

**Investigate research and best practice to engage and enhance boys achievement in writing. Develop a tool kit of strategies for schools and teachers to use to accelerate achievement.**

*"Even when it's not pretty or perfect Even when it's more real than you want it to be. Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own."*  
(Michelle Obama, 2018)

I sincerely thank the Port Chalmers School Board of Trustees and staff for their support that enabled me to undertake my sabbatical project. I especially thank Jared Roddick for accepting the challenges of running the school during the term of my sabbatical.

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My thanks go to my colleagues Sharon Livingstone, Debbie Smith and Stephanie Madden who talked, listened and shared their knowledge and expertise on raising writing achievement for boys with me.

Thank you to Gail Loane, education consultant and writing mentor who has inspired many teachers and students to be writers. Gail has a belief that people have something to say. Gail freely shared her thoughts on writing and how we can nurture learners so they know that they have something to say.

### **Why Boys Writing**

Our data in 2017 showed that our boys were 84% at or above expected achievement levels in reading however in writing only 75% were at or above expected achievement levels. Our girls in the same year were 92% at or above expected achievement in reading and in writing 89% at or above expected achievement levels. There is a difference of 8% for reading between the genders and 14% for writing between the genders.

We knew our boys could write, however why are boys struggling to write in the classroom?

### **Survey**

I asked our Year 3 – 8 learners of both genders some attitudinal questions about writing. I was interested in what the learners themselves thought about writing and if there was a difference between males and females in the way they went about writing.

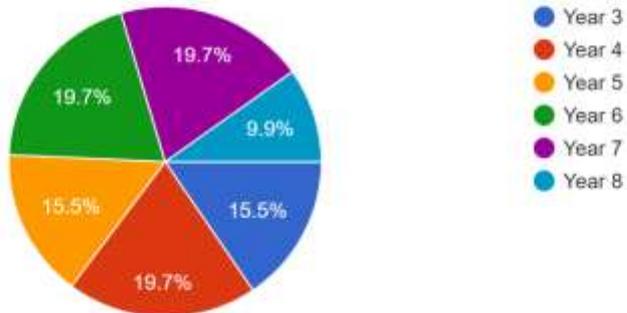
The survey asked the following questions:

1. What year are you in?
2. What gender are you?
3. I like writing at school. (Scale: very unlike me, unlike me, like me, very like me)
4. I am good at writing. (Scale: very unlike me, unlike me, like me, very like me)
5. I enjoy writing in my own time (not at school). (Scale: strongly disagree, disagree, not sure, agree, strongly agree)
6. The best thing about writing is...
7. The worst thing about writing is....
8. I like writing about....
9. I don't like writing about ...
10. Do you have any other comments about writing at school?

## Results for whole cohort

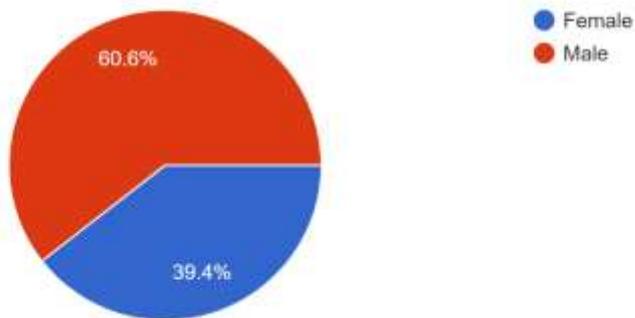
### What year are you in?

71 responses



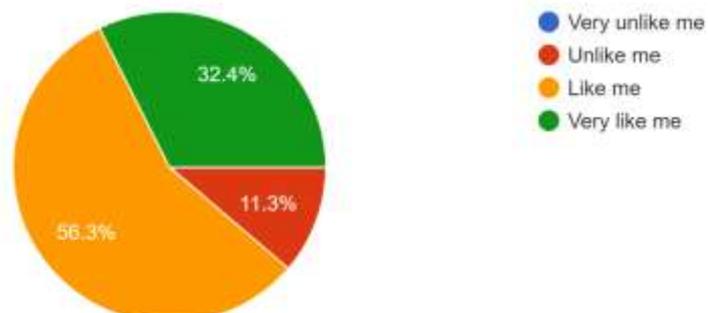
### What gender are you?

71 responses



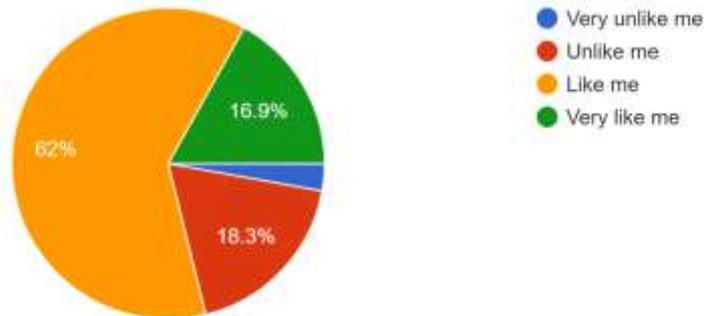
### I like writing at school

71 responses



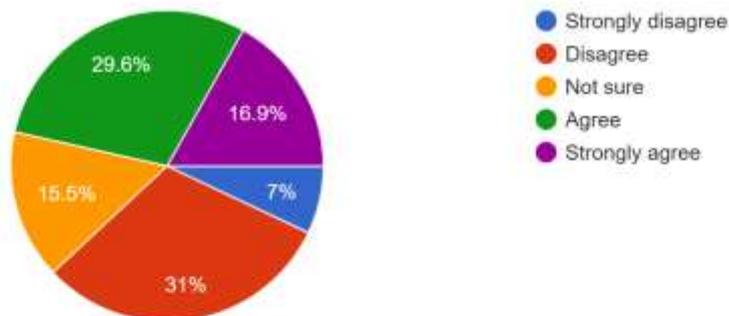
## I am good at writing

71 responses



## I enjoy writing in my own time (not at school)

71 responses



The best thing about writing is:

70% of the respondents liked the fact that they could write about anything they wanted. Other comments included that they like sharing and listening to each other's writing.

The worst thing about writing is:

30% found editing, spelling and punctuation the worst thing about writing. 25% hated having to write about something that the teacher chose. There were no real common categories for the rest of the comments although some children commented that they struggled to find ideas to write about.

I like writing about?

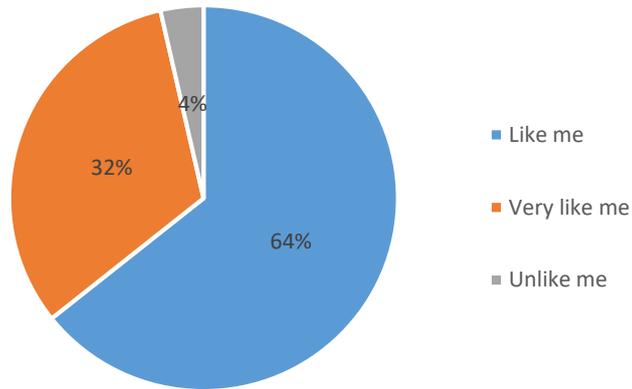
The top topics the children liked writing about included sports, animals, scary/horror, adventures, comedy, history and free choice.

I don't like writing about?

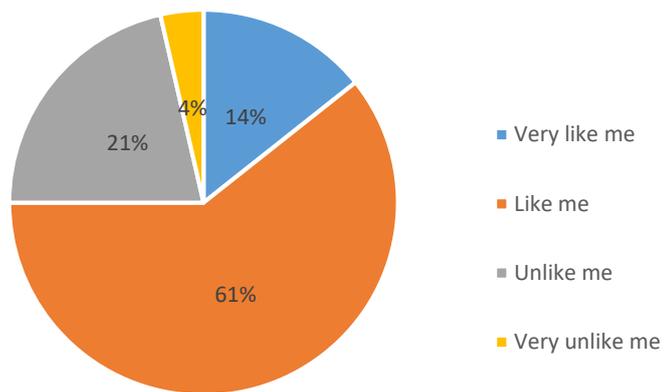
The things the children didn't like writing about included teacher choice topics, nature, weekends and holidays.

## Results for the girls

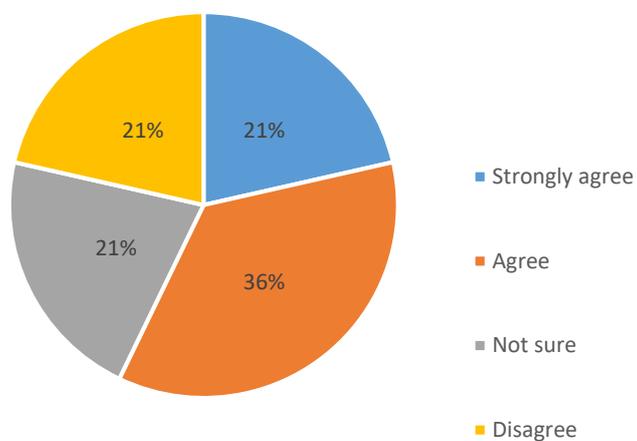
I like writing at school - females



I am good at writing -females



I enjoy writing in my own time - females



The best thing about writing is:

78% of the girls state that the best thing about writing is that they get to choose their own topic and use their imagination. This included comments about free choice and making up new adventures.

The worst thing about writing is:

There were a lot of separate answers to this question, however 21% of the girls found editing, spelling and punctuation the worst thing about writing. 17% sometimes found finding ideas to write about difficult.

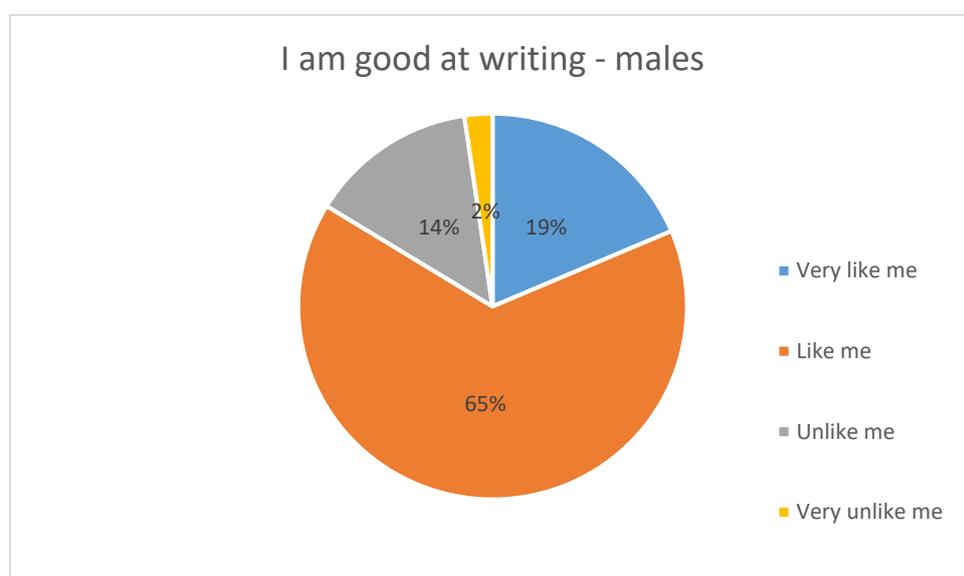
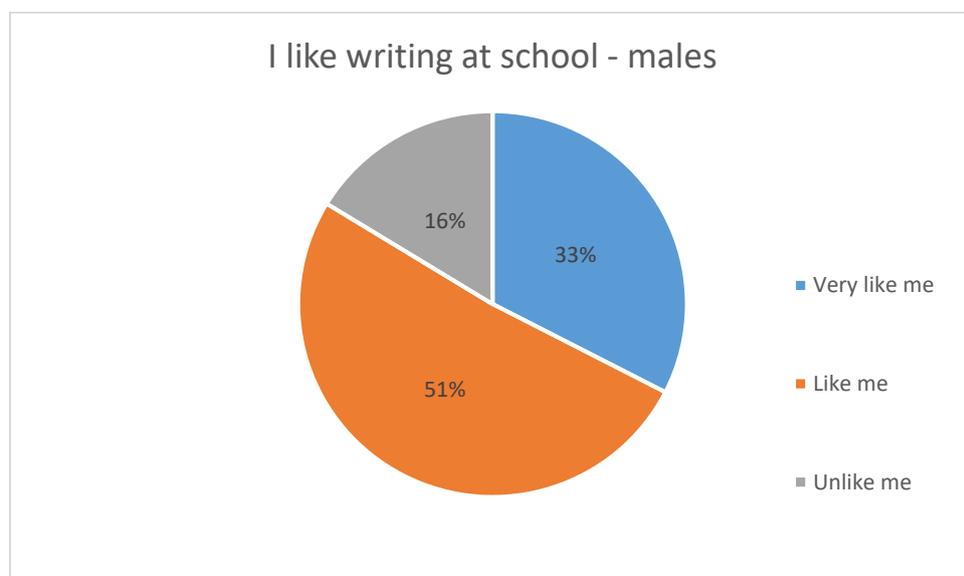
I like writing about?

21% of the girls like writing about animals and also about having a choice in what they write about. 25% of the girls like writing about adventures.

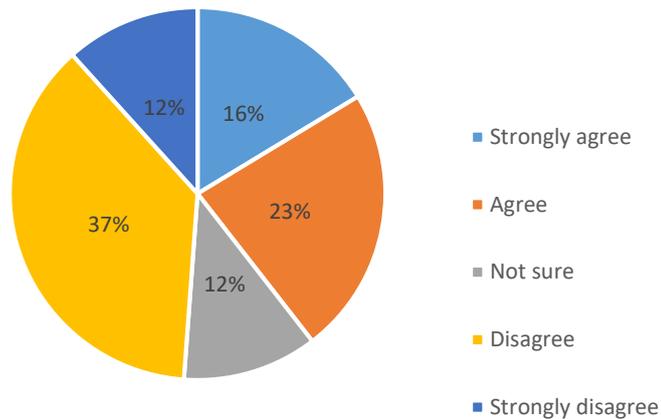
I don't like writing about?

28% of the girls don't like when the teacher chooses the topic and 21% of the girls don't like writing about weekends or holidays.

### Results for the boys



## I enjoy writing in my own time - males



The best thing about writing is:

51% of the boys state that the best thing about writing is that they get to choose their own topic and use their imagination. Boys also liked using humour and writing scary stories.

The worst thing about writing is:

There were a lot of separate answers to this question, however 35% of the boys found editing, spelling and punctuation the worst thing about writing. 12% found having to write about what the teacher chooses is the worst thing about writing.

I like writing about:

19% of the boys like writing about sports. 16% like writing adventures, 16% like writing about things in their lives. 12% like writing about nature and animals and another 12% like writing scary horror stories.

I don't like writing about?

14% of the boys don't like writing about nature. 7% don't like writing fairy tales and another 7% don't like writing non-fiction texts.

### What the data tells us?

96% of the girls like writing at school (32% saying it was very like them and 64% saying it was like them). 84% of the boys like writing at school (33% saying it was very like them and 51% saying it was like them). Four times as many boys don't like at school as compared with the girls (16% of boys; 4% of girls).

A quarter of the girls thought they weren't good at writing. However only 16% of boys thought they weren't good at writing. It is interesting that 16% of the boys don't like writing at school and the same percentage think they are not good at writing. Whereas only 4% of the girls don't like writing at school, but 25% of them think they are not good at writing.

57% of girls enjoy writing in their own time however only 39% of the boys enjoyed writing in their own time. 49% of the boys disagreed or strongly disagreed that they enjoyed writing in their own time, as compared to only 21% of the girls.

Both girls and boys enjoying writing about things that are important to them and that they choose. Boys did mention other topics more consistently than the girls and included such things as humour, horror, sports and adventure stories. Boys stated that their worst thing about writing was editing, spelling and punctuation. Several also stated they disliked writing topics set by the teacher. Another common theme that came out of the survey was a dislike for writing fairy tales.

### **How do we engage boys in writing?**

Every child has something to say. The teacher's role is to help each student find what it is that he or she has to say and how best to say it. The teacher needs to be 'larger than life' – to be visibly passionate about life, people, ideas, language and the immediate environment. Children need to know that their lives matter and that aspects of their lives are worth recording. (Loane, 2010)

It is important that learners have control over the topics they write about. This was evident in the survey as boys realise that what they write about is important and relevant to them and their readers.

Writers need to be observant of and in their environment. Noticing is an important aspect of writing. Writing doesn't happen from a beginning of desk work, but with life work. (Calkins, 1994). Allowing boys to talk about what they can write about with peers may support their ability to have something to write about. A writer's notebook (Calkins, 1994) which supports noticing of events, topics and ideas that interest them will also support finding ideas at writing time. Teachers may need to model this to the class and give boys time to write into their writer's notebook.

"Kids should spend the lion's share of the writing lesson writing. Not talking about writing, not planning to write, but writing. Kids learn to write by writing about what matters to them and by living in a community of writers." (Fletcher, 2017. p 62). Teachers can support this by sharing their writing with their learners. Shared writing experiences can show ponderings and options that are available to writers. Teachers who engage in "think alouds" (Gadd, 2017) allow their learners to transfer the wondering and appropriate detail into their own writing.

It is important to respond to a child's writing as a human being, not as a teacher. If it is funny you need to laugh, if it is sad you need to let them know you feel that too. It is important to make a connection before correction. Building a relationship with your learners, especially boys is critical for learning to be meaningful to them. Ralph Fletcher states "that nurturing a boy writer begins by forging a strong relationship with him. Finding out what he is passionate about; his favourite sport, the rock group on the T-shirt he is wearing, what he loves to collect at home" (Fletcher, 2017. p 138).

### **Conclusion**

Boys can write. As teachers we need to make sure the conditions for writing encompasses some key concepts. The adoption of these ideas will not disadvantage other learners. The underlying and fundamental thing a teacher must do is develop a relationship with the boy writers in the class. Making a connection before making a correction is one of the most important aspects of developing fluent boy writers.

Other aspects that are important include:

- Give real choice about what to write and how to write about it
- Show an interest in what your boys are interesting in
- Manage violent writing and accept it
- Laugh at the humour in boys writing
- Introduce a Writers Notebook –to support the germination of ideas.
- Give specific praise and feed forward during writing conferences
- Support the editing process and don't insist that every mistake be acknowledged and corrected.
- Don't insist they revise everything they write
- Allow boys to collaborate with each other
- Encourage drawing
- Allow keyboard use - don't fuss with messy handwriting

A teacher's job is to get boys excited about writing. Engagement is the first stepping stone. Quality will come when they are engaged in meaningful and exciting purposes for writing.

Port Chalmers School has worked on developing and engaging our learners in the writing process and has already included many of aspects mentioned above. We are exploring authentic contexts for writing through the New Zealand Curriculum (2007). Professional learning in 2019 includes using STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics) as a driver for engagement and writing. We are committed to engaging all our learners and encouraging them to tell their stories, because all our learners have something to say.

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