

# Turning non-writers into writers: A case study

*Murray Gadd and Trish Clueard*

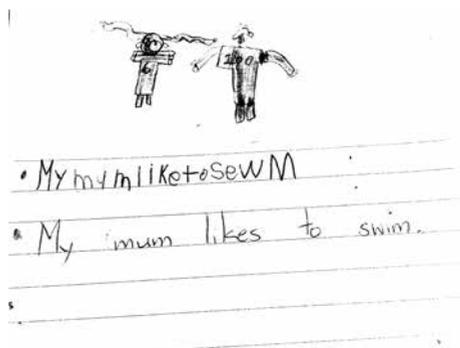
Facing the challenge of transforming students who are disengaged in writing and demonstrate few perceivable writing skills into engaged writers who demonstrate reasonable proficiency as developing writers is a daunting task for any teacher. This interview explores how an experienced teacher (Trish Clueard) at a low decile West Auckland school faced up to and successfully met this challenge with a group of three under-achieving Year 2 Pasifika boys (one of whom was ESOL) over three terms.

*Interviewer:* You've got a class of 28 Year 0-2 students, mainly of Maori and Pasifika descent. Why did you particularly want to focus on these three boys within the class?

*Teacher:* I noticed right from the beginning of the year that these three lads were particularly negative about writing. If I mentioned writing, they would always get despondent and not want to have a go. One would put his head in his hands and say 'too hard'. He even threw his writing book away thinking that he would never have to write if he had no book. The others were not as bad but it was clear that they really disliked writing. They could get quite disruptive. The only way they achieved any success was if they copied a piece of my modelling into their book or if I gave them a sentence pattern that they could copy and complete such as 'My mum likes to...', 'My dad

likes to...'. But it took them a whole writing period – about 45 minutes – to write down a sentence and they hated doing it. Also, they wouldn't have a go unless I sat with them and this wasn't fair on the other kids. It was painful. It was heart-breaking.

Here's an example of one of these students copying from the board and filling in the missing word. This took a whole writing period to complete:



*Interviewer:* You also noticed that they had few recognisable writing skills?

*Teacher:* They appeared to have some concepts about print like directionality, reasonable letter formation and maybe one-to-one matching but that was all. They found it very hard to articulate a sentence prior to writing it; they couldn't keep it in their heads if they tried to write it down; and they had very little phonological knowledge meaning that word formation was

a huge challenge, let alone sentence or text formation. They also had virtually no high frequency words. In reading, one was still reading at Magenta and the other two at early Red.

*Interviewer:* So what did you do?

*Teacher:* I tried to get them interested in ideas and sentences to start with. They'd tell me a sentence and I'd write it down for them on a big chart. Then I'd cut the sentence up into words and they had to work together at putting the words into the right order so that the sentence made sense. We did this for a couple of weeks but I knew I had to move the kids on to writing their own sentences.

*Interviewer:* So what happened after that?

*Teacher:* Well, I did lots of thinking, lots of reading, and lots of talking with colleagues, for this was my first year with juniors and I felt really lost. We were undertaking professional learning about writing with you [interviewer] and about oral language and vocabulary with another facilitator and I had taken five key messages from the work: that students need to have something to say if they're going to get engaged in writing; that they need lots of opportunities to practise; that instruction needs to be clear and direct; that oral language and vocabulary building must underpin the writing process; that students need opportunities to share and celebrate their writing efforts.

*Interviewer:* So what did you do with this information?

*Teacher:* Well, I started to wonder if our topics for writing were exciting enough, especially for these reluctant boys. It so happened that our whanau topic for the term was 'mini-beasts' and I realised that there could be plenty of excitement in this. So I spent my nights looking for gory You Tube mini-beast clips, such as cockroaches eating their babies and praying mantises biting their prey. One day we had a break through – I played them this clip of a praying mantis snapping at a passing fly and biting its head off and they loved it so much that we had to play it over and over again. We now had something exciting to write about. These boys then started to work with me at watching and choosing You Tube clips or National Geographic photos that we could share with the rest of the class.

*Interviewer:* So you involved the boys in selecting the topic?

*Teacher:* Yep, they loved it.

*Interviewer:* What else?

*Teacher:* Well, about the same time I remember having a conversation with a colleague where she mentioned the term 'word spaces'. This referred to writing down a line for each word represented in a sentence with a space between each line. This was a light bulb moment for me. So very soon the boys and I started to make up a sentence orally, repeat it a number of times and work out the number of words in the sentence by putting a finger out for each word,

just like you showed us. Then we'd draw a line representing each word in preparation for writing the words themselves.

But there was a problem. The kids understood that there might be, for example, eight words in a sentence and hence eight lines on the page but they couldn't remember what the eight words were. We needed a signal for each of the words. So I reminded them of the sentence and with the help of their phonics cards we worked out what we thought was the first sound or letter that went with each word and we recorded that sound or letter at the beginning of the line representing the word. Suddenly the boys realised that we had created word signals and that they could read that sentence back just with the help of the first letters or sounds. This was a real breakthrough for them and they were very excited.

*Interviewer:* You modelled this process for them?

*Teacher:* Yes, I demonstrated how I worked out the number of words in a sentence we had made up, how I drew lines representing each word and how I worked out what letter or sound represented the beginning of each word. I used lots of teacher think-alouds to do this. Then I read the sentence back using all this information. I did this as often as I could with them, probably about eight days over two weeks.

Then the next stage happened. The boys realised that we needed to record more than just the beginning letters or sounds. They wanted to work with me at working out other sounds or letters they could hear in words

by using their phonics cards. And of course I encouraged them to look for words that might help them around the classroom, think about patterns in words they could remember from their reading (which was starting to take off) and deliberately learn some of the high frequency words that we were using all the time. Once we'd written the words down as best we could, we'd then go back and put a tick beside each beginning letter or sound indicating that we'd elongated it into a full word. This was exciting. Suddenly we were creating meaningful and exciting sentences that the boys could proudly share with the others. They'd never been able to do this before.

*Interviewer:* So how long did it take before they would have a go?

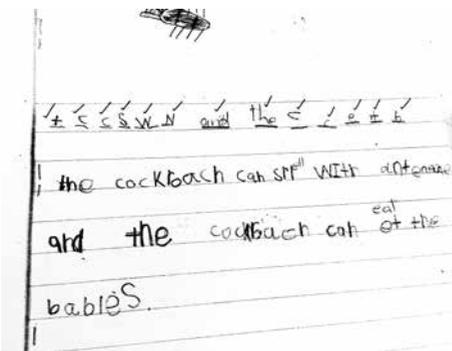
*Teacher:* Not long at all because within a matter of days I'd get them to think of a second sentence which they had to count out with their fingers, record lines for words, get down all the beginning letters or sounds they could, get down any other sounds or letters that they could in words and tick off the beginning sounds or letters as appropriate, just as they'd done with me for the first sentence. I was available to guide them with the second sentence if needed but I wouldn't do the recording for them.

*Interviewer:* So how long before they became independent?

*Teacher:* Oh, this actually happened quite quickly. By the end of the first term they didn't want me to be with them. They were away. They were quite happy thinking up their own sentences, counting out the number

of words, putting lines down for each word, working out the first sound or letter of each word, saying the sentence to each other, getting down as many other sounds and letters as they could in each word, ticking off words as they thought they'd completed them. From my point of view, I was also excited that they were using the word banks that we'd created around the room and they were enthusiastically learning more and more high frequency words. But above all, I was excited because they were excited. They started to see themselves as writers.

Let's have a look at what one of them was writing at that time about cockroaches. They'd watched the film clip, they'd talked about its content, they'd participated in building a word bank to go with the clip (with words like 'cockroach', 'antennae', 'babies') and they'd moved off to have a go by themselves:

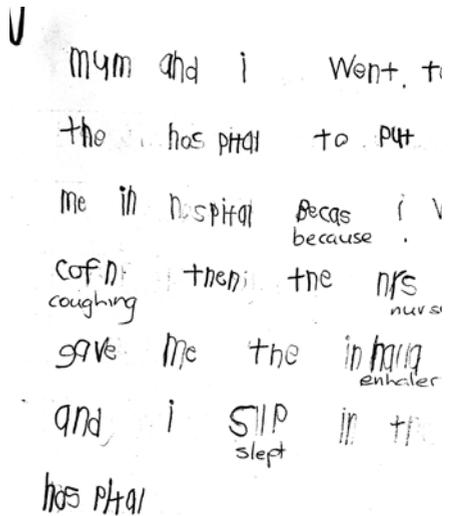


I was particularly pleased because this kid not only used the process I'd shown them but he was including two ideas in a sentence. This was a first. He also

had the confidence to use a couple of high frequency words that he'd learnt.

*Interviewer:* The kids are still writing like this?

*Teacher:* Gosh no. By the end of Term 2, they weren't drawing lines or inserting word spaces anymore; they saw themselves as grown up writers. One day they also announced to me that they wanted new writing books – ones without a space for drawing a picture. They told me that they wanted 'big boy' writing books now. By the beginning of Term 3, they were writing really full stories with really good content which they loved to share with others. One little chap was away for a couple of weeks because he had been hospitalised. When he returned to school, he didn't want to talk about why he had been away; he just wanted to write about it. This is the lad who used to put his head in his hands and say that it's just "too hard":



They arrive at school in the morning and they ask to write: "What are we going to write about today Whaea Trish?" Their reading has also improved (two are now reading at level 17; the other at level 11) but they tell me that they like writing better than reading.

*Interviewer:* Anything else?

*Teacher:* Yes, they are also now starting to extend their use of vocabulary. They are paying far more attention to me when I work with the whole class at 'using the best words to create the best picture in the reader's mind'. The crowd at the night market was not just 'noisy' but it was also 'vibrant'; the food at the market was not only 'delicious' but it was 'aromatic'. One of them now likes to write down a list of key words and then use them to form a sentence, as in this example of him

describing the teacher's bottom and a classmate:

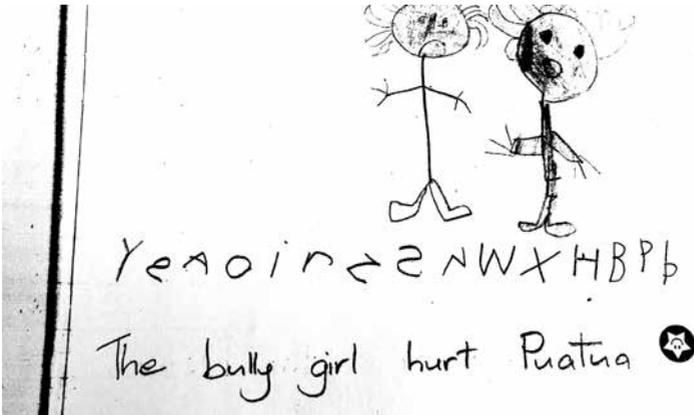
Ohh, and I've never had to teach them finger spacing. They just picked up the idea from the spaces between the lines that represented words.

*Interviewer:* I'm interested in your other students. They obviously observed you modelling word and sentence formation to these lads – do you think this helped them as well with their writing?

*Teacher:* Certainly. I noticed that quite a few others were counting out sentences with their fingers, recording lines for words, getting down all the beginning letters or sounds that they could and getting down other sounds or letters from observing me do this with my group of boys. So I encouraged them all to do this if they wished. I, in fact, use this approach when working with all of my Year 0 and 1 kids now. If you now walked into my classroom in writing time (first thing in the morning) you would hear a strong buzz of talk, and you would see lots of children working out sentences with their fingers, drawing lines for each word and working out word sounds and letters from their phonics cards. Perhaps my biggest success has been with one of my Year 1 boys. He began school at the beginning of this year and moved to me at the beginning of Term 2. At that point he could only make marks on paper (what I called 'magic writing') or write random letters as in this story about a naughty girl:

Now, at the end of Term 3, he is writing full sentences with good detail

Whaea Crazy  
 bottom Jiggly fat  
 Whaeas Crazy  
 bottom is Jiggly  
 and fat, Xaleah  
 Sassy cute funny  
 little, Xaleah is  
 little and She  
 is funny, She is  
 Sassy and cute



to stop putting in lines from the beginning of Term 4 and that he also wanted to start using a 'big boy' writing book.

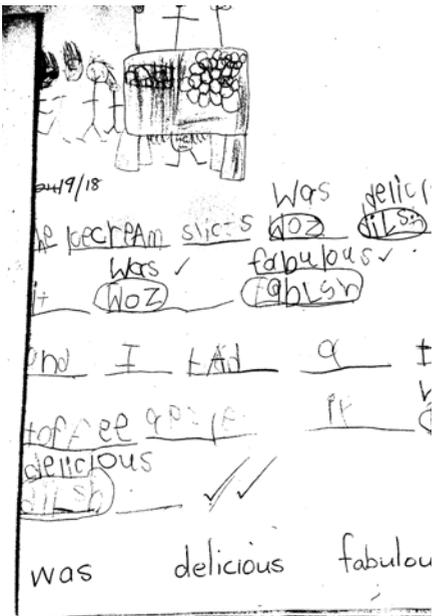
When I introduced this new process, I knew I was on to a good thing from the beginning because overnight

by using the 'word spaces' approach that I have taught my kids. He was, for example, incredibly proud of this text he wrote about food at the market:

At the end of Term 3, he announced to me that he was going

there seemed to be so much more engagement in writing. Having scaffolded the process so carefully, I really feel now that my students – and especially my three lads – are seeing themselves as writers. Their confidence has grown immensely and they are not just learning how to write but how to be writers.

Trish (the teacher) has foremostly recognised the importance of her students having something exciting, purposeful and meaningful to say if they are going to move from being disinterested and under-achieving writers to being engaged and proficient writers (Gadd & Parr, 2016). She has also recognised the importance of scaffolding writing processes carefully enough for all of her students to make progress and achieve success at their own level in writing (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan & Chinn, 2007), providing clear and explicit instruction that her students can emulate (Gadd & Parr, 2017), moving her students from a state of dependence to independence as developing writers (Perry & Drummond, 2002) and



recognising the need for differentiated instruction (Paratore & Indrisano, 2003). Above all, she has recognised that disengagement and under-achievement in writing is not inevitable. It is not just a matter of students having a go and taking risks; Trish (as teacher) took huge risks as she trialled new approaches to teaching writing. She was pleased she did.

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## Authors



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**Trish Clueard** is a teacher of Year 1 and 2 students at Ranui School, West Auckland. For most of her ten years of teaching, she has taught Year 5-6 students and has only recently accepted the challenge of teaching junior students.



*"Books are the perfect entertainment:  
no commercials,  
no batteries,  
hours of enjoyment for each dollar spent."*

Stephen King