ENHANCING STUDENTS’ PERSUASIVE WRITING THROUGH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND ACTION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reflects upon a professional learning literacy project undertaken with a mixed group of Australian primary and secondary teachers in the State of Tasmania. The funding for the project was provided by the government education authority as a pilot project of university and school partnership. The project involved diagnosis of literacy assessment data of 9-13 year old students in a small semi-rural high school and its two feeder primary schools. This analysis resulted in a negotiated focus upon persuasive writing skills and the planning of interventions to support students’ work in this area. A distinctive feature of the project was the use of students’ work as a platform for piloting a range of approaches to secure improvement in students’ persuasive writing skills. This chapter delineates key elements of the professional learning provided and outlines an action research process which involved examination, discussion, critique, and renewal of teachers’ pedagogies in helping students to develop and structure their writing. The latter part of the chapter reflects upon the nature of professional learning partnerships, the role of different stakeholders - including university faculties of education - and how best to build teacher ownership of literacy school improvement strategies.

Keywords

Professional learning; action research; persuasive writing.
INTRODUCTION

Literacy empowers young people and helps them to secure access to lifelong opportunities in terms of their education, career development and social wellbeing. Thus, in Australia and across the world, raising students’ literacy achievement is a core political and educational objective (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Schools and teachers are being exhorted to raise the literacy standards of their students and this requires teachers to continue to monitor and enhance their pedagogical practices associated with teaching literacy. Professional development in its variety of forms plays a central role in enhancing teachers’ pedagogical practices in the classroom (Birman et al., 2000; Millward & Timperley, 2010). Educational renewal is likely to fail if it is not well linked to the aspirations of schools and to curriculum enhancement, and if it is not supported by well-developed and relevant teacher professional learning (Fullan, 2000; Mulford, 2008). How teachers can enhance the literacy performance of their students and extend their teaching practices associated with literacy are the core issues in this chapter.

Specifically, this chapter reports on a teacher professional development project within one Australian cluster of schools. The funding for the project was provided by the State government education authority as a pilot project of university and school partnership. The project was established in response to relatively weaker State performance data from Australia’s National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). The national testing data indicated that Year 5, 7, and 9 students located in the more regional and rural Australian state of Tasmania were below the national average in persuasive writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation. The data also indicated a drop off in performance in the middle years of schooling, which encompass the transition to secondary school. For persuasive writing, in Year 5, Tasmania scores below the big States of New South Wales and Victoria but achievement is slightly higher than in Queensland, Western Australia, and South Australia. By Year 7, Tasmania has also fallen behind these three States (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2012). Therefore, the focus of this research is upon how one school cluster started to address concerns around improving their students’ persuasive writing and a relative drop-off in students’ achievement in this area in the middle and later years of schooling.

The nature of the project

The broader aim of the project was to work with a rural secondary school and their associated primary schools. The process of action research in this project was based on models suggested by Cousin (2009) and Kemmis & McTaggart (1988). Situational, collaborative, participatory and self-evaluative, action research is recognised as being a valuable means of achieving lasting improvement in educational contexts (Burns, 2000). Teachers are active and equal partners in the research: they engage in a process of diagnosing issues specific to their context; teachers and researchers work together to identify solutions to problems and build the capacity needed to respond effectively; and teachers assume responsibility for implementing agreed actions and gauging their efficacy.

The university was funded to provide eight days of professional development to be delivered in units of two days across the school year. The role of the university was to offer access to relevant research evidence; facilitate and undertake a critical friend role; provide tailored and negotiated professional learning linked to agreed areas of pedagogical focus; and to monitor and evaluate outcomes of the project. Teachers were also inducted into the
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processes and practices of researching their classroom practice. The university allocated one experienced academic to the cluster to be the case manager and liaison person. This person worked closely with the school cluster to facilitate the project and the planning and implementation of the professional learning. In the case study cluster discussed here, the decision was made for the key stakeholders to meet about once a month after school to maintain the direction of the project. Over time the responsibility for maintaining the project and reviewing the quality and impact of the teachers’ classroom interventions became the responsibility of the participants. This was deliberate as the education authority wanted the project to be more self-sustaining, past the one year of initial funding.

The Australian policy context

There is no shortage of advice coming from authoritative sources on how to raise standards of achievement in students’ writing (e.g. Freebody, 2007; Graham, MacArthur & Fitzgerald, 2013; Beard et. al., 2009; Bailey, 2002). The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2011) has also disseminated relevant material on this topic to complement the roll-out of the new Australian Curriculum, which includes a new English curriculum and a cross-curricular focus on literacy (called “General Capability – Literacy”). Specialist organizations such as the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association [ALEA] and the Primary English Teaching Association Australia [PETAA] provide invaluable guidance and professional learning (e.g. Rowe and Edwards, 2007; Holliday, 2010). At the State level in Tasmania there are attempts to embed good practice through Tasmania’s Literacy and Numeracy Framework 2012-2015 (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2012) and Supporting Literacy and Numeracy Success: A Teacher’s Resource for Early Years to Year 12 (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2013). However, it is one thing to delineate the principles and practices of good pedagogy, provide well-founded frameworks for professional learning, draw intelligently upon research evidence, clearly outline necessary conditions for learning, and identify the individual components that make for effective school-level and classroom-level literacy interventions; it is quite another thing to effectively implement and drive changes to ingrained practices in schools. And ambitious policy initiatives across a range of international jurisdictions have, unfortunately, too often lacked an implementation strategy.

Participants and the case study context

The school cluster discussed in this case study was relatively small. The Year 7-10 public secondary school had around 250 students on roll and was predominantly served by two primary schools in relatively close proximity. The schools serve a rural area and a small township community. From 2007 there was a history of working as a cluster to improve literacy results across grades 5-8 with a different agreed focus each year. In 2009 the agreed area of focus was rubric writing for the areas of persuasive writing, report writing and narrative writing. This involved drafting rubrics, taking these back to each school for feedback and amending and using these for common assessment tasks across the three schools. However, like most initiatives of this type, it was exposed to fragility through staff and leadership changes; thus, by 2012 this cross-school relationship and collaborative enterprise had gone into abeyance. Moreover, the Australian national testing data had plateaued in places. Drilling down into testing item level results indicated a number of literacy areas that needed attention. The 12 teacher participants in this study therefore decided to re-focus on persuasive writing as one of the project’s priorities.
The *Australian Curriculum: English*, like many other international curricula, articulates a transition from a more narrative based literacy focus in the beginning years of schooling, to a more expository form in the higher grades (ACARA, 2011; Rowe & Edwards, 2007; Holliday, 2010). In terms of writing there is also a transition in the English curriculum from a more descriptive writing form to a more purposeful and persuasive writing form in grades five to eight. In persuasive writing there is a focus on the writer developing an argument within the text to express a particular viewpoint. In the case study schools there was evidence of a number of areas of weakness coming through in the 2011 Year 5 data from the larger of the feeder primary schools – with performance against eight of the criteria for persuasive writing being more than 10% below the Australian average. Similarly, there were significant issues emerging from the 2011 Year 3 data from the smaller of the two feeder primary schools, with student performance against eight of the criteria more than 20% below the national average. There was a significant drop-off by Year 9 in, for example, the use of persuasive devices and students’ choice of rich and precise language to convey their ideas. The Australia-wide testing data in persuasive writing provides signposts towards possible teacher goals in this area. It was identified that students needed to move from writing text that contained two structural components to writing text that contained an introduction, body, and conclusion. Moreover, relatively few students were supporting their ideas with elaborations which supported their position and contributed to an argument.

The secondary school had reviewed its structures and pedagogies around enhancing students’ literacy achievement. The school had recently made structural changes to its timetable to enable a common focus upon literacy and numeracy in the first two hours of the school day. Moreover, the physical layout of the school, with clearly delineated and large year-group areas and two or three classes of children working alongside each other, created opportunities for collaborative teaching, flexible learning, and imaginative uses of space and technology. However, in the early stages of these new structures, opportunities were not being identified and acted upon. There was an awareness of operational concerns at the year-based planning level with calls for year meetings to be more focused and explicit. One of the approaches to teaching writing within the school cluster was an instructional writing cycle that was drafting focussed (student-led; emphasis on drafting and re-drafting; practising; and individual feedback as work progressed). Students tended to work in three-four week blocks on literacy tasks with a common introduction, a support booklet of instructions, staging posts, and individualised teacher support. While such an approach has its merits, Hillocks (1995) argued that the drafting model also had its limitations. He emphasised the importance of teacher-student interaction, with structure and genre learned in an integrated way, through task-specific processes. The claim is that in this process approach, drafting can be useful – provided that students are not ‘simply left to drift aimlessly’ (Harrison, 2002: 29). This process model was also observed within the school clusters and the teachers were keen to enhance the students’ writing through more modelling and richer discussion of key vocabulary and texts.

Participants agreed that it would be beneficial to spend more time – and be more explicit – at the acquisition stage of developing unfamiliar or new writing skills. They also recognized the value of being more aware of both prior and future learning over the horizon so that the students could experience and feel that their learning joined up in this area. Recent research evidence has confirmed the wisdom of this common-sense insight, Christie and Macken-Horarik (2007), following Grossman (1990), argued that English has “verticality” in that a more sophisticated use of the English language becomes layered over time. Students’ ability to read and write is built up through experience, practice and feedback. This is a gradual
process as the subject content changes and becomes more complex in structure across the years of schooling.

**Persuasive writing, issues and strategies**

Through their discussion in professional learning sessions, the teachers identified that persuasive writing was difficult for many students in the middle years because they had to do so many things at once. They had to:

- Remember what they wanted to say and select the right material to keep their answer relevant to the question or topic;
- Research a topic and so synthesise and summarise a range of information in way that was meaningful;
- Organize their ideas into a structure that allowed for a logical argument to be developed (this can pose difficulties when students are unfamiliar with – and perhaps unengaged by – the subject content);
- Distinguish between general points and the particular points that related to the topic under investigation: They needed to balance 'big points' – often the first sentence of a paragraph – with 'particular' material, e.g. details and examples which supported the 'big points';
- Write using appropriate types of sentences, syntax and spelling;
- Know the right words to link their ideas together (sentence starters and connectives) and develop an increasingly sophisticated 'language of discourse' (Counsell, 1997; Rowe & Edwards, 2007; Holliday, 2010).

The “grammar of persuasion” is complex, and it takes time for students to develop control of the language resources used for arguing (Derewianka & Jones, 2012). Young writers must learn to express and elaborate their ideas clearly whilst simultaneously engaging and convincing their audience. Achieving this within the context of a cohesive written text in which a range of distinctive language features are skilfully employed – including, for example, generalised participants, complex noun groups and nominalisation, as well as features associated with expressing attitudes, adjusting the strength and focus of arguments, and expanding and contracting arguments – is challenging indeed.

How teachers can more effectively assist students to develop their persuasive writing skills has often been explored by researchers under the heading of writing text structure (McNamara & Kintsch, 1996; Meyer, Brandt, & Bluth, 1980). From this perspective the text is what the student has written or typed and the structure is how the text has been organised to achieve a particular persuasive purpose or meaning by the writer. The five common text writing structures in persuasive writing are: (1) description (listing); (2) time order (3) compare and contrast; (4) cause and effect; and (5) problem and solution (Kucan & Palincsar, 2013). The following table has been adapted from that developed by Duke et al. (2011) and it is an example of a possible unit of work for middle school students on persuasive writing and land care in Australia. A similar table was presented to the teachers in the case study. While all five text structures can be used in persuasive writing, the cause and effect and problem solution structures are more characteristic of texts that are designed to present a logical argument (Meyer et al., 1980).
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Table 1 Teacher’s content knowledge on text structures and persuasive writing – Theme: Land care.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Structure</th>
<th>Sample questions</th>
<th>Topic Sample</th>
<th>Key words and cues</th>
<th>Sample activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>What are the features of the land? What animals, plants and birds live there?</td>
<td>Select a specific landscape that is under threat and describe it.</td>
<td>characteristics, identify, describe</td>
<td>Visit a forest and a farm. Write a descriptive piece on both.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time order</td>
<td>What happens before and after a bush fire?</td>
<td>What did the land look like before a fire then, after and then some time in the future</td>
<td>when, before, after, then.</td>
<td>Write on the changes to the landscape after fire. Use pictures to illustrate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare and contrast</td>
<td>How are things alike and different</td>
<td>Compare and contrast the augments for and against logging.</td>
<td>both, alike, unalike, but, however, than, change, different.</td>
<td>Write on the advantages and disadvantage of timber logging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause and effect</td>
<td>What caused the erosion of the river bank?</td>
<td>What are the long term effects of clearing trees from the land?</td>
<td>because, therefore, cause, effect, so.</td>
<td>Write on why forests need protection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem and solution</td>
<td>Looking at the eroded river bank what can be done to improve it?</td>
<td>Why are farmers focusing on sustainable land usage?</td>
<td>because, in order to, so that, trouble, if, problem.</td>
<td>Write on care of water ways focusing on the problems and solutions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The indications are that when students use these text structures and scaffolds in their persuasive writing they gain a greater understanding of the writing process and are better able to construct more interesting texts and extended writing that contains a more consistent and convincing argument (Dewitz & Jones, 2012; Hall, Sabey, & McClellan, 2005).

Representative senior and classroom teachers from the three case study schools broadly understood the nature of the persuasive writing problem. They were aware of good practice guidance in the research literature on literacy planning. They were also influenced by some powerful State-based literacy findings from a related successor Tasmanian research project entitled ‘Raising the Bar; Closing the Gap’. The most successful schools in this earlier project had applied ‘a layered approach’, building staff ownership of the teaching and learning agenda, creating smaller Year/Grade based literacy teams responsible for specific and targeted interventions, and also getting down to the level of individual classrooms and students (Castleton, Moss, & Milbourne, 2011; Hay et al., 2011). The group embraced the idea of planning across three layers – (1) strategic (moving to a single cluster plan for literacy), (2) year group (sharing ideas horizontally across year groups and enhancing year group planning); and (3) at the classroom level, planning, piloting and experimentation with new approaches with targeted challenge for individual students. The teachers in the cluster agreed that the wider objectives of the project were to build teacher capacity and school literacy leadership. It was also an aim to changes attitudes, expectations and elements of professional practice in relation to aspects of teaching literacy through whole-staff professional learning and engagement and greater use of data in planning for progress in literacy.

An early critical thinking and research design exercise aimed to turn the cluster’s general areas of focus into more closely defined research questions. For persuasive writing, the research question for the participating teachers became How can we improve persuasive writing in Years 5-8 through increased use of assessment for learning principles and practice?’ A team of classroom teachers, which included representatives from all three schools, agreed to design, experiment with, and evaluate a range of new learning tasks which: were engaging, purposeful, and authentic; more explicitly modelled writing processes and techniques; and provided scaffolded support for writing and experimentation with different kinds of writing frames (Lewis & Wray, 2000). In keeping with assessment for learning principles, the teachers hoped to achieve eight related goals:

1. Demonstrate to their students more explicitly what a successful piece of persuasive writing looked like;
2. As teachers, gain a greater understanding of the writing process and best practices for teaching persuasive writing;
3. Introduce their students to strategies to de-code complex written texts;
4. Enhance the students’ motivation to write and extend the quality and quantity of their writing;
5. Make more regular and effective use of assessment rubrics in their classrooms;
6. Make increased use of peer feedback within their classrooms;
7. Use more self-review of their teaching; and,
8. Work more consciously on the vocabulary and language of advocacy.

There are parallels between the above goals the Tasmanian teachers wanted to implement and aspects of the National Literacy Strategy [NLS] (1998) in England.
Designing professional learning – insights and lessons from England

The NLS in England, in terms of enhancing students’ writing, advised (and at times prescribed) explicit, whole class, direct teaching related to text-level objectives and sentence construction (Beard, 2000). This tended to involve teacher demonstration and modelling of writing processes. This would be followed by shared writing (the teacher and students jointly constructing a text) and guided writing (where the teacher supports and encourages students who are tackling a similar scaffolded task and circulates, supporting and monitoring the students’ developing writing). Finally, there would be consolidation of the identified writing skill with opportunities for purposeful student talk and discussion with peers about work in progress (Harrison, 2002). Key features of this style of pedagogy included: a significant amount of whole class interactive teaching; rigorously planned and structured teaching; the explicit naming up and sharing of learning goals; engaging hook/starter activities; active pair or group tasks; purposeful questioning and transitions; opportunities for creative student talk; and dynamic consolidating plenary sessions in which review of learning was undertaken. Opportunistic vocabulary development was also important – for example, developing the confidence to deploy a greater variety of appropriate verbs, adjectives and adverbs, depending upon purpose, context and audience. Collectively, these kinds of teaching approaches or ‘productive pedagogies’ (Queensland Department of Education, 2002) also exist in Australia, although the Australian Curriculum tends to have some different terms and sequences to those identified within the NLS in England.

Evidence regarding the effectiveness of the NLS in England as an intervention measure to lift aspects of literacy was positive (OFSTED, 2004). Such a finding is encouraging to this research project where many of the same strategies as identified by the NLS were preferred areas of focus for the Tasmanian teachers. The inspection evidence from England was that most schools implemented key aspects of the strategy effectively and that teachers welcomed the professional learning provided. Many of the teachers in England identified the importance of improved planning which they claimed had enhanced their students’ writing, such that students wrote more confidently in a wider range of genres, with greater awareness of audience and purpose. The accuracy of writing had also improved. The OFSTED evidence from England also noted progress in developing literacy across the curriculum with the teachers regularly sharing models of language use with their students and demonstrating varied forms of support, most commonly writing frames, to provide a structure on which students could build their work. Consequently, the strategy had also demonstrated a gradually increasing impact on attainment in English in most schools.

In terms of the professional development of the Tasmanian teachers, there was focus on demonstrating aspects of the writing process and encouraging the teachers to reflect on these and then adapt the information within their own classroom contexts. For example, an early professional learning session with the teacher participants shared three film clips from English national strategy resource materials (DiES, 2004). The first of these was a History lesson on slavery and the slave trade. In terms of pedagogy, the clip focused on ‘engagement’ and modelled most of the steps and processes outlined above. The other two clips linked directly to the explicit teaching of persuasive and extended writing. The second clip showed a lower secondary English teacher working to model a persuasive oral response. Having in earlier lessons focused on justifying points of view and acknowledging others’ points of view, this lesson focused on the value of modifying one’s point of view in the light of research or listening to others. Working with a support teacher colleague, the classroom teacher modelled arguments for and against recycling and acted out modifying her point of view. The class then
practised this skill in a ‘jigsaw’ group activity using role cards in relation to the issue of corporal punishment. The aim of the exercise was to develop verbal confidence in articulating a persuasive response and also develop listening skills and the capacity to articulate a sense of synthesis. Links were made to the importance of high quality oral work preceding the completion of extended persuasive writing. A third clip highlighted the explicit modelling of writing with a lower secondary History class around the question of ‘Why was the Roman army successful?’ The modelling included whole class discussion and shared writing relating to topic sentences, lexical choices, and the quality of linking words and phrases.

Anatomizing the development issues through children’s work

The Tasmanian teachers requested an opportunity to look at children’s work on persuasive writing across Years 5-8 to explore issues around progression and to identify the areas where focused interventions might be most warranted. They brought along samples of their own students’ work related to persuasive writing. The PL task was to review the student work samples and identify what the child could do and possible next steps. They agreed to provide written feedback that used the ‘Two stars and a wish’ marking philosophy or feedback sandwich (positive – area for development – finish on a positive). In undertaking this comparative exercise, the group recognised plenty of encouraging qualities in the children’s work. The work samples certainly reflected the attention that teachers paid to text structure – with exemplar material from each year group incorporating an introduction, body, and conclusion. The text was usually segmented into paragraphs. There were also examples of work with arguments and ideas that were conveyed with a degree of passion, creativity and humour. For example, Zach, a Year 5 lower attainer, certainly made a heartfelt case for the establishment of a Lego Club, supporting his conclusion that Lego is ‘Fun, educational and AWESOME!!!’ (Fig. 1), albeit that his reasoning lacks sophistication.

**Fig. 1: Year 5 argument for a Lego Club: Zach**

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“Dear Mrs Howes
i strongly belive that the lego club should exist for these reasons.
Firstly, it helps us with our building skills and also helps us with doing science investigations and lastly it makes me happy so i can work better.
Firstly, if the lego club goes through i will be helped with my building skills that will help me become an inventor, my dream job.
Secondly, it will make the students happyer and i belive that a happy student is a good working student.
Finally, lego doesn’t have to be used for having fun or playing it can be used for science investigations, like *
-my opinion is that the Lego Club should go through because children love to build with lego, because it is fun, educational and AWESOME!!!!”"
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Katie (Year 8) pitched her case for books over television with some dry, under-stated wit (Fig. 2)
Fig. 2: Year 8 case for books over TV: Katie

Books or TV?
This is a really interesting question, and has been commonly asked in many places. The answer is books, and if you say TV, then these reasons will change your mind.
Firstly, books give you a chance to use that wonderful thing called an imagination. With TV your brain is pretty much being told how everything looks and sounds like. That turns your brain into a lazy organ. Reading will captivate and switch on that imagination, leaving you with a hard working brain.
Secondly, there is no limit to the amount of books you can read. Nor is there a limit to the amount of categories books come under. TV’s though, they have a limit to the amount of channels to watch. As for their categories they are only romance, action, reality programmes and the movies for the younger generation.
In conclusion, although TV’s are important to many of us, our brains were made for thinking and our imagination is totally unlimited. Sitting in front of that dreaded box, isn’t going to do any good. So start reading!

The work samples also highlighted development aspects in the students’ writing. For example, the language of discourse, such as the use of connectives, was under-developed in many of the texts, and the teachers could see the limitations of the formulaic ‘list’ response (see the repetition of ‘All Children’ in Fig. 3) or the apparently ingrained use of ordinal adverbs (firstly, secondly) as the students outlined their arguments.

Fig.3: Year 5 argument for the benefits of sport: Kane

All children should play sport because they will have fun. And make new friends.
All children should play sport to keep fit and healthy. And to be positive.
All children should play sport to have fun and make new friends and to enjoy the sport.
All children should play sport for team work, helping each of them and co-operate.
I’m sure that you can agree with me there is so many ways.

The teachers recognized that they could usefully intervene to help students achieve greater cohesiveness of argument. Teachers also commented upon the relatively unengaging introductions and conclusions. Moreover, they could see that, whilst opinions were both expressed and supported, the level of analysis and evaluation usually remained at a rather surface level of assertion. The quality of reasoning sometimes lacked depth or convincing exemplification. And a limited range of persuasive devices were used to enhance and deepen the writer’s position. Rarely were opposing positions acknowledged, recognized, or refuted (an exception was Katie (Fig. 2) who knocked down television while simultaneously praising
books: ‘With TV, your brain is pretty much being told how everything looks and sounds like. That turns your brain into a lazy organ’). Sentence structure, whilst usually sound and meaningful, tended to be relatively simple and unambitious. Lexical choices generally played it safe, too – there were few examples of the use of single precise words or word groups, or of the use of technical language. Finally, each example of the children’s work highlighted some significant problems with the accuracy of spelling.

In addition to the range of assessment for learning strategies identified above (especially the sharing of assessment criteria and the use of other children’s work as models), cluster members decided that other extensions to their repertoire of teaching strategies might include: drama and debate as providing additional preparation and rehearsal of arguments; more explicit teaching of aspects of extended writing in other-than-English contexts, especially History; and more explicit teaching strategies to develop the sophistication of arguments and more varied expression of elaboration. The high school teachers in particular were looking for strategies to engage reluctant writers and to make connections to students’ lives. Some wanted to explore the involvement of the children in real campaigns, with opportunities to write letters or emails to newspapers or government authorities (at the time of the project there were impassioned debates in Tasmania around a range of environmental issues and concerns).

The teachers used their PL space to plan deeper and richer interventions around supporting children’s extended and persuasive writing. A teacher of English on secondment to the university shared an exemplar teaching-learning sequence on persuasive writing from a grade 7 class. The group reviewed what it could learn from this example. The unit was explicit about learning outcomes, detailed, organized and well-scaffolded. It had a good range of engaging and kinaesthetic activities. The model unit also prompted discussion around what explicit teaching was and what it felt like. Later PL days were more involved with teachers reporting back about what was occurring in their classroom and upon their own learning as teachers. The final set of PL days was to focus upon summarising what the teachers had learnt and how the project would be sustained.

CONCLUSION

Systemic changes to practice have to involve teachers as partners. It may be that policy-makers (and universities and commercial organizers of PL) would benefit from re-thinking how professional knowledge is constructed and change is embedded in schools and in teachers’ pedagogies (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Kerkham & Hutchison, 2004). Our approach in this action research project was to invite teachers to work with us collaboratively on all aspects of the intervention: research design, data collection and analysis, and how to do things. We sought to develop a shared mission and a community of professional learners (Mulford, 2008). We were keen, for example, that teachers be fully involved in identifying the qualitative data by which the project might be assessed. The participating teachers agreed that the evidence base might include: the children's work; changes to planning documentation at the whole school, year group, and classroom levels; teacher reflections; end of project interviews; peer observation of lessons; student surveys and feedback; and possibly filming lessons for observation and feedback.

The university team working in partnership with the teachers in the case study school reached some important early/interim conclusions about the various ways in which professional learning can support teachers’ competency in areas such as persuasive writing.
- The teachers in the preparatory phase of this project recognised that teaching writing was a dynamic process involving modelling, reflection, editing, and publishing (Graham et al., 2013; Kucan & Palincsar, 2013). They recognized that they needed to actively model for students how to construct their writing by instructing them on how to: introduce the topic, how to systemically develop a theme in their writing, how to use topic sentences and other resources to structure their writing, use relevant vocabulary, sentence structure and appropriate syntax, and form a conclusion.

- The teachers identified that their pedagogical practices associated with teaching middle school students’ persuasive writing involved them having the confidence to try new activities and to self-evaluate what was effective with different students. The project contributed towards enhancing teachers’ knowledge in this area. An example of this developing higher order thinking was illustrated by the teachers initially exploring how they taught persuasive writing to their students, then reflecting on this with others and following peer discussion, trying out new strategies in their classrooms, and again reporting back. In this way they developed their self-confidence and self-efficacy in teaching persuasive writing. This observed interactive link between teachers' confidence, self-efficacy and enhanced teaching practices has also been reported by Guo, Connor, Yang, Roehrig, & Morrison (2012) and Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2007).

- The participants recognized that their professional learning was likely to have limited impact if it was: fragmented; solely content based; had no follow up; was not engaging for the participants; and was not well linked to classroom practice (Millward & Timperley, 2010);

- The teachers appreciated the de-mystification of action research and were committed to the notion that professional development for teachers should have, as one of its main outcomes, better pedagogical practices in classrooms and so better student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, Bransford, LePage, Hammerness, & Duffy, 2005).

- Students’ work samples were shown to be an excellent prompt in activating higher-order teacher thinking about how they structured learning around persuasive writing and how they might feedback to students based upon their responses to tasks. The notion of writing as a process was exemplified through concrete examples of students’ work generated across the middle years of schooling.

- Against the backdrop of an educational space that is increasingly dominated by national standards, and high-stakes testing’ (Comber & Nixon, 2009), the participating teachers also appreciated a professional learning project that was undertaken and negotiated with them rather than being delivered to them.

Inevitably, the issue of leadership is central to the success of initiating and supporting organizational and pedagogic change (Sharratt & Fullan, 2006). Although the university-based educationists had a role in stimulating, challenging, sharing ideas and resources, facilitating and encouraging quality classroom based pedagogical approaches, the responsibility and implementation of changes to teaching practices lay with the classroom teachers who knew their students. The school Principals and senior leaders within the local educational authority were also actively involved in supporting the on-going professional needs of the teachers. The strong message from the action research project reported in this
chapter is that teacher professional development that is systematically implemented, evidence-based, and focused on the learning performance of the students, needs to be encouraged. Partnership between universities and local education authorities is a model of professional development that has significant merit and one that needs ongoing review and evaluation.

REFERENCES


and Assessment Authority discussion paper no.8.


