The staff at Aberdeen Junior High School in Winnipeg began, almost inadvertently, a Writing Across the Curriculum program by requesting a session on holistic marking. While already committed through the Aberdeen Project to improving literacy instruction, we focused increasingly on the writing abilities of our students and on methods to encourage the growth of those abilities. Inservices, the institution of writing folders, brown bag lunches to share progress, a professional Writer-in-Residence, visits with the division consultant all became part of this teacher-owned process.

Both for the purpose of providing data for the project's evaluation and for their own curriculum planning, the teachers have conducted a schoolwide assessment of writing every six months since the project began three years ago. Scoring sessions continue to provide the most important inservice for teachers in writing instruction.

The Aberdeen Project illustrates four principles important to effective staff development. The vehicle for change—in this case writing—must be sufficiently focused, yet central to all student learning. Frequent and institutionally sanctioned collaboration among teachers provide the pressure and support needed for meaningful change to occur. Administrative presence is another important feature; without taking over decisions he believed his staff should make, the Principal continually made clear his commitment to language development and to the process. Both he and the project's coordinator worked hard to maintain staff ownership of the project, recognizing the necessity for the staff to articulate its own needs, goals, and solutions. Outside "experts" served only to facilitate that articulation.

Aberdeen teachers have a powerful sense of directing the course of their school's program, of having put their students increasingly on track academically, and of having established patterns of genuine collaboration, all of which will continue to contribute to their success in facing the many problems—including teaching writing—of an inner city school.

The session began with a definition of a rhetorical community as a group that shares assumptions about what information texts should contain, how texts should be organized, and how texts should be presented in terms of tone and style. Such communities are often coterminous with academic disciplines or businesses. At times, however, they share broader cultural constituencies. The International Education Association (IEA) Written Composition Study sought to determine what were the characteristics of national or subnational communities by examining the shared assumptions of teachers and of students as to what constituted good writing, particularly good school writing. This was done through questionnaires and through a content and stylistic analysis of actual writing samples.

As a background for understanding these assumptions, we described the classroom in terms of its environment for literacy. Using data from Chile, Finland, Hungary, New Zealand, and the United States, we showed that most students do not spend much time reading for pleasure (except in Finland) but that in all countries most families have at least one newspaper in the home. School libraries were universally available in these countries and most (except Chile and New Zealand) reported having a school newspaper. Only in Finland was there a reported school policy of discouraging the use of multiple choice exams rather than essay exams. In Hungary and Finland, students tended to rate themselves as poor writers although this perception was not supported by their scores on these tasks. To determine if achievement in writing is related to the type of task assigned, a correlation of

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achievement on two of the tasks required by each student was taken. It showed that in New Zealand and in the United States (and to a certain extent in Hungary) the students write equally well (or equally badly) without regard to the task. In Chile and Finland achievement tends to be somewhat task related.

Chile entered the IEA Study of Written Composition in order to assess the existing curriculum and practice in writing in the Chilean school system against an international background. As a result of a series of reforms over a period of more than 25 years, education has become more accessible to a higher level for the majority of the population, but with resulting problems of overcrowded classrooms and teacher shortages. Over a period of time there was a perception of lowered student achievement, especially in the critical areas of reading and writing. At the same time, the level of students' writing ability was perceived as being not only an educational but a national concern. The availability of the verified valid evaluation and diagnostic instruments of the IEA international study was seen as an important fulcrum for the planning of further reforms. An international confrontation of results was thought to provide a more general rationale, not country or language specific, but pertinent to a moment or a historic-universal consequence in improving the quality of written communication teaching at primary and secondary school levels. Some results of the Chilean data were discussed.

In an attempt to explain differences between pupils' achievement in free writing in Sweden, the IEA used a Partial Least Squares program to test a theoretic causal model of factors of importance to pupils' proficiency in writing. The background data included, among other things, the pupils' sociocultural background, the teachers' experience and the classroom practices in writing instruction. They used pupils' marks on the argumentative composition to represent the standard of their achievement in writing. The theoretic model was verified showing the strongest correlation between background variables and writing achievement to be the sex of the student, especially as it related to the pupils' attitude toward freewriting. However, no relationships could be found between teaching in school (as represented by the variables in this study) and pupils' achievement.

USING MESSAGE LEVEL CRITERIA TO EVALUATE PRIMARY WRITING

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In April of three successive years, we collected writing samples from all English and French Immersion primary classes, about sixteen hundred samples in all. Students wrote according to procedures that are consistent with a process approach to writing. At least two persons evaluated the samples using a six-point scale, which focuses on the message level of the writing, i.e. on the child's success in conveying meaning.

Evaluators agreed on the message level in 65% of samples in grade one, 63% in grade two, 52% in grade three, with no more than one level of disagreement in 94%-99% of the samples (depending on grade level). The writing scale appears valid in that the percentage of writing samples at the different levels moves up the scale from grade one, to grade two, to grade three, with more than a third of grade three samples meeting criteria at the 5 -6 end of the scale.

Evaluators drew a number of other conclusions from the study: most students have no difficulty choosing a topic; interesting samples were written by students from all schools, regardless of socioeconomic level; boys as well as girls produce top level writing; students do not make revisions unless they write on every second line; and opportunities to share writing with others are critical in fostering writing development.

Classroom teachers use the writing scale to evaluate the content of a student's file, not to mark individual pieces of writing. Half-a-day's practice with the scale is sufficient to make teachers comfortable with its use.