



Validated Self Evaluation

Final report from Theme Groups

February 2012

Progress in the Development of Writing across Schools

Section 1 – Scope and Remit of the Working Group

The Group set out to explore the progress in the development of writing across schools in Scottish Borders Council. Following discussion of the initial key questions, and with agreement of the local authority senior management, these were revised in order to gather information that could be considered dependable for identifying key strengths and next steps. The group collated information on:

- Writing programmes;
- HMle reports;
- Pupils views on writing;
- Monitoring and evaluating for leading improvements;
- Quality assurance and moderation
- Continuous professional development; and
- Self-evaluation.

Since moderation and quality assurance within and across schools is still in its infancy, it was recognised that the existing attainment data from primary schools and the first two years of secondary schools was unlikely to be sufficiently dependable from which to draw conclusions. The need for dependable data is raised within the recommendations of this report.

Section 2 – Approaches Taken

Information was gathered from HMle reports and writing programmes, and questionnaires were used to collect data from senior managers within primary and secondary schools, teachers, and pupils.

Schools were invited to submit writing programmes which were then compared against the criteria for curriculum design principles (BtC 3).

Relatively recent HMle reports were examined to identify areas of good practice.

Information on CPD availability was gathered.

Open-ended questionnaires were distributed to senior managers of all primary and secondary schools to gather data on effectiveness of writing programmes; levels of expertise within schools; quality assurance practice within and across schools; monitoring and evaluating; and barriers to development.

The questionnaire for teachers comprised both open-ended and closed questions and addressed self-evaluation of programmes and practice; participation in quality assurance activities; and CPD needs.

The questionnaire for pupils comprised predominantly closed questions and addressed issues of confidence and classroom experiences.

None of the information requested through the teacher and pupil questionnaires could be used to identify an individual.

Section 3 - Specific Activities Undertaken

1. Writing Programmes

Five of the nine secondary schools and 37 of the 64 primary schools provided information on the writing programmes within their schools. It was acknowledged by the group, however, that courses and programmes are only as good as the quality of learning and teaching. The programmes submitted made reference to the criteria for curriculum design principles though it was felt that there could be more explicit reference to personalisation and choice and relevance to young people's lives. Thirty primary schools indicated the use of 'The Big Write' which arguably might suggest that these schools have identified the need for a whole school approach to help improve attainment in writing. Whilst there is some evidence within programmes of transition within schools, there is little evidence to suggest sound transitions across sectors.

2. HMle Reports

There is a positive picture coming through recent HMle reports in schools. For example, there is reference in some reports to high levels of attainment, levels achieved earlier than expected, improvements and progress, collaborative approaches, good examples of planning and writing, good approaches to writing, writing well for a range of purposes.

3. Questionnaires

The questionnaire for senior managers was sent via e-mail and Survey Monkey was used to collect data from teachers and pupils. Responses to open-ended questions were coded to identify categories and common themes or responses. This was an iterative process until the coding was sufficiently refined in order to provide trustworthy information. To guard against misinterpretation, two teachers undertook work separately and then checked against each other. Responses to open-ended questions were collated and coded under specific headings in order to identify the range of themes emerging, as opposed to how many of each response. This provided richer data than simply numbers.

i.) Questionnaire for senior managers

The purpose of this questionnaire was to identify where schools were in relation to developing systems to support the improvement of attainment in writing. The questionnaire was sent to all Headteachers in SBC, though may have been delegated to those responsible for leading writing development within the school. Thirty three of the 73 schools in SBC are represented in the analysis; four of the nine secondary schools and 29 of 64 primary schools.

Summary of findings

Effectiveness of Writing provision in school

Twenty seven of the 33 respondents report effective and recent improvements. Nine respondents from primary schools make reference to the use of external consultants to support developments. Seven respondents, all from the primary sector, note that a thematic approach to writing is used within their schools. Three of the four secondary respondents report a clear, structured programme in place, along with three primary schools. A further seven schools, including one secondary school, are currently developing their writing provision. One secondary respondent reports a whole school approach being taken to writing.

Ensuring continuity and progression

Eighteen of the 33 respondents report having effective programmes/approaches that promote continuity and progression. Fifteen of the 29 primaries make reference to the use of external consultants in helping the school achieve this aim. Developments, including training, are on-going in one third of the responding schools. Eight schools, two of which are secondary, have tight, structured programmes or frameworks designed specifically to promote continuity and progression. A further four respondents report programmes/frameworks in place but, whilst initially positive, too early to be conclusive.

Levels of expertise within staff

Twenty of the 33 respondents agree that the varying degrees of expertise within their own staff impacts on the quality of learners' writing experiences. About one third of respondents report training or collaborative working currently going on in their schools. Three note that changes in staff impacts on the level of expertise, and three note the need for further shared understanding of standards including expectations and approaches. Four respondents made no comment.

Quality assurance and moderation

Of the 33 respondents to this questionnaire, 28 report having in place some form of quality assurance procedures involving either moderation or collaborative working such as cross-marking. Respondents representing eight schools report in school working only, and across school working to share understanding of standards are reported in 13 schools. However, this figure includes 10 schools that are partnered and, therefore, have a shared Headteacher. Respondents from nine schools report cross sector working. Respondents representing five schools make reference to Learning Community approaches. Seven respondents note that their schools are developing a shared understanding of standards with the help of an external consultant.

Monitoring and evaluating for ensuring development

About one half of responses note a positive impact with just less than half providing examples of evidence. Ten responses suggest procedures are still in the early stages but, whilst positive, too early to be conclusive. Five responses report the procedures used in schools but make no reference to impact or evidence.

Barriers to improving attainment

About one third of responses acknowledge barriers to improving attainment, including time to develop, resources and changes to staff. Just under half of responses make reference to the need for shared understanding of approaches, standards, expectations etc. About half of responses recognise the need for training and support etc to be on-going and not a one-off development. Just under one

quarter of responses raise the issue of pupil context, for example, lack of personal experience, as posing a barrier to improving writing attainment within the school, with three responses indicating the importance of a rich environment for learning to help counter-balance these external factors. A lack of consistency, for example of expectations, is identified by responses from six schools, and three feel there are no barriers to improving attainment.

Evaluation of provision

Excellent	0	
Very good	15	
Good	14	
Satisfactory	3	
Weak	0	
Unsatisfactory		0
Non-responders	0	

ii.) Questionnaire for Teachers

One hundred and forty three teachers responded to the questionnaire posted on Survey Monkey, with 95 from Primary and 46 from Secondary. Fourteen percent (19) were working at Early level, 25% (35) at First, 36% (50) at Second and 25% (34) at Third level and above.

Summary of findings

Effectiveness of programmes

Sixty nine percent (87) find their writing programme useful or very useful in ensuring continuity and progression in writing. However, 31% (39) describe the programmes as adequate or unsatisfactory in this respect.

Practice

Eighty eight percent of respondents (122) report the majority or more pupils are motivated and actively engaged in all stages of the writing process, although 12% (17) report less than half as motivated and actively engaged in all stages. Fifty one percent of teachers (71) who responded thought their pupils had frequent opportunities to engage in peer and self assessment of writing though 15% (21) identified these opportunities as rare or non-existent.

Quality assurance and moderation

Twenty eight percent of teachers (66) report frequent engagement in QA procedures for writing, but one in four teachers (34) report engagement with writing QA as rarely or never. Moderation and quality assurance across schools is relatively rare.

Needs

Of the 143 teachers who responded, 94% (129) feel fairly confident or very confident in their teaching of writing. Teachers were invited to list their needs in relation to CPD and the following areas were raised:

- Collaborative working within and across schools – 20
- Activities for generating ideas and stimulating approaches – 19

Support in teaching the basics such as grammar – 13
More use of external experts – 12
Developing progression in writing – 9
Revisiting AifL strategies – 7
Focus on additional needs or EAL – 6
Time to work with pupils – 6
Literacy across the curriculum – 6

And one teacher responding with:

“Anything! There’s never anything. Have been looking for years and years.”

Barriers to improving attainment in writing

Teachers were also invited to suggest barriers to improving attainment in writing. Ninety teachers responded to this question and the following points were raised:

Time (including activities related to understanding and sharing the standards) – 47
Pupils’ poor technical accuracy – 13
Inadequate resources (including ICT) – 9
Lack of learning support – 8
Lack of staff confidence (including uncertainty of CfE) – 10
Lack of pupil engagement (including parental support) – 25
Not respondents’ responsibility – 3
No barriers - 2

iii.) Questionnaire for Pupils

Four hundred and seventy five pupils responded to the questionnaire posted on Survey Monkey.

Summary of findings

Confidence

Approximately 23% of pupils (106) report having more confidence about writing than compared to other activities and subjects. Twenty two percent of pupils (102) report less confidence about writing, and approximately 56% of pupils (262) report having the same level of confidence in writing as they have for other activities and subjects.

Progress and practice

Approximately 23% of pupils (107) report making very good progress in writing, 66% of pupils (309) making good progress in writing, and 11% of pupils (54) report making slow progress. Seventy seven percent of pupils (359) write for a range of reasons such as to inform, entertain or explain, and 73% of pupils (342) enjoy writing. Seventeen percent of pupils who responded (82) are frequently involved in self and peer assessment in writing, with 61% (291) sometimes involved. Nineteen percent (91) report rarely being involved in self and peer assessment and 2% (10) having no involvement.

Four hundred and twenty five of the 475 pupils feel their teachers inform them of how to improve their writing.

The analysis was further broken down to P6, P7, S1 and S2. However, the number of respondents for secondary is too low to make any meaningful comparisons between primary and secondary.

Section 4 – Findings

It is acknowledged that the findings are in relation to the responses/exploration of those schools, teachers and pupils who were involved in this theme.

The theme group's initial findings are:-

4.1 Strengths

- Schools have either developed or are in the process of developing programmes for writing that take account of the principles within CfE.
- HMIE reports contain growing evidence of a positive picture in writing practices across schools inspected.
- Self-evaluation highlights a developing effectiveness in writing provision, with a significant proportion of primary schools using external support to help develop practice.
- Some form of quality assurance/sharing the standards is taking place in almost all schools.
- Many teachers report confidence in delivering writing.
- Many pupils report confidence and engagement in their writing.

4.2 Areas for Improvement

- Developing transition across sectors and across schools.
- Provision of on-going support/CPD to minimise impact of different levels of staff expertise.
- Ensuring full participation in understanding and sharing the standards within schools and across schools.
- Identifying time for training and understanding and sharing the standards.
- Ensuring regular opportunities for pupils to engage in self and peer assessment of writing.

Section 5 – Recommendations

1. The local authority provides guidance outlining expectations and timelines for teacher engagement in quality assurance and moderation procedures in and across schools and sectors.
2. The local authority provides guidance to support schools in developing or reviewing writing programmes that provide continuity and progression and improvement in attainment.
3. In light of the areas for improvement listed above, the local authority reviews CPD/Professional Development availability to meet the needs of teachers with differing levels of experience and expertise.
4. Resources such as agreed writing criteria and exemplification are created to assist in the development of a shared understanding of standards across the local authority.
5. The questionnaires are repeated at yearly intervals to help monitor developing practices in writing.