Improving Literacy Outcomes for Years 5-8 Boys

Kelly Mercer
Riverdale School

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a small action research project carried out by a Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in a small rural, full primary school in New Zealand. It focused on improving the literacy outcomes for Years 5-8 boys in the school by way of a boys'-only writing group. Results show that the boys'-only learning group had a positive impact on the students' engagement and motivation for learning and improved literacy outcomes.

Research paper

Keywords: *Boys, literacy outcomes, motivation, writing*

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, as a result of my involvement in a SENCO professional development group, I devised an action research plan to improve the literacy outcomes of a group of Years 5-8 boys at my school. At the time I taught at a small, decile 6, rural full primary school in the central North Island. The question that I posed for the action research was "Do Years 5-8 boys' writing asTTle scores improve with the implementation of a boys' writing group which focuses on explicitly teaching writing?" I wanted to improve literacy levels for this cohort of boys, specifically asTTle writing scores, and I also wanted to improve their engagement in literacy and inquiry. The action research model that I used was based on the work of Mills (2007). An important part of this action research process is articulating my beliefs in relation to boys' literacy. It is an important part of action research as it allows the teacher-researcher to think about the beliefs that shape their attitudes and practices.

My beliefs/understandings prior to the intervention were:

- Boys work best in a competitive environment.
- The learning can be geared specifically to their areas of interest.
- Engaging with a positive male role model will have an impact on the boys attitudes towards school and also future learning.
- Boys may be more responsive to a male teacher than a female teacher.
- Girls tend to dominate in the regular class environment – they enjoy the role of researcher and writer, and boys with literacy difficulty can opt out – they will not be able to opt out in this small group.
- Smaller group sizes mean more teacher-to-pupil contact. Increasing the opportunities for positive relationships between teacher and student may have positive outcomes.

Table 1 summarises the background to the action research process (see next page).

INTERVENTION

The intervention began with having boys-only groups undertake specialised inquiry learning, with a positive male role model. The idea was that using the motivational experiences provided in the boys' inquiry class the teacher could build on these to improve the writing results of this cohort of boys. After two terms it became clear that this process was not having a significant impact on the boys asTTle writing results due to a range of variables and it was decided that we would be more explicit in our intervention.

The second intervention began with using current assessment data gathered from the class teaching programme, using AsTTle, to select a group of Years 5-8 boys who were working at a level below and significantly below their expected AsTTle level. These boys were grouped into small focus teaching groups and were taught regularly, in one hour sessions, throughout Terms 3 and 4 of 2010.

To scaffold their writing, Stephen Graham's Explicitly Teaching Writing frameworks and techniques were used (see Graham, MacArthur & Fitzgerald, 2007). I also ensured the children's

Table 1

Background

Who is involved?	Years 5-8 boys Classroom teachers Outside male role models
What is happening?	This cohort of boys has an historical trend of underachievement in literacy, specifically in writing.
When is it happening?	Across a period of years as evidenced by an Analysis of Variance/Reporting to the Board of Trustees.
How is it happening?	Interventions: RRAP, RTLit, RTLB. Professional development in reading in the Junior School and professional development focused on raising reading achievement throughout the school including Māori student achievement.
Why is this happening?	The boys have had a prolonged experience of finding literacy difficult and are giving up and becoming disengaged. As a result they have low personal expectations regarding their success in literacy and a place a low value on literacy in general. Teaching of Writing – we are "missing the mark". We have not had significant PD in writing in the 3½ years I have been at the school but we believe we have excellent teaching of writing – so why is it happening? This could be an area for future development.

Table 2

Timeline for Terms 3 and 4

Phase five: Teaching of Writing - ensure effective teaching/learning - planning - teaching - regular professional discussion Communication - Set up regular meetings with teachers to ensure firm link with class programme is established Further professional readings to share	 Wk 3 T3 Wk 6 T3 Ongoing Week 3, 6, 9 ideally Wk 8, T2
Phase six: Collect data: - Writing Sample – asTTle results - Student Voice – From boy writers Reflections: - from me – Boys' writing teacher - from class teachers - from the boys Meet with teachers to plan for Term 4 writers	 Start of Term 4
Phase seven: Writing teaching: - ensure effective teaching/learning - planning - teaching - regular professional discussion Communication - Set up regular meetings with team members to ensure firm link with class programme is established Further professional readings to share	 Wk 3 T4 Wk 6 T4 Ongoing Week 3, 6, 9 ideally Wk 8, T4
Phase eight: Reflections: - from myself – writing teacher - from class teachers Final Report on programme prepared - share with Principal - share with team - share with BOT - share with RTLB service/Senco Cluster Group From final report prepare an action plan	 October October November

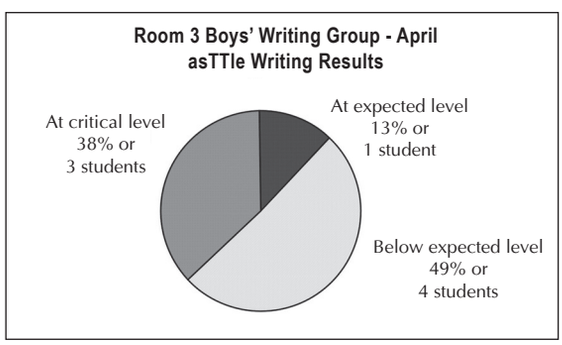
motivation by beginning each writing session with an engagement or language experience task. This programme was carefully matched to the current class programme, and in fact I would attempt to share a new writing genre or framework prior to the classroom programme, thus empowering these students within their own class. We explored a range of genre during this time; recount, response, argument or exposition. At the end of the term the boys were sampled again using asTTle and it is these results that are shared in this report.

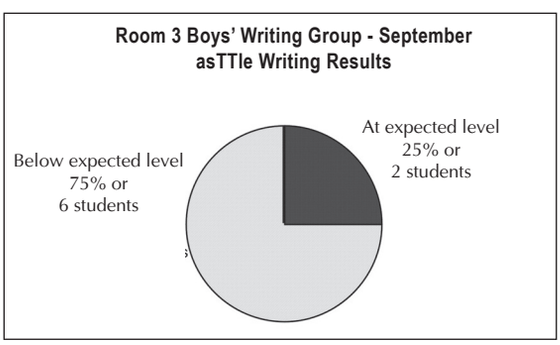
During the process I needed to make a variety of changes to respond to external influences. For example, the project initially began with a male teacher providing the programme, but after his resignation, I took on the role of teacher but still wanted to allow for the positive male role model so created ways to bring men from the local community in to work with the boys. After our mid-point data reflected no significant change in asTTle results, we decided an explicit intervention in writing would need to occur. A further change was in response to timetable changes in the school. I began teaching writing in year groups, but ultimately had to work with class groups as this had less impact on the home classroom and also enabled me to make stronger connections with their class writing programme, for the benefit of the boys.

Table 2 (previous page) outlines the Timeline for Terms 3 and 4.

RESULTS

Data: Boys' Writers Group 1 (Room 3 boys or Years 5-6 boys)

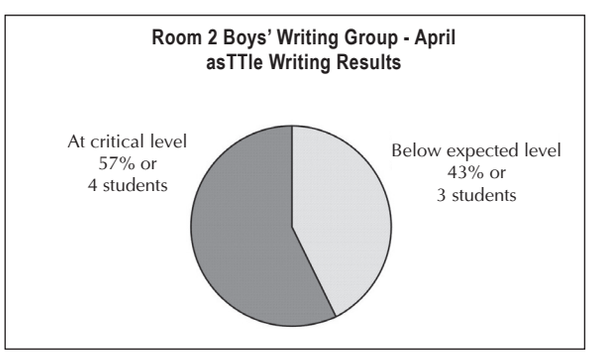


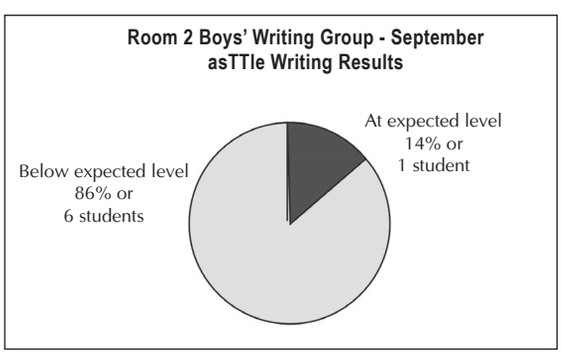


ANALYSIS

There is a significant shift with all boys no longer at a 'critical' level and now achieving at 'below the expected' level. There has also been another boy reach at 'expected' level. These results suggest that the boys' writing group could have had an impact on the asTTle writing results of this cohort.

Data: Boys' Writers Group 2 (Room 2 boys or Year 6-7 boys)



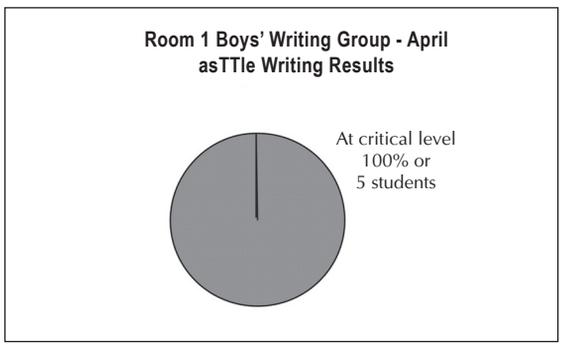


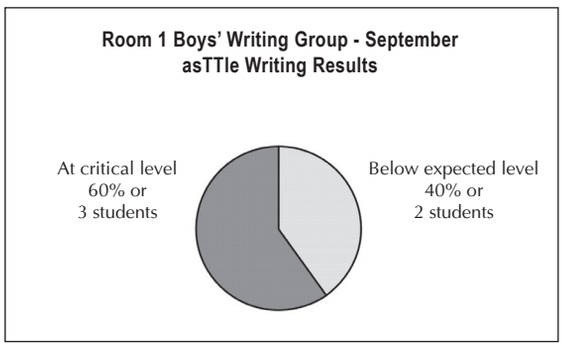
ANALYSIS

There has been a significant shift with all boys no longer at 'critical' levels and now achieving at 'below expected' levels. One student was working at the 'expected' level. These suggest that the boys' writing group could have had an impact on the asTTle writing results of this cohort.

RESULTS

Data: Boys' Writers Group 3 (Room 1 boys or Years 7-8 boys)



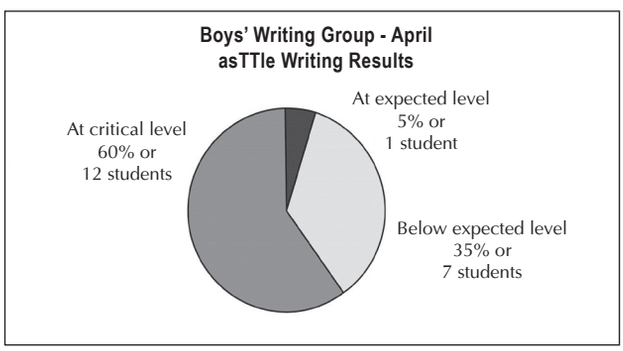


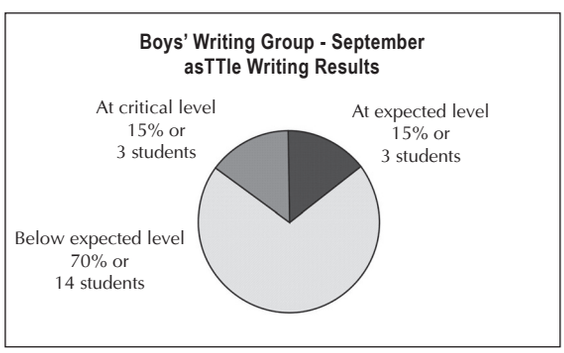
ANALYSIS

Two students have shifted from working at 'critical' level and are now achieving at 'below expected' level. These results would indicate that the boys' writers group could have had an impact on asTTle writing results.

OVERALL RESULTS

Data: All Boys from the Boys' Writers Group





These results clearly show a shift in the boys' achievement in writing, using the asTTle Writing Sample. The number of boys that were achieving 'critical' results from the April asTTle results to the September asTTle results has significantly improved. There has also been a small shift, with one more child achieving at 'expected' level.

Based on these results I could conclude that **Years 5-8 Boys' writing asTTle scores do improve with the implementation of a boys' writing group which focuses on 'Explicitly Teaching Writing'.**

FURTHER COMMENT

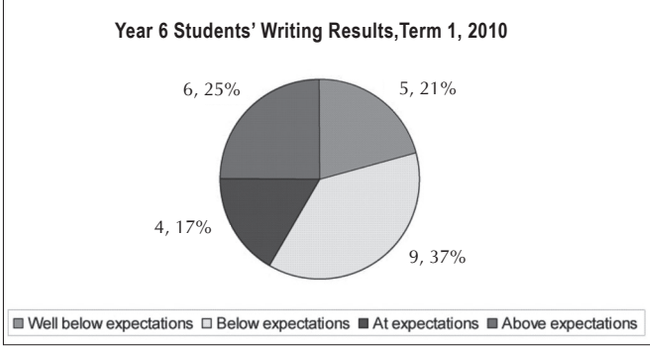
There are other variables that could have also contributed to the change in asTTle writing results that are not attributable to the boys' writing group.

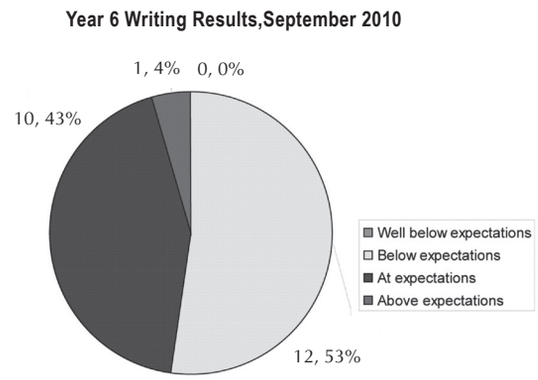
All the classroom teachers had recent professional development in the teaching of writing and, as a result, their teaching practice has changed considerably. The teachers are now clearly providing models of expected writing, are assisting their learners in the classroom in unpacking the model and using frameworks to assist the children to plan for their writing. The teachers are also now using success criteria and are also working with their children consistently in guided instructional writing groups.

As a result it is unclear as to what has directly contributed to the improvements in asTTle writing. It could be the boys'-only writing group, but it could also be the changes in teaching practice in their home classrooms.

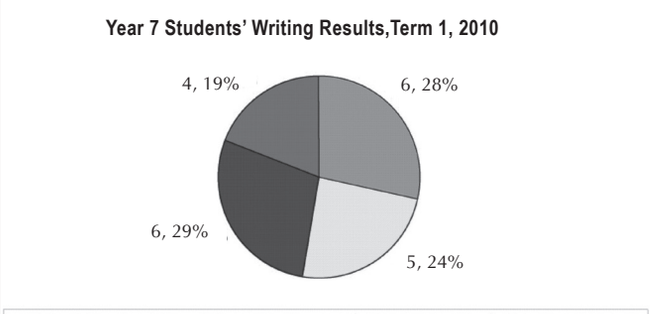
Yet there has been a school-wide drop in achievement in writing from the April to September asTTle writing samples. In particular the Years 6 and 7 cohort have shifted with 39% of all Year 7 students achieving at or above expectation (compared to 68% in 2009) and 47% of all Year 6 students achieving at or above expectation (compared to 79% in 2009). However, there was a shift of five Year 6 students and three Year 7 students from being 'critical/well below expectation' in April into the 'below expectation' category in September.

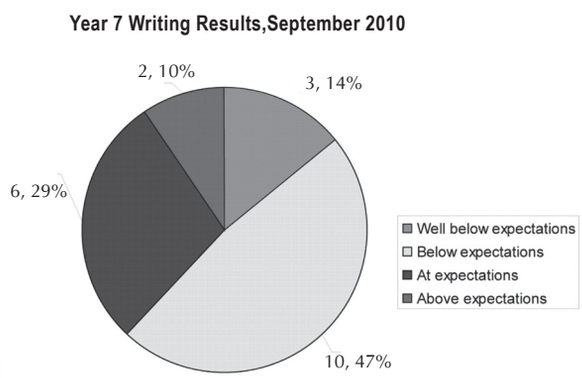
KEY:
Above Expectations - 4B or above
Met Expectations - Level 3P - 3A
Below Expectations - Level 2A - 3B
Well Below Expectations - 2P or lower





KEY:
Above Expectations - 4P or above
Met Expectations - Level 3A - 4B
Below Expectations - Level 3B - 3P
Well Below Expectations - 2A or lower





These results are surprising to both the management and teaching team at the school. It was expected with the improved teaching practice asTTle writing results would improve to match.

As the boys' writing group results have improved against a school-wide trend of falling results it could be concluded that having a boys'-only writing group which focuses on explicitly teaching writing has a significant impact on their asTTle writing results.

To further indicate the success of the boys' writers group I have included both teacher and student comments regarding engagement and motivation for writing, which are not measurable by the asTTle writing test.

STUDENT VOICE

Comments about engagement/motivation for learning:

- We do experiments like the mini rockets and not just writing.
- It's fun.
- Gives us more experience.
- We take away from it our ability to write.

Comments about being in an all-boy learning environment:

- Its better being just boys – boys get on together better than girls.
- Don't argue and we can do stuff we like doing like science experiments.
- We get used to working together.
- Girls just start talking or do their hair. They are annoying.

Comments about their attitudes to writing after the Inquiry Group:

- My teacher said I should be impressed with my writing result after being in the group and that she is proud of me.
- I know how to put the full stops in a sentence now, so I don't have to do press ups.
- I didn't like writing at the start of the group, but now it's much easier.
- I like having the statement of position (I think this refers to the framework).

TEACHERS' VOICE

Comments about engagement and attitude of the boys:

- The boys were motivated about going to writing. The only session they weren't keen on was Friday after lunch.
- Room 2 boys really enjoyed and were motivated by the procedural writing especially they liked all the hands-on projects e.g rockets and cooking. The use of the scaffold was revolutionary and held their attention. It was harder during production for obvious reasons as they didn't want to miss out on what was happening in class. The boys also enjoyed having the prior knowledge and being the expert in class if they had learnt a concept before being taught in class.
- The boys really enjoy the writing sessions and are always eager to get more individual teaching.

Comments about the impact of the group on their writing ability:

- In terms of impact on their writing, it helped reinforce the ideas from the current unit being studied in class. They were very familiar with expositions in particular and found writing in the scaffold helpful.
- Huge impact on their perception of their own writing and effort from all the boys. I was blown away by the writing samples and it was noticeable the boys who hadn't been in the writing group as their grasp wasn't as strong. The writing group and in-class work matched perfectly. The boys were all glad they did their sample in the resource room with Kelly as they appreciated the smaller numbers and chance to ask more questions.
- Coming up to the writing sample it was great and all the boys (as well as the rest of the class) improved from their last writing sample.

Comments about any issues resulting from the project:

- Maybe each child could have some specific targeted goals set from asTTle that appear in their success criteria (surface features) every time they write so they are regularly analysing their progress. Surface features are still an area of concern so the goals may help here.
- I would like to have an extension writing group for my top writers to extend them and have the same success these boys have had.
- When the classes were taken individually this was better as the teaching could be more directed to what they were learning in class and they could receive more focused teaching. It also meant that in class I could focus on the higher achieving writers or the struggling girl-writers more.

FINAL COMMENT

It is clear from this action research it is not enough to have a boys'-only teaching group to have an impact on their asTTle writing results. The group needs to focus on explicitly teaching writing.

The data following the Boys' inquiry project was unclear and did not show any significant change in asTTle writing results, although there were several outside influences which created variables making it impossible to accurately measure the effect of this programme. These included:

- The change of inquiry teacher from a male to female teacher.
- The change of classroom teacher from an experienced teacher to a beginning teacher.
- The effect of writing a different genre between asTTle writing samples and that teachers felt that writing a poetic genre was easier for the learners than the transactional genre.
- The lack of asTTle sample at the start and close of the second boys' inquiry group making it impossible to measure the impact of the group on their writing results.

What was clear was that the boys enjoyed being part of a boys'-only group. They found the opportunity to work in a group that was based on meeting their interests, and not that of the girls, was motivating. They also enjoyed the smaller group numbers and the resulting regularity of being able to get help from the teacher.

The data following the writing project was clearer and indicates clearly that having a boys'-only writing group has a positive impact on their asTTle writing results. All class groups and the overall group showed a positive shift in results, with fewer children achieving at 'critical' levels and moving into working 'below expectation'. These results are especially clear given that there is a school-wide trend of a decrease in asTTle writing results in the Years 6 and 7 cohorts.

This data could be affected by external influences; primarily that of the teachers receiving recent professional development and significantly changing their teaching practice. As a result it is not clear now whether it was the writing group or change in teacher practice that was the contributing factor towards these improved asTTle results.

Once again the feedback from the students and teachers was very positive. The boys enjoyed the learning environment that was free from girls, and felt that this enabled them to work together more positively. The teachers all reported they were motivated about going to writing and felt that it may have had a positive impact on the results.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Boys'-only learning groups have a clear impact on their engagement and motivation for learning. I would recommend that boys'-only learning continue in the future.

The data suggests that the boys'-only writers group had an impact on asTTle writing results, against a school-wide trend of a decrease in writing. Therefore I recommend having a boy's-only group, which focuses on explicitly teaching writing, for our at-risk boy writers in Years 6-8 in 2011.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Kelly Mercer

Kelly Mercer undertook the Action Research Project on Boys' Learning while in the position of Deputy Principal and SENCO at a rural school in the Central North Island. She is passionate about making a difference for students and was curious to see if working with a boys'-only group in inquiry and writing could have an impact on student engagement and ultimately on achievement in writing.

Kelly has had 17 years of teaching experience in a range of decile and districts within the Northland and Manawatu Region and is currently the Associate Principal of Riverdale School.

EMAIL
kmercer.riverdaleschool@gmail.com