

The influence of peer group response: Building a teacher and student expertise in the writing classroom

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ABSTRACT: New Zealand students in the middle and upper school achieve better results in reading than they do in writing. This claim is evident in national assessment data reporting on students' literacy achievement. Research findings also state that teachers report a lack of confidence when teaching writing. Drawing on the National Writing Project developed in the USA, a team of researchers from the University of Waikato (New Zealand) and teachers from primary and secondary schools in the region collaborated to "talk" and "do" writing by building a community of practice. The effects of writing workshop experiences and the transformation this has on teachers' professional identities, self-efficacy, and their students' learning provided the research focus. This paper draws mostly on data collected during the first cycle of the two-year project. It discusses the influence of peer group response – a case study teacher's workshop experiences that transformed her professional identity, building her confidence and deepening her understandings of self as writer and ultimately transforming this expertise into her writing classroom practice.

KEYWORDS: Writing, identity, self-efficacy, writing pedagogy, peer response, transformation.

WHY A PROJECT ON STUDENTS' WRITING?

The two-year research project which provides the backdrop for the particular case study report here developed from a range of concerns relating to New Zealand (NZ) students' poor achievement in writing and teachers' self-professed lack of confidence in teaching writing across the curriculum. The "big" research questions included: What is the impact of sustained involvement in writing workshop experiences on professional identities of participating teachers? Does this impact flow through to more effective pedagogical practices around writing in primary and secondary classrooms? We were interested in transformational learning taking place. Would we see evidence of change? Would the teacher-participants forge new ways of making meaning when teaching writing in their classrooms? (Mezirow cited in Whitney, 2008).

This article first explains the background to this project and then shares the transformative experiences of Jasmine¹, a junior-school teacher who, when engaged in developing a community of practice in her own classroom, explored the value of peer group response to writing.

¹ A pseudonym

Continuing concerns

Continuing concerns about New Zealand students' low performance in writing, evident in national data, provided the background to this project. The National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP)² over the years has provided useful information on primary school students' achievement in writing by tracking progress and identifying performances of subgroups based, for example, on gender and ethnicity. The last published report on writing in 2006, however, demonstrated that Year 8 boys were still performing below Year 8 girls, and that while the achievement gap had narrowed between ethnic groups, Year 8 Māori and Pasifika students were performing below the levels of NZ Pakeha students (Flockton & Crooks, 2007).

Students' low achievement in writing was also evident in the senior-school system. National writing data gathered from 2000 to 2004 from students at years 5-12 used the writing assessment tools for teaching and learning (asTTle)(Ministry of Education, 2010). A representative sample of 21,000 scripts (poetic and transactional texts) were analysed and demonstrated that "the writing ability of a large number of secondary students was not improving beyond curriculum level three (that is, they only wrote as well as many primary school children)" (Ministry of Education & University of Auckland, 2006, p. 2). The findings indicated that secondary students writing at years 11 and 12 only reached level 4, whereas their reading and mathematics achievement levels were at level 5 (p. 3).

While recognising teachers make the difference to student achievement (Alton-Lee, 2003), professional development programmes in NZ have followed the recommendations from *The Report of the Literacy Taskforce* (Ministry of Education, 1999) and focused on improving teacher capability by up-skilling teachers' literacy knowledge and expertise (see, for example, Baretta & English, 2007; Limbrick, Buchanan, Goodwin & Schwarcz, 2008). Limbrick et al. (2008) maintained that building teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, that is: "knowledge about the nature of writing; assessment of writing; the writing process; pedagogical approaches for teaching writing and awareness of research and resources to support the nature of writing" (p. 37), informed the teachers' practices and raised student achievement. These authors also raised concerns about teachers' professional knowledge of writing and stated (in reference to an earlier study in 2005) that many teachers "lacked confidence in analysing writing and using data from assessment of writing to inform their teaching. Many of these teachers admitted gaps in their own knowledge about writing and instructional strategies that focus on teaching and learning for a particular purpose" (p. 34). Acknowledging that teachers have been grappling with multiple curriculum changes over the past two decades and that these documents have not only signalled major shifts in educational policy in terms of writing theory and practice but have also placed greater accountability loadings on teachers in relation to assessment of learners (Dix & Amoores, 2010), it is not surprising teachers lack confidence in their professional practice. Teachers' lack of confidence was reflected in the early

² The National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) initiated in 1993 by Terry Crooks and Lester Flockton from Otago University has tracked and recorded Year 4 (9 year-olds) and Year 8 (12 year-olds) students' achievement in all curriculum areas. Achievement data for each curriculum area were collected over a four-year cycle. National monitoring and reporting of students' achievement is available in online reports.

analysis of data collected at the beginning of our project (see Locke, Whitehead, Dix & Cawkwell, 2011).

A point of difference for this writing project is that it focused initially and centrally on the teacher as writer. As will be discussed later, the project builds teachers' professional knowledge of writing, their expertise and self-efficacy through engagement within a community of practice, where teachers experience and share personal authoring situations, provide and receive peer feedback, and discuss texts and pedagogical practices (Locke et al., 2011).

BUILDING TEACHERS' EXPERTISE: SELF AS WRITER

To build teachers' self-efficacy and knowledge of writing, the research team drew on the National Writing Project (NWP) in USA in its writing workshop design. This very successful professional development project, operating since 1974, is backed by research findings which claim teachers' encounter life-changing experiences after participating in a five-week intensive summer school programme (Whitney, 2008; Wood & Lieberman, 2000). Whitney's (2008) research tracked case-study teachers, finding that those who engaged in the writing workshops, the authoring process, were more positive and reported significant changes in their classroom pedagogy. Wood and Lieberman's (2000) two year study in the field found that teachers who engaged in the summer programme developed "communities committed to sustained inquiry, dialogue, and risk-taking – all for the sake of children's learning" (p. 271). When evaluating the NWP programme, Gallagher, Penuel, Sheilds and Bosetti (2008) drew attention to the "strength of the combination of approaches it uses to bring about deep changes in teachers' understanding and practice" (p. 5). Central to the programme was a culture of community practice maintaining on-going professional dialogue. However, while most of the published research has focused on teachers' transformations, very little research identifies the effects on students' learning.

As NZ university researchers, we valued the NWP's central hypothesis based on the premise that when teachers embrace the identity of self as writer, experience the writing process, engage in metacognitive decisions, and build self-identity through the authoring process, then not only is the teacher's professional identity and expertise transformed but also students' engagement, understanding and achievement can be enhanced. In summary, the NWP proposes not only to transform teacher identity and expertise but also students' writing confidence and abilities. Central to the New Zealand project were the following principles (Andrews, 2008; Wood & Lieberman, 2000):

- Teachers work collaboratively as a community of writers providing professional support for each other;
- The programme builds teacher knowledge and expertise;
- Teachers research their own pedagogy and engage in reflective practice;
- The best teacher of writing is another writing teacher. Those who experience the writing process are aware of the challenges;
- Teachers model; they write when children write;
- Teachers verbalise cognitive thinking when they demonstrate to students;
- Students' writing is valued through audience and response;

- Writing workshops enable students to learn how to respond and comment on each other's writing;
- The writing process is key to practice. Students must experience the processes of planning, crafting, revising and editing before publishing.

Two conceptual understandings from the writing project are pertinent to this article: self-efficacy through authoring self-belief and the practice of peer response.

Self-efficacy: Authoring self-belief

The project recognises that “teachers’ perceptions of their own professional identity affect their efficacy and professional development as well as their ability and willingness to cope with educational change and to implement innovations in their own teaching practice” (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000, p. 250). Opportunities for learning in communities of practice have a role to play here (Lave, 1991; Wenger, June, 2006).

A writer's self-efficacy influences, and is influenced by, affective and social interactions around the text and its context. This is the case for both novice and expert writers. Notions of self-belief and identity as a writer are embedded in research on self-efficacy as “writing is not only a process of making meaning but also an activity through which individual's engage in self-understanding” (Pajares & Valiante, 2008, p. 158). These authors cite the seminal work of Bandura (1997), who claims that “students’ academic accomplishments can often be better predicted by their self-efficacy beliefs than by their previous attainments, knowledge or skills....it bears noting that self-efficacy beliefs are themselves critical determinants of how well knowledge and skill are acquired in the first place” (p. 159). In discussing children's views of themselves as writers, Bottomley, Henk and Melnick (1997-98) highlight the role of the affective domain on writers' beliefs, attitudes, values and motivation. They identify the following factors as influencing self-efficacy and writing.

- *General progress*: defined as how one's perception of present writing progress is compared with past achievement in general, how it is influenced by the effort involved, the degree of assistance required, belief in the teaching, and task difficulty.
- *Specific progress*: is described in relation to the more “explicit dimensions of writing such as, focus, clarity, organisation, style, and coherence” (p. 287).
- *Observational comparison*: relates to how the writer perceives his/her performance in relation to others, his/her peers.
- *Social Feedback on the writing*: received either directly or indirectly from teachers, class members and parents impacts on the writer's self-perception as a writer.
- *Physiological states*: describes the writer's emotions or feelings he/she experiences as they write.

Concepts related to self-efficacy play a key role in the teacher participant's perspectives of self as writer; this became evident in their journal writing and reflective practice. One key practice that influenced a teacher's self-efficacy and deepened her understanding of the writing process was peer response.

Peer response

The collaborative, social and cognitive dimensions of peer group response (PGR) draw on pedagogical process approach theories recognising that when writing is responded to, it can be revisited, evaluated and ultimately revised to enhance the message (Dix, 2006; Fitzgerald, 1987; Graves, 1983; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007). Pritchard and Honeycutt (2007) recognise that the effectiveness of the writing process is related to the social and cognitive dynamics of peer response – that “having writing *responded to using specific criteria for response* improves writing” (p. 35), while Silver and Lee’s (2007) research identifies different types of feedback to support students revision.

In the NWP, peer group response is an embedded practice: teachers comment on and respond to each other’s texts. In our NZ workshops, Ruie Pritchard, who worked with the project as an external consultant, outlined the basic rules as following:

- writers sit in a circle with copies of one writer’s paper;
- the writer reads his or her piece without comment or apology;
- response begins on the writer’s right and continues around the circle;
- first responses are positive;
- second responses can offer suggestions or ask for clarification;
- throughout the feedback the writer doesn’t comment but rather listens and processes the feedback.

The social benefits of PGR are acknowledged by Pritchard and Honeycutt (2007) as they explain:

These include a nonthreatening audience, immediate feedback, experience of a wide range of writing abilities, reduced writing apprehension, development of positive attitudes about writing, increased motivation to revise, increased quantity of writing, more teacher time for individual attention and development of cooperation and interpersonal skills. The social aspects fostered in a writing community have effects extending beyond writing products. Moreover, positive effects on writing products are also pronounced when peer groups are used. (p. 35)

Smith and Elley (1997) highlight the scaffolding possibilities that conferencing and feedback offer students, maintaining that, “what happens during conference with others can be explained by reference to Vygotsky’s theory. The children receive and then internalise the feedback from their social environment to further their understanding of how to write for a real audience” (p. 43).

However, research recognises that just because writers receive quality feedback, there is no guarantee that they will revise, or the quality of their writing will improve (Beach & Friedrich, 2008; Sadler, 1989; Silver & Lee, 2007). There are also questions relating to the maturity and experience of students. Gere and Stevens (1985) noted that when observing a range of students from different grades interacting in PGR, differences between novice and experts became evident. They noted that when the group of eighth-graders responded, they used precise language and were specific with feedback. However, when more experienced high school students responded to each other’s writing, they would debate using a deeper and more interactive dialogue of justification and elaboration. Saddler (1989) points out that the responder’s ability to

assess writing – to spot the gap, whether it is teacher or student – “must possess a concept of quality appropriate to the task, and be able to judge the student’s work in relation to that concept” (p. 121).

The indispensable conditions for improvement are that the *student* comes to hold a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teacher, is able to monitor continuously the quality of what is being produced *during the act of production itself*, and has a repertoire of alternative moves or strategies from which to draw at any given point. (Sadler, 1989, p. 121)

While it is recognized that PGR requires the responder to be able to make judgments on the quality of the text in relation to its purpose and offer alternatives, it is a skill that young children can learn with appropriate teaching (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982; Graves, 1979). The quality of the response also deepens with experience as writers gain expertise over time.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The participants

Our project took the view that all teachers are teachers of writing. The six teachers from four secondary schools, who taught across a number of disciplines (English, chemistry, history, technology) were viewed as teachers of writing, but positioned in differing contexts. The eight primary school teachers from four schools came with a range of experiences and expertise (for further information, see Locke et al., 2011). To select teacher participants, nearby schools were approached and from a discussion with the principals, teachers were selected and invited to an initial meeting at the end of 2009. The teacher participants committed to a two-year, action-research writing project.

To connect and engage with the NWP principles, building a community of writers, Dr Ruie Pritchard from North California State University co-led two 6-day intensive writing workshops in January 2010 and 2011, where many of the principles and elements of the NWP (USA) were implemented (information on the first workshop content is explained in Locke et al., 2011). Pritchard worked alongside the teachers and four lecturers from Waikato University in January, 2010. The overall team met again in April, 2010 for a one-day intensive workshop. The primary school group of teachers continued to build a community of practice and met monthly on university premises. These meetings focused on: effective writing pedagogy; sharing successful practices; discussing students’ progress and their writing achievements and building teachers’ knowledge and expertise through discussions based on readings and articles. University-based researchers supported the teachers in shaping their classroom-based research questions, considering assessment procedures (including the adaptation of an attitude survey) and designing teaching interventions. The shared intention was to build a community of openness, sharing and trust so that teachers were comfortable both receiving and providing critique as they engaged in professional dialogue.

Research methodology and data collection methods

The project employed a range of research methodologies. Because of its longitudinal and collaborative nature, an action research perspective guided the research process. An action research cycle enabled data to be collected at specific points to demonstrate shifts and changes in response to professional development and teaching interventions. Furthermore, multi-site case studies allowed for personalisation of classroom issues, investigations into specific foci, designing teaching interventions and trialling strategies, and enabled the team collectively to gather rich qualitative data. Teacher voices were thus valued, their challenges identified, and their professional decisions and changing practices affirmed and reflected on. The teacher participants' data was collected via teacher questionnaires, focus group responses, surveys, individual interviews and reflective journal writing. In their classrooms, teachers gathered writing samples, employed attitude surveys (adapted from the work of Bottomley et al., 1997-98), and observed and interviewed their students. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis was employed.

This article draws on one classroom teacher's experience. Case study methodology enabled us to focus on Jasmine's personal experiences of PGR in the writing workshop and how she implemented this in her classroom. Focus group interviews, teacher surveys, teacher questionnaires and in particular individual interviews as well as Jasmine's reflective journal entries provided data capturing this teacher's voice. The questionnaire and surveys provided baseline data identifying Jasmine's initial experiences as writer and as a writer engaging with PGR situations. Interviews were recorded on MP3 files and this allowed us to replay, listen to and capture the changes that Jasmine reflected on in relation to peer group response. These interviews were placed alongside Jasmine's journal writing to track and analyse her shifts in thinking and her responses to PGR.

ONE TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE: THE IMPACT OF PEER GROUP RESPONSE

In this section, I detail with her help the journey of one primary school teacher, as she reflects on herself as writer and as a teacher of writing. Jasmine describes how the writing workshop experience of PGR influenced and transformed her professional identity and her pedagogical practices in the classroom.

Initial authoring experiences

Before the writing workshops, Jasmine did not identify as a writer. Her experiences outside of the classroom related to personal emails, shopping lists and letter writing. Her self-efficacy as a writer related to pedagogical practices required for classroom teaching. At the first January workshop she wrote:

I write a jobs to do list, unit plans, lesson plans, timetables, emails, writing for modelling in class, school reports and extracts for such things as school newsletters and information sheets for adults. I don't feel confident writing poems, personal pieces about self, fiction anything that will have an adult audience... But I am quite confident writing any texts for students (fiction or non-fiction), including modelling.

I find writing quite daunting –just sitting down. (Journal reflection, January, 2010)

It is interesting to note that at the end of the first January workshop in 2010, the teachers, when asked to rate the organisational and pedagogical features of the workshop that helped them learn about writing, rated “share writing in small groups” as the most valued aspect (Locke et al., 2011, p. 280). When asked about the “likelihood of participants using workshop activities in their classrooms”, while “Eight of the twelve transfer categories were below the 80% level.... It is noteworthy, however, that the use of ‘peer group responses’ was highly rated as a potential pedagogical activity” (pp. 281-283). In the focus group responses, the teachers talked about “feeling confident sharing in a group with only a few members and that this was less intimidating”, “that there was no power struggle”, “everyone got to have a say” and a chance to develop “learning HOW to critique” (Locke et al., 2011, p. 283).

Jasmine only valued this workshop activity when she accepted and built a relationship with her colleagues and felt “safe to put myself out there” (interview, June, 2011). Initially, as author, Jasmine spoke of being “overwhelmed” by others, “feeling slightly intimidated being in a room of people who knew lots”. She spoke of her “pen being frozen” as she organised her thinking. In terms of the effectiveness of PGR during writing workshops, Jasmine appreciated the safe environment, the development of trust that Pritchard created, and she affirmed the focus group comments that the guidelines and presence of rules provided expectations in how to respond. She stated, “It wasn’t that scary, we learned to listen to each other and not feel threatened...and I appreciated that others made me think about my writingThey commented positively on things I hadn’t really thought about” (interview, June, 2011). This experience left Jasmine reflecting on her own practices.

Classroom profile and pedagogy

Jasmine teaches in a large rural school of 370 students from Year One to Year Six. The school has a high socio-economic status, drawing its student base from a relatively affluent community of professional and business people. Jasmine is regarded by her principal as an experienced and successful teacher and was appointed to a literacy leadership role in the school. Her class was a group of Year Two students (six year-olds) beginning their second year at school. In this group there were eight boys and ten girls. The ethnic make-up included Indian/Māori, South African, American, and New Zealand Pakeha students. In terms of literacy/writing all the children were working at Level One of the *New Zealand Curriculum English Exemplars: Written language* (Ministry of Education, 2003). This first level is set out in three progressive sub-levels to demonstrate beginner writers’ developmental learning progression assessed against levelled indicators. Jasmine stated that this group of children exhibited a range of writing skills. The self-efficacy survey she adapted indicated that they generally had a positive self-image of themselves as writers enjoying a range of writing tasks in the classroom.

As teacher of writing, Jasmine identified with social and cognitive theories and implemented a process approach to teaching writing. She explained that, “I always motivate children, we talk a lot”, and she explained that, “the writing/composing process is extremely important as children learn to create pieces of work which expresses their feelings, reactions, interpretations”. In addition, she took a reciprocal

view of learning language literacy. She believed that: “reading and writing are intertwined and are very prominent acts in my class. I like to saturate the class in reading material: picture books, non-fiction books, poems, their own writing, anything that may interest them” (Journal reflection, January, 2010).

At the beginning of the year (2010) Jasmine employed school-based assessment procedures to collect and analyse the students’ writing. The key tool used for assessment in the junior school was the *New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars: English* for writing (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2003). The school assessed students’ writing against the written exemplars that are levelled across five bands according to process indicators. These criteria are set out as matrices indicating deeper features (audience and purpose, content and ideas, structure and language [which addresses vocabulary and language features relating to specific genres]) and surface features (spelling, punctuation, grammar and layout). Thus, the levels identify specific knowledge and skills expected of the writer as they progress. Annotated examples provide further guidance and moderation for teachers. From analysis of the children’s writing samples and her early classroom observations Jasmine noticed and recorded that her students could:

- Self-motivate and choose a topic to write on quickly;
- Readily use own experiences for writing;
- Write independently and with enthusiasm;
- Write several sentences in logical order;
- Draw a picture plan;
- Attend to some surface features, for example, basic punctuation (full stops, capital letters) and some children are beginning to use more complex punctuation correctly by using commas, speech and exclamation marks.

Only some students could:

- Use expressions of excitement to get the audience’s attention;
- Use precise language; and
- Write for an audience.

She noted that her students needed to learn to:

- Vary sentences beginnings;
- Use conjunctions and commas to join ideas and/or sentences;
- Use specific vocabulary regularly;
- Consistently use descriptive vocabulary and phrases;
- Write full descriptions of events or learn to “take a picture” in their mind of an event and record that part and build on this;
- Proof read own writing; and
- Write it in their own words (the words they speak when participating in initial discussions about their story).

Reflecting on this data, Jasmine referred back to the January workshop session in 2010. She later wrote: “In the beginning I just absorbed all the new learning and began including it in my practice, for example PGR and author’s chair” (Journal, July,

2011). Her consideration of the usefulness of peer response groups with her six-year-olds became an important teaching strategy. She was aware from her own personal workshop experiences that PGR not only provided an audience for her personal writing, but her colleagues generated possibilities for improvement: audience response and feedback had empowered her self-efficacy as a writer. Jasmine considered that peer group response would not only engage her socially-interactive students by acknowledging writing as a social activity, supported by a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), but it would also provide opportunities for her young students to apprentice each other as writers (McCormick Calkins, 1991; Ward & Dix, 2004).

Jasmine, however, queried whether her students had the maturity and cognitive ability to respond to each other's writing. Could her six-year-old students listen to, evaluate and respond to others' written texts? Being able to revise or suggest others revise involves complex metacognitive decisions: the ability to listen closely; evaluate the writing; to make judgments noting gaps about certain qualities in the writing; and to generate and offer alternative possibilities for the text (Beach & Friedrich, 2008; Graves, 1979; Sadler, 1989). Being aware from earlier workshop discussions of the research basis indicating that peer response interactions can be very successful when students are *taught* how to respond, "they need training on both strategies for providing specific, descriptive feedback and on group process skills for working cooperatively with peers" (Dahl & Farnan, 1998; Fitzgerald & Stamm, 1990; Pathy-Chavez & Ferris, 1997, all cited in Beach & Friedrich, 2008), Jasmine was keen to explore this strategy.

DESIGNING THE CLASSROOM WRITING TASK

To provide a context for writing and responding to the writing, Jasmine established links with the children's oral language sharing of their favourite toy. In designing a teaching intervention Jasmine identified key learning intentions and then developed a sequential programme, which would involve PGR. The six foci points or learning intentions for the class were identified as:

- Build a "listening and response" community;
- Develop listening and questioning skills;
- Encourage writers to consider peer suggestions;
- Use "author's chair" for teacher to highlight skills;
- Think about written message;
- Extend and elaborate on ideas by adding detail;
- Vary sentence beginnings.

The first four objectives related to peer response as a way to engage students in social conversations about each other's writing; the three other learning intentions encouraged consideration of peer suggestions for self-evaluation, to critically reflect on their own scripts and employ metacognitive decisions on how to enhance their own writing.

As the research had indicated, Jasmine knew she had to explicitly model listening to texts and asking appropriate questions. During literature time, when reading aloud to

students, she modelled fat (open-ended) questions and skinny (closed) questions. The students listened to the story and asked questions during the readings. Jasmine transferred this to PGR during writing time. Her interview explains her teaching intervention and discusses *how* and *why* she changed this practice.

...that's where it kind of fell down because they [the children] found it hard to formulate those kind of questions. When I went around listening to groups talking, a lot of the questions or comments were still closed.... And that's why I changed it to *A Star* and *A Wish*. *The Star* was the compliment and the *Wish* was the open question ...and without a doubt because of my [second] modelling of the open questions, the *Wish*, it was natural, not forced. They'd say, "I'd like to hear more about...". They were mini me's.....I think the open and closed questions might work with older students. (Interview, June, 2010)

To motivate writing content and have young students talk and generate ideas, Jasmine organised the students into groups of three, each to describe in detail a favourite toy that they'd brought to school. After the discussion they went off to write. There was no peer feedback at this point. However, during that time, the teacher took digital photos of the children with their toys.

The key for encouraging students' revision in response to peer suggestions required Jasmine to word process each child's work, writing on every second line and printing out the digital picture. The next day, Jasmine modelled peer response by organising a student to sit in the author's chair (Graves & Hansen, 1983) and read out loud his writing. At the completion of the reading, the teacher modelled the "new way" she wanted the students to respond to writing – *a star* and *a wish* – by giving a positive response first and then a request for more information or clarification. The children then received their word-processed writing and picture image and sat in their groups of three. They showed their picture and read their writing to the small group. Each child responded by providing a compliment (a star) and a suggestion (a wish). Full of new possibilities and thoughts about making changes to their writing the students revisited and wrote, knowing they had the choice to add in, change words or add on.

FINDINGS: SHIFTS IN SELF-EFFICACY AND WRITING PRACTICES

Jasmine's concern as to whether young writers could employ peer group response to generate further ideas and to add detail to their writing was allayed. The following two examples demonstrate the results of PGR evident in changes the students made to their writing. The question was not about whether the quality of the writing improved but rather could these young students engage in a community of practice and listen to each other's text, respond to the ideas, making suggestions about what else the writer could say.

Susie (Figure 1) has made several revisions considering peer suggestions.³ She had added into her writing as well as adding on at the end. Susie has provided more detail such as information about teddy's physical description, adding in "she has yellow fur", and that "My teddy bear has a collar" on her "PJs". She also tells us that she sleeps with her teddy bear and gives him a kiss. Finally Susie adds on, "Emily (teddy)

³ For ethical reasons, photographs have been modified to maintain the anonymity of the children.

has a pet puppy called Stacey.” In terms of the class learning intentions for using a range of sentence beginnings, Susie varies the beginnings with “I”, “My”, “She” and “This”. Susie used “she” six times, so Jasmine noted there is a space for a student-teacher conversation here.

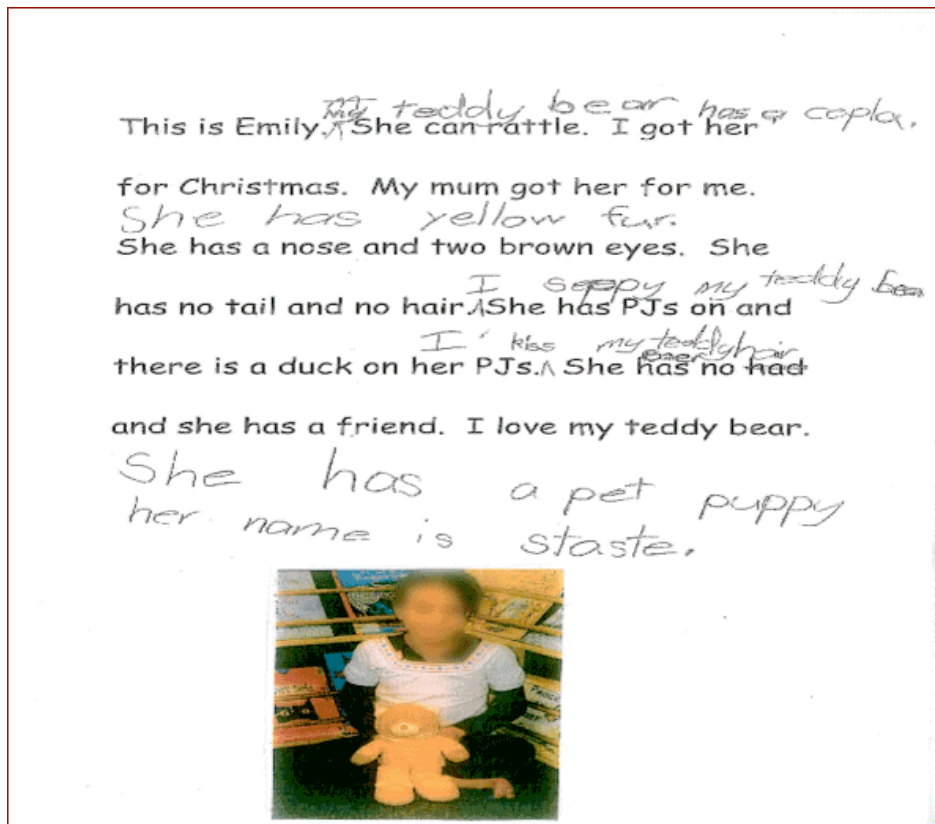
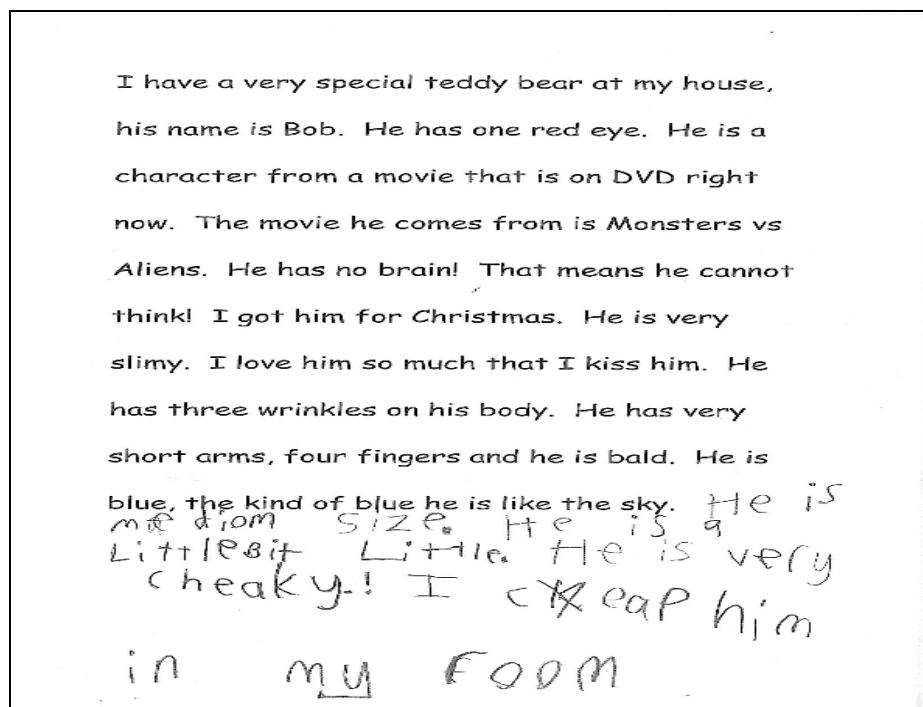


Figure 1. Susie's teddy bear



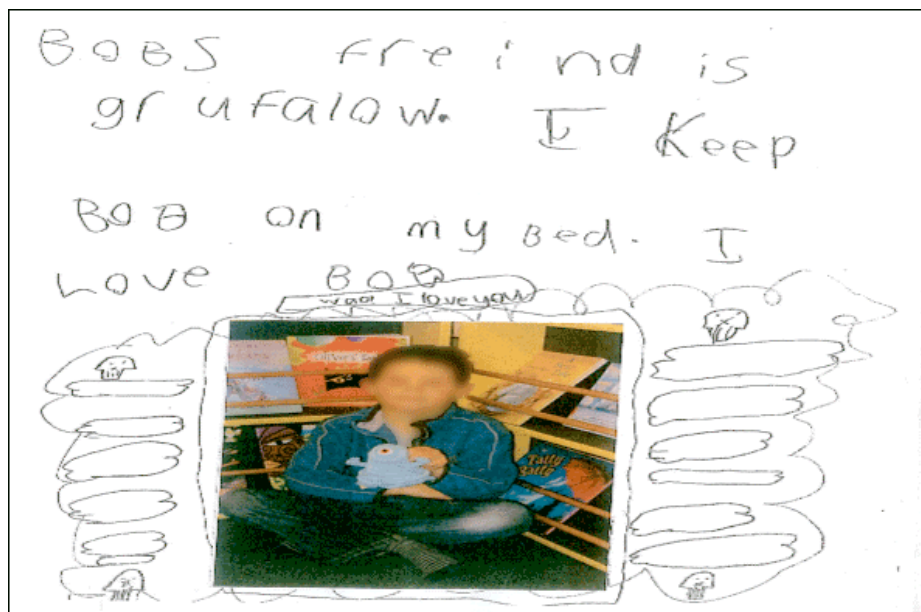


Figure 2. Mike's monster bear

Mike (Figure 2) provides a great deal of information about his toy bear, Bob. He tells us that his teddy bear is special, that he is a blue monster, and is a character in a movie. Some description, physical as well as the personality of the monster is given. Mike elaborates, explaining that Bob cannot think because he has no brain. We also gain an understanding of Mike's emotional attachment to his toy. Mike tends to add on to his writing, telling us that his toy is kept in his bed in his room. And that his toy is "a little bit little" and "is cheeky" and "has a friend the Gruffalo". Mike also uses a narrow range of sentence-starters, repeating "he" nine times. Jasmine noted that sentence-starters are an area for explicit teaching with these children.

Transformative pedagogy

Jasmine was excited about the success of this strategy with her six-year-olds. Opportunities to engage in peer response group interactions at the teacher workshops influenced and transformed Jasmine's practice and led to an increase in her students' engagement with written messages. Jasmine (June, 2010) shared the following in her interview:

- The students were more active listeners, they took their roles as peers supporting each other very seriously.
- Consistent grouping had provided a community of practice, where security and trust developed for all the writers.
- There was a heightened awareness of the messages in writing.
- The *Star and Wish* structured response enabled all children to participate.
- All of the children revisited their writing adding further detail.
- Further "spillover" of this strategy initiated writing at home: parents noticed differences in their children's engagement with writing and their attitudes towards it.

From a transformative pedagogical perspective, Jasmine made several points regarding the usefulness of PGR as a teaching strategy. In her interview, the first point she made related to the *power* of peer response. Jasmine explained, “I valued more the responses of the children and what they saw in their classmates’ writing”, and later she added, “It wasn’t that it was just coming from me, what the teacher said. They took on board what their peer group said because it was coming from them” (interview, June, 2011). This affirms the goals initiated by the NWP: writing is fostered in a community of practice as students are able to collaboratively apprentice their peers into authorship.

Jasmine’s second point related to the *time* and the *explicit instruction* she allowed for young writers to rework their texts. Jasmine commented on this shift stating: “Also it made me take time to go back and rework pieces, because that was an aspect, especially when children are young... once they’ve done it, they think it’s done, end of story” (interview). Donald Graves (1983) believed that without direct help, children saw little sense in revision. It was not until teachers explicitly taught revision and showed children how to generate options that revision occurred. The key factor, Graves believed, was that until children realise that writing is temporary and that words can be rewritten and deleted, the energy required to complete the task dominates.

The third point Jasmine noted was the engagement PGR provided for her students. As peers, they provided a listening audience for each other, which sustained the writing as “there were times when we would actually be writing on pieces for three or four days and the children were excited about that. It wasn’t onerous because it was being valued, not only by me, but because they wanted to share it with their classmates” (interview, June, 2011). This point affirms the NWP principle that emphasises that writing needs a reader and audience. Interactive feedback sustains the writer.

Jasmine’s fourth point related to the quality of the writing. The time given to spend on the process, composition and revision, and the social and cognitive engagement of others provided rewards. Not only did student-peers listen, respond and comment on others’ writing, but also the teacher responded and demonstrated how the listeners could engage with each other’s written messages. “For me as a teacher I got more quality writing because of the time I took with it – and it was always much deeper” Jasmine concluded (interview, June, 2011).

Shifts in Jasmine’s identity as a writer

At the beginning of the project, Jasmine had commented that she did not write for herself or share with an adult audience and that her self-efficacy as a writer beyond functional school and home tasks was limited. As a classroom teacher she felt that there were few opportunities to experiment. It was only after a year into the project, after the second writing workshop in January, 2011, that Jasmine realised that she was an author; her self-efficacy bloomed.

Well, that’s when I realised oh! I’ve actually got something here... I’ve actually got some ability, and it was quite empowering. I felt that I had a lot of power when I was writing because I could engage people. I was always aware when I didn’t, but I really enjoyed the entrancement that I sometimes saw on people’s faces as I was reading out

my writing, and I thought that was a neat feeling to have, so some ego was coming in there as well. (interview, June, 2011)

And what's more, Jasmine developed an awareness of the added dimension writing gave her that she wasn't able to grasp with oral modes. She recognises "that I use language that I wouldn't be able to use orally because I think writing gave me thinking time as opposed to talking" (January 2011).

CONCLUSION

The process that Jasmine engaged in throughout her workshop sessions and her personal writing experiences impacted on her professional and personal identity as a writer, enhancing her self-efficacy and providing a stronger belief in herself as an author. Jasmine's low self-efficacy was challenged as she realised how peer response experiences in the writing workshops empowered not only her self-belief as a writer but also deepened her knowledge of the writing process. It was through her participation in the community of practice and her engagement with peer response as pedagogical process that she was able to feel safe, present and compare her writing with others, and especially value the critical comments and feedback her colleagues provided. As a participant writer in this community of practice Jasmine experienced a deeper learning of the writing process; as an author Jasmine was able to relish the "entrancement" and the pleasure her writing gave others.

Jasmine's personal and successful experiences flowed into her classroom practices, transforming and reshaping her pedagogy. The students, through teacher modelling, were shown *how to* respond to each other's texts. When the initial fat and skinny questions did not provide the desired result, Jasmine refined her strategy so that peer group response gave her young writers a voice, the opportunity to listen and engage with each other's written messages. These young writers were challenged to consider the suggestions posed by their peers and were challenged to revisit their writing and make changes. These six-year-olds, like Jasmine, relished the opportunity and ended up engaging in the writing process in new and different ways.

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