



# Gap-minding, gap-closing, gap-worrying: addressing the gender gap in primary children's writing

Victorina González-Díaz, Elizabeth Parr and Angrosh Mandya

Policy Briefing 2(17)

November 2022



## The Liverpool City Region

Source: Office for National Statistics licensed under the Open Government Licence v.3.0

Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2020

# Gap-minding, gap-closing, gap-worrying: addressing the gender gap in primary children's writing

## Key takeaways

1. The so-called 'gender gap' in schoolchildren's writing (girls performing better than boys in writing attainment) has been an educational concern for the last 20 years. It becomes even more pressing following the COVID-19 pandemic and its detrimental effects on children's writing habits. This is a particularly pertinent issue in the Liverpool City Region where writing attainment at primary school level is below the national average.
2. Our research indicates that gender-related writing issues cannot be adequately addressed unless there is agreement on what 'good' writing means. There are, however, noticeable differences in perceptions of what 'good' writing is between children, teachers and education stakeholders. This lack of consensus needs to be addressed to avoid compromising the successful achievement of literacy outcomes.
3. Education stakeholders and teachers positively advocate the principles of gender equality. However, further guidance as to how to embed these principles in their policies and practices on children's writing is needed in order to avoid the unintentional reproduction of the gender inequalities that they try to counteract.
4. Limited vocabulary and inadequate transcription skills are consistently mentioned as issues for boys in the production of 'good' writing. Our research evidence provides only partial support for these gender-related associations and shows the importance of considering linguistic-specific evidence to tackle perceived gender-gap issues.
5. Equipping our teachers with evidence-based knowledge and tools to develop high-quality teaching resources constitutes the best strategy to both address gender-gap matters in writing and to maximise the development of children's literacy skills. This can only be achieved through targeted collaborations between local authorities, schools and research units in the City Region.

## 1. What is at stake with the gender gap in writing?

Concerns about a 'gap' in writing attainment between boys and girls (where girls consistently perform better than boys) date from the late 1990s, when central government implemented a non-statutory national strategy for literacy education and a target-setting agenda to increase the number of children working at or above the 'national expectations' in English (Beard and Burrell, 2010). It has been at the forefront of the educational agenda since then and constituted the subject of several reports from government agencies and research studies, as literacy gaps "can start early, persist through school and prove a limiting factor" both in terms of educational outcomes and socio-economic prosperity in later life (Quigley, 2022: 11).

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted a serious setback to previous efforts to address the writing gender gap. Remote modes of teaching and learning during the pandemic had a significant detrimental effect on children's writing (with at least a 6-point drop in writing-related activity for each gender nationally, Clark et al. 2021) particularly at the primary level and for those from disadvantaged social backgrounds (Juniper Education National Dataset Report 2022). This is especially worrying for Liverpool City Region, whose outcomes in Key Stage 1 and 2 (primary school age) attainment are in the lowest 10% nationally (Liverpool Education Improvement Plan, 2021). All of this is set in the context of the Levelling Up White Paper, published earlier this year, which aims for 90% of primary children to reach the expected standard in reading, writing and maths in 2030 (HM Government, 2022).

This briefing paper presents the main findings from a Liverpool-focused study of children's writing and the gender gap in local primary schools. Its aim is to inform policy responses by decision-makers working on improving writing outcomes in the City Region.



Figure 1: Most frequent words in stakeholders' responses

## 2. The study and its methods

The study collected two types of data: attitudes data and linguistic data. The attitudinal data included:

- A survey on Liverpool schoolchildren's writing habits (year 5 and 6).
- Two focus groups, one with local educational stakeholders (including local education representatives, teacher training providers and school improvement advisors) and the other with local teachers.

The linguistic data came from the analysis of 120 narrative and argumentative essays (60 essays from boys and 60 from girls) written by year 6 pupils in Liverpool schools in June 2021. We selected 15 vocabulary, spelling and grammar features that recent research has identified as indicative of high quality in learners' writing (Durrant et al., 2022) and compared their use and distribution in boys' and girls' writing.

The aim of the research was to identify where opinions on (gendered) writing and the actual writing performance of boys and girls agree and where they diverge. This evidence can be used to either modify current practices or develop new, tailored activity to tackle the writing gender gap in primary schools.

## 3. The results

### Boys vs girls: language analysis

We found that although girls write more than boys (10% more), the quality of writing between girls and boys was similar. The differences between girls' and boys' use of language are significant in fewer than half of the features analysed (for more information on the different tests, please contact the authors of this report).

Furthermore, those significant differences do not consistently signal boys' under-performance. This also tallies with previous research, which suggests that boys' lower results in writing tend to be associated with quantitative measures of writing (i.e. frequencies), not qualitative ones (i.e. skill in the use of features for character development, for example) (Adams and Simmonds, 2019). There were no noticeable differences in the language results across the two genres explored in the study (narrative and argumentative writing).

### Attitudes: what is 'good' writing at primary school level?

Writing is a complex process that includes different aspects such as writing purpose, audience, technical accuracy, structure and clarity of writing. This complexity makes it challenging to regulate clearly what 'good' writing should look like at different levels (Marshall, 2007). It is therefore not surprising to find in our data marked variation in the different stakeholders' responses to what 'good' writing means at primary school-level:

- Teachers and education stakeholders consider reader engagement and competent use of vocabulary, grammar and punctuation as essential characteristics of good writing.
- Children place significantly more emphasis on transcription features such as neat handwriting and correct spelling as characteristic of good writing. This is particularly noticeable in responses from boys.

# BOYS' VS GIRLS' WRITING

## LANGUAGE ANALYSIS COMPARISON

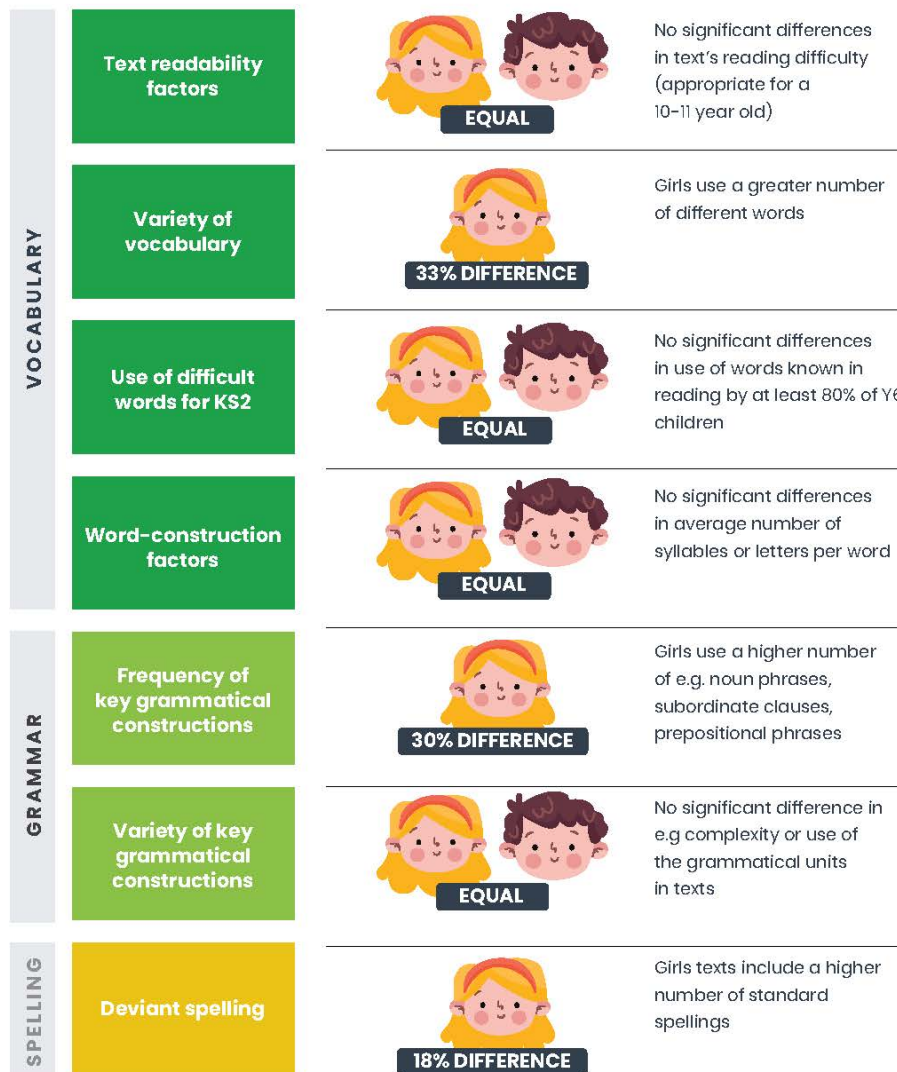


Figure 2: Summary of linguistic analysis of children's data

Teachers' and education stakeholders' understanding of 'good' writing align with the recommendations of national non-statutory documents (STA, 2017). By contrast, children's views reflect a very narrow concept of writing.

This 'narrow' view of writing is hardly new. Of interest is the apparent lack of awareness amongst many teachers of what children perceive to be important when writing. It is essential to the learning process that teachers, children and others involved in education share the same goals when writing is being taught.

“  
I think the key thing is cohesion throughout the entire piece. Making sure you've got that subject verb agreement all the way through constant use of your adverbials. Consistent handwriting as well.”

- Teacher

“  
I think what makes a good piece of writing is neat handwriting you need to stay in all of the lines and you need to have a sharp pencil before you start.”

- Year 5 pupil

## CHILDREN'S PERCEIVED CHALLENGES WHEN WRITING

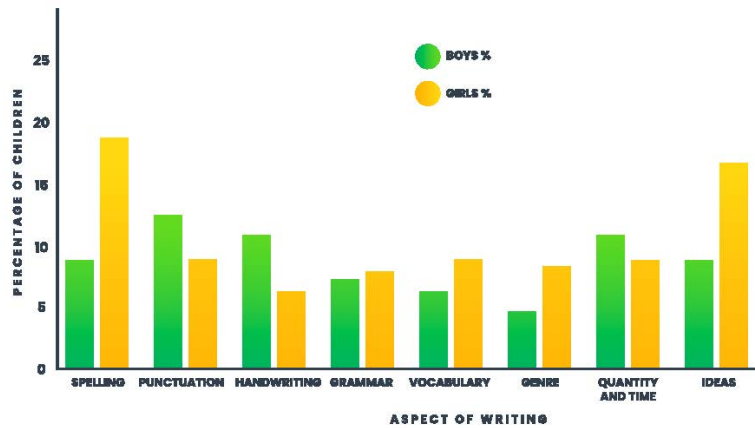


Figure 3: Writing challenges - summary of children's responses

### **Attitudes: challenges and concerns**

The evidence shows differences in opinions on the concerns or challenges facing primary school children's writing development.

- In their responses, children highlighted transcription skills as an important aspect that they struggle to master. There were notable gender differences here: girls found correct spelling more challenging than boys, while boys focused on the difficulties of handwriting and punctuation. Respondents, particularly girls, also mentioned some non-transcription features, such as ideas or vocabulary, as writing challenges.
- Teachers and educational stakeholders mentioned a lack of writing stamina (the ability to sustain writing for an extended period of time without losing focus), restricted vocabulary and limited reading as the main challenges to improving primary school children's writing.

The foregrounding of spelling, punctuation and grammar in recent Ofsted and Standards and Testing Agency publications (Ofsted, 2022; STA, 2017) leaves creative writing and text-led approaches to teaching writing lacking in prominence. Such text-led approaches have been successful in the classroom as a way of scaffolding children's writing development. They highlight the importance of reading and deconstructing high-quality children's literature, then using it as a model for writing.

Teachers and education stakeholders see reading as a gateway to and having a significant impact on writing. This tallies with current research evidence, which has shown that learners who are strong readers often use a wider range of vocabulary: they tend to 'borrow' reading ideas, words or styles and use them in their own texts (CLPE, 2017).

### **Attitudes: writing and the (perceived) gender gap**

The main differences between boys' and girls' answers are in the socio-emotional aspects of writing. Boys get less satisfaction from writing than girls and, as a result, they avoid engaging in writing more than girls. A contributing factor to such dislike may be boys' perceived struggle with the physical aspects of writing (handwriting) even at the end of KS2.

Another revealing finding from the data is that boys score lower than girls in how much they think their writing is valued in their immediate school community. This has been linked in previous research to writing feedback, where texts perceived to be written by males receive more corrections and suggestions for improvement than their (perceived) female equivalents (Jones and Myhill, 2007):

- Fiction is the genre both boys and girls prefer to write.
- Girls and boys highlight the limited opportunities they have to choose their own writing topics in school.

# CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF THEIR WRITING

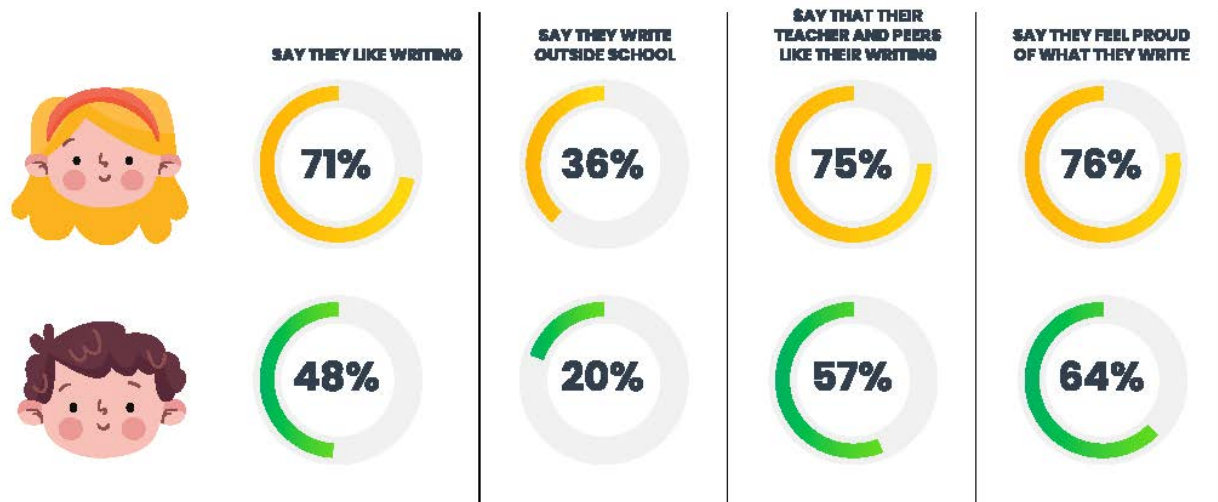


Figure 4: Summary of children's perceptions of their own writing

- Boys and girls show similar confidence levels when tackling a writing task in school. However, boys have lower scores in confidence about being 'good' at using handwriting and punctuation than girls.
- Girls are prouder of their writing than boys. They also have higher scores in perceptions of their own writing.

Teachers and education stakeholders observe that gender stereotyping and 'sweeping statements' that attribute certain types of language to 'boys' and 'girls' as gender categories is a harmful practice. However, their assessment of the difference in language use between boys and girls often focuses on boys' and girls' behaviours. Some of those behavioral traits reproduce long-standing attitudes on boys' underperformance that previous research and this study reject as problematic (see Mynard and Lowe, 1999; Jones and Myhill, 2007).

In general, proposals by teachers and education stakeholders to address the gender-gap aligned with recent research, as they emphasised that writing improvement should take place through high-quality teaching and interventions for all children regardless of gender.

They also suggested some gender-specific solutions (see below) but the suitability of these suggestions is questioned by research evidence (see Lahelma, 2014; Heinz et al., 2021).

- Boys' writing is seen by education stakeholders and teachers as more 'factual' and 'hastier' than girls' writing, with little attention being paid to structure, proofreading or editing. These characteristics are linked to boys' perceived lack of motivation for writing if there is not a clear purpose to it.
- Girls' writing is described as more 'imaginative' and having 'better' vocabulary, sentence structure and presentation than boys' writing. Girls are considered to take greater pride in writing and to be more interested in pleasing their teachers with the writing they produce.
- Respondents suggested boys' perceived underachievement in writing may partly be due to the lack of male role models within the school environment. Suggested gender-specific solutions included the incorporation of more 'boy-friendly' genres, subjects and perspectives.

## 4. Conclusion

Writing as one of the basic literacy skills is a key pillar of socio-economic wellbeing. If Liverpool City Region is to maximise its potential and address its education challenges, the so-called gender-gap in children's writing attainment requires urgent attention. This is particularly crucial in the post-pandemic world due to the rise of blended (online and offline) forms of communication that require skillful manipulation of speech and writing. It is essential that children are provided with a high-quality baseline in writing as early as possible in school if we want to avoid them being at an educational and social disadvantage later in life.

Our research, building on previous work, identifies teachers as an important factor in shaping literacy outcomes in children. We therefore make the following recommendations to be embedded through teacher education at all levels, from initial teacher training to continuing professional development. The recommendations are purposefully framed in a very broad manner to allow educators to shape them to their own modes and practices. More importantly, they are not gender-specific. This is because we believe, in line with previous evidence, that gender-specific recommendations can be detrimental for the academic and social welfare of the gender(s) not in focus.

Overall, the recommendations aim to raise awareness of the issues around the (perceived) gender-gap in writing, challenge stereotypes and negative perceptions of writing amongst children and educators, and improve writing practices across primary schools in Liverpool City Region and beyond.

**Recommendation 1:** Vocabulary and spelling are the only areas where some differences between boys' and girls' writing appear in our data. Therefore, variation in language use between boys and girls is not and must not be consistently translated as 'under-achievement' for boys. A broad concept of 'achievement', where all relevant aspects of writing are equally considered and valued, is needed.

**Recommendation 2:** Leaders need to raise awareness of the persistently narrow views of writing amongst pupils. Mechanisms need to be in place to unpick those views and develop children's understanding of 'good' writing as a balanced combination of writing skills and writing purpose.

**Recommendation 3:** Leaders need to monitor transcription features closely as they are most frequently identified by girls and particularly boys as difficult when writing. Such monitoring needs to be carefully planned in order not to overlook the importance of compositional and creative aspects of writing (see recommendation 2).

**Recommendation 4:** The connection between reading and writing needs to be explicitly made in all classrooms through text-led approaches to teaching writing. Pupils need to be encouraged to use their reading to scaffold and inspire their own writing.

**Recommendation 5:** General perceptions of boys' and girls' writing need to be explored throughout the education system (e.g. teachers' CPD) to ensure that long-standing gender stereotypes are discussed and challenged. Teachers and school leaders need to review the feedback they provide to children on their writing to ensure parity, drive pupil motivation and maximise academic relevance.

## 5. References

- Adams, Anne Marie, and Fiona R. Simmons. 2019. "Exploring Individual And Gender Differences In Early Writing Performance." *Reading and Writing*, no. 32(2): 235–263.
- Beard, Roger, and Andrew Burrell, A. 2010. "Writing Attainment In 9- To 11-Year-Olds: Some Differences Between Girls And Boys In Two Genres." *Language and Education*, no. 24(6): 495-515.
- Centre for Literacy in Primary Education. 2017. "Writing In Primary Schools: What We Know Works." London: CLPE. <https://clpe.org.uk/research/writing-primary-schools-what-we-know-works>.



Clark, Christina, Emily Best and Irene Picton. 2021. Children And Young People's Writing In 2021 And Their Reflections On Writing During The Covid-19 Pandemic In 2020. London: National Literacy Trust. [https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Children\\_and\\_young\\_peoples\\_writing\\_in\\_2021.pdf](https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Children_and_young_peoples_writing_in_2021.pdf)

Durrant, Philip, Mark Brenchley and Lee McCallum. 2021. Understanding Development And Proficiency In Writing. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Heinz, Manuela, Elaine Keane and Kevin Davidson. 2021. "Gender In Initial Teacher Education: Entry Patterns, Intersectionality And A Dialectic Rationale For Diverse Masculinities In Schooling." *European Journal of Teacher Education*. DOI: 10.1080/02619768.2021.1890709

HM Government. 2022. Levelling Up The United Kingdom. London: Crown. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>.

Jones, Helen and Debra Myhill. 2007. "Discourses Of Difference? Examining Gender Differences In Linguistic Characteristics Of Writing." *Canadian Journal of Education*, no. 30(2): 456-482.

Juniper Education. 2022. National Dataset Report 2022: The Impact Of The COVID-19 Pandemic On Primary School Children's Learning. <https://junipereducation.org/resource/downloads/national-dataset-report/>

Lahelma, Elina. 2014. "Troubling Discourses On Gender And Education." *Educational Research*, no. 56(2): 171-183.

Liverpool City Council. 2021. Education Improvement Plan 2021. Liverpool: Liverpool City Council. <https://www.liverpoolcamhs.com/ed-imp-plan-4-dec2020/>

Marshall, Bethan-Jane. 2007. "Assessment in English." In *Handbook Of Primary English In Initial Teacher Education*, edited by Teresa Cremin and Henrietta Dombey, 227-238. London: UK Literacy Association.

Maynard, Trisha and Kathy Lowe. 1999. "Boys And Writing In The Primary School: Whose Problem Is It?." *Education*, 27(2): 4-9.

Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). 2022. Curriculum Research Reviews Series: English. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-research-review-series-english/curriculum-research-review-series-english>

Quigley, Alex. 2022. *Closing The Writing Gap*. Oxon: Routledge.

Standards and Testing Agency (STA) 2017. 2018 Key Stage 2 Teacher Assessment Exemplification Materials English Writing: Working At The Expected Standard: Leigh. London: Crown. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/653133/2018\\_exemplification\\_materials\\_KS2-EXS\\_\\_Morgan\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/653133/2018_exemplification_materials_KS2-EXS__Morgan_.pdf)

The Heseltine Institute is an interdisciplinary public policy research institute which brings together academic expertise from across the University of Liverpool with policy-makers and practitioners to support the development of sustainable and inclusive cities and city regions.

Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place  
University of Liverpool, 1-7 Abercromby Square, Liverpool, L69 7WY

Follow us @livuniheseltine

## About the authors

**Victorina González-Díaz** (vgdiaz@liverpool.ac.uk) is Reader in English at the University of Liverpool. Her main research interest is in historical grammar and semantics, stylistics and educational linguistics.

**Elizabeth Parr** (parre@hope.ac.uk) is a Senior Professional Tutor in Primary English at Liverpool Hope University. Her research interests include children's metalinguistic understanding of writing and the pedagogies associated with children's reading and writing.

**Angrosh Mandya** (angrosh@liverpool.ac.uk) is Senior Tutor in Computer Science at the University of Liverpool. He is an expert in natural language processing.

The infographics in this policy briefing were produced by Mylene Delys at dreametry.com

The information, practices and views in this Policy Briefing are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Heseltine Institute.

Our cover image, 'Liverpool Summer 21', is licensed from Tim Jokl under CC BY-NC 2.0. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tmjokl/51228444973/>

Policy Briefs can be accessed at: [www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute](http://www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute)