

**ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE  
QUALITY OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE: THE EFFECTS OF USING EXEMPLAR  
WRITINGS TO BUILD CRITERIA ON THE QUALITY OF STUDENT WRITING**

by

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## Abstract

This action research project investigated the central research question: *To what degree does the quality of students' personal writings improve when students build criteria from exemplary writing?* This project requested teachers to implement specific *assessment for learning* strategies into their written language instruction of personal writing. The students participated in one baseline write and three subsequent writes to determine if using the *assessment for learning* strategies of analyzing exemplary writing and developing criteria would increase the quality of writing based on the meaning strand of the *BC Performance Standards in Writing*. For further evidence of effectiveness of using *assessment for learning* strategies, students completed a rating scale on their perceived helpfulness of these strategies, and teachers completed a rating scale on their beliefs of the effectiveness of using *assessing for learning* strategies, performance standards and participating within a learning team. The primary students' quality of writing improved substantially with the implementation of *assessment for learning* strategies. The students and the teachers perceived the *assessment for learning* strategies to be effective in increasing the quality of personal writing. The teachers believed the use of *assessment for learning* strategies, and performance standards and working within learning teams were highly effective in improving and assessing the quality of students' writing.

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## Chapter 1

Our main goal in public education is for all children to be successful learners. For this goal to be realized, change has to occur in our public education system. Change in education can be challenging but extremely rewarding. This goal takes effort and time, and involves collaboration among teachers, administrators, and district personnel. Change takes place when all participants in the system take responsibility and do not abstain from the process.

Assessment for Learning in education is an essential component needed for change to occur in our education system, as it is an integral part of effective teaching. "Assessment for learning is a planned process in which assessment-elicited evidence of students' status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning-tactics" (Popham, 2008, p. 3).

This definition is harmonious with Black and Wiliam's (1998) research on finding evidence to support the claim that improving Assessment for Learning raises standards. The positive impact Assessment for Learning has on students' learning and achievement and the interdependence of teaching and learning is thoroughly documented in Black and Wiliam's (1998) meta-analysis on this topic. They stated that there is a body of firm evidence that *formative assessment* (assessment for learning) is an essential component of classroom work and its development can raise standards of achievement. Further, they argued formative assessment helps low achievers more than other students and so reduces the range of achievement while raising overall achievement. Other than teacher quality, Wiliam (2008), and fully described in Hanushek (2004), the next most significant variable for student academic progress was Assessment for Learning. Studies by both, Black and Wiliam (1998) and Kluger and DeNisi (1996) concluded that when formative assessment is thoroughly

implemented, it will effectively double the speed of student learning. It is therefore imperative that teachers and students incorporate assessment for learning strategies in their daily learning and teaching practices.

The definition by Popham (2008) is exemplary but needs more clarity for regular classroom teachers. Assessment for learning is both a teaching and a learning strategy. Information gained from assessments on students' performances needs to inform subsequent teaching. It is equally important for both students and teachers to understand what needs to be known and what needs to happen next, in order to continue to have academic achievement. The ultimate understanding of teaching and learning is that they are intertwined. It is no longer acceptable to have the perspective that it is the teacher's responsibility to teach and the students' responsibilities to learn.

The key components of assessment for learning are providing learning intentions, stating clear criteria on what is expected for successful demonstration of learning, giving rich, informative feedback to improve or to re-demonstrate learning, designing and using thoughtful questions to lead discussions to further learning, using both peer and self-assessment to assist students in taking responsibility for their own learning, and enabling learners to be the owners of their own learning. These learning strategies empower students to gain knowledge on their learning in relation to the specific learning concepts and to adjust their tactics to improve (Wiliam, 2008).

### **Using Assessment for Learning in Written Language**

Written language is an area of the curriculum where teachers can successfully implement assessment for learning strategies. As an educator with 30 years of teaching experience, I have taught written language using a variety of methods. For several years,

schools in the Prince George School District #57 dedicated time, effort, and money towards a balanced literacy approach. The main focus of Heritage Elementary School's literacy approach was on ensuring our students were successful readers. Our Primary Learning Team (PLT) at Heritage Elementary School felt confident in the knowledge, skills, and assessment for learning strategies that ensure students learn to read successfully. However, data from summative reports on the writing literacy of our primary students indicated that written language was an area of instruction that needed our attention.

Discussions on written language, with our PLT and other educators in the district, indicated an array of ideas on how to best teach written expression, and a wide range of expectations for students' writing at each grade level. It was recognized that the quality of students' written language can be very subjective in nature and consequently, depending on the expectations of the teachers, the students writing was graded differently. Upon acknowledging this disparity among the PLT, it was decided that there was a need for further professional development and research.

During our Primary Learning Team (PLT) discussions, we decided student writing was an area that needed significant improvement. Through implementation of this action research project on improving written language, we gained pertinent data that helped us enhance our students' written language abilities. Prior to this project, our staff had been reliant on student journals (personal daily writing with little or no criteria given) as a form of teaching and assessing written language. The PLT was concerned that students' journal writing was limiting and did not encourage growth in written language. The PLT planned and proceeded to implement assessment for learning strategies in written language and new methods of written instruction to improve students' writing skills and ultimately engage young writers.



The Heritage staff had understanding and experience in assessment for learning strategies in other instructional areas of the curriculum. Previously, the PLT teachers had worked together successfully in gathering data to inform our instruction in reading literacy with very positive student reading results. Our goal now was to improve written literacy for Heritage primary students.

Wiliam (2006) stated that there are five elements that increase successful implementations of assessment for learning: accountability, support, choice, flexibility, and gradualism. In our desire to improve written literacy and engagement of students in writing, Wiliam's five elements were considered carefully to help ensure a successful implementation of assessment for learning strategies by using exemplars and building criteria to improve the quality of students' personal writing.

The Primary Learning Team was supported and accountable to their colleagues on the Primary Learning Team and to me, the researcher. Support was given as the team met regularly to discuss our written language instruction and to assess student's writing. Accountability was obtained with PLT members attending meetings, prepared with both students' writing for assessment, and questions and comments concerning the writing instruction. Throughout this initiative, the teachers were encouraged but given the choice to participate in the action research. This research allowed teachers to be flexible in most aspects of their instruction of writing (i.e., how often personal writing was taught with the minimum being once a week), writing topics (other than the ones chosen for the research data), the literature used to support the writing, and what pre-writing strategies and post-writing expectations were used by the teacher. The requirements for this action research were students would be given the opportunity to analyze (read, discuss, and examine) exemplary

writing, to create a criteria list for exemplary writing, and to have a specific date for their writing to be completed. Wiliam's last element for successful implementation was gradualism. Gradualism means allowing time to acquire a mindset of assessing for learning. Specifically, using exemplars and building criteria with students so they may read, see and understand what makes quality writing. The PLT analyzed the results from this research looking for a positive relationship between the use of assessment for learning strategies (analyzing exemplary writing and building a list of criteria for their personal writing) and improved written language, in hopes, that these strategies could be implemented in all writing genres for positive results.

### **Significance of the Project**

The goal of this action research was to use assessment for learning strategies in written language to positively impact the quality of students' personal writing. Black and Wiliam's (1998) research provided evidence for the importance of formative assessment and how this dramatic link between assessment and instruction leads to significant increases in student achievements. The process of assessment for learning allowed the teacher, student, and parent to see what is expected and to work together so that learning moves forward (Chappius & Stiggins, 2006). Through this action research, we explored the use of assessment for learning strategies with personal writing to see if students' personal writing improved when students created and implemented criteria from exemplary writings.

Assessment for learning is frequently discussed at professional learning sessions but it became apparent, during professional dialogues on this topic, that there were varying degrees of understanding. Consequently, an additional goal for this action research project was for our PLT to gain an in-depth understanding and comfort in using assessment for learning

strategies in writing literacy and to encourage its use in all instructional areas. This action research helped our team become more knowledgeable regarding implementing assessment for learning strategies and ways to increase students' performance in written language.

Through dialogue with the Primary Learning Team, it was noted that the assessment on the quality of personal written language was ambiguous and teachers judged the writing on varying criteria. Most commonly, written language was judged on writing conventions (use of proper grammar, punctuations, and capitalization) and the reason being because of the ease of assessment. The PLT believed it is more difficult to assess on the content or meaning in writing (use of language for greater understanding, descriptive language, relevance, cohesiveness and organization). The difficulty with assessing written language became even more compromised when teachers judged the writing based on their own criteria instead of using standardized criteria. The *BC Performance Standards on Writing* (BC Ministry of Education, 2009) is a document with which the Heritage Primary teachers became more familiar and viewed as valuable document for assessing written language. Personal writing continues to be an area of instruction where students' written expression needs to be assessed and instruction determined for quality writing to occur. The ability to write effectively at all academic levels is required for all academic progress.

The Heritage Primary Learning Team used assessment for learning strategies, specifically, building criteria using writing exemplars (excellent examples of personal writing) and anchors (examples of writing at different stages of learning, not meeting, approaching, meeting or exceeding expectations). The team only used the meaning strand of the *B.C. Performance Standards in Writing* as the criteria to assess writing and to provide feedback to students to improve personal writing. The significance of this research for



teachers was to learn and use an effective way of assessing students for learning and then instructing individual students on what they need to know to improve the quality of their personal writing.

My action research question asked, To what degree did the quality of students' personal writing improve when students built criteria from exemplary writings? The writing criteria were based on the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2009) Writing Performance Standards. This action research project provided needed forums among the Primary Learning Team to discuss assessment for learning strategies, quality student writing, and the latest research on both assessment for learning and written language instruction.

### **Researcher Context**

Currently, I am a teacher at Heritage Elementary School in the Prince George, British Columbia School District. I have been at this school for 12 years and I have taught all of the primary grades, Kindergarten to Grade 3. Throughout my 30 years of teaching, I have taught all grades from Kindergarten to Grade 6, held the position of Support Teacher at Ron Brent Elementary, an inner-city school in this district and was a District Itinerant Special Education teacher. I am an instructional leader within Heritage School and I am an active member of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) at Heritage.

Fullan (2007), an internationally known author and consultant on educational change and improvement, described a professional learning community as a collaborative culture with a focus on learning for all, as action oriented and committed to improvement and results. Within the Heritage School PLC, functions an effective Primary Learning Team (PLT), consisting of Kindergarten to Grade 3 teachers. Our PLT has initiated and researched three previous inquiries in the past three years. These inquiries addressed Reading Power

strategies on school-wide comprehension, teachers' understanding of assessment for learning strategies on teachers' instruction, and effectively using Daily Five Reading structure within the classroom to increase reading fluency and comprehension. Consistently, throughout the school year, our PLC chooses and reads current professional books for discussion, action, and reflection. The Primary Learning Team staff is truly committed to life-long learning.

This action research was conducted with Heritage Elementary School students and the research was implemented and collaboratively assessed by members of the Heritage Primary Learning Team. The research subjects were students in Grades 1, 2, and 3 at Heritage Elementary School, Prince George, British Columbia in School District 57. The members of the action research team were the primary teachers at Heritage Elementary School teaching Grades 1, 2, and 3. Heritage Elementary School, located within the city of Prince George, has a diverse student population with both multi-cultural and first-nation backgrounds making up 15% of our population and most students coming mainly from middle social economic backgrounds. Within this population, there are students who have exceptional needs and students who receive support from Learning Assistant teachers and Educational Assistants. We have approximately 430 students attending our school, with 25 teachers and approximately 20 support staff including an administrator and vice-principal. The primary classes have between 22 and 24 students.

The Primary Learning Team was informed of the inquiry for this action research, having studied the BC Writing Performance Standards, and read and supported, the ideas and strategies of the reference book on teaching writing using criteria by Reid and Wells (2004). Forums were held on expectations for teacher instruction and how to use the assessment for learning strategies of using exemplary writings and creating a criteria list from them. Data

were collected on students' writing performance on all personal writing samples in October and November 2011 and then January 2012. Reflections provided by teachers on the questionnaire after each write were analyzed for any themes or trends among teachers on their thoughts, ideas or concerns on both the process and outcome. Students rated their understanding and use of criteria from exemplary writing after completing their own writing.

This research is beneficial for administrators, instructional leaders, and teachers of written literacy within the confines of the research subjects. Specifically, the results assist in pursuing more continuity among primary teachers at Heritage Elementary School in assessing and providing feedback for students to improve their personal writing. The results would indicate effective assessment for learning strategies for teaching writing.

The success of this project was to see if after three months of student writing using criteria created by exemplary writings there was a significant increase in the quality of personal writing. The assessment write occurred during the same time frame on a similar topic in the months of October and November 2011 and January 2012. The writings were compared to the baseline data obtained in September on students writing abilities assessed on the *BC Writing Performance Standards* (BC Ministry of Education, 2009). An additional success for this project was from the students on rating their own learning of using criteria and knowledge of quality writing. The third success for this project was an analysis of the teacher questionnaires on their understanding of assessment for learning strategies and their judgment on the effectiveness of this action research on creating criteria for exemplary personal writing.

## Chapter Summary

The intent of this research was to demonstrate that when students analyze (read and discuss) personal writing exemplars and anchors with the purpose of creating criteria for personal writing, students' own personal writing will significantly improve. The criteria for analyzing student writing was based on the Meaning strand in the *BC Performance Standards in Writing* (BC Ministry of Education, 2009). An example of one criterion in the meaning strand for Grade 3 states that one way to increase meaning for the reader is by using examples. During the research, students noticed or were directed to notice the use of examples in explaining a thing, an event or an emotion in exemplar writing (e.g., *The snowflakes sparkled like millions of tiny diamonds*). The use of examples in personal writing helps capture and engage readers. Students analyzed and discussed how using examples significantly improved the quality of their writing. The students will then add "use of examples" to the list of criteria for exemplar personal writing. Assessment for learning gives feedback to students on how they can improve their learning (i.e., using examples to increase the quality of personal writing). The inquiry question for the action research was: To what degree did the quality of students' personal writing improve when students built criteria from exemplary writings?



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 1 established the purpose of this project and provided background knowledge on the school where I conducted this research. This chapter provides evidence for the importance of assessment for learning and how the link between assessment and instruction leads to significant increases in student achievement. The literature review will concentrate on the benefits of assessment for learning, the strategies that are involved in using assessment for learning, and the effectiveness of using assessment for learning in written language. I will also address current research on written language pedagogy.

### Assessment for Learning

*Assessment for Learning* (AFL) is a teaching and learning strategy. Black and Wiliam (1998) conducted an extensive survey of more than 160 journals between 1990 and 1998. They used 250 sources that were published in special issues of the *Journal of Assessment*. They focused on one aspect of teaching: formative assessment (i.e., Assessment for Learning). They showed that formative assessment is at the heart of effective teaching. Their research set out to answer the central question of whether there was evidence that improving formative assessment raised standards. Black and Wiliam (1998) purported that all of the studies arrived at the same conclusion: innovations that included strengthening the practice of formative assessment produced significant and often substantial learning gains in students.

Their study provided evidence for the importance of assessment for learning and how the link between assessment and instruction can lead to significant student achievement. The information gained from assessments informs teachers on what students know or do not know, in order to adapt teaching to meet students' needs. Assessment for learning allows teachers to know their students' progress and difficulties with learning. Black and Wiliam

(1998) suggested that formative assessment be used to advise students on what they can do to improve their learning. Self-assessment and peer assessment enhances formative assessment when students are given learning targets to obtain, indication of their present position in relationship to the learning target, and strategies on how to close the gap between them. The ultimate understanding of teaching and learning is that they are closely intertwined. Black and Wiliams (1998) stated that it is no longer acceptable to have the perspective that it is the teachers' responsibility to teach and the students' responsibility to learn.

Earl (2004) discussed the perpetuating ideology of education as a sorting system or gatekeeper towards an ideology of society supporting learning for all students. The purpose of education is changing to a learning system. The pursuit of education is one of learning and helping others to learn. All students need education that gives them a deeper understanding of ideas and concepts. To have this understanding for all people requires a mindset in which society views teaching, teachers, schools, and particularly, assessment differently. To shift this mindset to a, learning for all mindset requires a dramatic change in how teaching and learning happens in schools. Earl (2004) emphasized a belief that all students are required to be contributing members of society and that all teachers have a moral obligation to teach students what they need, to be successful learners.

Earl (2004) discussed three different kinds of assessment that are all essential but have different purposes: *assessment of learning*, *assessment for learning*, and *assessment as learning*. Assessment of learning is used to confirm what students know and whether they have met the standards. Its purpose is summative, intended to certify learning and to report to students and parents their school progress. In assessment of learning, the results are reported symbolically by marks or letter grades that are averaged by marks across content areas.

Earl (2004) stressed that with assessment for learning, the importance of collecting the right evidence, which is vital to the whole process of assessment for learning as it allows teachers to gather information on what they need to provide in the form of instruction. This information identifies the next steps in learning and teaching, and teachers can target the instruction and resources, based on this information. Assessment for learning shifts the emphasis away from summative to formative assessment to make decisions on what the next stage of learning will be. Assessment for learning highlights the students' strengths and weaknesses and provides feedback that will further the learning. Assessment for learning is motivating as students can see the opportunity to close the gap in their understanding (Earl, 2003).

Assessment as learning addresses the aspect of becoming cognizant of ourselves as learners. It is equally important for the learner to understand where the gaps of learning are and what the expectations are for negating the gap as it is for the teacher. When students are self-assessing, looking at exemplar work samples and making decisions on criteria for excellent work, they become responsible for their learning as well. (Earl, 2004)

Earl (2004) stated that using assessment for learning strategies in classrooms allows teachers to constantly build learning profiles of students. This profile provides information on what students need so their progress in learning can be done effectively and efficiently. Assessment for Learning uses many sources of information: observation, worksheets, questions in class, conferences, demonstrations, exams, tests, essays, portfolios, self or peer evaluation, student journals, and many other ways of assessing students to facilitate future planning and teaching. There is the undeniable fact that there are many gaps in students' knowledge and understandings that need to be discovered in order to avoid the

misconceptions and confusion that occurs in student learning. McTighe and O'Connor (2005) stated that the best teachers recognize the importance of ongoing assessment as the means to achieve maximum performance.

Knowing that formative assessment is part of the teaching and learning process, teachers and students need to become knowledgeable on the content standards or benchmarks that they are trying to meet. Chappius and Stiggins (2006) explained that curriculum or standards need to be deconstructed into classroom level learning targets. Learning targets are the specific learning intentions that define the objectives of the daily lessons. Students learn more when they know what they are expected to achieve. When students know what constitutes quality work, and when teachers directly connect their teaching to those expectations, the probability rises, that students will meet the achievement expectations.

Harris (2007) discussed the various techniques in formative assessment that can enhance teaching and learning by providing a more focused application for students. As with many aspects of the learning process, target-setting which was previously the domain of the teacher is now just as much the responsibility of the students. She explained the benefits of sharing the learning intentions so students know the expectations and can focus on achieving them rather than going on an unknown journey. Too often the expectations of learning and performance are vague and hazy; however, when using learning intentions both teachers and students become accountable for the learning that needs to occur. Learning intentions need to be posted in student-friendly language, read, and referred to often, as this clarifies for the learners what performance is expected. It establishes a focus on what students need to achieve through the teaching lesson. Students need to know what is expected and how they



will demonstrate their knowledge in an authentic performance, which in turn gives learners the motivation to achieve.

To further support learning, Harris (2007) argued, teachers need to give students the criteria for the performance standard they are trying to meet. Teachers need to be aware of the importance of deconstructing exemplars in order to analyze specific features. When students have analyzed the exemplars and built criteria on what is needed to meet expectations they then will become successful learners. Cooper (2007) also emphasized that when students and teachers discuss criteria for learning it sets students up for success. Students have a greater understanding of what the teacher wants and how to best attain the concept. Using exemplars of quality work give students an opportunity to see what is expected from the teacher. Anchors of students work helps students and teachers develop a shared understanding about the performance indicators associated with specific levels of achievement.

Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, and Wiliam (2005) stated that to be effective, feedback needs to cause thinking. Grades, scores, and comments like “good job” do not cause thinking. When work or performance is assessed by teachers this assessment knowledge, needs to be communicated to the learner. This communication is referred to in literature resources as *feedback*. Effective feedback is what moves learning forward. The feedback on performance needs to be descriptive, timely, and often. Wiggins (1998, cited in McTaghe, 2005) pointed out that, to serve learning, feedback must meet four criteria: it must be timely, specific, understandable to the receiver, and formed to allow self-adjustments on the student’s part. Comments on the students’ performance tasks need to cause thinking and offer support on what students need to do to improve the tasks.

Effective questioning allows teachers to gauge students' understanding and to adjust the instruction to meet the students' needs. It is important to assess students' understanding and plan questions ahead of discussions to enhance student learning and thinking skills. It is worthwhile for teachers to spend more time planning instruction than on marking student work. Harris (2007) noted that questioning is one of our most effective strategies in creating learning rather than simply testing learning. Teachers need to use questions that go beyond recall in order to promote, challenge or broaden the range of student experiences or learning.

Black and Wiliam (1998) stated that self-assessment by students is not a luxury but in fact an essential component of formative assessment. Self-assessment allows students to take responsibility for their own learning. Learners involved in the process of developing agreed-upon criteria for success will rise to a higher level of learning and engagement. Students who are given opportunities to self-assess against criteria before submitting work will strive to improve their work. Students need opportunities to refine, revise, practice, and retry. If teachers are giving feedback instead of grades, using criteria, and self-assessment, then it only makes sense to allow students to improve their work and resubmit. Classroom assessment needs to focus on how well the knowledge and skill has been mastered, not on when it was mastered. Teachers want students to attain the knowledge and skills as ultimately the end goal is student learning. McTighe and O'Connor (2005) described seven assessment practices to enhance learning and teaching, the seventh of which is allowing new evidence of achievement to replace old evidence. It conveys an important message to students that teachers care more about the students' successful learning and not merely their grades.

Assessment for Learning has a significant positive impact on student achievement; therefore, it cannot be dismissed as a new fad or strategy that eventually will fade. As teacher leaders, we need to inform, promote, coach and reflect with colleagues on the importance of Assessment for Learning on student learning and achievement, especially for the low achievers. Teachers need to address the inaccurate mindset that students who encounter difficulties are lacking ability, which leads them to believe there is a defect within themselves. The attainable goal of education is for all students to learn and for all students to help others learn for greater understanding and achievement.

### **Written Expression**

Writing is the most complex literate activity in which students engage. Writing text involves the coordination of multiple cognitive processes, linguistic skills, and physical operations to accomplish the goal of composing. The writer also needs to consider both the audience and genre-specific conventions that need to be implemented (Troia & Graham, 2003). Klassen and Welton (2009) believe the task of writing is both complex and demanding, requiring a heavy cognitive load.

Troia, Shin-jin, Munroe, and Cohen (2009) pointed out that approximately 30 years ago, there was a paradigm shift in the approach to teaching writing. Prior to this time, writing was limited to small paragraphs on a topic that was contrived by the teacher with the feedback focusing on writing conventions. These teacher lessons were mostly directed on writing conventions skills such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation. In the 1980s new ideas were being researched, discussed, and implemented. The writing process began to be adopted throughout North America mostly under the name of *Writer's Workshop*. Hayes and Flower (1980), Graves (1983), Culkins (1986), and Atwell (1987) were the prominent

advocates on the theory of writing being more than skill-specific lessons but being completely process-oriented (Troia, Shin-jin, Munroe, & Cohen, 2009).

Reid and Wells (2004) explained Writers' Workshop as a framework for writing instruction and practice in the classroom. It follows a predictable format of teaching mini-lessons for 10 minutes, independent student writing for 20 to 30 minutes, teacher conferencing with students during independent writing time, and students sharing of writing for 10 minutes. The total amount of daily writing instruction is between 30 and 50 minutes. When using the writing process, writing topics need to be authentic to the student and to be done in a risk free environment to cultivate a sense of community (Reid & Wells, 2004).

Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) claimed that most researchers now recognize that the writing process model involves an understanding of procedural knowledge on how to plan, write and revise writing. They continued by saying that students need to be taught strategies that help with planning (activating prior knowledge by brainstorming or using a semantics map), writing (constraints of different genre writing: poetry, narrative) and revising (student assessment, peer assessment and teacher feedback). Troia (2009) believed that writing is a process that benefits from multiple drafts and revision, and that assessment of writing should be repeated across the academic year to evaluate change or growth in specific aspects of writing. He claimed that the advantage to repeated assessments is its use in modifying instruction if there is no progress. When using a writing process approach, writing assessment takes into account the student's ability to improve writing across multiple drafts and time during the school year.

Troia et al. (2009) summarized the National Assessment of Educational Practice (NAEP) document that stated seven out of ten teachers in America use a process approach to

writing. These data indicated that both good and poor writers did not make significant gain or benefit appreciably from writing process instruction. Numerous researchers in this field have studied the possible reasons for the lack of gains. Gersten and Baker (2001) stated that an effective writing program should include: explicit teaching on the stages of process oriented writing and the dimensions of different writing genres, as well as on giving extensive feedback to the students on the quality of their writing either by teachers or peers. They emphasized the key to any writing process program is *explicit teaching*.

Trion et al. (2009) again summarized the NAEP (1999) document that suggest the reasons for lack of expected growth with a writing process model was because the teachers of the writing process were not implementing two critical agents for successful outcomes, systematic and integrated teaching of *transcription skills* (printing and handwriting skills, keyboarding and computer skills) and a focus on students self-regulation in writing through students' goal setting, progress monitoring and self-evaluation.

Advocates for writing process model dismiss the importance of transcription skills but research from Graham, Berninger, Abbott, Abbott, and Whitaker (1997) suggested that transcription skills account for sixty percent of the inconsistency in students writing and twenty-five percent of inconsistency in writing quality within primary students and forty percent within the intermediate population. Graham et al.'s (1997) and De La Paz and Graham's (2002) studies indicated that mechanics of writing, especially handwriting fluency, have an effect on compositional fluency and quality. They clearly stated not teaching transcription skills may impede the writing development of those children who do not acquire these skills easily. It is believed that when these mechanical skills are more fluid it then frees up the cognitive processes that enable higher thinking, planning, writing, and

reviewing while composing. What Graham et al. (1997) suggested is a more balanced approach to written instruction that emphasizes both explicit instruction on the mechanics of writing and authentic writing that emphasizes both meaning and process. Olinghouse (2007) also affirmed the importance of handwriting fluency as students who have faster handwriting skills wrote more and was of higher quality. This research also suggested that less attention to handwriting frees up the cognitive resources for idea generation, advanced planning and compositional fluency (Olinghouse, 2007). Writing instruction needs to include explicit teaching of writing conventions, handwriting skills and strategies to employ meaning during composing. Hidi and Boscolo (2006) described writing as a meaningful activity rather than a process, as writing only becomes meaningful, when it aims at expressing and communicating thoughts and feelings. Writing is a process of making meaning, an activity that individuals engage in for self-understanding.

Writing is challenging especially for the inexperienced writer. Writing can cause anxiety for students and frustration for teachers, and then often leads to the avoidance of writing. It is common to hear teachers say they lack of knowledge, skills, and strategies to teach students to become competent writers. Troia and Graham (2003) stated that the quality of instruction that children receive plays a major role in writing achievement. Teachers need support on best teaching practices in writing instruction which includes more individualized explicit teaching, use of extensive modeling, guided practice and coaching with informative feedback, and numerous opportunities for independent practice. Troia and Graham (2003) listed comprehensive features on what constitutes exemplary writing instruction. The features are daily writing with multiple composing tasks and audiences; extensive efforts to excite the mood and having them do authentic writing; overtly teaching and modeling writing skills,

building and self-evaluating criteria for writing; providing explicit feedback discussing progress and goals; having cooperative arrangements to enable students to help each other revise, plan and edit; and displaying and presenting students work.

Klassen and Welton (2006) stated that an essential key to successful writers is strong self-efficacy. When students have a strong sense of self-efficacy they show thoughtful planning and skillful composing, motivation and willingness to put effort into writing, and persistence in completing compositions successfully. Students need to believe they can do it. Their study claimed that by age 10, students are able to accurately differentiate between effort, performance and ability. Students who doubt their competence show less perseverance for difficult tasks thus confirming their belief that writing is a difficult task. Self-efficacy influences the on the level of academic success students attain (Klassen & Welton, 2006). Walker (2003) discussed ways to cultivate self-efficacy by giving greater autonomy in writing choices, using collaborative writing groups and discussions, and developing self-regulating learning strategies that lead to improved self-monitoring. Walker (2006) explained these meta-cognitive skills: monitoring their understanding, self evaluating their strengths and weaknesses, engaging in self-corrective actions and making appropriate choices, all help to regulate students own learning.

Routman (2005) believed that during the primary years in school, journal writing became the mainstay of most writing programs. She also stated that journals are fine if they are not used for just personal writing but are used as a notebook for all genres of writing. She affirmed that students need to have authentic writing opportunities, extensive modeling, guided and individual practice, and coaching and encouragement with informative feedback.

The writing process allows for differentiated learning to occur for all students if assessment and instruction occur during teacher student conferences or through mini lessons with only those students who need that skill taught or re-taught. Using this method, struggling students can receive more time and specific instruction on areas that need improvement. Good writers also benefit from feedback through assessments from teachers, peers and self. Assessment needs to occur throughout the academic year to evaluate growth in specific aspects of writing. Repeated assessment has the advantage of giving teachers data to modify their instruction. Through assessment and feedback writers can see for themselves the visual evidence that progress has happened (Troia & Graham, 2003).

Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) presented, that as a result of new theories, new research, and the changing status of writing in the curriculum, the process model has evolved. Teaching the writing process model now demands careful instruction and assessment of students' written language and creating explicit lessons that extend across the entire writing process. Increasingly, educators and researchers are realizing that writing is a multi-faceted complex process that takes on many forms and functions. Berninger and Winn (2006) stated that there is a rapid expansion of knowledge on brain processes in writing that is leading to new approaches of brain-based clinical assessment of writing. They believe that to increase achievement for all students, educators need to take into account both developmental and individual differences in students, to generate individual learning profiles both strengths and weaknesses, and to link evidence-based assessment findings to evidence-based effective instruction. They also professed that effective instruction depends upon social context, interactions between internal and external environments and brain research.



The pedagogy of written language is continually changing as research continues to identify promising practices in teaching and learning. Klassen and Welton (2006) emphasized that writing is an essential skill. They believe competency in writing is imperative for all academic success and that one's writing ability determines their academic paths. Even as computers and word processor programs replace pencil and pen, writing continues to demand effort, knowledge of specific strategies and specific skills. Writing is as much an emotional activity as it is a cognitive activity. The affective components strongly influence all phases of the writing process. Writing is also one of the major means by which students demonstrate their knowledge, and it provides a powerful mechanism for communication, self-expression and self-reflection (Graham, 2006b). Students use writing to gather and share information, and as useful tool for exploring, organizing and refining ideas.

Wells and Reid (2004) discussed the knowledge, skills, and strategies that must be taught for quality writing to occur with students. Reid and Wells (2004) adhered to the writing processes but believe anchor lessons (explicit lessons) need to be taught to students. An example of an anchor lesson is called *Zooming in on a Personal Moment*, which refers to a skill of expanding a moment in time, a technique which can be used not only in personal writing, but also across writing genres. The Writing Workshop is a cornerstone of the program that is guided by two beliefs. For quality writing to occur, teachers must create a supportive classroom and environment that encourages risk taking and that teachers need to understand the craft of writing and skills that students need to know. Ultimately, teachers need to be knowledgeable about all aspects of writing.

## **Chapter Summary**

The positive impact of *assessment for learning* on student achievement, especially for low achievers, is well documented. Instructional leaders at all levels of the education system need to inform and encourage professionals to learn and implement assessment for learning understandings. Assessment for learning is imperative for our public education goal of academic success for all students.

An essential component of education, *assessment for learning*, is needed for change to occur in our school system, as it is an integral part of effective teaching. *Assessment for learning* is the process of information gained from assessments to inform teachers on what students know or do not know, in order to adapt teaching to meet students' needs. When *assessment for learning* strategies are implemented thoroughly, they increase the speed of student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). It is therefore imperative that teachers and students incorporate AFL strategies in their daily learning and teaching practices.

Writing is a complex, literate activity that involves a coordination of multiple cognitive, linguistic and physical skills. The complex task of writing demands a significant cognitive capacity. Most researchers adhere to the importance of a balanced approach to written instruction that emphasizes both explicit instruction on the mechanics of writing and value placed on the meaning and process of written language. Competency in written language is essential for all academic success. It is therefore essential that *assessment for learning* be used in the teaching and learning of written language. When students analyze exemplary writing examples and develop criteria from them, students know what is expected of them and attempt to attain exemplary standards.

Chapter 3 will explain the methodology used in this project in ascertaining to what degree the students' writing would improve if they analyzed and built criteria from exemplary writing.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

Chapter 1 outlined the significance of this study and presented the central research question. Chapter 2 summarized the professional literature on Assessment for Learning and on the writing processes. This chapter discusses the research methodologies used for this inquiry and why specific research designs were chosen. Action research is discussed and why it was chosen as the method of research for this inquiry. This chapter also explains why a Mixed Method of research, and specifically the Embedded Research design, was used in this study for collecting and analyzing data.

#### **Action Research**

The purpose of action research in education is to improve educational practice. It gives researchers an opportunity to study their own problems or issues in a school (Creswell, 2008). Action research allows educators to reflect on school problems, collect and analyze data, and implement changes or plans of action based on their findings. According to Sagor (2000), “action research is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the ‘actor’ in improving and or refining his or her actions” (p. 3). Creswell (2008) stated that action research encourages collaboration among staff to help transform schools and educational practices. It also allows educators to reflect on their practices and to test out new ideas without substantial risk to them professionally. Sagor (2000) believed that through action research, practitioners make a personal commitment to collect data that fosters continued professional growth and development. It allows for professionals to make continual progress in developing the strengths of a reflective practitioner and it ultimately creates an atmosphere of collegiality. Sagor (2000) advocated for action research because of the empowering

experience for teachers who are involved, as it is both relevant and important to teachers and for their students. I chose action research for this study as it empowered the teachers to reflect, collaborate, and collect data on an issue. It allowed the teachers and other educators to become learners through this research and I wanted the teachers to see immediate benefits of their actions. The Primary Learning Team were concerned with the primary students' quality of personal writing. The information received from this research was used to help make decisions on assessment for learning practices, writing learning pedagogy and directing educators on effective practices in obtaining quality personal writing.

### **Mixed-Method Design**

A mixed-method design is used when a comprehensive understanding of the research inquiry is wanted. Campbell and Fiske (1959) introduced the multi-trait, multi-method approach consequently stimulating other researchers to use multiple methods of data collection in a single study. When a mixed method design is used it is a very powerful mix of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The mixed method design extends or elaborates on the primary database for more detailed specific information that cannot be gained from results using only one method of data collection.

**Embedded mixed method.** The mixed-method design employed in this study was an embedded mixed method of data collection. The purpose of this type of method is to collect quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously but to have one form of data play a supportive role to the primary form of data. The reason for collecting the second form of data is to augment or support the primary data source. In this study, I collected quantitative data as my primary source using students' performance standards in writing to address whether the use of assessment for learning strategies increased the quality of students' personal writing

and quantitative data from both teacher's and student's rating scales regarding their perceptions of using assessment for learning strategies. Embedded into this were qualitative data that came from teachers. Their answers to short answer questions regarding their perceptions of the using assessment for learning strategies to improve the quality of primary students' personal writing provided additional information not provided by the primary source of data. This qualitative data were themed for greater clarity on the effectiveness of this inquiry. Using the embedded designed of having the qualitative data embedded into the quantitative data provided additional confidence in the inquiry results.

### **Quantitative Research**

Quantitative research is educational research in which the researcher decides on the educational issue that needs to be addressed. It then collects quantifiable data from participants and analyzes these numbers using statistics as well as conducts the inquiry in an unbiased objective manner. The quantitative data collected in this study were student performance standards, student rating scale data and teacher rating scale data.

**Student Performance Standards.** The embedded mixed-method design in this study gave priority to the quantitative data gathered from the students' performance standards in writing and to the quantitative data collected from the rating scales of both teachers and students. For the performance standard data, the students first completed a personal write in September 2011 without the implementation of assessment for learning strategies. This data gave a baseline of performance standards on students' writing abilities to compare to forthcoming writes. The students then did three more writes with the assessment for learning strategies of analyzing (reading and discussing) and building criteria from exemplary student writings used. Data were collected on the quality of students' writing on the first write in

October 2011, on the second write in November 2011 and on the third write in January 2012. The students' writings were rated compared to the *BC Performance Standards in Writing* using only the meaning strand (see Appendix A). The data from students' writing were given either a (1) *not meeting expectation*, (2) *approaching expectations*, (3) *meeting expectations*, or (4) *exceeding expectations*. Teachers from different grades rated students' writing to avoid bias towards the teachers' own classes. The students' names were also absent from the writings, but were given a grade numbers and a code numbers for identification (e.g. Grade 1: student one, or 1:1).

An example of the data collected was *Student A* received a performance standard of (1) *not meeting expectations* on the baseline write in September 2011, a performance standard of (2) *approaching expectations* on the first write in October 2011, a performance standard of (3) *meeting expectations* on the second write in November 2011 and a performance standard of (4) *exceeding expectations* on the final write in January 2012. The collected data were collated by grade and for the baseline write and the three formal writes. The median performance standards were used to compare writes within each grade level. The data were collected on the percentage of students at each performance standard for each write in order to compare and identify if there were significant increases in students' performances on the quality of their writing among the writes. It was anticipated that students' performance standards would increase significantly by the third formal write in January because of the implementation of assessment for learning strategies.

**Student rating scale data.** The second primary source of quantitative data analyzed came from the students involved in the action research. The student questionnaire (see Appendix B) focused on the knowledge they gained and the skills they were taught to

produce exemplary writing. The students rated answers to questions concerning the usefulness of creating criteria from exemplary writing before they wrote. The students responded, on a Likert-type scale out of 3, specifying their level of disagreement or agreement to five questions by circling a sad face for *Not Helpful* which received a score of one, a neutral face for *Helpful* which received a score of two, and a happy face for *Very Helpful* which received a score of 3. An example of a student question was: *Is it helpful to see examples of students' writing before you write?* (Appendix B). Data from questionnaires were obtained from the students only after the January personal writing. The students' acquired knowledge of what constituted excellent writing was an important aspect of assessment for learning. The quantitative data from student questionnaires were a primary source of data. The median score was collated on each question and by each grade. By using these strategies, it was anticipated that students would have the knowledge on how to reach the target of excellent writing.

**Teacher rating scale data.** The third primary source of quantitative data came from a teacher's questionnaire on whether the assessment for learning strategies of analyzing and building criteria from exemplary writing improves the quality of students' personal writing. The teachers rated these questions on a rating scale from one through to five, with a one being *poor* to five being *excellent* (see Appendix C). The individual learning team members were asked to reflect on the strategies of analyzing (reading and discussing) exemplary work and creating criteria from the writing used with the students. An example question read: *Has your knowledge of what constitutes exemplar writing increased?* (see Appendix C). The quantitative data from teachers' questionnaires were a primary source of data as it indicated the median score on each question related to whether teachers perceived they had benefited



from assessment for learning strategies. Sagor (2000) gave further reasoning for professionals doing action research as it inevitably builds reflective practitioners. The questionnaire was intended to allow teachers to reflect on the strategies used with the students and the effectiveness of these strategies.

### **Qualitative Data**

Qualitative data is a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants. It asks broad general questions and collects data consisting largely of words or text from the participants. The researcher describes and analyzes these words for themes and conducts the inquiry in a subjective biased manner. The qualitative data collected in this study were answers and comments from teacher's short answer questions based on benefits of using specific assessment for learning strategies.

**Teacher short answer questions.** The embedded qualitative data were obtained from two short answer questions done by the Primary Learning Team ( see Appendix C, Questions 7 & 8). The data collected were themed to provide additional information to augment primary data. The first question was, *What do you see as the benefits of using this assessment for learning strategy in your instruction of writing?*, and the second questions was, *What are additional comments that you would like to share with the researcher or Learning Team regarding building criteria from exemplary personal writing?* These two questions allowed teachers to share their insights and concerns with the Primary Learning team and myself on the implemented assessment for learning strategies.

### **Participants**

The participants involved in this research were students attending Heritage Elementary School during the 2011-2012 school year. These student participants were enrolled in Grades

1, 2, and 3 participated in the writings however students who were labeled as special needs were taken out of the data collection. The teachers involved were experienced primary teachers at Heritage Elementary School in the 2011-2012 school year. They were considered qualified to analyze students' writing and evaluate them based on the *BC Performance Standards in Writing*. It is important to note that because of their experience, they were able to evaluate what was *usually* expected from student's writings in October, November and January of a school year.

### **Data Analysis**

For this study, the strength of the embedded design was that it combined the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data was an effective way of recording the outcomes for this study and qualitative data was effective in augmenting the quantitative data. The quantitative data collected were the students' performance standards results. The baseline write results done in September 2011 were compared to the subsequent writes in October 2011, November 2011, and January 2012. Two sets of data were collected on the performance standards. The median performance standard was obtained on the baseline write and on the subsequent writes for each grade level. This allowed the team and the researcher to see if there were correlations between the implemented assessment for learning strategies and an increase of the median performance standard for each write. The next data collected were percentages of students that obtained performance standards of *not meeting, approaching, meeting* and *exceeding expectations* at each grade level. These were calculated for comparison between writes. This comparison allowed for a clear analysis on whether there were significant percentage increases of performance standards at the *meeting*

and *exceeding expectations*. The percentages data indicated a writing competency at each grade level.

The rating scale data from the students' questionnaire were analyzed to see if the students' perceptions of using assessment for learning strategies were effective. The median rates for each question were calculated for each grade. The rating scale was one, *Not Helpful*, two, *Helpful* and three, *Very Helpful*. This quantitative data on student's perceptions gave further evidence whether assessment for learning strategies were effective.

The quantitative data from the teacher rating scales were used to augment the proposal that using assessment for learning strategies with students would help improve the quality of students' personal writing. The median rates were found for questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, & 6 on the teachers rating scales. These medians rates were calculated for each formal write in October 2011, November 2011, and January 2012. The teachers' perceptions data gave supportive evidence to the use of these strategies.

The answers and comments that emerged from the last two questions on the teachers' rating scale were qualitative data. This data were gathered from teachers on the benefits of using the assessment for learning strategies. This data were themed and analyzed to give further evidence of the effectiveness of these specific strategies. The inclusion of this data strengthened the quantitative data as it gave a voice to the writing results.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter discussed the methodology of action research and why this methodology was chosen for this inquiry. It also explained the mixed-method research design and, more specifically, the embedded mixed-method design that was involved in this research. The chapter described fully the primary sources of quantitative data that were collected and how

they were analyzed for evidence on the benefits of using the specific assessment for learning strategies studied in this inquiry. The chapter also describes the qualitative data embedded into the inquiry to further augment the data on improving students' quality of personal writing.

This project inquired about the degree of effectiveness in using assessment for learning strategies to improve personal writing with primary students. The specific *assessment for learning* strategies studied were analyzing and creating criteria with students by using samples of exemplary personal writing. The students were given many opportunities to read, discuss, and build criteria from exemplary writing samples for use in their personal writing. The expected outcome was when students were given the opportunity to build and implement criteria from analyzing exemplary writings, their quality of personal writings will increase.

When measuring for validity and reliability enough evidence needed to be gathered to provide for trusted research results. With this action research inquiry, the results from the students' writing performance standards were calculated by obtaining the median performance standard for each grade on each write. The percentages of students at each performance standard in writing were also calculated for comparison. Along with this data, the students' and teachers' rating scale questionnaires were analyzed and calculated to find the median rates for each question. These sources of data supported the inquiry that students' writings were superior when using assessment for learning strategies rather than without this intervention implemented. The three quantitative sources of data were independent and yet were able to provide evidence on whether the quality of students' personal writing improved.

Embedded into the quantitative data were the qualitative data. The qualitative data provided by the teachers were their comments and answers to Questions 7 and 8 on the

teachers' questionnaire. Their words were analyzed and themed to provide further evidence to the success of this inquiry. This qualitative data allowed teachers to have a voice regarding the assessment for learning strategies and the effects on students' learning and their learning. The next chapter of this project will present the results of the research study.

## Chapter 4: Results

Chapter 1 stated the significance of this study and the question asked in this action research. Chapter 2 presented literature on the current ideology of Assessment for Learning (AFL) and the Writing Process. Chapter 3 discussed the data sources, the collection methods and the reasons for my methodology choices.

This chapter presents the results of the data collected on students' writing performances from September 2011 to January 2012. The students' written language performances were first analyzed after each write to see if the implemented AFL strategies (*analyzing and building criteria from exemplary writing*) increased the students' performances compared to the baseline write and to the subsequent writes. This chapter also presents data obtained from students' rating scales on their understanding and knowledge of using these strategies. Finally, this chapter presents data obtained from a rating scale completed by teachers on their perceptions of using AFL strategies with written language. In this chapter, all data sources are presented in an effort to answer the research question: To what degree does the quality of students' personal writing improve when students build criteria from exemplary writing?

### Results

For the September, October, November 2011 and January 2012 writes, the results, including: the number of students, the median standard performance and the percentages obtained at each performance standard, were examined for significant increases of performances or trends in the competency of writing. Grades 1, 2 and 3 results were analyzed and discussed by grade. The student's rating scales were interpreted by grade, using the number of occurrences and the percentage of occurrences at each rating for each question. These data gave me the opportunity to hear from the students on their perceptions of using

AFL strategies. The teachers' rating scales were evaluated by the median rating for each question posed to the teachers after each write in October 2011, November 2011, and January 2012. The median rating by the PLT gave further indication of the perceptions of using AFL strategies, utilizing performance standards, and working within a professional learning team. The last data analyzed in this chapter were the text responses to questions 7 and 8 on the teachers' survey. The texts from their responses were collated and themed, and then this data was presented by number of occurrences and percentage of occurrences for each themed text. This gave individual teachers a voice on the benefits or concerns related to using of AFL strategies to improve student's quality of writing, using performance standards, and assessing and learning within a professional learning team.

### **Student Performance Standards**

In September 2011, the Professional Learning Team (PLT) met to discuss the topic for the baseline write, the time frame in which it would be completed, and the expectations for this write. The baseline write was completed during the second week of September on the topic of *My Summer*. The students were given opportunities to share ideas with one another on any fun and exciting activity done during their summer vacations and then they were asked to *zoom in* on one particular event or activity that they wanted to share.

The PLT met on September 30, 2011 to assess the students' writing using the meaning strand of the *BC Performance Standards in Writing* at each grade level (see Appendix A). The teachers assessed writing from a different grade than their own, and the students' writings were coded with a grade number and a student number, to help eliminate bias towards individual students. The students' writings were discussed among the assessing teachers, and were given a (1) *not meeting expectations*, (2) *approaching expectations*, (3)

*meeting expectations* or (4) *exceeding expectations* by using criteria from meaning strand on the *BC Performance Standards in Writing*.

The first write, *My Special Person*, in October 2011 was an engaging topic for most students. The exemplary writings, used at all grade levels, were personal and heartfelt. The students read and discussed the writing, and then sorted the writing into *not meeting*, *approaching*, *meeting* and *exceeding expectations*. Through this process, students developed a list of criteria for exemplary writing. The students used this developed criteria when working on their own *My Special Person* writing. The teachers continued to use good teaching strategies (e.g., brainstorming and sharing ideas with peers) that assisted students with their writing.

The second write in November 2011 was on the topic of *My Talent*. The students were asked to write about a talent that they felt they excelled in. They were then asked to *zoom in* on a time when they felt particularly pleased when using their talent. They were given opportunities to brainstorm talents that they believed they had. The talents ranged from *Being a Good Friend* to *Being a Hockey Player*. They read and sorted writings into the categories of *not meeting*, *approaching*, *meeting* and *exceeding expectations*. Using these writings, they created a list of criteria for exemplary writing that was again used while working on their own writings of *My Talent*.

The last write was done in January 2012 on the topic, *Winter Fun*. The students chose one winter activity that they enjoyed participating in that was fun and exciting. They were to *zoom in* on one time and share the experience in writing. The students read, discussed, and sorted the exemplary writings on *Winter Fun*, putting them into, *not meeting*,



*approaching, meeting and exceeding expectations* categories. From this process, the students created and used, a list of criteria that was available for them while writing.

**Grade 1 results.** There were 55 Grade 1 students in three different classrooms. Two of these students (1-7, 1-51) were removed from the data due to moving schools during the data collection time leaving 53 Grade 1 students in the data collection. Table 1 shows 49 students in Grade 1 (92.2%) were *approaching* or *not meeting expectations* levels. Additionally, over twice as many students were not meeting expectations for their grade level (n=33) than those who were approaching their grade level writing competency (n=16) and eight times the number than those students who were meeting expectations. Many students wrote one to two words or strings of letters. These writings were unable to be read by students or teachers. Most Grade 1 students are unable to write at the beginning of the year so this result was expected for this time of year. The AFL strategies of *analyzing and building criteria from exemplary writing* were not implemented for this baseline write.

The Grade 1 results for the first personal write *My Special Person* showed impressive gains when the students *used* AFL strategies with their writing (see Table 1). The Grade 1 criteria for *meeting expectations* are sentences remaining on the same topic with some relevant details. Using these criteria, two-thirds of the students (n=33) were at the performance standard (1) *not meeting expectations* on the baseline write in September but by the first write in October, only 4 students were left *not meeting expectations*.

Table 1

*Grade 1 Writing Results: Including number of students (n=53) and the percentage of students at each performance standard (PS) and the median PS on the September, October, November 2011, and January 2012 write.*

|                          | Performance Standards | Number of Students | Median PS | Percentage at each Performance Standard |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------|---|
| <b>Baseline Write</b>    |                       |                    |           |   |
| <i>My Summer</i>         |                       |                    |           |   |
| September 2011           |                       |                    |           |   |
|                          | 1                     | 33                 |           | 62.2%                                   |
|                          | 2                     | 16                 |           | 30%                                     |
|                          | 3                     | 4                  |           | 7.5%                                    |
|                          | 4                     | 0                  | 1         | 0%                                      |
| <b>October Write</b>     |                       |                    |           |   |
| <i>My Special Person</i> |                       |                    |           |   |
| October 2011             |                       |                    |           |   |
|                          | 1                     | 4                  |           | 7.5%                                    |
|                          | 2                     | 35                 |           | 66%                                     |
|                          | 3                     | 11                 |           | 20.7%                                   |
|                          | 4                     | 3                  | 2         | 5.6%                                    |
| <b>November Write</b>    |                       |                    |           |   |
| <i>My Talent</i>         |                       |                    |           |   |
| November 2011            |                       |                    |           |   |
|                          | 1                     | 5                  |           | 9.4%                                    |
|                          | 2                     | 18                 |           | 33.9%                                   |
|                          | 3                     | 22                 |           | 41.5%                                   |
|                          | 4                     | 8                  | 3         | 15%                                     |
| <b>January Write</b>     |                       |                    |           |   |
| <i>Winter Fun</i>        |                       |                    |           |   |
| January 2012             |                       |                    |           |   |
|                          | 1                     | 2                  |           | 3.8%                                    |
|                          | 2                     | 9                  |           | 17%                                     |
|                          | 3                     | 26                 |           | 49%                                     |
|                          | 4                     | 16                 | 3         | 30.2%                                   |

Additionally, on the first write *My Special Person* two-thirds of the Grade 1 students (n=35) were *approaching expectations* for competency level in writing. This was a

substantial gain in students' quality of writing with the AFL strategies *implemented* in comparison to students' writing ability on the baseline write when AFL students at *meeting expectations* in writing, increasing from 7.5% on the baseline write to 20% on the October 2011 write, almost tripling the number of Grade 1 students (n=11) who were *meeting expectations* already in October of the Grade 1 year. Three students were assessed at *exceeding expectations* on this write. The criteria for *exceeding expectations* were writings that showed individuality on a well-developed topic with supporting details. The Grade 1's demonstrated significant gains in writing from the baseline write to the first write, considering again, these students have only attended school for two months of the school year.

The substantial gains continued with the second write *My Talent*, in November 2011, with 40% of the Grade 1 students (n=22) *meeting expectations* in this write, doubling the amount of students from the October 2011 write to the November 2011 write. This left only one-third of the students (n=18) *approaching expectations* in November of the school year and approximately 10% of the students (n=5) left at *not meeting expectations*. There also was a substantial percentage increase of students *exceeding expectations*, almost tripling the amount from the October write of 5.6% of the students (n=3) to the November with 15% of the students (n=8).

The last write, *Winter Fun*, in January 2012, students had notable increases in their writing performance standards, considering that this was only 5 months into Grade 1 year. Close to one-half of the students (n=26) were *meeting expectations* in writing. Even more remarkable, was that 30% of the students (n=16) were exceeding expectations in writing competency. With close to five months left in the school year, it would be reasonable to

assume that the two students who were writing at *not meeting expectations* and the nine students who were writing at *approaching expectations* had time to *meet expectations* in writing.

The statistical evidence for Grade 1, the median performance standard for each write, also indicated a significant increase in the quality of writing when using AFL strategies (*analyzing and creating criteria from exemplary writing*). The baseline write *My Summer* had the median performance standard (1) *not meeting expectations*, and this increased on the first write *My Special Person* to the median performance standard (2) *approaching expectations*, and this again increased on the second write *My Talent* with the median performance standard (3) *meeting expectations* and for the last write *Winter Fun*, it remained at the median performance standard (3) *meeting expectations*.

Considering that this was only January of Grade 1, and the performance standard median was *meeting expectations*, the evidence indicated the AFL strategies (*analyzing and building criteria from exemplary writing*) were highly effective methods of improving the quality of writing for Grade 1 students.

**Grade 2 results.** There were 53 Grade 2 students in three different classrooms at Heritage Elementary School. Seven students in Grade 2 were non-writers due to learning difficulties identified in the previous year. Despite a variety of interventions implemented, these students (2-16, 2-17, 2-19, 2-24, 2-30, 2-34, 2-51) remained non-readers and non-writers in Grade 2. These 7 students were excluded from data collected. One student identified as special needs (2-23), was unable to understand the directions of the assignment and three students identified as students (2-13, 2-21, 2-44) moved to different schools before

Table 2

*Grade 2 Writing Results: Including number of students (n=42), the median performance standard (PS) and the percentage of students at each PS on the September, October, November 2011, and January 2012 write.*

|                          | Performance Standards in Writing | Number of Students | Median Performance Standard | Percentage at Performance Standard |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Baseline Write</b>    |                                  |                    |                             |                                    |
| <i>My Summer</i>         |                                  |                    |                             |                                    |
| September 2011           |                                  |                    |                             |                                    |
|                          | 1                                | 21                 |                             | 50%                                |
|                          | 2                                | 20                 |                             | 47.5%                              |
|                          | 3                                | 1                  |                             | 2.4%                               |
|                          | 4                                | 0                  | 1                           | 0%                                 |
| <i>My Special Person</i> |                                  |                    |                             |                                    |
| October 2011             |                                  |                    |                             |                                    |
|                          | 1                                | 7                  |                             | 16.7%                              |
|                          | 2                                | 21                 |                             | 50.0%                              |
|                          | 3                                | 13                 |                             | 30.9%                              |
|                          | 4                                | 1                  | 2                           | 2.3%                               |
| <i>My Talent</i>         |                                  |                    |                             |                                    |
| November 2011            |                                  |                    |                             |                                    |
|                          | 1                                | 6                  |                             | 14.3%                              |
|                          | 2                                | 16                 |                             | 38.0%                              |
|                          | 3                                | 16                 |                             | 38.0%                              |
|                          | 4                                | 8                  | 2                           | 9.5%                               |
| <i>Winter Fun</i>        |                                  |                    |                             |                                    |
| January 2012             |                                  |                    |                             |                                    |
|                          | 1                                | 15                 |                             | 37.5%                              |
|                          | 2                                | 19                 |                             | 45.2%                              |
|                          | 3                                | 8                  |                             | 19%                                |
|                          | 4                                | 0                  | 2                           | 0%                                 |

completing all writes and were omitted from the data collection. There were 42 Grade 2 students that remained in the data collection (see Table 2).

The data collected from the Grade 2 students on the baseline write *My Summer* indicated one-half of the students (n=21) were (1) *not meeting expectations*, and approximately one-half (n=20) were (2) *approaching expectations* while only 1 student was assessed at (3) *meeting expectations* for Grade 2.

The Grade 2 results for the first write *My Special Person* indicated a moderate increase in students' quality of writing when the AFL strategies were *implemented* in comparison to students' writing ability on the baseline write when AFL strategies were *not implemented*. There were increases in students' performances on the first write *My Special Person*, with now one-half of the students (n=21) with (2) *approaching expectations*. A substantial gain of 30% of the students (n=13) were writing at the performance standard (3) *meeting expectations* on the first write *My Special Person* as compared to the baseline write *My Summer*. Only 1 student was assessed with *exceeding expectations* on their writing. The criteria needed to meet expectations in Grade 2 writing competency were writings that made connections to personal experiences and sentences closely related with some relevant details and examples.

For the second write *My Talent*, there were considerable increases in student performances. Approximately 40% of Grade 2 students (n=16) were at the performance standard (2) *approaching expectations* and (3) *meeting expectations*. The number of students writing at Grade 2 competency was augmented by 10% of the students (n=8) writing at (3) *exceeding expectations*. The students assessed at (4) *exceeding expectations* needed to have their writing meet the criteria of having a general purpose, all sentences focusing on one central theme, and having relevant details, reasons, or opinions.

On the last write *Winter Fun*, in January 2012, the Grade 2 students did not show gains. The Grade 2 students' performances standards were lower than on the previous write *My Talent*. The students who were (3) *meeting expectations* on the second write *My Talent* decreased by one-half on the last write *Winter Fun*. The percentage of students fell from 38% (n=16) to 10% (n=8). On the *My Talent* write, 20% of the students (n=8) were at (4)

*exceeding expectations* compared to 0% of students (n=0) on the last write *Winter Fun*.

Also, an increase of approximately 60% more student (n=15) were (1) *not meeting expectations* on the last write *Winter Fun* compared to the second write *My Talent* (n=6). Approximately 15% more students were at (2) *approaching expectations* on the last write *Winter Fun* than the previous write *My Talent*.

The statistical evidence for Grade 2 indicated a slight increase in the quality of writing when using AFL strategies (*analyzing and creating criteria from exemplary writing*) when comparing the baseline write *My Summer* with the median performance standard (1) *not meeting expectations*, with the increase on the first write *My Special Person* to the median performance standard (2) *approaching expectations*. There were no further increases in performance standard medians as both the second write *My Talent* and the last write *Winter Fun* remained at the median performance standard (2) *approaching expectations*.

**Grade 3 results.** The results for all Grade 3 writings were recorded for comparison. (see Table 3). From 45 Grade 3 students, five students (3-10, 3-14, 3-28, 3-30, 3-34) participated in the writes to the best of their abilities but their data were not added to the collection because of their lack of understanding of instructions and intellectual limitations. There were 40 Grade 3 students in the data collection.

The Grade 3 results showed a substantial gain in students' quality of writing when the



Table 3

*Grade 3 Writing Results: Including number of students (n=40) and median performance standard (PS) and the percentage of students at each PS on the September, October, November, and January Write.*

|                          | Performance Standards in Writing | Number of Students | Median Performance Standard for Grade 1 | Percentage at Performance Standard |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| <b>Baseline Write</b>    |                                  |                    |   |                                    |
| <i>My Summer</i>         |                                  |                    |   |                                    |
| September 2011           |                                  |                    |   |                                    |
|                          | 1                                | 3                  |   | 7.5%                               |
|                          | 2                                | 24                 |   | 60.0%                              |
|                          | 3                                | 13                 |   | 32.5%                              |
|                          | 4                                | 0                  |   | 0%                                 |
|                          |                                  |                    | 2                                       |                                    |
| <b>October Write</b>     |                                  |                    |   |                                    |
| <i>My Special Person</i> |                                  |                    |   |                                    |
| October 2011             |                                  |                    |   |                                    |
|                          | 1                                | 0                  |   | 0%                                 |
|                          | 2                                | 19                 |   | 47.5%                              |
|                          | 3                                | 17                 |   | 42.5%                              |
|                          | 4                                | 4                  |   | 10%                                |
|                          |                                  |                    | 3                                       |                                    |
| <b>November Write</b>    |                                  |                    |   |                                    |
| <i>My Talent</i>         |                                  |                    |   |                                    |
| November 2011            |                                  |                    |   |                                    |
|                          | 1                                | 3                  |   | 7.5%                               |
|                          | 2                                | 11                 |   | 27.5%                              |
|                          | 3                                | 21                 |   | 52.5%                              |
|                          | 4                                | 5                  |   | 12.5%                              |
|                          |                                  |                    | 3                                       |                                    |
| <b>January Write</b>     |                                  |                    |   |                                    |
| <i>Winter Fun</i>        |                                  |                    |   |                                    |
| January 2012             |                                  |                    |   |                                    |
|                          | 1                                | 0                  |   | 0%                                 |
|                          | 2                                | 11                 |   | 27.5%                              |
|                          | 3                                | 19                 |   | 47.5%                              |
|                          | 4                                | 10                 | 3                                       | 25%                                |

AFL strategies were *implemented* in comparison to students' writing ability on the baseline write when AFL strategies were *not implemented*. In the baseline write *My Summer* approximately two-thirds of the Grade 3 students (n=24) obtained the performance standard (2) *approaching expectations*, and one-third of the Grade students (n=13) obtained a performance standard of (3) *meeting expectations* and only 3 students were *not meeting expectations* writing competency for Grade 3

There were significant gains in the performance standards in the October write *My Special Person*. There were no students *not meeting expectations* and also there was a decrease in the percentage of students *approaching expectations* in writing by over 10%. The most substantial increases were both the percentage of students *meeting and exceeding expectations*. Close to one-half of the students ((n=19) were now *meeting expectations* with their writing competency and 10% of the students (n=4) were *exceeding expectations*.

In the second write, *My Talent*, there continued to be gains in the writing performance of the Grade 3 students. There was a continued decrease in number of students at *approaching expectations* in their writing with now only one-fourth of the students (n=11). There was a slight increase of 7.5 % of the students (n=3) *not meeting expectations* on this write. The most noticeable increase came with the number of students *meeting and exceeding expectations*. Over 50% of the students (n=19) were *meeting expectations* and 12.5% of the students (5) were *exceeding expectations* in writing competency.

The last write *Winter Fun* indicated significant increase in students' writing competency. There were no students *not meeting expectations* in writing. There were still approximately one-fourth of the students *approaching expectations* and approximately one-

half of the students *meeting expectations*, however, there were now 25% of the students (n=10) *exceeding expectations* in writing competency.

The statistical evidence for Grade 3 indicated a substantial increase in the quality of writing when using AFL strategies (*analyzing and creating criteria from exemplary writing*). The median performance standard on the baseline write *My Summer* was (2) *approaching expectations*, and this increased on the first write *My Special Person* to the median performance standard *meeting expectations*. This median performance standard *meeting expectations* continued to be for the next three writes.

### **Summary of Student Performance Standards**

The students' performance standards gave significant evidence on the effectiveness of implementing AFL strategies. The median performance standards for Grade 1 increased from *not meeting expectations* in September 2011, to *approaching expectations* in October 2011, to *meeting expectations* on the last two writes in November 2011, and January 2012. The median performance standards for Grade 2's were not as significant but still increased in performance standards as it went from a median performance standard of *not meeting expectations* in September 2011, to *approaching expectations* for the October 2011, November 2011 and January 2012. The Grade 3 median performance standards showed substantial increases as the median rose from *approaching expectations* in September 2011, to *meeting expectations* on all subsequent writes in October 2011, November 2011, and January 2012.

### **Student Rating Scales**

The primary students completed a rating scale on their perception of how effective the implemented AFL strategies were when writing. They rated the questions as (1) *Not Helpful*, (2) *Helpful*, (3) *Very Helpful* by marking a sad face if it was *Not Helpful*, a neutral face if it was *Helpful* and a smiling face if it was *Very Helpful* (see Appendix B) Each question was read and explained to the students while the students recorded their responses. These responses were collated to determine the number of students and percentage of students choosing each rating. These results indicated the degree of helpfulness that students believed the AFL strategies were in improving the quality of their writing.

**Grade 1 results.** There were 38 students present on the day the Grade 1 students responded to the student rating scale (see Table 4). The results to first question (Does it help to see good writing before I write?), were encouraging for the learning team as three-fourths of the Grade 1 students (n=35) thought that seeing exemplary examples were *Very Helpful* to them and another 15% of the Grade 1 students believed it to be *Helpful*. It was noted that 9% of these students did not find this strategy helpful. The Grade I teachers stated that students were very excited to see the samples of writing from other students. It allowed them to see what was expected of them.

The results of the second question (Does it help to discuss what makes good writing before I write?) (see Table 4), indicated that two thirds of the Grade 1 students (n=28) thought it was *Very Helpful* and 24% of them (n=11) indicated that it was *Helpful*. However, 15% of the students (n=7) perceived that discussing exemplary writing was

Table 4

*Results of the Grade 1 Rating Scale on Questions concerning using AFL strategies and rating them on a scale of Not Helpful, Helpful, and Very Helpful, providing number and percentage of students.*

|   | Rating Scale     | Number of Students | Percentage of students |
|---|------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| <b>Question 1</b>   |                  |                    |                        |
| Does it help to see good writing before I write?  |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 4                  | 9%                     |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 7                  | 15%                    |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 35                 | 76%                    |
| <b>Question 2</b>   |                  |                    |                        |
| Does it help to discuss what makes good writing before I write?                               |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 7                  | 15%                    |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 11                 | 24%                    |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 28                 | 61%                    |
| <b>Question 3</b>   |                  |                    |                        |
| Does it help to see a list of what makes good writing when I am writing?                      |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 7                  | 15%                    |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 5                  | 11%                    |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 34                 | 74%                    |
| <b>Question 4</b>   |                  |                    |                        |
| Does it help to sort writing into not meeting, meeting and exceeding expectations?            |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 3                  | 7%                     |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 24                 | 52%                    |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 19                 | 41%                    |
| <b>Question 5</b>   |                  |                    |                        |
| Does it help to have the teacher give you ideas on how to improve your writing for next time? |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 1                  | 2%                     |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 3                  | 7%                     |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 42                 | 91%                    |

*Not Helpful* to them before they wrote. The Grade 1 teachers expressed that the children found it difficult to sit through a lengthy discussion on what makes good writing as the students were excited to start their own writing. The Grade 1 teachers shared they consistently felt rushed with the discussions on the exemplary examples.

The results of the third question (Does it help to see a list of what makes good writing when I am writing?), gave evidence of the helpfulness of having a list of criteria available to them while writing. Three-fourths of the students (74%) believed that having a list of criteria was *Very Helpful* in improving the quality of their writing and 11% of the students (n=5) believed it was *Helpful*. The data indicated that again 15% of the students (n=7) thought that seeing a list of criteria was *Not Helpful* in improving the quality of their writing. The Grade 1 teachers stated that because they had been discussing exemplary writing for five months some students already knew the criteria and felt it wasn't necessary to have the list.

The results of the fourth question (Does it help to sort writing into not meeting, meeting and exceeding expectations?), revealed that less than half of the Grade 1 students (41%) believed that strategy of sorting the writings was *Very Helpful* but just over one-half of the students (52%) thought that it was however *Helpful*. Less than 10% of the students (n=7) believed it was not helpful at all. The Grade 1 teachers indicated the students found it very easy to decide what was not meeting or meeting expectations but found at times hard distinguishing between approaching and meeting expectations.

The results of the fifth question (Does it help to have the teacher give you ideas on how to improve your writing for next time?), signified the importance that Grade 1 students place on receiving help from their teachers. A remarkable 91% of the Grade 1 students



(n=42) believed that it was *Very Helpful* to have the teacher give ideas on how to improve their writing. Only three students thought it was *Helpful* and only 1 student thought it was *Not Helpful*. The Grade 1 teachers indicated the desire students had for wanting their writing to meet or exceed expectations so they were enthusiastic about asking for feedback from teachers on their writing performance.

The Grade 1 data from the students rating scales gave overwhelming positive evidence of students' perceptions on the effectiveness of using AFL strategies to improve their writing. When considering only the *Very Helpful* data from the Grade 1 students, it allowed me to identify which strategies the students thought were most valuable to them. It is clearly evident that the Grade 1 students believed teachers giving them ideas on how to improve their writing, which is identified in literature as effective feedback, was considered the most valuable. The second most valuable AFL strategy considered by Grade 1 students was seeing exemplary writing. This is also supported substantially in the professional literature. Students need to know the targets for which they are aiming consequently students needed to see examples of meeting or exceeding the performance standards in writing to know what is expected of them. The Grade 1 students' results indicated that the third most valuable strategy was making a list of the criteria needed to have exemplary writing. This strategy was also supported in AFL literature. Having the criteria available to students, allows them to focus on their writing with the security of having the criteria listed for them.

When considering both the *Helpful* and *Very Helpful* students' responses, the most effective AFL strategy was sorting the writings into not meeting, meeting and exceeding expectations. This process allowed students to actively participate in evaluating a writing

example and to do this effectively they needed to know the criteria in order to make that judgment.

**Grade 2 results.** There were 46 students in attendance on the day when the Grade 2 Student Rating Scales were completed. Table 5 displays the results for each question by giving the number and percentages of students who responded to the rating scale of *Not Helpful*, *Helpful* and *Very Helpful*. These results gave affirmative evidence on students' perceptions on the value of using AFL strategies. Each question asked about one AFL strategy that was implemented to help them increase the quality of their personal writing.

The Grade 2 results on the first question (Does it help to see good writing before I write?), indicated a significant amount of students believed that seeing exemplary writing samples helped them prior writing. Two-thirds of the students (n=27) rated this question *Very Helpful* and this was approximately 3 times more than the number of students (n=9) who rated this strategy as *Helpful*. 12% of the students (n=5) thought that this strategy was *Not Helpful*. During our Professional Learning Team (PLT) forums, the Grade 2 teachers commented that students believed seeing and reading the writing samples was an enjoyable activity.

The Grade 2 results on the second question (Does it help to discuss what makes good writing before I write?), suggested that this strategy was valuable to the students. 58% of the students (n=24) perceived this strategy to be *Very Helpful* and over one-third of the students (n=13) perceived it to be *Helpful*. 10% of the students (n=7) perceived this to be *Not Helpful*. The Grade 2 teachers' comments were similar to the Grade 1s, stating that it was difficult to have lengthy discussions on the writing examples because of students' anticipation of writing.

Table 5

*Results of the Grade 2 Rating Scale on Questions concerning using AFL strategies and rating them on a scale of Not Helpful, Helpful, and Very Helpful, providing number and percentage of students.*

|   | Rating Scale     | Number of Students | Percentage of students |
|---|------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Question 1<br>Does it help to see good writing before I write?  |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 5                  | 12%                    |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 9                  | 22%                    |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 27                 | 66%                    |
| Question 2<br>Does it help to discuss what makes good writing before I write?                               |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 4                  | 10%                    |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 13                 | 32%                    |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 24                 | 58%                    |
| Question 3<br>Does it help to see a list of what makes good writing when I am writing?                      |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 5                  | 12%                    |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 7                  | 17%                    |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 29                 | 71%                    |
| Question 4<br>Does it help to sort writing into not meeting, meeting and exceeding expectations?            |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 9                  | 22%                    |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 7                  | 17%                    |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 25                 | 61%                    |
| Question 5<br>Does it help to have the teacher give you ideas on how to improve your writing for next time? |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 6                  | 15%                    |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 7                  | 17%                    |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 28                 | 68%                    |

The Grade 2 results from the third question (Does it help to see a list of what makes good writing when I am writing?), indicated that this strategy was also helpful. Close to three-fourths of the students (n=29) rated this strategy as *Very Helpful* and this was approximately four times more students (n=7) than who rated this strategy as *Helpful*, and 12% of the students who rated this strategy as *Not Helpful*. The results verify the comments from the Grade 2 teachers at the professional learning team forum, regarding the students requesting the list of criteria to be posted for them.

The Grade 2 results from the fourth question (Does it help to sort writing into not meeting, meeting and exceeding expectations?), indicated that two thirds of the students believed this strategy to be *Very Helpful*. 17% of the students (n=7) rated this strategy as being *Helpful*. It is significant to note that there were one-fourth of the students (n=9) who rated this strategy as *Not Helpful*.

The Grade 2 results from the fifth question (Does it help to have the teacher give you ideas on how to improve your writing for next time?), again indicated that most students need to have feedback from their teachers. Two-thirds of the students (n=25) rated this strategy as *Very Helpful* and 17% of the students rated the strategy as *Helpful*. However, it is significant to notice that again close to one-fourth of the students perceived this strategy to be *Not Helpful*.

The results from the Grade 2 students gave conclusive evidence on the students' perceptions of helpfulness on the implemented AFL strategies. The results allowed the Professional Learning Team and me to identify which strategies the Grade 2 students considered most valuable. 71% of the Grade 2 students believed the most valuable strategy

Table 6

*Results of the Grade 3 Rating Scale on Questions concerning using AFL strategies and rating them on a scale of Not Helpful, Helpful, and Very Helpful, providing number and percentage of students.*

|   | Rating Scale     | Number of Students | Percentage of students |
|---|------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| <b>Question 1</b>   |                  |                    |                        |
| Does it help to see good writing before I write?  |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 4                  | 10%                    |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 12                 | 32%                    |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 22                 | 58%                    |
| <b>Question 2</b>   |                  |                    |                        |
| Does it help to discuss what makes good writing before I write?                               |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 6                  | 16%                    |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 15                 | 39%                    |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 17                 | 45%                    |
| <b>Question 3</b>   |                  |                    |                        |
| Does it help to see a list of what makes good writing when I am writing?                      |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 7                  | 19%                    |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 13                 | 34%                    |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 18                 | 47%                    |
| <b>Question 4</b>   |                  |                    |                        |
| Does it help to sort writing into not meeting, meeting and exceeding expectations?            |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 7                  | 19%                    |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 11                 | 29%                    |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 20                 | 53%                    |
| <b>Question 5</b>   |                  |                    |                        |
| Does it help to have the teacher give you ideas on how to improve your writing for next time? |                  |                    |                        |
|   | (1) Not Helpful  | 3                  | 8%                     |
|   | (2) Helpful      | 8                  | 21%                    |
|   | (3) Very Helpful | 27                 | 71%                    |

was having the list of criteria available for them to refer to when they need it. The professional literature on AFL continually stressed the importance of students having access to criteria. This allowed students to have immediate information on how to improve their writing. The second most valuable strategy was receiving feedback from their teachers and the third most helpful strategy was having the opportunity to view exemplary writing. When considering both the ratings of *Helpful* and *Very Helpful*, 90% of the students (n=37) rated the valuable AFL strategy to be the ability to discuss what makes good writing. Discussions on how to make your writing exemplary allows for opportunities to identify features that are looked for in good writing like giving examples and opinions in writing.

**Grade 3 results.** There were 38 Grade 3 students in attendance the day the rating scales was completed. The results were collated by number and percentage of students who rated each question at *Not Helpful*, *Helpful* and *Very Helpful* (see Table 6). There was convincing evidence that students saw the positive effects of using AFL strategies on the improved quality of personal writing.

The Grade 3 results from the first question (Does it help to see good writing before I write?), provided positive evidence of the effectiveness of viewing exemplary writing. Close to two thirds of the students (n= 22) rated this strategy as *Very Helpful* and one-third of the students (n=12) perceived this strategy as helpful. Only 10% of the students (n=4) rated this strategy as ineffective.

The results for the second question (Does it help to discuss what makes good writing before I write?), suggested that students thought this strategy helped them in their writing. Close to the same number of students found this strategy either *Helpful* or *Very Helpful*, with 17 students and 15% respectively. However, 16% of the students found this strategy to be



unhelpful. The comments from the Grade 3 teachers during the Professional Learning team forums suggested that the lessons were too long as students quickly lost their enthusiasm for the writing examples if they were reviewed the next day or days after. Nevertheless, they did believe the strategies of seeing and discussing exemplary writings needed to be done together.

The third question (Does it help to see a list of what makes good writing when I am writing?), results suggested that nearly one-half of the students (n=18) felt this strategy was *Very Helpful* for them to write with improved quality. One-third of the students (n=13) thought that it was a *Helpful* strategy but close to one-fifth of the students (n=7) believed this strategy was *Not Helpful*. This high rating for *Not Helpful* was discussed in our forums. After speaking with a few of the students on why they chose *Not Helpful*, teachers said it was mostly the students who were exceeding expectations and already knew the criteria.

The fourth question (Does it help to sort writing into not meeting, meeting and exceeding expectations?), results indicated favorable evidence on the use of this strategy. Over one-half of the students (n=20) perceived this strategy to be *Very Helpful*, and close to one-third of the students (n=11) of the students believed this to be *Helpful*. 19% of the students (n=7) also considered this strategy to be ineffective.

The fifth question (Does it help to have the teacher give you ideas on how to improve your writing for next time?), results were three-fourths of the students (n=27) rated this strategy as *Very Helpful*; therefore, suggesting that receiving feedback from teachers was highly effective. Also another 8 students thought that this strategy was *Helpful* and only 3 students thought this was an ineffective strategy.

The data from the Grade 3 students indicated that they were convinced with the effectiveness of AFL strategies improving their writing. The Grade 3 results showed that the most effective strategy was for them to receive feedback from the teachers. Again, professional literature substantiates effective feedback as a valuable method of ensuring students improve their quality of work. The second most valuable strategy for the Grade 3 students was reading and seeing exemplary writing. Again, students need to know the target for which they are trying to reach with their writing.

### **Summary of Student Rating Scales**

The student rating scales gave significant evidence on the effectiveness of using AFL strategies. The strategies were considered significantly valuable if close to 50% of the students indicated it was *Very Helpful*. The students in all grades considered all strategies to be significantly effective.

The students' rating scale data indicated what students perceived to be the most valuable AFL strategies. Receiving feedback from the teacher was considered by the students to be one of the most valuable strategies. Obtaining effective and immediate feedback allowed students to make improvements or corrections in their writing during the writing process. The second most valuable strategy considered by the students was the opportunity to analyze exemplary writing. The exemplary examples gave students the understanding of what was expected in their writing in order to meet or exceed expectations. Students need to see the criteria used in exemplary writing for it to be effective. The third most valuable strategy indicated by the students rating scales was making a list of the criteria needed for exemplary writing. The list is hugely valuable when it is created by the students, referred to during lessons with the students, and referred to when receiving feedback from the teachers.

The students in this study perceived the AFL strategies be an effective method of improving the quality of their personal writing.

### **Teacher Survey Results**

The teachers involved in the Professional Learning Team (PLT) completed a teacher survey after the October 2011, November 2011, and the January 2012 assessment writes. The PLT responded to questions using a Likert-like rating scale to collect further quantitative data on the benefits of using AFL strategies, specifically, using exemplars and building criteria with students (see Appendix C). This rating scale also collected data on the effectiveness of assessing writing using the performance standards and the advantages of collaborating on writing within a learning team. The first six questions were rated on a scale from one to five, with one being *Poor* and five being *Excellent*. This data was collated and the median rating was obtained from the teachers on the PLT (see Table 7).

**Teacher rating scales.** The PLT on the first question rated their knowledge of what constitutes exemplary writing with the same median of *Very High* after all three writes. As an example of the knowledge was for Grade 3 writing to be assessed as exemplary, using only meaning strand criteria, readers felt connected to the writers' experiences and feelings, and also the writing had supporting details, elaboration of ideas and perhaps comparisons within the writing (see appendix A). The data indicated the PLT were confident in their ability to judge student's writing as exemplary.

On the second question, the PLT median ratings for students' knowledge of what constitutes exemplary writing were *average* after both the October 2011 write and the

Table 7

*Teachers rating scale results: the median rating on teacher's perceptions of their acquired knowledge of assessment for learning strategies (AFL), the benefits of using AFL, and benefits of PS and PLT for all three assessment writes in Oct. Nov. 2011 and Jan. 2012.*

| Questions   | October 2011<br>Median Rating | November 2011<br>Median Rating | January 2012<br>Median Rating |
|---|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Has your knowledge of what constitutes exemplary writing increased?              | 4                             | 4                              | 4                             |
| 2. Has the student's knowledge of what constitutes exemplary writing increased?     | 3                             | 3                              | 4                             |
| 3. Has the student's writing improved by building criteria from exemplary writing?  | 3                             | 4                              | 4                             |
| 4. Do you believe students find writing easier, when the criteria are discussed?    | 4                             | 4                              | 4                             |
| 5. Has it been beneficial to use the B.C. Performance standards in writing?         | 4                             | 4                              | 4                             |
| 6. Has it been beneficial to collaborate on writing with our Primary Learning team? | 4                             | 4                              | 5                             |
| Scale: (1) Poor (2) Low (3) Average (4) Very High (5) Excellent                     |                               |                                |                               |

November 2011 write but then increased to the median rating of *Very High* after the last write in January 2012. The PLT believed the students had a very good understanding of what they needed to include in their writing to meeting or exceeding expectations.

On the third question, the median rating of *average* indicated that the PLT perceived the students' writing had improved after the October 2011 write and then teachers' median ratings increased to *Very High* on students' writing improved after the November 2011 and January 2012 writes indicating they believed the writing had significantly improved. The teachers were confident that student's writings had improved with using AFL strategies.

On the fourth question, the median ratings of *Very High* indicated that the PLT's perceived students had found writing easier when using AFL strategies after the October 2011, November 2011 and January 2011 writes. This was enthusiastically discussed at length at our PLT forums. The teachers were convinced that students found writing less challenging when the criteria were discussed. Additionally, they saw greater confidence on what was expected of them, which transferred to student enthusiasm and engagement when writing.

The PLT's median ratings were *Very High*, with the fifth question, on the benefits of using the performance standards in writing after all writes October 2011, November 2011 and January 2012. There were several teachers within the PLT indicated their increased confidence when assessing writing using the performance standards.

The last question were on the benefits of collaborating on writing within our PLT and after the October 2011 write and the November 2011, the PLT median ratings were *Very High* but this increased to a median rating of *Excellent* after the January 2012 write. The team commented several times in our forums on the benefits of collaborating with a team when assessing writing rather than working in isolation on assessing.

## Summary of Teacher Survey Results

The PLT data indicated overwhelmingly positive evidence on the use of AFL strategies, the benefits of using the performances standards, and the collaboration on writing within the PLT. After the last write January 2012, the median ratings from the PLT, on all questions were *Very High*, with the exception of the benefits of collaborating on writing with the PLT, which obtained the median rating of *Excellent*. The PLT were convinced that their knowledge and the students' knowledge were *Very High*, on what constitutes exemplary writing because of going through this inquiry. They believed that students' writing had improved and that they found writing easier using the AFL strategies. This data suggested the BC Performance Standards in Writing had become an effective working tool for the PLT. It offered them the criteria on which writing could be assessed against. The benefits of using performance standards were discussed at length at our forums. They saw that assessing writing using performance standards became a more objective assessment rather than a subjective judgment on writing quality. The PLT were of the opinion that using AFL, assessing using performance standards in writing, and being a member of the PLT were all very valuable endeavors.

## Teachers' Text Responses

The PLT's text responses from two short answer questions were themed and collated to add further evidence and clarity on the teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness with using AFL strategies, the benefits of using performance standards and value of being a member of the Primary Learning Team. The responses were themed and collated separately, using both number of occurrences and percentage of occurrences, with same or similar text for each question in ascending order of number of occurrences (see Tables 7 and 8).

**Themed responses to Question 7.** Question 7 asked the teachers: What were the benefits of using the implemented assessment for learning strategies in their instruction of writing? Their responses to this question were themed and then further extracted into subthemes for greater understanding on the teachers' perceptions. Table 7 represents the number of occurrences and the percentages of subthemes within the text. Additionally, a sample quote from the text is presented to show examples of the subthemes.

The 54 responses from the PLT for Question 7 (see Table 8) were presented in themes in ascending order of prevalence. The three major themes were all close in value, with only one occurrence less than the next most prevalent theme. The most frequent theme that emerged from the text was *Teacher Learning*. 42.7 % of the text occurrences (n=27) were pertaining to this major theme. It became evident from the PLT responses that teachers believed their professional learning had developed significantly. There were 4 subthemes extracted from the major theme *Teacher Learning*.

The subtheme, *Student Expectations*, was the most frequently mentioned with 14.9% of the occurrences (n=8). These responses mostly related to becoming more familiar and comfortable with the expectations for students in written language. An example text response under this subtheme was ("more awareness of the writing expectations of students"). The second most prevalent subtheme with only one less occurrence (n=7) than the first theme was *Teachers Instruction* with 13% of occurrences in text. These responses indicated teachers believed their writing instruction had improved. An example response for this subtheme was ("using exemplars improves my teaching of written language"). The third most-frequent subtheme under Teacher Learning was *Written Language Improvement* with 11.1% of the responses again this was only one less occurrence (n=6) than the second subtheme. The PLT



Table 8

*Results of 54 text responses from PLT to Question 7 on the benefits of using AFL strategies with themed text analysis by using number of occurrences and percentage of occurrences.*

| Themes from Teacher Responses     | Number of Occurrences |          | Percentages of Occurrences |          |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|----------|----------------------------|----------|
|                                   | Major Theme           | Subtheme | Major Theme                | Subtheme |
| Teacher Learning                  | 23                    |          | 42.7%                      |          |
| Expectations for Students         |                       | 8        |                            | 14.9%    |
| Teacher instruction               |                       | 7        |                            | 13.0%    |
| Writing Improvement               |                       | 6        |                            | 11.1%    |
| Student Instruction               |                       | 2        |                            | 3.7%     |
| Student Learning                  | 20                    |          | 36.9%                      |          |
| Increased Engagement and Effort   |                       | 10       |                            | 18.5%    |
| Students Understand Expectations  | 5                     |          |                            | 9.2%     |
| Students Needs                    | 5                     |          |                            | 9.2%     |
| Assessment for Learning           | 11                    |          | 20.4%                      |          |
| Benefits of Using Exemplars       |                       | 6        |                            | 11.1%    |
| Benefits of Developing Criteria   |                       | 4        |                            | 7.4%     |
| Benefits of Performance Standards |                       | 1        |                            | 1.9%     |
| Total Responses                   | n=54                  |          |                            |          |

thought writing had improved significantly with the use the AFL strategies (“writing is significantly better”). The fourth frequent subtheme was *Student Instruction*. The PLT felt students needed consistent writing instruction to fully understand the expectations needed for grade competency in writing, and a text example of this was (“more writing instruction for students needed”). The second major theme identified was *Student Learning*, received 36.9%

of the responses. There were approximately 5% less responses on this theme than the first major theme, with the number of occurrences being 20, which was only 3 less than the first major theme with 23 occurrences. This theme was extracted into 3 subthemes with the most prevalent subtheme being *Increased Engagement and Effort from Students*. This subtheme obtained 18.5% of the responses (n=10), an example response was (“students are excited and more engaged with writing”). The PLT’s opinion was students were more engaged and excited about their writing when AFL strategies were implemented. The second and third most prevalent subthemes that emerged from the text were *Students Understanding Expectations* and *Student Needs*. These subthemes both had five fewer occurrences than the most-prevalent subtheme. They both obtained 9.2% of the total responses. The PLT believed that students were more aware of what was expected of them in writing to achieve meeting or exceeding expectations. An example response from the text on the second subtheme was (“students are more aware of how to improve their writing”). The subtheme *Student Needs* responses indicated that teachers believe students continue to need practice to meet competency levels, an example being (“exemplars give students expectations”).

The last major theme was concerning *assessment for learning* with 20.4% of the occurrences. This had approximately one-half of the occurrences (n=11) than the first major theme. This theme was extracted into 4 subthemes. The first frequent subtheme, *Benefits of using Exemplars*, received 11.1% of the responses (n=6). An example of these responses was (“exemplars give students expectations”). The second most frequent subtheme, *Benefits of Developing Criteria*, received 7.4% of the responses (n=4), and was only 2 less than the first subtheme. An example for this subtheme was (“criteria gives students the information to improve writing”). For the last subtheme, there was only 1 response (1.9%) on the *Benefits of*

*Performance Standards* and the response was (“performance standards make it easier to assess students’ writing”).

**Themed responses to Question 8.** Question 8 asked teachers to share other ideas with the Professional Learning Team on the research that was conducted. After coding and collating the text, there were 3 major themes that emerged from teachers’ responses: *Assessment for Learning, Teacher Learning, and Student Learning*. There were 40 responses from the PLT for Question 8. The most prevalent theme was concerning *Assessment for Learning* with 19 occurrences, almost one-half the responses. This theme’s responses were 10% more frequent than the next major theme *Teacher Learning*, with only 15 occurrences, approximately one-third of the text responses. The last theme, *Student Learning*, had 6 occurrences, which was more than two-thirds less than the most prevalent theme.

*Assessment for Learning*, the most frequent theme was coded and themed into two subthemes. The most prevalent subtheme, *Benefits of Using Exemplars* received 16 occurrences that were close to 6 times more frequent than the second frequent subtheme, *Benefits of Using Performance Standards* (n=3). An example of the first subtheme was (“writing exemplars makes it easier for students to write”) and an example of the second subtheme was (“Performance Standards give confidence in assessing student’s writing”). The responses expressed an understanding of both AFL strategies and Performance Standards.

The second major theme from the text responses to Question 8 was *Teacher Learning*. This theme was broken down into two subthemes, *Benefits as Team Learners* and *Benefits of Assessing as a Team*. The most prevalent subtheme received 8 response occurrences,

Table 9

*Results of 40 text responses from PLT to Question 8 on additional teacher comments on using AFL strategies with themed text analysis by using number of occurrences and percentage of occurrences.*

| Themes from Teachers                    | Number of Occurrences |          | Percentage of Occurrences |          |
|---|-----------------------|----------|---------------------------|----------|
|   | Major Theme           | Subtheme | Major Theme               | Subtheme |
| Assessment for Learning                 | 19                    |          | 47.5%                     |          |
| Benefits of Using Exemplars             |                       | 16       |                           | 40%      |
| Benefits of Using Performance Standards |                       | 3        |                           | 7.5%     |
| Teacher Learning                        | 15                    |          | 37.5%                     |          |
| Benefits of Team Learners               |                       | 8        |                           | 20%      |
| Benefits of Assessing as a Team         |                       | 7        |                           | 17.5%    |
| Student Learning                        | 6                     |          | 15%                       |          |

however, this was only one more occurrence ( $n=7$ ) than the second subtheme. An example of both subthemes are presented, respectively, (“learning with the team is less threatening”) and (“can see the benefits and enjoyed the process of assessing writing with a team”). It was noticeable through the responses that teachers were grateful for the opportunity to learn more about AFL strategies and Performance Standards through working as a team.

The last major theme was *Student Learning* with 6 occurrences or 15% of the text responses. This theme was 3 times less prevalent than the most frequent major theme for question 8, and as well it was 2 times less prevalent than the second most frequent theme. An example of this theme was (“students are engaged in their writing after discussing exemplars”).

### **Summary of Teachers' Text Responses**

The themed text gave the PLT a voice concerning the use of AFL strategies and Performance standards as well as a voice on their reflections of working within a learning team. This qualitative data gave additionally insight into the PLT's ideas or concerns on using AFL strategies, Performance Standards and working with the PLT.

Through the themed text from question 7, it was apparent that the teachers' were reflecting on their own professional learning, as there were 42.7% of the text responses on teacher learning. Through this learning process, they expressed their knowledge on: what was expected of students in writing at each grade, how best to teach writing, how best to help students improve their writing using AFL strategies, and how to evaluate the students' progress in writing. The teachers communicated their observations on students' learning with 36.9% of the text responses. They were delighted with the excitement and engagement students demonstrated, the students' knowledge of writing expectations, and students' desire to improve the quality of their personal writing. The PLT also communicated the benefits they observed when using both AFL strategies and Performance Standards with 20.4% of the text responses.

Through the themed text from Question 8, the PLT expressed additional information regarding the inquiry. With 47.5% of the text responses, the teachers shared insights on assessment for learning strategies. 37.5% of the text were regarding the professional learning that had occurred for them while working and learning in a team environment and assessing writing as a collaborate team and 15% of the PLT text gave voice to the student's learning and progress that had occurred through this process.

## Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 presented the results of this inquiry on the central research question: *To what degree did the quality of students' personal writing improve when students built criteria from exemplary writing?* The results gave comprehensive evidence on the effectiveness of using assessment for learning strategies. The Student Performance Standards were analyzed and collated by the number of students at each performance standard, the median performance standard and the percentage of students at each standard for Grades 1, 2, and 3 after each write in September 2011, October 2011, November 2011, and January 2012. The evidence indicated that the students' quality of writing had improved significantly over the action research time frame. The number of students writing, at both meeting and exceeding expectations were significant. All grades showed impressive gains on their performance standards from the baseline writing in September through to the last write in January.

The student rating scales gave further validation of the effectiveness of using AFL strategies. The students rated answers to questions, concerning analyzing exemplary writing, discussing exemplary writing, making lists of writing criteria, sorting the writing into not meeting and meeting categories, and receiving feedback from teachers on how to improve their writing, with a rating scale of *Not Helpful*, *Helpful* and *Very Helpful*. Grades 1, 2, and 3 overwhelming rated *Very Helpful* for most questions on the rating scales.

The teachers' survey results substantially supported the use of AFL strategies and performance standards, and the effectiveness of collaborating within a learning team with median ratings of *Very High* on most questions rated after the January 2012 write, with the exception of one question concerning working within a learning team, which receive a median rating of *Excellent*.

The last data set was themed texted, from PLT responses to short answer questions on their insights, beliefs, and knowledge of AFL strategies, performance standards and learning teams. Their responses were exceptionally favorable for all three.

The results from all data sources indicated a significant positive affect on students' quality of writing with the use of AFL strategies and performance standards, and working within a learning team. The next chapter, Discussion, will provide interpretations of these data and these data answers the central research question.



## Chapter 5: Discussion

Chapter 1 presented the introduction of the action research inquiry, the significance of the project, the researcher context, and the intention of the research. Chapter 2 outlined a literature review on Assessment for Learning and Written Language by presenting the philosophy regarding the benefits of implementing AFL strategies and the new pedagogies of written language. The chapter also discussed the benefits of using AFL within Written Language instruction. Chapter 3 described the methodologies chosen for this action research and how the data were collected. Chapter 4 presented the results of the action research project on the implementation of AFL strategies in the instruction of written language. The students' writing performance standards were presented and compared from baseline data obtained in September of 2011 and three subsequent formal writes in October 2011, November 2011, and January 2012. It presented the student rating scale data on the students' perceptions of using the AFL strategies, and the rating scale data on the teachers' perceptions and ideas on using AFL strategies in written language instruction, using performance standards, and participating within a professional learning team. In short, a great deal of information has been presented in the previous chapters in support of the action research project on whether using *Assessment for Learning* strategies would increase the students' quality of written language.

Chapter 5 presents interpretations and discussions of the data collected from this action research inquiry to determine if students' writing performance standards improved with the implementation of AFL strategies in the instruction of Written Language. This chapter also discusses the data on students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of AFL strategies in written language. Additionally, this chapter analyzes the Professional Learning

Team's thoughts regarding the effectiveness of implementing AFL strategies in the instruction of Written Language, along with their responses to using performance standards, and working within a professional learning team. This chapter synthesizes the results under the main themes of students' performance standards in written language, students' rating scales and teachers' rating scales and responses in support of the research inquiry: To what degree will the quality of students' writing improve when students build criteria from exemplary writing?

### **Synthesis**

I interpreted the data collected from the students' performance standards by comparing the baseline write in September 2011 to the subsequent three formal writes in October 2011, November 2011, and January 2012 using the meaning strand on the *BC Performance Standards in Writing* (see Appendix A). The student rating scales surveys were interpreted by collating the number of occurrences and the percentage of occurrences of each rating (see Appendix B). The teacher rating scale surveys rated the teachers' perceptions on using AFL strategies and performance standards, and the benefits or concerns of working within a learning team (see Appendix C). The text from the responses on two short answer questions on the teachers' rating scale were themed and collated to find the number of occurrences and the percentage of occurrences for the emerged themes. The themed responses gave further indication of their thoughts and concerns on the effectiveness of this inquiry.

### **Student Performance Standards**

All three grades completed a baseline write at the beginning of the school year without the use of assessment for learning strategies. After completing the baseline write, the AFL strategies were implemented in all writings within the classroom. There were three

subsequent writes occurring in October 2011, November 2011, and January 2012, where the writings were assessed using on only the meaning strand of the performance standards (see Appendix A). These data were compared and analyzed to ascertain if using the AFL strategies increased markedly the quality of the primary students' writings.

The Grade 1 students' performance standard median on the baseline write in September was *not meeting expectations*. This is an expected performance at the beginning of a school year, as they have not yet received any formal instruction in writing. Their writing comprised one or two words or strings of letters. After this baseline, the AFL strategies were then implemented into all writings that occurred in the classrooms. The first write in October 2011 had the performance standard median increased to *approaching expectations* which was a substantial gain for Grade 1 students as this result meant that most students were now writing one or two meaningful sentences. With the writes in November 2011 and January 2012, the Grade 1 students again increased substantially, attaining performance standard medians of *meeting expectations*, which meant that most students were now writing sentences that were related and had supporting details. Considering the last write was in January, only half way through the school year, having the performance standard median of *meeting expectations*, gave significant evidence that using AFL strategies was impacting the Grade 1s writing performances. Another source of evidence that indicated the Grade 1 students had made significant gains was demonstrated by the percentage of students at both *meeting* and *exceeding expectations* for each write. For the baseline write, 7.5% of students were *meeting or exceeding expectations*. In October, there were 26.3% of students, in November there were 56.5% of the students and, in January, there were 79.2% of the students *meeting or exceeding expectations* in personal writing.

The Grade 2 students attained the performance standard median of *not meeting expectations* on their baseline write in September 2011. A month later with the implementation of *assessment for learning* strategies in all personal writing, the performance standard median on the first write in October 2011, increased the performance standard median to *approaching expectations*. The Grade 2s received the performance standard median of *approaching expectations* for the next two writes in November 2011, and in January 2012. The median data did not reflect any substantial improvement in the quality of their writing. It is important to consider that their writing did show substantial increases when the percentages of students at each performance standard were analyzed. The Grade 2s went from 2.3% of the students at *meeting or exceeding expectations* in September, to 32.3% of the students in October 2011, to 47.5% of the students in November 2011, but then decreased to 19% of the students at *meeting or exceeding expectations* in January. The lower results of the Grade 2s performance standards may in part be due to the learning challenges that are eminent but not diagnosed, and consequently present many challenges for students learning. The decreased performance on the last write may also be due to student's limited ability to participate in winter activities because of severe winter temperatures for several weeks preceding the final write in January. I also suspect that many students, who were away ill on the day the write was completed, may have received instruction that varied greatly from the instruction that the rest of the class received. I surmise that these factors may have contributed to lower percentages of students at the *meeting or exceeding expectations* performance standards on the January write.

The Grade 3 students achieved the performance standard median of *approaching expectations* in September 2011. With the *assessment for learning* strategies implemented in

all student writings after the baseline write, the Grade 3 students' median performance standard increased to *meeting expectations* in October 2011, and stayed at *meeting expectations* in November 2011 and January 2012. The performance standard median of *meeting expectations* meant that most students' writings were clear and easy to follow, having relevant and logical ideas about a topic. The degree to which Grade 3 students increased the quality of writing by implementing *assessment for learning* strategies was significant. The increased writing competency was also evident in the percentage of Grade 3 students either *meeting* or *exceeding expectations* going from 32.5% of the students in September 2011, to 52.5% of the students in October 2011, to 65% of the students in November 2011, to 72.5% of the students in January 2012. This result demonstrated that the *assessment for learning* strategies of analyzing and building criteria from exemplary writing significantly increased the students' personal writing performance standards. I contend that the *assessment for learning* strategies implemented impacted positively students' quality of writing.

### **Summary of Student Performance Standards**

It is important to note, we had experienced teachers as part of the professional learning team, and it was with their knowledge of student progress in previous years that allowed us to judge whether the writing was substantially better than past students' writings at the same time of year. It was through this lens that we saw significant increases in the quality of students' writings. Based on our knowledge of students' writing progress, we believe the substantial degrees of increase occurred because of the implementation of AFL strategies. I and the PLT believe that the quality of the writing was significantly superior because of the implementation of the AFL strategies.

## Students Rating Scales

The students' rating scales produced results on the degree of helpfulness that students believed the AFL strategies had in improving the quality of their writing (see Appendix B). The students used the AFL strategies of analyzing exemplary work and building criteria for classroom writings from September 2011 to January 2012. The data collected from the students' rating scales showed their overwhelming support for using *assessment for learning* strategies. The students believed the AFL strategies implemented into written language instruction produced substantial increases in the quality of their personal writing.

Over 80% of the primary students surveyed indicated it was either *Helpful* or *Very Helpful* to see and discuss exemplary writing, to create a list of criteria for writing in an exemplary fashion, to sorting writings into *not meeting, meeting or exceeding expectations*, and to have teachers give you feedback on how to improve their writing. Again, the majority of the students perceived the AFL strategies to be beneficial to achieve quality writing.

The most valuable AFL strategy according to the data from the student's rating scales was receiving effective feedback from their teachers on how best to ensure quality writing. The students in this inquiry received effective and immediate feedback to make improvements or corrections in their writing. Wiggins (1998, as cited in McTaghe, 2005) pointed out that, to serve learning, feedback must meet four criteria: it must be timely, specific, understandable to the receiver, and formed to allow self-adjustments on the students' part. The second most valuable strategy considered by the students was the opportunity to analyze exemplary writing. The exemplary examples gave students the understanding of what was expected in their writing in order to meet or exceed expectations.

Students need to see, read, and discuss exemplary writings, and to build criteria from these writings in order to write in an exemplary fashion.

I believe it is essential for students to know the expectations for a quality assignment, but too often students are unaware of them. I am convinced that many students believe it is a guessing game, that they are not supposed to know, until after the assignment has been evaluated, what was required. Additionally, I maintain there are many teachers who still hold this belief. They would consider giving students examples of assignments as a form of cheating or, at the very least, feeding the students the answers.

### **Summary of Students Rating Scales**

I maintain that most primary students were comfortable with the AFL language and strategies, and rated their answers confidently according to their perceptions of how effective the AFL strategies were. The data from the student rating scales indicated significantly that students thought it was beneficial to use AFL strategies to increase the quality of their writing.

I also conclude that students need to self-assess against exemplary work in order to become responsible for trying to attain exemplary quality. Earl (2004) stated that when students are self-assessing, looking at exemplar work samples and making decisions on criteria for excellent work, they become more responsible for their learning. Additionally, when teachers and students know what constitutes quality work, teachers can directly connect their teaching to those expectations and students can meet the achievement expectations.



## Teacher Rating Scales

Using rating scales, the teachers indicated their perceptions of using assessment for learning strategies to improve the quality of student's written language (see Appendix C) The median ratings on the Teacher Rating Scales were attained from the PLT on their perceptions of effectiveness with implementing AFL strategies, using performance standards, and collaborating and assessing writing within a professional learning team.

The teachers' rating scales indicated that their understanding of exemplary writing was a median rating of *Very High* after all three formal writes. Teachers became very familiar with creating exemplary writing examples using the performance standards for personal writing as they were asked to use this strategy for all writing that occurred in the classroom throughout this research. I believe the likelihood is high that this process helped their understanding of what constitutes exemplary writing. During the first meeting in September 2011, I gave the expectations for the action research. It was at this time that teachers asked questions on the entailment of exemplary writing and what constituted this at each grade level. My impression at the time was most teachers in the PLT had minimal understandings of what constitutes exemplary writing. By the end of this inquiry, the teachers' rating scale data showed evidence of significantly increased understanding of exemplary writing.

The teachers rated students' understanding of what constituted exemplary writing after the first two formal writes with the median of *average* and then with the median of *Very High* after the last formal write. The PLT believed that students were more aware of the writing expectations when more opportunities were given for analyzing and creating criteria for exemplary writing. Cooper (2007) emphasized that when students and teachers

discuss criteria for learning it sets students up for success. Students have a greater understanding of what teachers want and how to best attain the target.

The teachers rated whether they believed writing had improved with building criteria from exemplary writing with the median of *Average* after the first formal write, and then with the median of *Very High* after the next two formal writes. Harris (2007) argued the need for teachers to give students the criteria for standards they are trying to meet. The PLT saw marked differences with students' writings after each assessment write. The teachers were excited on the increased quality of students' writings.

The teachers rated the fourth question on whether students found writing easier when the criteria were discussed with the median of *Very High* after all three formal writes. The teachers saw students' enthusiasm and pride regarding the quality of their writing when students shared their writing with teachers, peers, support staff and parents. These data indicated that teachers believed students found writing easier when the criteria were discussed.

The fifth question on the teachers' rating scale asked how beneficial it was to use the BC Writing Performance Standards. The teachers rated this question with a median of *Very High* after each formal write. It was noted at the first meeting that teachers were familiar with the performance standards in writing but they stated they did not use them in their instruction of written language. The ratings of *Very High* for this question showed that teachers welcomed an assessment tool for assessing students' writing. It also indicated teachers had become confident in using performance standards in their instruction of writing and that they saw the benefits of using the writing performance standards as an assessment tool.

Teachers believed it was beneficial to collaborate with the Primary Learning Team on the instruction and assessing of writing. The median ratings for the benefits of using performance standards were *Very High* after the first two writes and then increased to the median rating of *Excellent* after the last formal write. The teachers were excited with the opportunity of professional time to collaborate on writing with Primary Learning Team. They demonstrated enthusiasm when both reading and assessing students' writings with members of the team.

### **Summary of Teacher Rating Scales**

The teachers' rating scales gave further indication of the successfulness of using assessment for learning strategies. Their ratings were all consistently *Very High* and one question on the benefits of collaboration within a learning team was rated *Excellent*.

### **Teachers' Text Responses**

The last two questions on the teachers' rating scale were written responses that were themed and collated by number of text responses and the percentage of text responses. The first question asked for responses on the benefits of using assessment for learning strategies and the second question asked for any additional responses concerning any aspect of the inquiry. This qualitative data gave an opportunity for teachers to voice their own thoughts, ideas and concerns regarding AFL, Performance Standards or collaborating within a Learning Team. These data gave a very personal perspective to their own learning.

**Benefits of Assessment for Learning Question 7.** The teacher's responses to Question 7 on the benefits of using assessment for learning strategies in written language were coded into three themes. I have discussed the text responses according to the following emerged themes: *teachers learning, student learning and assessment for learning*.

With close to 40% of the responses related to teachers learning, it became evident that teachers thought that their professional learning had been impacted by the use of assessment for learning strategies in written language. For a more in-depth analysis, three subthemes emerged from the *Teachers Learning* theme: *expectations of students*, *teacher instruction*, and *writing improvement*. The teacher's responses indicated that using exemplary writing to build criteria gave clearer *expectations for students*. As teachers became more aware of the writing expectations at each grade level, they realized that the assessment and evaluation of writings were more consistent. It was evident through the teachers' responses that they believed that by using assessment for learning strategies, allowed them to identify students who needed extra support in writing more easily, and what skills students needed to improve their writing become more evident. *Teacher instruction* was the next most prominent theme present in the responses. They claimed their teaching skills were positively impacted by the use of assessment for learning strategies. Overall, they suggested that their whole teaching practice had improved and professional learning had increased with use of assessment for learning in their instruction. Another prominent theme from the teachers' responses was students' *writing improvement*. The teachers used the following words to describe the students writing: exciting, impressive, significantly better and improvement. McTighe and O'Connor (2005) stated that the best teachers recognize the importance of ongoing assessment as the means to achieve maximum performance. It was evident through these responses that teachers were impressed with the quality of students' writing when assessment for learning strategies were implemented.

There were approximately 35% of the responses from teachers on the benefits of using assessment for learning strategies in written instruction related to students' learning. It

became evident through the responses from teachers, that they were amazed with students *increased engagement and excitement* with their writing, a prominent subtheme. Teachers saw increased effort from the students when they knew what the expectations were for their writing. Teachers emphasized in their responses that analyzing exemplary writing and building criteria gave students greater understanding of how to best attain quality writing. Teachers stated that the students demonstrated pride in their writing and looked forward to writing with increased confidence. Black and Wiliam (1998) claimed that learners, involved in the process of developing agreed-upon criteria for success, would rise to a higher level of learning and engagement. Students who are given opportunities to self-assess against criteria before submitting work will strive to improve their work. Another sub-theme under student learning was *students understanding expectations*. Teacher's responses focused on students' abilities to rise to the expectations when they knew them. When expectations were discovered through analyzing exemplary writing and building criteria, students knew how to improve their writing. Teachers stated it gave students a clearer idea of what was expected from them with personal writing. They also found it interesting that students worked for the higher standard of writing when they knew what it looked like. Chappius and Stiggins (2006) discussed that when students know what constitutes quality work, and when teachers directly connect their teaching to those expectations, the probability rises, that students will meet the achievement expectations. The last sub-theme under student learning was *Student Needs*. The teachers realized that through assessment for learning strategies the students' needs became evident. They were able to focus in what the students needed to improve their writing.

There were close to 20% of the responses from the teachers on the theme of Assessment for Learning. There were three sub-themes that emerged from the responses:

*Benefits of using exemplars, Benefits of using criteria, and Benefits of Performance*

*standards*. The teachers indicated from their responses that students *benefited from using exemplars*. They commented on how much students enjoyed reading the exemplary writing examples and that students found this process engaging and inspiring. Teachers expressed in their responses that, after reading the exemplary writing, students worked hard to meet the expectations that were set by analyzing the exemplars and building the criteria. They stated that it was important to give students the opportunity to see excellent examples of writing so that they knew what to strive for in their writing. The teachers indicated in their responses that student learning was impacted by *using criteria* in writing. Teachers noticed when criteria was discussed the student strived for exemplary writing. Troia and Graham (2003) listed comprehensive features on what constitutes exemplary writing instruction and one of these features was building and self-evaluating criteria for writing. Another sub-theme under *Assessment for Learning* was the *benefits of using performance standards*. The teachers' responses indicated the importance of having standards for teachers to assess against and also standards of expectations for students to strive towards. The responses indicated that teachers saw performance standards as a way to provide consistency to teachers' assessment of students writing. Through the data, it was evident that teachers thought *The BC Performance Standards in Writing* allowed teachers the opportunity to see the specific descriptions for each performance standard and to adjust their instruction to meet the criteria.

**Additional Information Question 8.** Question 8 asked for teachers to share any additional ideas or thoughts on the research that was conducted. After analyzing the data, two majors themes emerged from teachers' responses: *Assessment for Learning* and *Teacher Learning*. The most prominent sub-theme that emerged from the major theme *Assessment for*

*Learning* was again the *benefits of using exemplars*. The teachers were excited with their knowledge on how effective assessment strategies were, especially the strategy of using exemplars. They commented on the effectiveness of using exemplars and how showing and analyzing these gave students so much more understanding of what their writing could be like. They reflected on the *benefits of using the performance standards* for both themselves as learners and for students for needed expectations. They gave a strong indication that they felt more confident teaching using the performance standards and assessing student's writings using the performance standards.

The sub-themes within the *Teacher Learning* theme were *Benefits as Team Learners* and *Benefits of Assessing as a Team*. The teachers conveyed the message through their responses on how much they appreciated learning within a team environment. Some teachers felt the learning team approach was less threatening as they were learning together. They found it useful when concerns were discussed and solutions were decided on within a learning team. The data indicated that teachers found working in a team to be beneficial for all teacher learners. The next sub-theme coded under Teacher Learning was *Benefits of Assessing As a Team*. The responses from the teachers reflected on how much easier it was assessing as a team. It allowed for teachers to confer with other colleagues on what performance standards to assign to writings. It also gave them the opportunity to hear others opinions on why or why not the writing deserved a particular performance standard. Through these discussions, teachers learned and benefited from the team. Assessing as a team allowed for reflection on their assessment and their instruction of writing. Another major of theme from the teachers' responses was *Student Learning*. Through the data, it was evident that teachers were excited about the students' progress.

## Chapter Summary

This action research inquiry on improving the quality of personal writing by using assessment for learning strategies provided the evidence needed for our primary learning team to make decisions on how to best improve primary students' personal writing. The evidence was clear that using AFL strategies, specifically: analyzing exemplary writing and creating a list of criteria for students to use when writing, was significantly effective. The student performance standards were the first data source used to find evidence of its effectiveness. The performance standard medians for both, Grade 1 and Grade 3 students were *meeting expectations*, and the Grade 2s obtained the performance standard median of *approaching expectations* with still one-half of the school year yet to be completed. I believe the student performance standard results would be significantly higher if it had been a full year inquiry.

The Student Rating Scale also gave overwhelming confirmation that the students' valued the use of *assessment for learning* strategies. There were 80% or more of the students who perceived these strategies as *Helpful* and *Very Helpful*. The students' most valued strategy was receiving timely rich descriptive feedback on their writing and the second most valued strategy was analyzing exemplary writing.

The Teacher Rating Scale gave irrefutable evidence on the teachers' belief that AFL has a significant impact on the quality of students' personal writings. The teachers rated all questions on the AFL strategies as *Very High*. The one question on the effectiveness of working within a learning team was rated as *Excellent*. The last two questions on this rating scale gave qualitative data on the inquiry. The teachers responded in text to the benefits of using *assessment for learning* strategies and were given an opportunity to comment in text on



all aspects of the inquiry. These responses were themed and analyzed by finding the number of theme occurrences and the percentage of occurrences. The teachers were indisputably impressed with the results of the inquiry. They believed the evidence was conclusive on the positive impact AFL had on increases to the quality of students' writings. There was also overwhelming support on the effectiveness of working within a professional learning team.

The results from all data sources indicated a strong relationship between the increased quality of students' writings and the use of *assessment for learning* strategies. It would appear that *assessment for learning* strategies utilized by primary-grade teachers do improve students writing – especially in the meaning strand.

The next chapter, Chapter 6, will outline conclusions from this study and present recommendations based on the perceived limitations of this research.

## Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter 1 introduced the action research inquiry, the significance of the project, the researcher context and the intentions of the research. Chapter 2 provided a review of the literature on the benefits of *Assessment for Learning*, and the new pedagogies on Written Language to support this research. Chapter 3 discussed the methodologies that were chosen for this project and how the research data were collected. Chapter 4 presented the results of the data collected on student's performance standards over four writes. The first write occurred in September as the baseline write without the implementation of AFL strategies. On the three subsequent writes in October, November, and January the AFL strategies were implemented in all writings. The data were collected from student rating scales on the perceived helpfulness of using AFL strategies, and from the teacher rating scales on the benefits of using AFL strategies, performance standards, and working within a learning team. Chapter 5 interpreted and discussed the data collected from this action research inquiry to determine whether students' quality of writing improved with the implementation of AFL strategies in the instruction of Written Language. This chapter interpreted and discussed the students' rating scale data on the benefits of using AFL strategies and the teachers' rating scale data on the benefits of AFL strategies, performance standards and learning teams.

Chapter 6 discusses the conclusions and recommendations that can be made from this research inquiry on the effectiveness of implementing the AFL strategies, and of analyzing and creating criteria from exemplary writing. It also discusses the conclusions and recommendations on using performance standards and on working within a learning team.

## Conclusions

The degree of increased quality of students' writing was measured by the *BC Performance Standards in Writing*, the data from both the students' and the teachers' rating scales, and the data from teachers' responses. The conclusions on this action research inquiry, based on the results in Chapter 4, are discussed under the following headings: *Student Performance Standards, Students' Learning, Teachers' Learning, and Teachers' Comments.*

**Student performance standards.** Writing is believed to be the most complex literate activity students engage in. Klassen and Welton (2009) claimed the complexity occurs because writing needs to coordinate multiple cognitive processes, linguistic skills, and physical operations to accomplish the goal of composing. Klassen and Welton (2006) emphasized that writing is an essential skill. They believe competency in writing is imperative for all academic success and that peoples' writing ability determines their academic paths. The Primary Learning Team wanted evidence on whether implementing the AFL strategies of analyzing and developing lists of criteria from exemplary writings would significantly increase the quality of students' writing. Black and Wiliam (1998) reported that their study provided evidence for the importance of AFL and how the link between assessment and instruction can lead to significant student achievement. This action research project inquired on the degree to which implementing AFL strategies had on the quality of student's personal writing.

Teachers presented writing samples to students, discussed with them the reasons for an exemplary status on writings, deconstructed exemplary writings with students to create lists of criteria to use with their own writing, and provided timely, rich, descriptive feedback on

how to improve their writing. With AFL strategies implemented, Heritage primary students received explicit instruction in writing.

The results from the students' performance data gave conclusive evidence that from the baseline write in September 2011 through the subsequent writes in October 2011, November 2011 and January 2012, the implementation of AFL strategies significantly increased the quality of students' writings with the exception of the last write from the Grade 2 students. Considering this, the evidence remains decisive that AFL is an effective means of improving students' writing competency.

**Students' learning.** The data from students overwhelmingly indicated that AFL strategies were perceived as helpful. The students believed that the most valuable AFL strategy was receiving informative feedback from teachers. Cooper (2007) stated that receiving rich, descriptive, informative feedback from teachers increases student learning by advising them on how to improve. The students also indicated that analyzing exemplary writing had positive effects on their writing. They found it helpful to deconstruct the exemplary writing and through this process understand the expectations that are needed to increase the quality of their writing. The students were convinced AFL strategies were invaluable for increasing their writing performance competency. To further support learning, Harris (2007) argued, that teachers need students to have the criteria for the performance standard they are trying to meet.

**Teachers' learning.** The teachers indicated strongly that implementing AFL strategies had positively affected student learning and teaching performance. They are convinced that AFL is invaluable to student learning. Through this inquiry, I believe the PLT developed an embedded understanding that AFL is a necessary aspect of the teaching and learning process.

The ultimate understanding of teaching and learning is that they are closely intertwined (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Overall, the PLT claims their understanding AFL has greatly impacted their teaching practices and instruction.

The teachers are more knowledgeable on grade competency expectations through the use of the *BC Performance Standards in Writing* document. After assessing close to 130 students' writings using the performance standard, the teachers became very cognizant of the criteria. With this knowledge, they were able to assess and evaluate writing with confidence and consistency, but most importantly, it positively affected teachers' written language instruction by directly connecting their teaching to the criteria.

**Teachers' comments.** The teachers voiced their thoughts and ideas on the benefits of using AFL strategies, using performance standards and participating in a learning team. Again, through these comments, they indicated their professional learning has been positively impacted by the knowledge and use of AFL strategies. Teachers indicated that assessing students' writings by using the performance standards, made them more aware of the expectations for students at different grades. Having the knowledge of using criteria has made teachers more confident in teaching writing to students. They concluded that the assessment and evaluation of students' writings impacts their instruction and gives consistency with assessment of writing.

The teachers believe that students' quality of writing significantly increases when the AFL strategies are implemented. Additionally, teachers claim that when students participate in analyzing exemplary writing and in developing the criteria, they are not only more cognizant of the expectations but they have increased effort and engagement. This increased understanding also leads students to become more responsible for their own learning and

increases students' desire to strive for excellent work. When students are self-assessing, looking at exemplar work samples, and making decisions on criteria for excellent work, they become responsible for their learning as well. (Earl, 2004)

The process of working within a professional learning team, namely the Primary Learning team was an enriching experience for the teachers. Their responses indicated that the opportunities to discuss students' writings and to assess within a team allowed for all members to grow professionally. The learning team gave them the opportunity to learn in a risk free environment with the support of their colleagues. Participating in this professional learning team gave members the time to reflect on other's ideas and opinions and gave them the opportunity to voice their own. This impacted learning for all teachers of the team. Fullan (2007) stated in successful schools, teachers form professional learning communities that focus on student work through assessment.

### **Recommendations**

Considering the results of this inquiry that AFL strategies positively affect the quality of students' personal writings, I would recommend using AFL strategies in all genres of writing. These strategies have a desired effect on the quality of students' writing. I recommend always doing a baseline write in September and then subsequent writes throughout the year on engaging or inspiring topics. The time constraints for this research did not allow for collections of students' writings until the end of the year which would have provided a full year's growth of students' written language progress using AFL strategies. A full-year collection of student writing samples would provide more substantial evidence of their effectiveness. I urge teachers to collect the students' writing performance standards data for evidence of improved writing competency for each student. I also suggest that most

writings be kept for the year to allow teachers, students and parents the opportunity to assess the continued progress in writing. AFL allows teachers, students, and parents to see what is expected and to work together so that learning moves forward (Chappius & Stiggins, 2006). The process of assessing students' writings allows teachers to modify their writing instruction to meet the need of the students. Black and Wiliam (1998) claimed that innovations that included strengthening the practice of AFL produced significant and often substantial learning gains in students. I strongly advocate for AFL strategies being used in all genres and aspects of writing: meaning, conventions, form, and style.

The overwhelming evidence, from the students' rating scales on the helpfulness of using AFL strategies, implies the need to continue using these practices. The practice of analyzing exemplary works and building criteria needs to be done with all writing genres. Students need to know the expectations for any assignment for them to successfully meet them. I recommend all expectations be discussed and posted, with exemplary samples available for analysis. I also recommend the continuation of students receiving timely, descriptive feedback on their writing as students considered this the most valuable AFL strategy. Feedback effectively and significantly moves learning forward.

Teachers are more confident and knowledgeable about the expectations for students in written language. With the use of performance standards, teachers are more knowledgeable and consistent in their planning, teaching, and assessing of written language. The PLT are more aware of the necessity for students to become responsible for their learning, and in order for this to happen, students need to know what the expectations are. When they understand the expectations, they will strive to meet them. Cooper (2007) emphasized that when students and teachers discuss criteria for learning it sets students up

for success. With clear expectations, students have a greater understanding of what the teacher wants and how to best attain the concept. I recommend the continued use of analyzing exemplary writings and establishing criteria with student involvement at all grade levels.

It became evident to me that the teachers involved in this inquiry were enlightened with the use of AFL strategies. The teachers recognized that their professional learning was beneficial for both the teaching and learning that occurred in the classroom. I would adamantly recommend the continued use of AFL strategies in all aspects of writing and with all genres. Student benefited from: learning the strategies, understanding the expectations, participating in developing the criteria, and recognizing their responsibility in creating exemplary writing. The teachers realized the benefits of using performance standards in writing. I recommend that teachers have professional time to review, discuss and plan using all performance standards. These standards then need to be shared with the students so they can be responsible for their learning.

Lastly, I recommend the use of professional learning teams. The teachers learning together allowed for learning to occur in a safe environment. Professional learning teams have vast amounts of experience and knowledge that may otherwise be unattainable in professional literature due to teacher's lack of time and motivation. I believe the teachers significantly valued the opportunity to learn, reflect and be a valuable member of the Primary Learning Team.

### **Personal Development**

This inquiry has greatly impacted my learning and instruction as a teacher. It has provided me and the other professionals the evidence on the effectiveness of using AFL



strategies in not only written language instruction, but other areas of the curriculum as well. I have benefited from the intensive review of the literature to support this research in using AFL in instruction, and the newest pedagogies on written language. It has been a stimulating and worthwhile journey to provide students a chance to significantly improve their understanding of expectations and increase the quality of their writing.

### **Chapter Summary**

This action research project was initiated and completed to determine the degree to which AFL strategies of analyzing and creating criteria from exemplary writing would increase the quality of students' personal writing. This project contains an extensive literature review on the theories of AFL and on the pedagogies of written language instruction to support this research. The theories behind this research stated that when students have knowledge of the expectations they are trying to attain, the quality of their work increases to meet these expectations. The literature claims when AFL strategies are thoroughly implemented, students demonstrate more effort and engagement, and have a greater standard of work. The Heritage students in Grades 1, 2, and 3 participated in this research by completing a baseline write in September 2011. The students then received instruction using AFL strategies of analyzing exemplary writings and creating lists of criteria for all personal writings. The teachers involved in the research assessed the students' writings based on the meaning strand of the *BC Performance Standards in Writing*. Quantitative data were collected from the students' performance standards on the baseline write and on the three formal writes in October 2011, November 2011 and January 2012. The data results indicated the AFL strategies implemented were effective in increasing the quality of students' personal writing. Quantitative data collected from a student rating scale indicated that they believed

the AFL strategies were helpful in improving their writing and data from the Primary Learning Team survey indicated increased knowledge and understanding of AFL. Qualitative data from teachers' written responses gave substantial evidence on the benefits of using AFL strategies, performance standards and participating within a learning team.

The performance standard data conclusively indicated that implementation of assessment of learning strategies in written language significantly increases the quality of students' personal writing. Teachers also gave a clear indication that using AFL strategies was significantly beneficial to the quality of students' writing. Teachers indicated this research project improved their understanding of teaching and learning. They stated their confidence in teaching writing skills using AFL strategies and with assessing and evaluating writings using the performance standards. They clearly indicated that working within a learning team was beneficial for them professionally. The teachers shared that this research project was overwhelmingly successful in improving the quality of students writing, but also improved them as professionals.

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## Appendix A

### Quick Scale: Grade 3 Personal Writing

The Quick Scale is a summary of the Rating Scale that follows. Both describe student achievement in March-April of the school year. Personal writing is usually expected to be checked for errors, but not revised or edited.

| Aspect  | Not Yet Within Expectations  | Meets Expectations<br>(Minimal Level)   | Fully Meets Expectations  | Exceeds Expectations  |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| <b>SNAPSHOT</b>   | <i>The writing offers few ideas, and these are often disjointed, illogical, and hard to understand. The student needs ongoing support.</i>   | <i>The writing presents loosely connected ideas; may be vague or hard to follow in places or flawed by frequent basic errors.</i>   | <i>The writing is clear and easy to follow, with relevant and logical ideas about the topic or issue.</i>   | <i>The writing flows smoothly, offers detail and elaboration, and shows some insight.</i>   |
| <b>MEANING</b><br>• ideas and information<br>• use of detail  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• often very brief—a statement of opinion without support</li> <li>• details may be irrelevant, vague, or inaccurate</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• opinion or reaction tends to be vague or unsupported</li> <li>• relies on retelling or offering factual details without explanation or analysis</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• connects to opinions, experiences, feelings</li> <li>• some explanations, details, examples</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• connects to experiences and feelings; writer's perspective comes through</li> <li>• supports and elaborates ideas; may make comparisons</li> </ul>   |
| <b>STYLE</b><br>• clarity, variety, and impact of language  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• basic language</li> <li>• sentences are often long and rambling or short and stilted</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• language may be vague, repetitive</li> <li>• tends to rely on simple and compound sentences; may include run-on sentences</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• language is clear and shows some variety</li> <li>• some variety in sentence length and pattern</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• language is clear and varied; some precision</li> <li>• flows smoothly</li> <li>• variety of sentence patterns and lengths</li> </ul>  |
| <b>FORM</b><br>• opening<br>• organization and sequence<br>• conclusion   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• may be very brief</li> <li>• no introduction; tends to ramble</li> <li>• repeats a few basic connecting words (e.g., <i>and then</i>)</li> </ul>                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• some sequence; connections among ideas may be unclear</li> <li>• introduces topic, but often loses focus</li> <li>• some transitions may be abrupt</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• logically sequenced</li> <li>• introduces and generally sticks to topic; conclusion may be abrupt</li> <li>• variety of connecting words</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• logically sequenced and connected</li> <li>• clear beginning, middle, and end; sticks to topic</li> <li>• smooth transitions</li> </ul>  |
| <b>CONVENTIONS</b><br>• complete sentences<br>• spelling<br>• capitals<br>• end of sentence punctuation<br>• correct pronouns | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• frequent, repeated errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure often make the writing hard to understand</li> <li>• capitals often omitted or misused</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• basic spelling and sentence punctuation is correct; errors do not interfere with meaning, although some parts may be hard to read</li> <li>• may include run-on or incomplete sentences; may overuse pronouns</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• basic grammar, spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure are generally correct; minor errors do not interfere with meaning</li> <li>• may include errors with commas, quotation marks, or agreement</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• few errors; these are usually caused by taking risks with newly acquired or complex language</li> <li>• may overuse some punctuation marks or make occasional errors in agreement</li> </ul> |

**Appendix B****Student Rating Scale: Assessment for Learning**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Rating Scale: (1) Not Helpful (2) Helpful (3) Very Helpful

1. Does it help to see good writing before I write?



2. Does it help to discuss what makes good writing before you write?



3. Does it help to see a list of what makes good writing when I am writing?



4. Does it help to sort writing into not meeting, meeting and exceeding expectations?



5. Does it help to have the teacher give you ideas on how to improve your writing?



## Appendix C

### Teacher's Rating Scale: Assessment for Learning

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate your views on the following questions:

**Scale: (1) Poor (2) Low (3) Average (4) Very High (5) Excellent**

1. Has your knowledge of what constitutes exemplar writing increased?

1                  2                  3                  4                  5

2. Has the students' knowledge of what constitutes exemplar writing increased?

1                  2                  3                  4                  5

3. Has the students' writing improved because of building criteria from exemplar writing?

1                  2                  3                  4                  5

4. Do you believe students find writing easier, when the criteria are discussed?

1                  2                  3                  4                  5

5. Has it been beneficial to use the B.C. Performance standards in writing?

1                  2                  3                  4                  5

6. Has it been beneficial to collaborate on writing with our Primary Learning team?

1                  2                  3                  4                  5

7. What do you see as the benefits of using this assessment for learning strategy in your instruction of writing?

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8. What are additional comments that you would like to share with the researcher or Learning Team regarding building criteria from exemplary personal writing?

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