

Under-achievement Is *Not* Inevitable: Working Effectively With Struggling And Reluctant Writers



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Please note that students' inclusion in photos or video clips in this resource does not necessarily imply that they are struggling or reluctant writers. Photos and video clips are included to illustrate the author engaging with students.

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Under-achievement in writing is reported as a significant issue in schools across the English-speaking world, especially amongst upper primary and middle school students.

In New Zealand, for example, the Ministry of Education¹ reported in 2017 a relatively high level of under-achievement (27.3%) for Years 1 to 4 students in writing, and an even higher level (30.1%) for Years 5 to 8 students. This indicates that approximately 30% of students begin their secondary schooling under-prepared to meet the writing demands contained within the New Zealand secondary school curriculum.

Furthermore, a recent survey² of 449 Year 5 to 8 New Zealand students about their attitudes to writing indicated that only 38.8% liked to write 'heaps' or 'quite a lot' in their own time, either at school or at home.

This situation is even more pronounced in other parts of the English-speaking world. In the United States, for example, findings presented in the most recent Report Card³ indicated that almost three-quarters of American students in their final year of middle schooling achieved slightly below or well below an expected level of proficiency.

In the United Kingdom, the Department for Education's most recent research report on writing indicated that "writing is the subject with the worst performance compared with reading, maths and science".⁴

There appears to be an urgent need for teachers to address issues of under-achievement in writing across the English-speaking world, especially amongst many upper primary and middle school-age students (particularly boys and students from minority ethnic groups) so as to prepare them better for the demands of future school learning and beyond.

¹ "Statistics | Education Counts." <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics>. Accessed 13 Jan 20.

² Gadd, M., Parr, J. M., Robertson, J., Carran, L., Ali, Z., Gendall, L., & Watson, K. (2019). Portrait of the student as a young writer: some student survey findings about attitudes to writing and self-efficacy as writers. *LITERACY*, 53 (4), 226-235. [10.1111/lit.12178](https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12178)

³ National Center for Education Statistics, 2012 NAEP Nations Report Card Accessed 13 Jan 2020

⁴ "What is the research evidence on writing (in schools)." (p3) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183399/DFE-RR238.pdf. Accessed 13 Jan. 2020.

This might necessitate, for example, teachers working more effectively with students who cannot easily or willingly come up with ideas for writing or words to express their ideas, who maybe hold ideas but whose encoding or sentence formation skills are weak or negligible, or who write reasonably proficiently but will not take risks within their writing.

Ultimately, this means teachers working more effectively and strategically with students who demonstrate low levels of proficiency as developing writers.

This resource, which is a synthesis of both the author's and others' research findings, has been developed to assist teachers in addressing issues of under-achievement in writing, particularly but not exclusively amongst upper primary and middle school students.

All major findings are supported by authentic classroom illustrations (including some video clips of practice in action) as well as suggested actions for teachers.

The resource aims to address two questions that are of prime importance to teachers of literacy:

- Why do some students (particularly boys and students from minority ethnic groups) under-achieve as developing writers?
- What are some key actions that teachers can undertake so as to raise student achievement levels in writing?

The first part of the resource focuses on why some students under-achieve as developing writers. The second part focuses on some key actions that teachers can undertake to help raise student achievement.

There is also an appendix at the end of this resource that outlines how I put it together.

How To Use The Resource: School/Literacy Leaders

- It is suggested that school/literacy leaders could use the resource to lead professional inquiry and learning amongst their teachers if under-achievement in writing is an issue at their school.
- They can do this at the whole school level (teacher-only days, staff meetings), small group or team level (team or whanau meetings) or at the individual teacher level (meetings or conversations with individual teachers about their practice and students).
- They can do this by leading shared reading, viewing and discussion of each section and component (What do I learn about under-achievement and effective practice? What does it tell me about my practice and my students?) and by co-constructing goals, interventions and actions with teachers that can be monitored.

How To Use The Resource: Teachers

- It is suggested that interested teachers could also use the resource to lead their own professional inquiry and learning around under-achievement in writing.
- They might want to do this independently (by reflecting on the content of each section and component) or as guided by a school leader. This process may lead to the establishment of inquiry goals for teachers.
- To help school/literacy leaders and teachers to use this resource for their own or others' professional learning and inquiry, there is a reading and discussion guide at the beginning and end of all sections and components.
- The reading / discussion guide often includes actions for teachers to trial.

Questions To Reflect On/Discuss About Under-achievement In Your School or Class

- How prevalent is under-achievement in writing in your school, team or classroom? How do you know?
- Does the national picture of under-achievement in writing match your local picture?
- How do you think the majority of your students would answer the question: How much do you like writing in your own time at school/away from school?
- Do you notice a difference in writing achievement and/or attitudes to writing in relation to your students' gender and/or ethnicity? How would you describe this difference?