concern motivated them to examine the adequacy of their practice and theories, with the intent of improving student outcomes. Professional development activities were designed to equip them with new knowledge of content and pedagogy related to writing, which would support them to achieve their goals.

After examining the impact of their practice on student outcomes, using interviews and asTTle data, teachers concluded that they would have to change their practice if student outcomes were to improve. They increased their curriculum and pedagogical knowledge by engaging in professional readings and becoming aware of the progressions defined in the asTTle rubrics. The facilitator provided information as required. The asTTle assessment tool was used to inform teaching and learning goals and to guide formative and summative assessment of students.

The theory underpinning this practice was that students' learning needs should be identified from data, that they should be shared with and understood by the students, and that feedback should relate specifically to learning goals. The teachers developed an action plan with the facilitator, which incorporated ideas for changes in practice that were informed by the new theory. Observations and feedback allowed teachers to examine their own practice in the light of established goals.

Action plan

Ideas for change:

- Need to present models of quality writing;
- Need to investigate the features of these with children;
- Need to give more focused feedback;
- Need to make learning intentions and success criteria more explicit;
- Need to share published work;
- Need to teach children to give focused feedback.

The teachers identified the beliefs underpinning their teaching and changed their practice as a result of understanding the consequences for their students: the students' responses created dissonance for teachers—between what they expected and what was actually happening. Information from interviews and asTTle data collected at the beginning of the project continued to inform practice. Teachers moved from believing that writing was only about motivating students to share their ideas to explicitly teaching students to use specific skills and strategies. Teachers gathered information from their own contexts. Beginning with their prior knowledge, they related this to new knowledge and understandings, changing their theory and practice around writing, with substantial gains in student achievement.

> *… it gave the staff a voice and a chance to discuss what their beliefs and practices were, and that's been half of it, with the growth that's happened here, that chart and being able to discuss … It's just that openness, that's probably been the biggest thing. And the fact that sometimes we've thought that what children know is not what children know and what we think they can do, sometimes they can't.*

Principal

How did the teachers make this work?

The teachers were engaged and had involvement in all aspects of the professional development. Through the needs analysis process they identified their common learning needs, developed an action plan to address these, and evaluated and re-evaluated their practice through observations and feedback and in the light of student performance. The facilitator's role was to support this process by analysing and presenting relevant data, directing teachers to appropriate resources, and training key personnel so that they could maintain the momentum of the new learning. The theory that teachers developed during the process evolved in response to new knowledge applied within their classroom contexts. Teachers were motivated to review not only their day-to-day teaching, but also the beliefs underpinning it, and worked together as a learning community with a common goal and focus.

How this case links to the synthesis

Professional learning and literacy

8.2.2.1	Pedagogical content knowledge
8.2.2.2	Shared theories
8.2.2.3	Multiple uses of assessment
8.2.3.2	Activities to link key ideas to teaching practice
8.2.3.3	Activities to support teachers to enact key ideas in their own practice settings

Topical issues

10.1	Issue 1: Multiple roles of assessment in promoting teacher learning
10.1.2.1	Informing next teaching steps
10.1.2.2	Review of teaching effectiveness
10.1.2.3	A motivator to engage

Reflective questions

These teachers had been concerned about their students' writing achievement for some time.

- Why were they previously unable to address these concerns?
- What were the key elements in the process that led to the positive outcomes?

Source

Timperley, H., Bertanees, C., & Parr, J. (2006). *A case study: Promoting teacher learning using a needs analysis approach.* In J. Parr, H. Timperley, R. Jesson, P. Reddish, & R. Adams. *Literacy Professional Development Project: Identifying Effective Teaching and Professional Development Practices for Enhanced Student Learning.* Report to the Ministry of Education.