To Monty,
my true love and closest confidant,
without your constant support, patience, help, humor, and sweet encouragement
none of this would be possible.

To Sam, Grace, Noah, and Joe,
the four greatest blessings in my life.

To Nana,
Who I know would take us all out for ice cream to celebrate
if she were still with us.

I dedicate this to ya’ll.
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While I will be the one walking across the stage to receive my diploma, there are many people who should be walking across with me. Without them, this day would have never arrived. Even though I hope they each already know the impact they have had on my journey in academia, I am happy to honor them here in writing and express my gratitude and love to them again.

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My Mom and Dad, the best parents and teachers a girl could have, instilled a love of learning in me and supported me in graduate school both emotionally and financially. They shaped me from a young age to “look to the end of the row” and gave me the roots I needed to dream and achieve. My sisters and best friends, Bonnie and Karen, have been an essential part of every important event in my life and I always want them by my side. Bonnie always cheers me onwards and insists I can do more than I ever believed, and my brother, Joe, double-dog-dares me to do the same. Thanks to my sister-in-law, Susan, for being a prayer warrior, my conference buddy, and an inspiring literature teacher. Gerald and Venice Ann Ergle, my in-laws, remain the most unselfish people I have ever known and have shaped my character and faith more than they will ever know. Last, and most importantly, I want to give thanks to my savior, Jesus Christ, who gives unconditional love and grace to us all and provides meaning and purpose to my life.
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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

BECOMING WRITERS: BOY-WRITERS IN A FOURTH GRADE

By

Roberta Brown Ergle

December 2008

Chair: Danling Fu
Major: Curriculum and Instruction

Boys have fallen significantly behind girls in the area of writing. The purpose of this study was to study fourth grade boy writers within the context of the writing workshop classroom and explore the experiences that promote their achievement or underachievement. The overarching research question framing the study was, “How do 4th grade boys experience the daily writing class?”

This study used a Constructivist research lens and Grounded Theory methodology to study four male participants in the fourth grade writing class. Data sources consisted of four formal interviews, 10 informal interviews, writing samples, plus classroom observations two to three times a week over a five month period. From these data, theories emerged about the experiences of the boy writers.

Findings suggest several important relationships in the classroom context that motivate boys by allowed them to play the roles as a mentees, mentors and equals. The Theory of Relevancy explains how the relevancy of the writing is directly related to the boys emerging identities as a boy writer, a male, a son, a friend and a student. The more relevant and meaningful the writing task is to the formation or maintenance of their identities, the more
motivated the boys are to engage in the writing tasks. Much of the boys’ experiences relate directly or indirectly to the Florida Writes standardized prompted writing test. The boys’ reflections of the testing experience and their testing papers indicate irrelevancy to be a factor in their motivation and test scores.

The complexity of the writing process, biological differences in language processing between genders, and the impact of culture on writing leads to a large discrepancy in the time and fluency levels between boy and girl writers. The theory of think-time explains the boys’ mental and physical processing before they begin to write a piece. Boys indicate this processing time is a necessary step in their writing process.

Despite this uniqueness of this writing classroom context, or maybe because of it, these findings do have important implications for teacher educators, teachers, testing, and the research community as we strive to shrink and ultimately dissolve the gender achievement gap in writing.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Writing is arguably the greatest tool of humanity. The written word is permanent. It is continuous. It documents individuals’ thoughts, ideas, and contributions to the world. In small and big ways, in immediate and far-reaching ways, writing is immensely important. It is the tool for communal knowledge that leads each generation towards a better and brighter world, towards innovation and invention, towards a greater understanding of one another, the world, and the universe.

Writing has always been an important part of my life. With writing, I explore who I am and what I believe. I can use writing to vent, to learn, to experience life. It is a way to connect with others and to myself. At important points along this dusty trail of life’s journey—weddings, funerals, birthdays, gatherings—written words serve as a means to express ourselves and connect with others.

Examples abound in which the written word has made a difference in our world and can make a difference in our classrooms. From the *Diary of Anne Frank* to my daily reliance on the written words in the Bible, writing serves to help individuals crystallize thoughts, express sentiments, reflect upon experiences, and create new ideas and inventions. The voices that speak to us through those written words remain more powerful because they are lasting and move beyond us to a greater sphere of influence. When the founding fathers of our country wanted to do the impossible and begin a new democratic form of government, they worked together to write down those beliefs and guidelines in the Constitution of the United States. Writing has been and will be a part of both our communal and individual histories.

Because writing is such an important part of who we are as a society, I felt great dismay when my male students, and more recently my own sons, repeatedly asserted their loathing of
writing. As an educator for the past seventeen years with a passionate belief about writing, I was curious about why boys, in general, were struggling in writing. As I began my investigation, I was shocked to see the startling statistics showing just how far behind boy writers were compared to girls. When I started my doctoral work and began to read the research centered on boys and writing, I found myself nodding along with other teachers who had struggled to engage the boy writers in their classrooms. I was fascinated with the work of scholars, their findings about boy writers, and possible implications that would affect the boys in both my professional life as an educator and in my personal life as a mother. For these reasons, I decided to delve more deeply into the phenomenon of boys and writing, build on past research in the area, and further develop theories that might make significant contributions to assist boy writers and their teachers in the classroom.

**What Does the Research Say?**

The gap between boys and girls [in the area of writing performance] is comparable to the difference between whites and racial/ethnic groups that have suffered systematic social and economic discrimination in this country. (Newkirk, 2002, p.35)

When I told people I was devoting my research to the exploration and analysis of the declining writing scores of boys in our public schools, I got mixed reactions. Some people wondered why I would spend time and energy researching males, when they saw them as part of a historically privileged group determined to deny females their rights and equality. Others, who were more like-minded with me, did not believe research devoted towards boys took away from the necessary and important research devoted to girls in education. They were quick to agree that they saw similar literacy achievement gaps with the boys in their classes or in their families and were interested in finding solutions to the problem.

My first endeavor was to question the legitimacy of the claim that boy writers were behind. I wondered if the achievement gap between boys and girls was just a media induced
overreaction. I analyzed scores from the NAEP, an organization that assesses students nationwide in a variety of subject areas and publishes the results in The Nation’s Report Card. The Report Card helps to keep the public informed about the academic achievement of elementary and secondary students in the United States. Writing achievement can be put into context by comparing writing scores to other subject area scores in data collected by the NAEP. Table 1-1 gives the male and female scores across the core academic subject areas from the most recent national assessments.

Table 1-1. The NEAP Nation’s Report Card Subject Scores by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Subject area</th>
<th>Male score</th>
<th>Female score</th>
<th>Achievement difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>2 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>4 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>6 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>0 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2007</strong></td>
<td><strong>Writing</strong></td>
<td><strong>146</strong></td>
<td><strong>166</strong></td>
<td><strong>20 points</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1-1 shows the gender achievement gap in writing is a serious concern nationwide. The discrepancy between boys and girls in writing is 20 points while the next closest gap is 6 points in the area of reading. Boys slightly outscore girls in math and science and there is no discrepancy in the history scores.

There have been significant differences in gender writing achievement over the past several decades. In July 2007, the NEAP’s writing tests show boys scoring an average of 21 points lower than girls (www.nationsreportcard.gov., 2008) which was an even greater difference than shown on the 1998 test. Prior to the 2007 test, 4th grade 8th grade and 12th grade students had been tested and the writing scores represented all levels of public education. In 2007, the NAEP administered the national test to over 165,000 students across the United States in 8th and 12th grades but did not test 4th grade. The gender gap, as seen in Table 1-1 showed no significant
difference from the 1998 scores of the same test with boys an average of 20 points behind girls in their writing abilities.

On a statewide level in Florida, the 2007 FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test) writing test was administered to 4th grade, 8th grade, and 10th grade. These results (Figure 1-1) indicate a similar achievement gap between boys and girls. While 85 percent of 4th grade girls received a passing score, only 73 percent of 4th boys passed marking a 12% difference in gender achievement, much greater than the achievement gap in writing between whites and other minority groups. (Florida DOE, 2007).

In 2008, the scores of the Florida Writes exam remained stagnant and the gender gap remained constant (Figure 1-1). These scores equal an average pass rate for girls of 86 percent and a pass rate for boys of 76 percent for a difference of 10 percent.

Why are boys falling significantly behind in the area of writing? What is happening to boys in the classroom that promotes the achievement or underachievement of our young boy writers? Recently, there has been a flurry of attention in scholarly journals and mainstream magazines on the state of boys’ achievement in school. Parents, educators and all stake holders are wondering about boys’ lack of achievement, especially in the area of writing. Researchers have surveyed and interviewed boy writers and their teachers, looked at writing products, and explored boys’ out of school literacy practices in hopes of finding answers for the achievement gap. Data clearly show there are gendered differences in the writing achievements of students; boys are lagging behind.

**Nature of the Problem**

When researching boys in the writing classroom, it is essential to begin with a general understanding of gender trends in school achievement. From the late 1800s to the present, there is documentation that highlights boys’ underachievement in writing and reading (Maynard,
The literature suggests two main forces at work in the construction of gender differences in our society: social and biological.

The social construction orientation promotes the belief that gender is primarily a construction of a society. Cultures impose sex roles on children and teach them through words and actions, both conscious and unconscious, societal expectations and norms (Pollack, 1998). Since we are all born into existing societies, languages and ideologies, our ideas about gender seem part of a natural order and “official reality” that is internalized and can be quite invisible (Berger & Luckman, 1966). In the case of boy writers, the social construction of gender can explain the stereotypical thinking of what it means to be male, what it means to be literate, and the existing tension between the two (Booth, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). The social construction of gender supports the importance of exploration of classroom factors such as teacher beliefs about boys (Palardy, 1998) and cultural connections and disconnects between school and home worlds (Dyson, 1993). It also can challenge institutional beliefs about literacy and call for a close examination of the narrowness of the official school literacies (Newkirk, 2002).

Brain based research illuminated biological differences in the processing of language and in human development that may put boys at a disadvantage in school literacy events (Gurian, 2005). Those who support biological differences as the primary reason boys are underachieving believe schools, with a majority of female teachers, employ strategies and curriculums that are not “boy-friendly” (Fletcher, 2006).

Addressing gender differences from a biological viewpoint means that instead of trying to change boys’ natural tendencies for learning to fit the official school ways of learning, schools should change their ways of teaching to better accommodate boys’ natural ways of learning.
Research studies on boys and writing does not mean that attention must be taken away from girls in the schools. Historically, girls have been repressed and silenced in American schools that reproduced andocentric ideologies of the culture. In the late 1970’s, Title IX federal legislation pushed for more equality among genders in academic and athletic funding. In the 1990s, more critical studies illuminated hegemonic practices that put girls at a disadvantage in the schools. Sadker and Sadker's book, *Failing at Fairness: How America’s School’s Cheat Girls* (1994), and the AAUW’s study, *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (1992), highlighted institutional discrimination, intentional and unintentional, that harmed girls’ ability to achieve in American schools.

Over the past twenty years, a change in educational paradigms and practices has led to a diminished gap between genders in the areas of math and science and a dramatic increase in girls’ achievement in both academics, athletics, college enrollment, and the work force (Tyre, 2006). Today, girls are outperforming boys in almost every academic area. Using this past research as a model can empower others to believe that education can evolve to help all children reach their potential, including boy writers who are falling dismally behind their girl counterparts.

**The Teaching of Writing**

The most current research about the teaching of writing advocates incorporating workshop methods that give agency, choice and power to writers (Fletcher, 2006; Gurian, 2005; Newkirk, 2002). Schools can broaden official literacies to include genres, topics, and teaching methods that are boy-friendly. Providing male literacy role models, incorporating the use of technology and popular culture will affect the success of boy writers (Newkirk, 2002). Insisting on an examination of teacher beliefs and expectations will help to overcome the disparity between
home and school literacies and the disenfranchisement of the young men in our schools (Collins, 2003).

A change in paradigm and practice may be necessary to overcome the disparity between boy and girl writers. Boys learn to be literate just as girls do. By learning more deeply about boys and writing, teachers will be better prepared to help all students to meet their potential.

**Purpose of the Study**

For boy writers to begin to reach their full potential in the classroom and close the existing gender achievement gap, we must take a close look at what teachers and schools are doing today to affect that change. This study was designed to take an in-depth look at the experiences of 4th grade boys as they become writers. The following questions were explored:

1. How do 4th grade boys experience the daily writing class?
   a. What do boys view as important components of writing instruction?
   b. What motivates boy writers to engage in the writing class?
   c. How do boys view themselves as writers?
   d. How do boys view classroom writing as relevant to their lives?

To answer these questions, this constructivist study examined the experiences of four boys during writing instruction over the course of a five month period from January 2008 to May 2008. Primary data were collected with bi-weekly semi-structured and unstructured interviews and more formal interview times with each participant once a month. Participant observations took place two to three times a week to generate interview questions and to better understand classroom context and culture. All data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using grounded theory methods.

**Study Significance**

In the field of gender and writing, there have been a few studies of boys’ preferences in writing through student and teacher surveys, interviews, and examination of writing products
Studies have been conducted on the effects of self-efficacy on boy students (Pajares, 1997, 2007) and the effects of teacher beliefs about boys in general (Palardy, 1998). However, there has been little research within the classroom setting that studies the process boys go through in becoming engaged and successful writers and the intersecting factors (such as the students, teachers, peers, teaching and assessment methods) that promote the achievement or underachievement of boy writers. A qualitative study of boys specifically within the context of the writing classroom is warranted if teachers and teacher educators are to begin to understand how we can help the boys in our writing classrooms experience needed growth and success in writing.

**Literacy and Gender**

A wider array of research is housed under the title of “literacy.” It is devoted to boys and reading practices which focused mainly on reading skills, reading preferences, and reading achievement. In comparison, there are relatively fewer studies devoted to the writing aspects of “literacy”. Reflecting this trend, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP) has tracked reading scores by gender from 1971 but writing scores only recently since 1998 (www.nces.ed.gov).

Other literacy researchers in the area of writing focus on home-school connections of boys and their out of school literacies (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002). This research tracks 49 boys in 6th through 12th grades over three months through self kept literacy logs about their literacy activities in and out of school. Through interviews with the boys and the analysis of the logs, the researchers theorize on the types of activities teachers can construct in the classroom that would mimic boys’ voluntary literacy practices, both reading and writing, outside of school.

There are two significant researchers who primarily focus on writing and gender. Newkirk’s current research in *Misreading Masculinity* (2002) was the springboard for my own
interest in children’s writing and gender study. In this book, Newkirk’s research questions are:
What counts as literacy? How can we learn about, appreciate and make use of narrative affiliations of potentially alienated boys? The data for his book came from sets of student stories and a series of interviews with 100 girls and boys in five New Hampshire schools that give student writers considerable latitude in choosing topics and genres. He is primarily interested in the written stories children chose to read and compose and the effects of popular culture, violence, media influences, and socialization. This critical literacy study builds strong arguments exposing false assumptions and perceptions about boys, violence, pop culture, and boys’ literacy lives.

Ralph Fletcher (2006) read research done by Tom Newkirk and was inspired to continue when Newkirk called for “widening the circle” in reference to boys’ reading and writing possibilities. Consequently, Fletcher also wrote a book about what “widening the circle” might mean for boy writers (p.6). In his book, Fletcher surveys 100 teachers and over 500 boys of multiple ages. He collected and analyzed student writing samples from elementary, middle and high school boys. He ends each chapter discussion with a section, “What Can I do in My Classroom?” to help the classroom teacher apply new ideas and theories about boy writers.

While information in these studies is applicable to my research, this study will be unique and add to a small but growing body of research focused on questions devoted specifically to writing processes, writing instruction, and gender. I believe a qualitative study of boy writers and a close look at what is happening inside the classroom to boys during writing instruction will be of great value to the field. With this framework, the boys will be observed during composition and creation. Important interactions taking place in the classroom will be observed over a prolonged period of time for a richer and deeper understanding of the experiences of boy
writers that may impact their engagement or disengagement in writing. I believe this is the next necessary step in this area of research. Currently, we do not have a window into the writing classroom that allows us to see the classroom influences on boy writers’ achievement or underachievement. This study will act as that window and allow better understanding of the experiences of 4th grade boys as they participate in daily writing instruction.
Figure 1-1 Percentages of Boys and Girls Earning 3.5 or higher on the 2007 and 2008 Florida Writes Test.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the in-class experiences of 4th grade boy writers. The struggle of boys in the area of writing is currently an important issue in our nation’s educational discussions due to significant discrepancy that exists between boys’ and girls’ writing scores on standardized state and national writing tests. Data compiled by the Educational Testing Service shows the gender gap in writing is the largest of any academic area. The 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP) writing scores show boys falling behind girls by 17 points in fourth grade, 21 points in eighth grade, and 24 points in twelfth grade. Qualitatively, teachers report a “night and day difference” between boy and girl writers and realize boys are “floundering” in writing classes around the country (Fletcher, 2006).

Mirroring national statistics, the 2007 Florida Writes state exam scores show boys well behind girls in writing achievement. Statewide in 4th grade, 85 percent of girls and only 73 percent of boys met the passing score of 3.5.

Locally at Central Elementary, where this research was conducted, the 2007 writing results of the 4th grade of Central Elementary showed an even wider achievement gap with 87 percent of the girls and only 58 percent of the boys earning the passing score for a whopping difference of 29% (www.fldoe.org).

This type of data is forcing educators to ask hard questions about what is happening to boys in the writing classroom. Why aren’t boys able to meet the achievement levels expected in the area of writing? What is affecting boy writers in the context of the classroom culture that promotes their achievement or underachievement in this academic area? This research is my
attempt to investigate how 4th grade boys experience writing instruction in the classroom context and to understand how boys’ classroom experiences shape their views of themselves as writers.

This literature review synthesizes previous research that has been conducted in the area of boys and writing. First, a theoretical orientation is given to explain my research lens for approaching the project. Next, a review in the areas of gender and literacy learning in schools highlights previous studies, findings, and implications. Finally, I focus these issues into the current writing classroom and illuminate the problems and possibilities of boy writers in the 4th grade.

Theoretical Orientation

As a student and teacher of language, literacy, and culture, I built a foundation of pedagogical and philosophical knowledge that forms my epistemology and formed my research lens for this study. The next section will discuss how constructivism is the most influential and relevant lens for this research. Critical Literacy theory will not be the primary research lens but the influences of these theorists will be discussed as they impact my beliefs about language and literacy. While my research questions do not presuppose hegemonic issues, it would be irresponsible not to explore how these scholars influenced my research lens for the project.

Social Constructivism

The Social Constructivist theorists and researchers of the past century who have shaped my understanding of language, thought, literacy and learning are Lev Vygotsky, Jerome Bruner, M.M. Bakhtin, and John Dewey. These theorists believed knowledge is constructed by the individual in interactions with others, themselves, and the environment rather than knowledge being objective and being transferred from one person to another.

Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social construction of knowledge proposes the necessity of interaction for cognitive growth, specifically thought, language and reasoning processes. For
Vygotsky, language and thought support each other in a fluid and permeable relationship. Even though thoughts are individual, language is communal and affects thoughts, making the two recursive in nature. Thought, language, and reasoning abilities develop through social interactions with others, especially parents, and embody the shared knowledge of the culture.

Vygotsky conceptualizes this social interaction in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where a child looks to an “expert” to scaffold understanding of new concepts and knowledge. If the interactions are too easy, the child loses interest and if they are too hard, the child becomes frustrated and shut down. In the ZPD, the child is able to internalize new knowledge and accomplishes tasks with the help of another.

Vygotsky orients learning within the social context of a culture. When children engage in any language based activity, whether it is with another person, a text, or even with themselves and their “private” speech, they are bringing with them both cultural and individual understandings. He says, “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of ideas. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals (Vygotsky, 1978, p.57).

Like Vygotsky, Bruner (1986) also believed the mind only reached its full potential through involvement with others and the culture. To Vygotsky’s theories, Bruner brought a focus on language as a series of connected narratives. Bruner believed we live through narratives and these stories produce cultures- how we understand and make meaning of the world. Because of this interdependence, language is inseparable from culture and culture inseparable from language. Bruner emphasized the mind as a meaning-maker rather than an information-processor. He says, “Culture shapes the mind…it provides us with the toolkit by
which we construct not only our worlds but our very conception of ourselves and our powers” (1996, p.x). Bruner, like Vygotsky, understood human mental activity was always assisted by culture and language, whether it was external or internal.

Fitting well with the theories of Vygotsky and Bruner, Bakhtin’s (1986) theory of language conceptualized it as part of an ongoing dialogic chain. This interconnected dialogic chain connects people through speaking, writing, listening and talking with others. Language helps both relay knowledge and create knowledge. Bakhtin viewed language as a tremendously complex system with finite rules and infinite possibilities. He defined this paradox with the idea of the “repeatable utterance” which can be recreated as a speech genre and the “unrepeatable utterance” which cannot be recreated because the particular context of the language in use will never be relived (Bahktin, 1986). Like Vygotsky and Bruner, Bakhtin believed language and thought are inexplicably intertwined and support each other’s progress. All learning takes place in Bahktin’s dialogue- the interactions of the mind or language between learner and others, self, or text. All three theorists believed language is like the air around us; we might not be conscious of it, but it is part of our every moment and necessary to be a healthy, human being. Bakhtin says, “Utterances are existence” (1986).

John Dewey (1916, 1944), the father of progressive education, rallied against the popular behaviorist philosophy of education and formulated the precursor to the social constructionist epistemology. His pragmatic, student-centered approach to teaching and learning incorporated the key components of dialogue and social interaction that are central to Vygotsky, Bruner and Bahktin’s theories of language and learning. Dewey wanted schools to mirror a democracy where each child was encouraged to operate with others in preparation for the demands of responsible membership with the democratic community.
In the writing classroom, social constructionist theories understand children experience school literacy within the larger context of experiences they have already had with language, literacy, and culture since birth. Students come to school with a repertoire of different experiences and must link past experiences with present ones for meaning-making and knowledge construction to take place. Therefore, if students have no or little experiences in school writing, learning about writing in a school setting needs to be tied to other learning previously experienced. Enveloping students in lessons that include direct experiences with scaffolding, talking and listening, thinking, reflecting and acting, encourage students to construct and internalize meaningful knowledge about writing.

Critical Literacy Theorists

Critical literacy theorists, as social constructivists, believe language and gender are a part of our ideologies and, in large part, socially constructed. Critical theorists believe ideologies and cultures are formed by complex networks of beliefs and cannot be neutral. In addition, the critical theorist believes language and gender are part of the hegemony of the social and political institutions in our worlds. In this way, literacy and education are potentially liberating for all people, both women and men. Scholars such as Louise Rosenblatt, Shirley Brice Heath, Paulo Freire, Anne Haas Dyson, and Thomas NewKirk have shaped my beliefs about language, literacy and learning because of their research and theories, and their implications.

Louise Rosenblatt (1904-2005) created the Transactional Theory of Reading to explain the process that happens when a reader assigns meaning to a text to create a new “virtual” text as the reading proceeds. Rosenblatt asserts the words are just black marks on a page until individuals bring meaning to them in both efferent and aesthetic ways (1938,1995). Like Vygotsky, the construction of knowledge is a blending of the reader’s culture and experience as he or she brings meaning to the written word. This is in stark contrast to traditional literacy
criticism where the text has one official meaning. No one has had more of an impact on empowering students as active participants in literacy learning as Rosenblatt because she allows readers a voice and choice in their meaning-making. Like Vygotsky, Rosenblatt supports the idea of language and learning as both communal and individual. In her case, she applies this theory to the reader and says, “The finding of meanings involves both the author’s text and what the reader brings to it” (1978).

She, like John Dewey, advocated a more democratic way of teaching that has implications far beyond the literature classroom. In a tribute to her, Farrell (2005) wrote, “To Louise, literature was at the core of a democratic education…it could free students from provincialism and stereotyped notions of cultures and people, educating them to be judicious in their evaluations of social issues and human behaviors.”

Paulo Freire (1968) believed literacy was the tool to counteract political and social oppression because it gives individuals a voice and a mind. He created a powerful metaphor of learning contrasting positivist and constructivist epistemologies called the “banking” philosophy of teaching. In the banking philosophy of teaching, teachers deposit information into students who are passive receptacles waiting to be filled. When information is required, such as on a test, the deposits are withdrawn. In contrast to this, Freire’s advocates language as a dynamic, powerful and liberating tool for everyone, especially the oppressed people in his native Brazil. Through reading, writing, speaking, and listening, Freire believed all people could achieve conscientization- a process which questions the status quo and cultural assumptions that are oppressive.

Shirley Brice Heath (1983) conducted over a decade of research in three different rural and ethnic communities. She applied the social constructivist beliefs of Vygotsky, Bruner,
Bahktin and Dewey to the language practices of her participants and proves learning must connect with the language and culture of the individual and their respective communities. Each of the communities of Trackton and Roadville had different ways of using language and defining the “story” and narratives in unique ways. Her powerful ethnography illustrated the power of language to shape the way we perceive the world and also the hegemony that surrounds language and teaching in educational institutions. Both Heath and Ann Haas Dyson (1993) found when teachers of diverse students gained more knowledge of language and language acquisition, this understanding had a positive impact on the way they taught the children. This knowledge allowed them to create lessons built on children’s prior knowledge and that culture’s paradigm of the world, even if this wasn’t compatible with the school’s or townspeople’s official language.

Looking at children through a broad language lens enabled teachers to focus on the language skills children brought to the classroom, rather than greeting a child by categorizing him or her on the basis of perceived deficits.

Anne Haas Dyson recognized this discursive mismatch between home and school worlds of many students and advocated the official curriculum become more “permeable” and incorporate the “multiple worlds” of young students to include their home and peer spheres. She aimed to, “…counteract visions of literacy learning and teaching that are grounded in narrow imaginative universes, universes that see literacy as taking root comfortably only for children with middle-class backgrounds who speak Standard English and respond to school-like tasks in conventional ways” (1993, p.6).

Thomas Newkirk, like Dyson, centered his critical literacy research on the writing practices of children in the schools and called for the “widening the circle” beyond the official, traditional school definition of literacy (p.171). In more than stories (1989), he challenged the
traditional views of writing development and advocated for a multi-genre approach to writing that recognized young children’s abilities to write in both analytical and narrative ways. In *Misreading Masculinity*, a book on gender and literacy, (2002), he crafts a powerful argument for allowing boy writers more choice and agency in their writing and inviting popular culture into the school’s literacy practices. Newkirk’s theory of discrimination of boys stems from the fact that boys are as intelligent as girls, yet are collectively scoring lower in writing (2002, p.35). He questions the institutionalized definition of literacy and calls for a redefining that includes diverse voices and a more democratic classroom that will benefit all students, especially boys.

In the first sections of this chapter, the research topic is established and the theoretical orientation of the researcher outlined and supported with scholarly references. Next, gender and literacy will be discussed generally from a social and biological viewpoint and then more specifically on girls and boys and their literacy learning in schools. The chapter will end by highlighting specific research directed towards boys in the writing classroom.

**The Social Construction of Gender**

Man is biologically predetermined to construct and to inhabit a world with others. This world becomes for him the dominant and definitive reality. Its limits are set by nature, but once constructed, this world acts back upon nature. In the dialectic between nature and the socially constructed world the human organism itself is transformed. In this same dialectic man produces reality and thereby produces himself.

Berger & Luckman, 1966, p.183

There is an abundance of evidence and literature that supports the belief that gender is a historical and social construction that varies widely with time, culture, and situation (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000; Pollack, 1998; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). In this view, gender roles are internalized at young ages through culture and language. Babies are born into cultures with existing ideologies about sex-roles. Berger and Luckman (1966) call this “recipe” knowledge that institutions transmit to all members and supply the “institutionally appropriate rules of
conduct” (p.65). This collection of ideas forms the lens through which we view the world and becomes our ideologies about everything, including gender roles and expectations. The dominant ideology becomes the “official reality” of that culture.

Psychologist William Pollack explored the social reality of boys in America in his book, *Real Boys: Rescuing our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* (1998). He defined a “boy code” of stereotypical and preconceived behavioral rules that forced boys to act in certain ways. If boys try and break free or deviate from the code, their masculinity was challenged.

Similar to Pollack’s ideas, two other leading psychologists in this area, Kindlon and Thompson, wrote about psychological struggles of American boys in their book *Raising Cain* (2000). In their clinical practice with adolescent boys, they saw American culture “railroading boys into lives of isolation shame and anger” by narrowly defining maleness and not allowing them to express their true feelings (2000). The cultural constraints these psychologists feel boys are experiencing in our culture is significant to the writing classroom. In the next section, the tension between being fully masculine and fully literate is explored.

**Masculinity vs. Literacy**

Can a young boy follow the expectations of our culture and be highly literate and fully masculine? In *Boys and Literacy: Exploring the Issues* (2002), Maynard speculates that the male literacy crisis is linked, “to a more fundamental crisis: that of masculinity itself” (2002, p.13). The definition of masculinity is in a state of flux as it is redefined by society. These shifts in defining masculinity may be due to the decline of the traditional family unit with a male head of the household. Over 40% of households are considered single mother homes and many boys are brought up without a constant male figure in their lives. Many boys are left to frame an idea of masculinity from models in popular culture and media (Maynard, 2002).
Psychologists emphasize the need for adolescent boys to have a father figure in their lives (Gurian, 2005). This “missing male” phenomenon impacts school achievement and the writing classroom as well (Fletcher, 2006; Tyre, 2006). In the area of literacy, male role models dwindle even farther with studies showing that children report seeing fathers do very little reading beyond the newspaper and very little writing at all (Booth, 2002). Some schools, such as an all boy high school in New York, are using mentoring programs with “profound results” (Tyre, 2006). Male community members commit to mentor boys and spend time weekly helping with school work and building connections with school and the “real” world of working after graduation.

The missing male phenomenon can be applied to the school. Schools are “feminized” in that females dominate the education profession and may have unknowingly molded their teaching methods, curriculum choices, and assessments to suit their gender (Maynard, 2002; Newkirk, 2002). If males feel pressured to define themselves as “not female,” than school literacy events and activities will be rejected as feminized even though many school literature texts and curriculum choices are predominantly male authors.

Many popular texts, both written and visual, reinforce the heavily patrolled, stereotyped, gender borders students experience daily. Tension between masculinity and literacy is easily identified in adolescent media and literature with literacy becoming synonymous with females or feminine qualities. For example, the best selling adolescent novel series Harry Potter (Rowling, 1998) casts Hermione as the highly literate female who solves problems through reading and information gathering. On the other hand, Harry Potter and Ron shun school literacy and are constantly asking her to write their school papers or find books for them in the library while they solve their problems through great courage, brawn, and luck.
Popular sitcom characters are frequently cast in very one-dimensional, gender-driven ways that promote gender stereotypes to children. In the popular Disney Channel sitcom, *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*, the twin boys are cast with opposite personalities. The one who is highly literate and successful in school is also the twin who is cast with stereotyped feminine qualities and more of a “geek” with low social skills.

Scholars argue that hegemonic versions of masculinity are not consistent with being literate and undermine literate behaviors for boys (Booth, 2002). When boys do write, they will often pick topics that assert their ideas of masculinity and avoid expressions of affection because they feel it might make them look weak or vulnerable (Pollack, 1998). Boys often use violent writing such as war stories or superhero stories as ways of bonding with friends. Girls have an easier time constructing identities that are positive about school work, but boys—especially minority boys—feel more tension negotiating between peer acceptance and being an enthusiastic writer and reader (Newkirk, 2002). When applied to the writing classroom, research agrees that institutional official reality of becoming literate and American ideologies of masculinity may have conflicting goals.

Parents also contribute to a double standard when they have different expectations for their sons than their daughters. In a gender study of parent involvement, a double standard emerged (Carter & Wojtkiewicz, 2000). Parents had higher academic expectations for girls and engaged in more discussions with their daughters about school work.

Interestingly, even though boys are experiencing lower achievement in academics, their self-esteem is higher than girls. The more important something is to defining identity, the more critical it becomes in one’s self-perception and happiness. In the area of writing, “males have a higher academic self-esteem even though they don’t perform as well as girls. This might be
related to lower self-standards, particularly if they see reading and writing as a feminine activity” (Newkirk, 2002, p.44).

A higher contentment about school achievement may be due to a sense of entitlement that has been historically established. Newkirk speculates that boys may just believe they don’t need to succeed in school writing because it doesn’t translate into real world success:

This male cynicism about schooling may come from a powerful residual sense of male entitlement- an unarticulated belief that the traits of traditional masculinity (aggressiveness, competitiveness, physical strength, gregariousness, an outgoing personality) will more than compensate for any educational deficiency. These, after all, are the real traits valued in the real world… Males can, in effect, make a run around the educational system and its ladder of credentials. Bart Simpson, despite his poor disruptive school record, will manage to do as well as his high-flying sister Lisa. (Newkirk, 2002, p.44).

Feminist scholar Carol Gilligan supports this argument when she says, “…despite the lag in school achievement, despite the fact that girls have always gotten better grades and more boys go to prison, men still outnumber women at the highest levels of academia, as well as in business and government” (2006). She speculates that boys may not engage in academic exercises if the exercises are not perceived as authentic and purposeful because boys are more confident they can refuse to “…engage in a false relationship” and still be okay in the long run (Tyre, 2006, p.53).

This perceived disconnect with in-school skills and real-world skills can lead to apathy and disengagement among boys. Many studies highlight boys’ abilities to do more outside of school than in the classroom. In stark contrast to in-school assignments viewed as artificial, useless or meaningless, outside of school boys used their writing for a purpose that was intensely social; they wrote blogs, songs, text-messages, letters, poetry, notes to family and friends, and job applications (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002, 2006). Parents typically look to the school to help children reach their full potential as learners, especially parents who want their children to have a better life than they did. Instead, studies show schools failing boys and their families and
unknowingly (sometimes knowingly) using practices which alienate these students, their families and even their communities (Heath, 1988; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Rogers, 2003; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Collins, 2003).

When literacy is seen as a set of dispassionate skills that can be counted, measured, and weighed, it becomes irrelevant to many boys’ lives. Social and cultural disconnects in language use cause boys, especially marginalized boys to be misinterpreted (Heath, 1989; Collins, 2003). Boys disengage in literacy events when they experience racism, classism, or sexism (Purcell-Gates, 1995).

Self-efficacy studies show student perception and beliefs has a strong influence on writing achievement. In Pajares’s study of 215 fifth graders in gender and self-efficacy, he established student beliefs about their writing abilities powerfully influence their writing performances. Girls reported stronger self-efficacy beliefs in elementary through high school and are judged better writers by themselves and their teachers (2007, p.115). Pajares suggests teachers, knowing these affective influences on student writing, give attention to helping students cultivate stronger, “robust” self-efficacy beliefs through mastery experiences and focus on “writing progress rather than writing deficiencies” (p.117).

A teacher’s self-perceptions and beliefs about boys are just as important as a student’s beliefs. Research has shown that when, “teachers believed boys are as successful as girls in beginning literacy, scores were approximately the same. In similar classrooms where teachers believed boys were less successful, the boys scored an average of 12 points lower than girls” (Palardy, 1998). When teachers challenged these types of unconsciously held beliefs about students and changed them, the classroom became a more equitable place.
The Birds and the Bees: A Biological Overview

Testosterone or estrogen? When it comes to biological differences between genders it may initially seem clear cut, but beyond the sexual organs, it isn’t. Research shows boys and girls do not follow exact paths of cognitive, emotional, and physical development. The philosophical orientation that supports biological and genetic gender differences as a cause for differences in the behavior, development, and learning styles of children is coined “biological determinism” (Gurian, 2005). This orientation believes that males’ tendencies towards many behaviors are genetically influenced to some degree. While most researchers acknowledge biology as a factor in the construction of gender attributes, they do so in varying degrees.

Michael Gurian, the founder of The Gurian Institute in 1997 and author of The Minds of Boys: Saving our Sons from Falling Behind in School and Life (2005), believes teachers and parents can help boys by understanding these biological differences and their implications in schools and society. He says, “Boys have a lot of Huck Finn in them- they don’t, on average, learn as well as girls by sitting still, concentrating, multi-tasking, listening to words” (2005). In an outreach to educating educators about biological differences in boys and how this affects the classroom, the Gurian Institute has enrolled over 15,000 teachers in their seminars to help teachers employ teaching strategies aimed towards engaging boys in academia.

Another leading figure in the media supporting the biological explanation of boy behaviors is Dr. Leonard Sax, a physician and psychologist who recently wrote Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know about the Emerging Science of Sex Differences (2005). He says the last 20 years of research shows gender differences in behavior, once thought to be primarily socially programmed, are more heavily linked to biological factors than suspected. From this perspective, the boys aren’t the problem; boys’ declining achievement
in the school setting is caused by the school’s inability to accommodate and capitalize upon boys’ natural behaviors and learning styles.

Developmentally, boys often speak their first words and develop clear speech an average of 18 months later than girls. Their fine motor skills lag behind those of girls by about a year (Sax, 2005). This affects handwriting success and puts boys at a disadvantage due to the aesthetic focus of writing teachers on neatness of letter formation. In one study of elementary boys, a researcher was surprised when he asked what boys dislike the most about writing and many answers referred to the physical pain it caused their hands (Fletcher, 2006).

Four times as many boys stutter as girls and baby girls have better hearing than baby boys (Gurian, 2005). Boys are more prone to physical activity and risk-taking. They respond well to kinesthetic learning and may see reading and writing, especially when this involves extended periods of time sitting still and silent, as a form of “bodily control and isolation” (Booth, 2002; Sax, 2005).

Recent brain research from the Kennedy Krieger Institute and Johns Hopkins University (Reiss, et al., 1996) reveals differences in cerebral development and organization of children’s brains. In a study of 172 fourth grade students, boys scored significantly higher in the use of their spatial ability and visual reasoning skills to solve problems (Lowrie & Diezman, 2007). Girls have a larger language processing center in the right frontal lobe which may enhance their capacity to process language. Women’s brains use both the left and right hemispheres of the brain in language operations, while men only use the left hemisphere (Gilbert, 2000; Booth, 2002; Sax, 2005). In further support of biological determinism, hormones affect language and cognitive abilities as well. In recent research with transsexuals given high doses of testosterone
in preparation for sex-change operations, “…their visual-spatial skills improved dramatically and their verbal fluency skills declined dramatically within three months” (Barlow, 1999, p.50).

Biological differences do not mean that boys are not as intelligent as girls but may be significant when addressing possible factors in school achievement (Booth, 2002). Proponents of biological determinism have suggested boys need schools that are more suited to meet their needs. Suggestions include single-sex classrooms (Sax, 2005) and calls for a transformation of schools that they consider feminized to become more boy-friendly in their approach to teaching (Gurian, 2005).

Looking at gender differences in both biological and social ways can be a pathway to understanding classroom behavior and achievement for fourth grade boy writers. Understanding gender more completely from a variety of perspectives opens the door for positive changes in education.

**Girls: The Other Half of the Equation**

When looking at co-education of the past century, one cannot talk about boys without talking about girls. Gender studies that focus specifically on girls is not a new topic in schools. With so many decades of hegemony piled upon female students in schools and the workplace, some feminists argue that focusing on boys’ achievement levels will undermine efforts to help girls who still face institutional and societal gender barriers. I feel, as do the scholars I have read, that the research of boys and their difficulties in school should not minimize the ongoing research of girls. No one rejects claims that girls experience difficulties or inequities and there exists a need for the continued specific research of girls (Sanford, 2006; Fletcher, 2006; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Our task as educators is to create gender-equal learning environments that help both genders reach their full potential in the classroom and in
life. With this said, we continue onward to a brief review of the history of girls and public education.

At the onset of the creation of American public education, girls were greatly discriminated against because of the social norms of the times. As the social norms for women changed in the 1960s and 1970s, women fought for more social equality. In the 1970s, the Feminist Movement strongly supported promoting gender equality in education with co-educational classes. The belief of the time was that gender was entirely a social construction and schools should be gender neutral (Logsdon, 2003).

Also in the 1970s, gender studies illuminated girls’ low scores in math and science compared to male achievement. School textbooks, especially in math and science, “…made it clear that girls would grow up to be passive mothers and boys would grow up to be active fathers. In older mathematics texts, the wording of the problems themselves revealed gender bias. Girls were off to the store to buy materials for cooking and sewing…” (Shalala, 1995, p.394). More recently, gender bias in the use of educational technology is documented with far fewer girls enrolling in computer programming courses. Teachers and counselors are more apt to counsel girls into traditional female roles, including teacher, nurse, and secretary (Shalala, 1995, p.395).

As a push for gender equitable schools, legislation named Title IX was passed in 1979 and prohibited sex discrimination in school academics and athletics forcing schools to encourage females in their academics and also expand female athletic opportunities. Previously, school sports had been monopolized by boy’s athletics because girl’s teams had little or no funding. In 1971, only one in twenty-seven girls participated in sports but by 1996, one in three did so (Freedman, 2002, p.226).
By the 1980s, many feminists began to wonder if coeducational schools reinforced male hegemony and marginalized female voices. In her extensive study of over 1200 women, psychologist Dr. Sylvia Rimm explored the issues of equality and sameness,

To date, the research on raising girls for equality has come from comparisons of how boys and girls are treated at home and in classrooms...The assumption has been that if girls are raised similarly to boys and the same opportunities are provided, girls and boys will be equally successful. It is also assumed that if girls as given the same opportunities as boys, they will become as fulfilled as boys. These assumptions may in fact be correct, and certainly we have learned from these research comparisons. However, they assume sameness rather than equality, and biology tells us that men and women are surely not the same. Gender differences need to be addressed. (1999, p.2)

Feminist Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (1982), interviewed adolescent girls and boys and found girls were characterized by care, empathy, and connection whereas boys were characterized by achievement, autonomy, and independence—qualities typically held in high regard by men. In the face of dominant male culture of the school institution, she found girls were not able to be heard and sometimes chose silence as a way of maintaining their autonomy.

In the 1990s, two landmark studies rocketed the gender equality issue to the top of the nation’s educational priority list. In 1994, Myra and David Sadker's book, *Failing at Fairness: How America’s School’s Cheat Girls*, turned a critical eye towards the co-educational model of primary and secondary education. *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (1992) was another study commissioned by the AAUW that reviewed over 1300 studies about education and female students. This study also highlighted institutional discrimination, intentional and unintentional, that harmed girls’ ability to achieve in American schools. The AAUW and Sadker’s findings demonstrated that teachers in co-educational classrooms were more likely to foster achievement among boys than among girls. Boys spoke more often and received more attention from the teacher. For example, the Sadker’s documented the observation of girls pausing or hesitating before participating in classroom interactions in coeducational schools, whereas boys did not
hesitate (1994). Girls more often were silenced or chose silence rather than compete with the aggressiveness of boys in classroom discussions and teacher interaction. Diana Meehan echoes similar findings in Learning Like a Girl (2007) and says, “Adolescent girls in the classroom respond to their teachers with quiet compliance, whereas boys demand attention, commanding the floor for ideas, comments, quips; in return, boys receive praise for participating, reinforcing their behavior” (p.3).

The reports of the 1990s led the charge for educators to become more aware of gender equity issues and strive to give equal attention and encouragement to girls, especially in the male dominated areas of math and science. In 1994, U.S. Congress passed the Gender Equity in Education Act giving millions of dollars in grants to study the plight of girls. While the validity of the Sadkers’ research has been called into question (Barlow, 1999; Sommers, 2000), the efforts to help girls reach their potential in the classroom have been working and the achievement gaps, especially in math and science, have dwindled. While females' performance in mathematics is often perceived to be lower than that of males, NAEP results for 2004–2008 show few consistent gender differences over the past few years, particularly among younger students. The twelfth-grade NAEP assessments in mathematics and science showed no significant gender differences in achievement scores. However, females are less likely to report liking math or science. Over the past twenty years, girls’ testing scores, graduation rates, and college degrees have steadily increased in all subject areas (Tyre, 2006).

Single Sex Classrooms and Schools

At the turn of the century, single-sex schools existed as a form of hierarchy and discrimination and allowed certain opportunities for women and other, more beneficial opportunities, to men. This form of schooling all but disappeared by the 1950s. The co-ed schools were created to reshape societal beliefs about gender and gave women more
opportunities to succeed in male-dominated careers. At the same time, schools also helped to maintain societal beliefs about gender roles, some which are not positive to boys or girls. Girls may be marginalized or silenced in the co-ed setting and boys may be more pressured into a stereotyped male role that hinders their academic progress (Meehan, 2007; Sommers, 2001).

Now, the reemergence of single-sex classrooms and schools over the past few decades has been promoted by advocates for both boys and girls. Girl advocates say single-sex classrooms allow daughters the freedom to explore male dominated fields such as science and technology and take on leadership roles without worrying what the boys will think (Meehan, 2007). Girls believe it is easier to learn and form healthy friendships when they do not have to worry about impressing males or acting in certain cultural prescribed ways.

With the recent passing of NCLB legislation and Supreme Court rulings, single-sex classrooms are an option that is proving successful. Most single-sex public school classrooms are held within co-educational schools and students and parents choose to register for the classes. New legislation allows girls and boys to attend separate classes within a school site and sometimes completely separate schools as long as both genders are offered equal opportunities for learning and progressing. South Carolina has created the country’s first state-wide position to oversee single-gender education and has over 70 schools offering the program (Adcox, 2007). In Baltimore, same-sex classroom options were offered on a voluntary basis in graders three, four, and five and were a great success with parents, who are asking for more of them. In 1996, California allocated five million dollars towards the development of all-male and all-female academies (Sommers, 2001).

In the 1980s, groups such as NOW and ACLU opposed single sex classrooms and brought legal action to stop plans in Detroit, Michigan and Dade County, Florida to establish all-
male and female academies for at-risk urban youths (Sommers, 2001). The NOW president, Kim Gandy, said segregating boys and girls could be damaging if boys come away with sexist ideas of superiority or if students are boxed into learning a certain way (Adcox, 2007). To these groups, single-sex education is a mechanism for reinforcing persistent gender stereotypes. Regardless of these warnings, the single sex education argument is strengthened by the impact it is having on both girls and boys. Parents, teachers, psychologists and policymakers are consistently concluding that schools and classrooms that are able to focus exclusively on boys or girls are more positive and productive than many co-educational classrooms.

In the past sections, I explored the issue of boy writers in the larger context of gender as both a social construction and a biological construction and the implications these have for masculinity and literacy. Viewpoints from sociologists, psychologists, feminists, physicians, and educational researchers were included. In addition, I illuminated significant research of educational studies of girls and the new movement of single-sex classrooms to complete the gender picture. The next section will begin to funnel the study of gender and literacy in the school to look at the research of educational practice. I begin by exploring the general status of males in academia and move to a specific focus on the teaching of writing to boys.

Research on Educational Practice and Boy Writers

General Academic Status of Boys

Gender differences in achievement are being highlighted in general academia as well as in the writing classroom. High schools are experiencing a decrease in males earning honors based on GPA such as valedictorian or salutatorian and boys are 33% more likely than girls to drop out of school before graduation (Fletcher, 2006). Their school experiences are marked with both behavioral and academic problems. Boys are given 70 percent of failing grades on report cards and are 50 percent more likely to be retained than girls. Boys are disciplined 5 to 10
percent more than girls and are 10 times as likely to be diagnosed with ADD as girls (Gurian, 2005).

Student perceptions of gender equity in the schools show both genders believe teachers like and pay more attention to boys. In a 1990 unpublished report by the AAUW, 79 percent of the students said teachers think girls are smarter and 78 percent believed teachers like to be around girls more in school (Sommers, 2000, p.42).

In higher education, there has been a drop in male enrollment which used to be majority male and now is majority female. In the 1970s, only 43 percent of college students were women. In 2005, national college admission reports indicate enrollment is 57 percent female and 43 percent male. There is a call from university admissions across the nation for primary and secondary schools to make some “major changes” to restore the gender balance and the US Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings says this widening gender achievement gap, “has profound implications for the economy, society, families, and democracy” (Tyre, 2006).

In surprising contrast to girl’s momentum in academic achievement, boys’ achievement in schools has shown a steady decline over the past twenty years. There has recently been a flurry of publishing in the area of boys and academic achievement in literacy but in reality, boys have been receiving lower marks in the area of writing and reading for a lot longer. There is evidence of female superiority on literacy tests dating back to the 1930’s (Cohen, 1998, Holbrook, 1988). Systematic testing as far back as 1868 shows many of the same results as today with girls outperforming boys in their language skills. In the patriarchal lens of that time period, these results favoring girls were interpreted negatively as an “overstrain” for girls, rather than an under-achievement for boys (Maynard, 2002). Similarly, tests in the 1950s and 1960s that showed poor performance of boys on the 11+ examination were justified in terms of boys’
later biological development (Maynard, 2002). Gender studies show boys are still struggling academically and behaviorally within our schools and the achievement gap between boys and girls is widening rather than shrinking (Sommers, 2000; Gurian, 2001).

Advocates of boys feel that the reports of the 1990s manufactured a false crisis for girls based on research that cannot be substantiated. In *The War Against Boys*, Sommers asks, “How do boys fit into the ‘tragedy’ of America’s ‘shortchanged’ girls? Inevitably, boys are resented, being seen as the unfairly privileged gender and as obstacles on the path to gender justice for girls” (p.23). These studies of boys show a different perspective of school inequality with girls outnumbering boys in student government, honor societies, on school newspapers and in debating clubs (Dey, 1991). The girl crisis of the 1990s did result in girls receiving more attention in math and science but Sommers says, “But these benefits could and should have been achieved without…presenting boys as the unfairly favored sex” (p.43).

Regardless of who’s to blame, if anyone, stakeholders agree boys need to begin to make improvements in literacy skills and become better prepared for today’s literate society. The new service sector and informational age jobs value traits of flexibility, adaptability, cooperation, and communication skills more highly than traditional male traits of physical prowess and competitiveness (Maynard, 2002). What is happening to males in the classroom that affects the teaching of these communication skills, specifically writing?

**Boys and Writing: Agency and Choice**

In one literacy study of writing, over 500 male students were surveyed and asked what their “wish” would be to improve their writing classrooms. “Choice of topic and genre” was overwhelmingly the number one answer (Fletcher, 2006). Boys almost universally felt school denied them choice and control in their reading and writing and therefore any sense of personal agency or competence. The practices in many schools revolve around teacher worksheets, strict
planning and revising writing schedules, topic limitations, genre limitations, and test preparation (Maynard, 2002). Writing, in many 4th grades has become strictly a test preparation classroom where students may only write in narrative or expository five-paragraph form in response to generic prompts removing all traces of agency, power and choice in their learning (Fu & Shelton, 2006).

Research suggests teachers should not make test-writing the primary focus of learning. Rather than teach to the test, teachers can incorporate prompt writing into the process writing classroom for a more balanced approach. In one classroom study, the teacher spends 20 percent of the time (one day a week) teaching prompt writing and held writing workshop for the other 80 percent of the time with positive results. The students did well on the standardized test but more importantly, were highly engaged writers throughout the year (Fu & Shelton, 2006).

Many boys feel constrained by their ability to choose topic and genre for writing pieces. Genre choice in writing places many boys at odds with the “official literacies” of the school institution where popular and media driven literature is disregarded as sub-level quality. Similarly, boys’ reading preferences tend to put them at odds with their teachers while girls’ choices of books tend to coincide more frequently with those of their teachers (Booth, 2002).

A broader approach to writing allows for a more recursive and authentic approach that can include options for boy writers. One important strategy recognizes drawing as a key element in the writing process. Current brain research indicates the importance of drawing in the writing process, especially for boys, who are strong in the visual-spatial skills (Fletcher, 2006). An analysis of student drawings shows the inclusion of many writing elements such as characterization, setting, important detail, plot and sense of place (Newkirk, 1989).
Incorporating drawing as part of the writing process also made a difference in the progress of boys who were English Language Learners (Fu, 1995).

Smith and Wilhelm characterize a high engagement in learning as being in the “flow” with four characteristics: a sense of control and competence, challenge of appropriate level, clear goals and feedback, and a focus on the immediate experience (2006). Research suggests constructing process writing classrooms create this “flow” in a workshop approach. Workshop writers write contextually for authentic audiences and purposes. They receive group and individual instruction on writing through mini-lessons and conferencing and have agency, choice, and power to make decisions about their writing every day. Their writing is both individual and social as they are part of a supportive writing community (Atwell, 1998, 2002; Calkins, 1998; Graves, 1983).

Other ways to give boys more choice and agency is to establish a high-quality, varied, and accessible classroom library, provide a strong writing mentor (not necessarily male), establish writer’s notebooks as a non-threatening place to write, incorporate art and drama into the writing classroom and have an abiding sense of fun and humor (Booth, 2002). Teacher resistance to these approaches to writing may be attributed to fear of classroom management problems, fear of inadequate test preparation, administrative restrictions, or a lack of pedagogical knowledge about the teaching of writing (Allen, 2006).

In the workshop classroom, genre choice should include the boys who write, “wilder, edgier, more fantastic action pieces of writing or write about characters borrowed from popular culture” (Fletcher, 2006, p. 135). There is a call for teachers to have greater acceptance of non-traditional forms of literacy such as news articles, informational texts, comic books, graphic novels and stories that include violence, parody, and bodily humor as a way to engage boy
writers and readers (Booth, 2002; Taylor, 2005; Maynard, 2002; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). This more “permeable” curriculum will allow outside, unofficial literacies and cultures of the students into the official curriculum of the school which will engage boys, including minorities (Dyson, 1993). Recently, there has been an increase in book lists and websites that specifically appeal to boys and their teachers (Scieszka, 2005; Gurian, 2007).

A more permeable curriculum can also mean allowing more technology and media-driven culture into the classroom. In technology and computer use, males are very active and engaged and more comfortable with the digital world than girls (Williams, 2007). This does not help boys in the writing classroom when much of the technology and media influences (including television, video games, and movies) set up a dichotomous relationship with the school official literacies. The Kaiser Family Foundation study found boys spend more time watching TV, playing video games, and with alternative digital literacies such as the Intranet, computer games and digital video (Sanford, 2006). Many writing teachers do not see this technology as literacy at all and others accept it but only as a lower, more vulgar form of literacy. It is seen as the “enemy” and acts as a “narcotic” that keeps boys from achieving in school (Newkirk, 2002, p.xix). Allowing students to take this aspect of their out-of-school literate lives in which they feel competent and use it as a basis for a writing piece can be a powerful, positive motivation. Researchers in England, United States, and Australia have reported that increased use of technology and computer education has led to greater engagement among boys (Taylor, 2003).

**International Writing and Gender Research**

While there has not been funding for boy literacy research in America over the last decade, there has been activity in other countries. Recently, the Australian Department of Education designated a $19.4 million dollar initiative in 2006-2007 named “Success for Boys”
that focuses on at-risk and disadvantaged boys in key areas of, “positive male role-models, literacy, information and communication technology, and improving Indigenous boys’ engagement with school and educational achievement” (www.dest.gov.au). Another $7 million initiative named “Boys’ Education Lighthouse Schools” (BELS) was implemented over 2003-2005 to assist schools in improving boys’ educational outcomes. This initiative selected 351 school sites and grouped them into 51 clusters that implemented programs based on their cluster needs. Three practices which were successful across clusters were 1) Activity based learning that included hand-on activities and links to the “real” world; 2) mentoring and role models including boy-to-boy mentoring and older males as role models in both academic and social contexts; 3) enhance learning environments to improve literacy outcomes for boys, including allowing boys to have choice in choosing books and magazines according to interests (BELS Final Report Stage Two, 2006).

These three initiatives are based on the 2002 comprehensive Australian study in which recommendations were made which nicely frame many ideas surrounding boys and literacy explored in this chapter:

- **Recommendation 1:** That, as part of their ongoing community analyses, schools and teachers acknowledge and explore the varied, social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds that boys bring with them to the literacy classroom, paying particular attention to the ways that constructions of masculinity influence boys’ behavior and learning in literacy.

- **Recommendation 2:** That schools, teachers, researchers, and policy-makers adopt a practice- and futures-oriented approach to literacy in their work to improve boys’ literacy outcomes.

- **Recommendation 3:** That teachers adopt a range of pedagogical strategies in the literacy classroom that are designed to promote an active, purposeful and democratic learning environment.

- **Recommendation 4:** That teachers construct literacy classrooms as active environments for learning by maximizing hands-on learning through multiple textual modes; by providing opportunities for students to take control of their own learning; by taking
account of student’ backgrounds and experiences; and by focusing on maintaining a productive sense of self among students as literacy learners.

- **Recommendation 5:** That teachers construct literacy classrooms as democratic spaces where authority and agency are shared and where students learn to work collaboratively and cooperatively.

- **Recommendation 6:** That teachers engage and work with... popular culture, electronic technologies and multimedia texts... teachers need to consider systematically the ways in which such activities can connect productively with curricular learning, and ways in which critical, analytic work can be developed in the use of misogynistic and institutionally hostile materials.

- **Recommendation 7:** That, to improve literacy outcomes for boys, schools need school systems’ cooperation to provide increased levels of learning support, professional development and technology infrastructure and support.

- **Recommendation 8:** That future research address the effectiveness of the three repertoires model- repertoires for (re)presenting the self; repertoires for relating; repertoires for engaging with and negotiating cultural knowledge and meanings—for improving literacy outcomes for boys.
  (Alloway, et.al., 2002)

**Summary**

Over the past decades, there is documentation that highlights boys’ underachievement in writing and reading. The social construction of gender roles and expectations has changed over time and suggests that boys experience more tension defining them as both highly literate and masculine. Brain based research has illuminated biological differences in the processing of language and in human development that may put boys at a disadvantage in school literacy events. Teacher and institutional attitudes and practices, also influenced by historical and cultural expectations, may consciously or unconsciously hinder the literacy lives of boys.

Research has suggested a change in paradigm and practice may be necessary to overcome the disparity between boy and girl writers. Writing classrooms can incorporate the most current research about the teaching of writing and work to engage boy writers. Possible solutions are incorporating workshop methods that give agency, choice and power to writers. Schools can...
broaden official literacies to include genres, topics, and teaching methods that are boy-friendly. Providing male literacy role models, incorporating the use of technology and popular culture, and insisting on an examination of teacher beliefs and expectations will affect the success of boy writers and begin to overcome the disparity between home and school literacies and the disenfranchisement of the young men in our schools. It is the hope and purpose of this data that by learning more deeply about boys and writing, teachers will be better prepared to help all students to meet their potential.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how 4th grade boys experienced writing instruction in the classroom context. While quantitative methods found the general patterns or the “whats” of the achievement gap between boy and girl writers, qualitative research methods dig deeper and see the uniqueness of the participants and try to understand “whys” of what is happening. Qualitative research strives to understand the perspective of the participants, their uniqueness, and their complexity. The researcher studied participants in their natural setting, in this case a fourth grade classroom, in order to understand the world through the participants’ eyes and experiences. This chapter will describe the conceptual research lens and methods employed in conducting this study.

Theoretical Orientation

All research has a philosophical stance that underlies a methodology and methods used in research. Crotty (2004) says, “Different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world” (p.66). In the case of this qualitative research, the underlying philosophical stance is that of Constructionism. Constructionism is an epistemology that promotes the belief that knowledge is constructed by humans through interactions between themselves and their world (Crotty, 2004). Constructionism is unlike Objectivism which insists that truth exists regardless of experience and independently of consciousness and promotes positivist methodology. It is also unlike Subjectivism which insists meaning does not come into being through interaction between subject and object but rather meaning is imposed on the object by the subject. Constructionism insists there are no objective truths waiting to be discovered and that, “Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the
realities in our world” (Crotty, 2004, p.8). Meaning, then, is not discovered or assigned but constructed.

In this epistemology, it is believed people are born into existing social and symbolic systems used to make meaning of the world and could not function without them (Kincheloe, 2005). These systems, or cultures, are both the result and source of human thought and behavior. They can be seen as a “set of control mechanisms- plans, recipes, rules, institutions, and programs that govern our behavior” (Crotty, 2004, p.63). Culture gives us lenses through which to construct the world and gives meaning to the world. Within the epistemology of constructionism, the meanings have a subjective element. Constructionism recognizes the individual’s interpretation and leads to the possibility of multiple valid interpretations of data.

Constructionism is an epistemology that supports the theoretical perspective of Constructivism. Constructivism highlights “both the dynamic contours of social reality and the processes by which social reality is put together and assigned meaning” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). Constructivism describes “the individual human subject engaging with objects in the world and making sense of them” (Crotty, 2004, p.79). Qualitative methods are supported by this constructivist paradigm which portrays a world “in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing” (Glesne, 1999, p.5).

Using constructivism as my theoretical orientation means viewing the boy writer as individual learners who must actively ‘build’ knowledge and skills and that information exists within these built constructs rather than in the external environment (Huit, 2003). The boys’ experiences transmitted through interviews describe knowledge not as truths to be transmitted or uncovered but as “emergent, developmental, nonobjective, viable constructed explanations by
humans engaged in meaning making in cultural and social communities of discourse” (Huitt, 2003, p.162).

While constructivism definitions can be quite varied, there are five important points that appear in most definitions and will be used in this fourth grade study of four boy writers: (1) the human experience of the boy writers involves continuous active agency; (2) boy writers try and make order and organization out of experiences; (3) boys’ experiences are fundamentally self-referent and recursive; (4) boy writers exist amid networks of relationships and cannot be understood apart from their “embeddedness” in social and symbolic systems; (5) the lifespan development of the participants is an ongoing developmental flow where order and disorder co-exist in lifelong quests for a dynamic balance that is never quite achieved (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008; Kincheloe, 2005; Mahoney, 2004). This constructivist framework of language and learning is the theoretical perspective that framed this research focused on the experiences of fourth grade boy writers.

Selecting a Classroom Research Site

The purpose of this study was to examine how 4th grade boys experience daily writing instruction. My first consideration was to choose a research site that supported the research question. To begin, I created a list of the following criteria with their justifications for the research project:

- **A fourth grade public school classroom in a high-quality educational setting.** I decided to use 4th grade because this is the youngest age that is tested in the area of writing on both a national and state level. The quantitative data supplied by these tests spurred my initial curiosity leading to the investigation of 4th grade boys. Studying younger students is beneficial because what is happening in elementary school will impact what occurs in middle and high school. In addition, choosing a school that has met minimum state standards set forth by the Florida Department of Education will eliminate a research setting plagued with the additional academic and emotional tension of a failing school.

- **Writing is taught as a separate subject rather than combined with other content areas.** Writing instruction must be a separate part of the school curriculum to meet the
goal of my research question. During writing instruction, attention is given to the art and science of writing across multiple purposes and genres rather than a focus on writing solely as a vehicle to answer content questions in subjects such as science or social studies. Because of state testing in narrative and expository essays, 4th grade is a grade in which writing is typically taught as a separate academic subject.

- **Writing is taught every day during a specified time slot of at least 45 minutes.** Research suggests this is the minimum suggested time for effective writing instruction by the leaders in the field of writing instruction such as Donald Graves (1983), Nancie Atwell (1998) and Lucy Calkins (1998).

- **The classroom teacher has at least three years experience, is recommended by the principal, and demonstrates competency in the 12 Florida Educator Accomplished Practices of teaching.** The criteria will insure administrative support and are likely to eliminate many problems with classroom management that may greatly affect writing instruction.

- **The classroom teacher is familiar with current research in the teaching of writing and utilizes the teaching of process writing in the curriculum.** The teacher should demonstrate sound pedagogical and content knowledge so I can study what is happening to boys in a situation that is supported by current research in writing instruction, rather than study a situation that has already been proven as ineffective.

- **Classroom has a balanced number of boys and girls and is a heterogeneous mix of skill levels, socio-economic status, and races.** Since I am studying boys, but not a specific sub-category of boys, I wanted a maximum variation sampling in the participants that mimics the typical demographics of the community.

I began searching for a possible research site during the summer months of 2007 using my network of principals, teachers and district personnel. Next, I used email and phone to contact six 4th grade teachers who had been nominated; four of these gave me permission to visit their classrooms. During the first months of the 2007 school year, I visited four classrooms two times each and took field notes. I conducted observations of the writing lessons and engaged in informal conversations with the teachers face-to-face or over the phone to gather additional information and answer any of their questions. From these interactions, I was able to determine which classroom best met the research criteria.

Only one of the potential classrooms met all the research criteria. It is a fourth grade public school classroom in Central Elementary, located in a downtown area of the city,
Brownsville. The school is housed in a historic, three story brick building built in 1914. The school population is smaller than many others in the city because it is located in the historic district near the downtown area and is hemmed in by development on all sides with no room for expansion. Central Elementary is an “A” school as judged by the state criteria tied to FCAT testing scores and Adequate Yearly Progress of all students on standardized testing for the 2006-2007 and the 2007-2008 school years. Overall school and county demographics are provided in Table 1. These data were collected from the most current academic reports located on the district’s website (http://www.marion.k12.us) and also by calling the school district public relations office (March, 2008).

Table 3-1 School, and District Demographics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>ESE</th>
<th>Free/Reduced Lunch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Elementary</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District</td>
<td>42,623</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mrs. Green, the classroom teacher, is in her seventh year of teaching and received excellent recommendations from her principal. This 4th grade classroom is co-educational with 10 boys and 11 girls and contained a heterogeneous mix of races, skill levels and socio-economic classes. Mrs. Green teaches writing every day from 10:00 a.m. to 10:45 a.m. and from 11:15 to 11:30 a.m. with her class eating lunch in the cafeteria from 10:45 to 11:15 a.m. Even though Mrs. Green teaches writing skills across the curriculum in other content areas, this 60 minute period focuses solely on strategies and techniques for writing construction and addresses the art and science of writing as a tool for communication across multiple purposes, audiences, and genres.

Mrs. Green has continued her professional development throughout her teaching career by attending writing conferences each year and reading current research on the teaching of
writing from the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) journal *Language Arts* and texts such as *The Art of Teaching Writing* by Lucy Calkins (1998) and *Craft Lessons* by Ralph Fletcher (1998). She teaches writing in a way that promotes process writing, writing workshop, student agency, choice and time for writing, conferencing, supporting writing with literature, and multi-genre writing. She blends process writing and prompt writing with an “80/20” approach (Fu and Shelton, 2004) in her writing curriculum to incorporate four days of process writing and one day of test preparation prompt writing.

Process writing days are characterized by mini-lessons, writing workshop with both peer and teacher conferences about student drafts, revision, editing and publication stages, and sharing of writing with peers and adults. Students are expected to produce at least one final product every two weeks. Prompt writing or test preparation happens once a week, or 20% of the time, and is devoted to a 45-minute timed prompt writing to prepare students for the Florida Writes exam in February 2008.

**Participants**

The research questions and methodology determined that all the participants were 4th grade boys in the selected classroom. Mrs. Green’s class consisted of 10 boys, ages 9 to 11 years old with a racial make up of 2 Black, 1 Hispanic, and 7 White boys.

**Initial Interviews:**

I began the participant selection process in January 2008 by conducting initial interviews with all 10 boys in Mrs. Green’s class. The goal was to gain a general sense of the boys’ willingness to talk and participate in the research project. These interviews were used to aid in the selection of four boys for the dissertation focus. For these interviews, I took each individual to the school library and asked him to bring his writing notebook where he kept all his writings,
drafts, notes and class handouts from writing class. The interviews were taped and lasted about 5 minutes each. The following questions were asked:

- Tell me about the best part of your writing class. Why is this?
- Are you a good writer? How did you get to be a good writer? (Or if not) What makes you think that? How do you think you could get better?
- Can you talk to me about your favorite piece of writing in your writer’s notebook?

From these initial interviews I chose four boys to for my study. Since interviews were a main part of data collection, I chose boys who were willing and able to verbalize their thoughts about themselves and their writing class. The second criterion was to employ “typical case sampling” (Patton, 2002) and have a general representation of boys choosing a heterogeneous mix of participants focusing on boys in general and not a subset of boys isolated by race or class (Patton, 2002). The participants varied in race and academic ability but all fell within the mean of the class academically with no extreme differences such as giftedness or learning disabilities. As with most qualitative research, sampling was purposeful rather than random in order to obtain information-rich cases. The participants and schools were assigned pseudonyms and data were collected for a five month period beginning January 2008 and ending May 2008 with one follow up interview held in August of 2008. An overview and description of the participants is provided below.

**Samson**

Samson was a friendly, ten year old Black boy with big, dark eyes and chocolate colored skin. He was average height and weight for a fourth grader and wore his black hair in dread locks that framed his face and hung right below his shoulders. Samson lived with his mother, father, and 9-year old brother. His mother worked for a bank and his father worked in the concrete industry. Samson was born in Florida and lived in Brownsville his entire life. He
attended a different elementary school for kindergarten and first grade and has attended Central Elementary in 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades.

Samson was crazy about football; he and his brother played on the city league. He wrote and talked about football a lot and claimed relation to a currently popular professional football player. He seemed well-adjusted in class and with his peers. Samson interacted with the other boys and girls in the class; he asked questions and offered feedback to the teachers and peers during whole group and small group instruction.

Miguel

Miguel was an outgoing, Hispanic 10-year old boy. He was of average height and build for his age, had olive skin, short silky dark hair and bright brown eyes. His gregarious nature and quick smile made him popular with friends and teachers alike. While he was respectful, he was also very social and liked to talk to the others at his table and around the room.

Miguel lived with his mother, father, and a 17-year old brother. His mother was born and raised in Puerto Rico and his father was born and raised in Ecuador, South America. They met in New Jersey after they came to America and then moved to Florida. Miguel was born in Florida and has lived in Brownsville since birth. His mother owned a Dollar Store, and Miguel and his brother helped her there in the afternoons and weekends. His father worked for a trucking company. Miguel also had two grown half sisters who were 25 and 27 years old and lived out of state.

Miguel was bilingual and had a slight accent when he spoke in his very expressive way. He said his father only spoke Spanish and knew “about 20 English words” (M1:14). When his father was not there, Miguel said the family spoke English because his mother “enjoys speaking English” (M1:28). Miguel repeated first grade while attending a different elementary school and
had attended Central Elementary for the past two years in 3rd and 4th grades. Outside of school he liked to ride his bike and play soccer.

**Junior**

Junior was a 9 year old white boy and one of the younger 4th graders in his class. He had a smaller build and wavy blond hair that he wore a bit messed and hanging slightly over his ears and blue eyes. He was the quietest of the boys but would raise his hand in class, peer-conference with others, and talk with me one-on-one. Junior also received tutoring once a week with the school’s writing coach, Mrs. L, even though he was not in any remedial classes. This tutoring took place after school in her classroom, and she helped him on any subject with which he needed assistance, including writing.

Junior lived with both parents. His mom worked in a pharmacy and his dad worked in the maintenance department for the school board. Junior had a twin sister and also lived with a 14 year old brother and an 18 year old sister. He had one half-sister who was 21 and did not live with his family but with her own mother out of town. Junior was born and raised in Brownsville and had attended Central Elementary since kindergarten. Outside of school, Junior enjoyed playing soccer and running track on a city track team.

**Gabe**

Gabe was a white, 11 year old boy with short, sandy brown hair and blue eyes. He stood taller and stockier than most of his classmates. Gabe was alert and active in the classroom and liked to read and share his writings with the class. He was confident and talkative with his peers and teachers.

Gabe lived with his mother, who worked in the construction industry, and her boyfriend. There were three younger sisters living in the home; a 10-year old sister and a 4-year old and a 2-year old half sister. He saw his birth father on the weekends and also spent time with his
grandmother. Gabe was born in Florida and had attended several elementary schools but had been in Brownsville at Central Elementary for 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 3\textsuperscript{rd}, and 4\textsuperscript{th} grades. Gabe said outside of school he took care of his sisters and enjoyed storytelling and doing home projects with his grandmother. Table 3-2 provides relevant information about the participants’ home and school lives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Live With</th>
<th>Home Language</th>
<th>Years at Central Elementary</th>
<th>Free/Reduced Lunch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Mom, Boyfriend, Sister (10) Half-Sister (4) Half Sister (2) Mom Dad</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Twin Sister (9) Brother (14) Sister (18) Mom Dad</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Dad, Brother (17) Mom</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samson</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Dad, Brother (9)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Subjectivity**

In qualitative research, subjectivity is recognized and defined in an effort to produce more trustworthy research. One way of exploring subjectivities is to look at the way the research intersects with my life and why it is of interest to me. Glesne (1999) says that subjectivity can be a “strength on which you build. It makes you who you are as a person and a researcher…something to capitalize on rather than to exorcise” (p.109).

I was drawn to the subject of boys and literacy when I began my doctoral work at the University of Florida. From a professional standpoint, I had eleven years of teaching experience in multiple grades in the public school classroom and four years teaching college level education courses as an adjunct at different institutions. I connected with the research I was reading as a
teacher who recognized differences in the learning styles of boys and girls. Much of Newkirk’s (2002) research validated what I had already noticed about the boy writers in my classes, and I believed research in this area had great potential for improving teacher effectiveness in reaching boy writers. As a career educator, helping each child to reach his or her potential is always the goal in my classroom. As a college professor of pre-service teachers, I believe research in this area will have an impact on preparing new teachers with the knowledge and strategies they need to meet the needs of their future students.

The research also intersects with my life on a personal level. I am a mother and have four children of my own, three of which are boys and are currently in school. My own children’s achievement is of utmost importance and interest to me, so I was interested in studying boys and literacy on a personal level as well. I believe these subjectivities will help me to maintain a high level of interest in a research topic that I care deeply about on both a professional and personal level.

On the other hand, I realize that my extensive background experience as an educator will need to be bracketed while I am doing participant observations and interviews. Because I am comfortable in the classroom and school setting, I wanted to make sure that I did not overlook important processes and interactions that might seem mundane or even be invisible to me because of my background in education. In addition, I realized I had strong views on the essential components of effective writing instruction and did not want a disconnect between my epistemology and that of the selected classroom teacher or school institution. I attempted to select a classroom that aligned with my constructionist beliefs on teaching and learning so I could study students in a classroom context based on research based beliefs and best practices. I
believe with an awareness and close monitoring of my subjectivities in these areas, I will approach the observations and interviews with an open and alert mind.

My role in the classroom is another area of subjectivity I monitored. Mrs. Green and I formed a partnership in this research effort—something I believed had to happen for her to feel comfortable with me in the classroom three days a week for five months. In the beginning of the research, she asked me many questions about her writing lessons, the students, and some of the literature she was reading about the teaching of writing. I tried to be encouraging and informative, reassuring her I was not there to judge her teaching practices or her students.

After I had been sitting in on the writing class for about three weeks, Mrs. Green asked if I would teach a mini-lesson to the class. I agreed and taught a mini-lesson on the revision technique of cutting and pasting when adding information to a draft. For the lesson, I showed the students a first draft of a story I had written about my cat, and then we proceeded to cut and paste the revisions as I added detail where the class thought the story was thin. After the lesson, I encouraged them to do the same on their drafts. During workshop, several students employed this technique for revision. Mrs. Green and I both felt it was a success, and the budding writers in the class were very interested in seeing another adult who was willing to write along with them. At the end of the class, the students shared revisions in the author’s chair.

As a qualitative researcher, I knew this experience was an important step in building a good relationship with Mrs. Green and the students. Since I was willing to teach in front of her, she became more comfortable teaching in front of me, and the students and I began to establish a trusting relationship. To the students, I wasn’t the mysterious stranger sitting in the back typing on a laptop or writing in a notebook but another adult who was becoming part of the classroom.
community and wanted to help them become better writers. This is the type of interaction I felt was necessary for a successful qualitative study.

I have to admit that my presence in the class has had an impact on the classroom, the students and the writing instruction, but hopefully a positive one. Children are very curious and they always acknowledged my presence, talked to me, asked questions, and wanted to show me their writing. Mrs. Green encouraged them to interact with me so I followed her lead and have, at other times, participated in writing circles and share times with groups of both boys and girls. These types of interactions happened sporadically and for the most part, I sat to one side when the students entered the class and I observed them quietly as they progressed through the writing time.

I was quickly accepted by the other adults that walked in and out of the room such as the teacher’s aides, parent volunteers, university intern, and the writing coach. At the beginning of the year, I was questioned and had to show my identification badge but later, after checking in with the front office, I either received a quick greeting or was ignored.

Researchers are split in their opinions of whether being a different gender than the research participant has a positive or negative impact. Some argue that women are more open and sensitive as ethnographers and have an easier time gaining access to the male world than males have gaining access to a female world (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002). Other feminist and ethnic researchers argue that accurate portrayal of the voice of the participant can only be achieved by researchers who are similar to the participants in race, gender and class (hooks, 1989). I feel my gender was both a positive and negative subjectivity in this study of boy writers. First, being a woman in the classroom was very natural to the boys as most of their teachers have been women. I believed as a woman, I had a better rapport with the classroom
teacher who was also a woman and therefore created a more accurate and natural setting for my research.

On the other hand, I may lack past gendered experiences in school that might have connected me with the young boys in their feelings, brain processes, and social-cultural influences of masculinity and literacy. The positive aspect of the gender difference was that I may have noticed details that may have been invisible to a male researcher.

The Collection of Data

The primary sources of data were formal and informal interviews with the four 4th grade boys in the writing class. I used naturalistic methods of data collection by interviewing the boys in the classroom setting or in the library and also by frequent visits over an extended period of time. I received IRB approval from the University of Florida in mid-September and was able to submit a proposal to the Marion County School District (MCSD) Research office. The research was approved by the MCSB in late September. In early October, principal and teacher approval forms were obtained and parental consent forms were given to all children in the class to explain my presence in the classroom and the research project. By mid-October, I received parental consent forms from each parent.

Table 3-2 Summary Chart of Time Spent with Participants and Teacher Interviews and Classroom Observations from January 2008 to May 2008.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Logged Interview Time</th>
<th># of Informal Interviews</th>
<th># of Formal Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>2 hours 32 minutes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>2 hours 18 minutes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>2 hours 33 minutes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samson</td>
<td>2 hours 25 minutes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Green</td>
<td>3 hours 10 minutes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. B</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. L</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation Hours</td>
<td>155 hours 23 minutes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Time:</td>
<td>168h. 51 min</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During October and November, I visited the classroom regularly to establish a relationship with the teacher and students and become familiar with the students and school. Data were collected for five months during the school year from January 2008 to May 2008. I used formal and informal interviews with the boy participants as the primary data in analysis. I also incorporated participant observation in the writing classroom, and archival materials such as writing samples and other assessment data as secondary data. Table 3-2 provides summary of the time spent in classroom observations and in interviews with each participant.

Interviews

The interview, both formal and informal, was the primary data collection for this research. Interviews were used to understand participants’ lives and “learn about what you cannot see and to explore alternative explanations of what you do see” (Glesne, 1999, p.69). The interviews were semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions based on both participant observations and the research focus. This meant I began with a series of questions and probes with the understanding that additional questions or probes would be asked during the interview as needed. The questions were created to answer the research question and be in alignment with the epistemology, theoretical perspective, and methodology of the researcher.

The interview was seen as a negotiated accomplishment since it was produced in interactions between interviewer and interviewee (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). The interview in recent times, is viewed as a “meaning-making conversation- a site and occasion for making meaning. It is more like a two-way informational street than a one-way data pipeline” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004, p.143). In my interview experiences, I utilized a multiple, sequential interview format which created a strong base and context for understanding complex social issues over a period of time (Seidman, 1991).
Informal Interviews

During the school year, the four boys were interviewed informally for 5-10 minutes on a regular basis. Since the overarching question of the research was, “How do 4th grade boys experience writing instruction?” I asked them on a weekly basis about their writing by speaking to them at their desks during the writing class or right before lunch time. These interviews took place during the flow of the class primarily during the workshop time when students were working individually and in groups on their writing. I began with questions such as, “Tell me what is happening in your writing?” and “How is it going?” or “What are you doing that is helping you become a better writer?” and “What are you doing that isn’t helping you become a better writer?” These interviews allowed an ongoing conversation about the boys’ engagement with the writing instruction, writing curriculum, and their personal experiences in the writing class.

Formal Interviews

In addition to the informal interviews, I formally interviewed each boy five times in a semi-structured interview format approximately once a month. These interviews were conducted one-on-one in a setting outside the writing classroom and were longer and more in-depth. These five interviews had a general focus. A complete list of interview questions for each interview is included in Appendix A.

• First Interview Focus: Explanation of the Writing Class Experience.
  Sample Questions: Can you tell me the important parts of instruction that go on during your writing class? What is helping you become a better writer? Are there some things that don’t help you so much?

• Second Interview Focus: Process Writing and Test Writing Influences
  Sample Questions: How do you feel about the writing test you took? Do you think the test is a good way to test writers? Why or why not? How would you like to be tested?
• **Third Interview Focus: Motivations to Engage in Writing Class**
  Sample Questions: What is the best thing that happened in writing class lately? What makes you want to write in class? What makes you not want to write? How would you motivate a younger student who is reluctant to write?

• **Fourth Interview Focus: Reflections on Becoming Writers**
  Sample Questions: How would you rate yourself as a writer at the beginning of fourth grade? How about now? Why? How did you become a better writer this year? Why should anyone care about becoming a writer?

• **Fifth Interview Focus: Reflections on Florida Writes Experience**
  Sample Questions: After rereading your test paper from the Florida Writes test, what do you think of the piece? Do you think this piece represents what you can do as a writer? Why? As you think back on 4th grade, what were the best things about writing class? Why?

Since these interviews took place in the library on an individual basis, boys were asked to bring their writer’s notebook to the formal interviews as an aid for talking about their writing experiences. Both the informal and formal interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure participants’ words were represented verbatim in grounded theory analysis.

**Participant Observations**

From the months of January to May of 2008, I had 62 classroom visits. In addition, I had 22 previous classroom visits during the fall term while I was establishing the research setting and forming a good relationship with the teacher and students. These classroom observations were imperative to this qualitative research because they allowed me to situate the boys’ words in the classroom context, gain an intimate understanding of the participants and their world, and observe how the boy writers engaged with the writing curriculum and with the others in the classroom. Participant observation means “establishing a place in some natural setting on a relatively long-term basis in order to investigate, experience and represent the social life and social processes that occur in that setting” (Emerson et. al., 2001, p.352).
Classroom observations took place during the daily writing class from 10:00 to 10:45 a.m. and again after lunch from 11:25 - 11:45 a.m. Field notes were taken during the observations using a laptop computer and long hand.

Participant observers can have different degrees of involvement with participants (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). In my case, I believe I had a moderately high degree of involvement in the classroom as described in the Subjectivity section. These observations were used as secondary data and helped to accurately describe the classroom context in Chapter 4, establish a relationship with the participants and teacher, and foster a deeper understanding of the boys’ experiences as they described them in the interviews and lived them each day in writing class.

Archival Materials

Archival materials aided in the understanding of participants and their worlds, and gave social and historical context to the setting and participants. Initially, I collected archival materials about the city, school history, and demographics to better understand the social and historical context of the research site. Other archival materials included writing samples, curriculum materials, and photographs of the classroom, the school, and the participants.

Documents and artifacts provided a contextual dimension to observations and interviews. The artifacts were a part of the participant’s lives and enriched what I saw and heard by, “supporting, expanding, and challenging portrayals and perceptions of the phenomenon” (Glesne, 1999, p.59). For this reason, during the months of January through May, I collected copies of all the writing pieces in the boys’ writing notebooks. Since the notebooks and their contents were a constant factor in both our informal and formal interviews, the artifacts served as a valuable point of reference by providing insight into the experiences of the boys during writing class.
Data Analysis

For my analysis, I chose to employ grounded theory, one of the first and most widely accepted forms of qualitative analysis. Crotty (2004) explains, “Grounded theory can be viewed as a specific form of ethnographic inquiry that, through a series of carefully planned steps, develops theoretical ideas” (p. 78). Glaser and Straus introduced grounded theory methods in 1967 in an attempt to transform public opinion that believed qualitative research was mainly descriptive and was not valid or systematic. Grounded theory transported qualitative studies into the “realm of explanatory theoretical frameworks, thereby providing abstract, conceptual understanding of the studied phenomena” (Charmaz, 2006, p.6).

A potential problem with qualitative studies is an overwhelming amount of data that can remain ambiguous and “undigested” leading researchers towards shallow analysis. Grounded theory requires the researcher to compare and contrast data as it is collected from the beginning of the project, to compare new data with emerging categories, and demonstrate relationships between categories and concepts. This recursive process of constant comparison (Glaser, 1978) aids the researcher in overcoming several ethnographic problems such as: “1) accusations of uncritically adopting research participants’ views, 2) lengthy, unfocused forays into the field setting, 3) superficial, random data collection, and 4) reliance on stock disciplinary categories” (Charmaz, p.23).

While I incorporated the basics of grounded theory from Glaser and Straus (1967) and Straus and Corbin (1998), I leaned heavily on Charmaz’s interpretation of Glaser and Straus’s grounded theory in her book, Constructing Grounded Theory (2006). With Straus as her dissertation chair and as a graduate student of Glaser, Charmaz builds on an intimate knowledge of both their theories and methods but also creates a fresh, less positivist model of grounded
Figure 3-1  The Grounded Theory Process Conceptual Diagram  Adapted from Charmaz (2006)
theory that is especially appealing to the constructivist and one that is more flexible in a variety of disciplines. Grounded theorists let the data be their guides (Charmaz, 2006, p.2).

**Grounded Theory Analysis**

In this section of the chapter, I first outline the grounded theory process of analysis using a graphic organizer (Figure 3-1). Next, I give specific examples of the analysis process through examples of initial coding, focused coding and theoretical coding. The section ends with a visual organizer of the grounded theory findings specific to this research.

Since this was a Constructivist study, the boys’ interviews were coded and the field observations and archival materials served as supportive contextual data. Both formal and informal interviews were coded in a line by line coding process which led to 18 initial working codes. As data was collected, the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) outlined in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* was employed. This method of analysis generates successively more abstract concepts through the inductive process of comparing data with data, data with category, category with category, and category with concept (Charmaz,
2006). Through the process of coding and constant comparison, the initial categories were formed and then slowly merged and re-formed into fewer, more focused codes. As additional interviews were transcribed and coded using the focused codes, conceptual categories emerged from the data. Through constant comparison between data and categories, and category to category, tentative concepts began to form and the focused codes were raised into conceptual categories (Figure 3-3). During later interviews, I used theoretical sampling to develop and further define the tentative categories.

**Tentative Conceptual Categories Raised from Focused Coding:**
- Relevancy
  - Emerging Identity
  - Relationships
  - Test Writing
- Complexity of Boys’ Writing Process
  - Language Processing
  - Time and Fluency
  - Biological and Social Influences

Figure 3-3 Theoretical Conceptual Coding

The conceptual codes were “grounded” in the raw data since the boys’ words had to progress through each step of coding, from initial coding to focused coding to conceptual coding and theory conception to support the final categories and theory development. As interviews progressed, some codes lessened and some codes grew into more meaningful concepts supported by a multiple data.

Another important part of the grounded theory analysis is the writing of memos to help the researcher remain open to fresh and insightful analysis of the data. Memo writing, an important part of grounded theory analysis, took place throughout the analysis process and was a “pivotal intermediate step between data collection and draft writing” (Charmaz, 2006, p.188). Memos were a way to keep alert and involved with the data and help to increase the level of
abstraction of ideas (Charmaz, 2006). I found that memo writing during all stages of data collection and analysis was of great benefit for the crystallization and creation of theory. I use examples of memos throughout the study to show the evolution of the findings and theory. The Grounded Theory analysis helped me to utilize an interactive, recursive process of analysis of this qualitative data to produce theoretical concepts.

**Constructing Theory**

The early categories were suggestive but not definitive. As data collection progressed, theoretical sampling of the categories, coding, and analysis, and the tentative categories were refined and evolved into the final grounded theory findings. In the interpretive qualitative theory model of Charmaz, which this study is based on, the theory aims to conceptualize the studied phenomenon to understand it in abstract terms with ample evidence of scope, depth, and relevance of theoretical claims. It does not aim to create a positivist theory seeking cause or deterministic explanations. Constructivist theory emphasizes understanding rather than explanation and this research presents new arguments about boy writers that lend new insight into the phenomenon of their writing experiences. The content of this theorizing attempts to cut to the core of the studied life and pose new questions about it.

A visual representation of the grounded theory maps out the major findings of the study and outlines the information in the following chapters. The experiences of the four fourth-grade participants during writing class were rich, multi-layered, and complex. These experiences are framed under the conceptual categories of Relevancy and the Complexity of the Writing Process. Chapters 5 will flesh out the impact of relevancy on the writing experiences by exploring the boys’ relationships, emerging identities, and test-taking experiences. In Chapter 6, the complexity of the writing process is explored through a close look at boys’ experiences with time and fluency in the classroom writing experiences and the social and biological influences on their
writing experiences. The findings of the study inform Chapter 7 with conclusions and implications for the field. Figure 3-5 is a visual organizational diagram of the grounded theory findings in this study of fourth grade boy writers and their writing experiences.

Figure 3-5 Visual Representation and Advanced Organizer of Grounded Theory

Boys’ success in the writing classroom orbited around many facets of relevancy. The relevancy of the writing experience was multi-layered and multi-dimensional going far beyond choosing a topic that was appealing. In this study, the relevancy of the writing experiences encompassed a variety of powerful relationships where the boys played different roles as teacher, learner and peer. The boys created identities as boy writers and these emerging identities had to mesh with their existing identities of male, son, student, and friend created by their individual and communal cultures. In addition, standardized test writing, an important part of the fourth grade experience, demonstrated the boys’ resistance and their reactions to a very irrelevant situation.
Even when relevancy was high and the engagement and motivation for boy writers was present, the complexity of the writing process manifested itself in differences between boy and girl writers’ use of time and gender differences in fluency levels. Because the social filters of gender that seemingly constrained the boys’ freedom in writing and because of the biological differences in language processing, boys utilized their time during writing workshop in different ways than girl writers. The theory of think-time explains the external and internal differences demonstrated by boy writers during the first 10 minutes of writing time and the impact these differences have in the writing production in class and on the standardized writing test.

Validity and Trustworthiness of Study

Validity and trustworthiness have been proposed as criteria to judge qualitative research within constructivist inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Guba and Lincoln (1994) relate trustworthiness to a systematic research process, which addresses issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Following the suggestions of Lincoln and Guba, (1985) and my doctoral committee, I utilized prolonged engagement, source triangulation, rich thick description, and the processes of grounded theory analysis to enhance the trustworthiness and validity of this study. The prolonged and regular interaction with the participants increased the validity of the study.

The reliability of the study was increased by a careful documentation of the methodological choices including how interviews were conducted and how observations were made and under what conditions. Clearly articulating the research lens and theoretical orientation, and giving a detailed account of the methodology for data collection and analysis allow interested readers and researchers to assess the validity and also attempt to reproduce the results (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002, p.94).
Rich, thick description is a necessity for good qualitative research. With great detail and description of the learning environment, classroom culture, participants and their experiences, including the use of participant voice through the use of quotations, readers will be able to determine if the research results can be applied to other settings. Patton (2002) defined thick descriptions as “using rich, detailed, and concrete descriptions of people and places…in such way that we can understand the phenomenon studied and draw our own interpretations about meaning and significance” (p. 438). I achieved this type of description through the verbatim transcripts of the participants and detailed field notes during participant observations at Central Elementary.

Triangulation of data added depth and validity to the theory that was generated by comparing interviews, archival materials, and participant observations. Triangulation happens when the researcher compares different types of data with each other to gain deeper insight into the continuity of responses, categories, and theories. Patton (2002) states, “Different kinds of data can be brought together in a case study to illuminate various aspects of a phenomenon” (p.59). For example, participant observations provided an important check on responses given in interviews to questions about behavior (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002)

Peer debriefing is another method for developing trustworthiness. It is a common technique used by qualitative researchers and provides another check against researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I conversed and debriefed weekly in a writing group with another doctoral candidate who was also collecting and analyzing dissertation data and using grounded theory methods for analysis. I also harvested regular feedback from my dissertation chair and several committee members. These discussions were invaluable for entertaining different
interpretations of data and finding new insights in analysis. Participant confidentiality was observed at all times through the use of pseudonyms of participants, school, and town names.

**Limitations of Study**

One limitation of the study is the small number participants. I researched just one class of 4th grade boys in a specific classroom during writing instruction under the umbrella of specific state, county, and school site guidelines. However, qualitative researchers believe that by looking at a group of participants in a deep and meaningful way, results can and will have implications in a broader context. The qualitative researcher embraces the multiplicity of forces, both internal and external, that affect boy writers. From these boys, we will hopefully be able to look outward and inductively and tentatively develop a theory for testing and future application.

Another limitation is the absence of formal member checking with the participants. Although the interviews were recursive in nature and I did use reflective listening and clarification techniques, the boy writers did not read any parts of the dissertation or give me specific feedback on the theoretical findings of the study.
CHAPTER 4
THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: A MULTIPLICITY OF FORCES

No student is just a boy or just a writer but rather has a multiplicity of forces and interactions that shape his learning and growth in the area of writing. This chapter paints a picture of the city, school and classroom culture that enveloped these boy writers during writing class. It describes the setting and context of the study, the workings and daily schedules of the writing classroom, and the influential adults who interacted with the boys during the daily writing class.

The School:

Central Elementary is a smaller school with 355 students situated within a large school district of 42,623 students in K5 through 12th grades. It is one of thirty elementary schools in the school district and is located in the downtown, historic district of Brownsville. Because of the established development around the school, the original size of the student population has been maintained over the years.

The Florida city of Brownsville was established in 1854 as a military outpost during the Seminole Indian wars, and in 1881 the railroad was brought in and the area began to grow. In the mid 1900s, the city was a center for tourism with natural springs, national forests, and other attractions which are still in existence today but have been minimized by an abundance of giant theme parks nearby. In the late 1900s, the area supported one of the largest thoroughbred horse industries in the world and still has over 1,200 horse farms. Currently, the city has a population of approximately 53,000 residents. From 1980 to 2000, the county experienced one of the highest growth rates in the entire United States and the county population more than doubled to a population of over 300,000 residents. This growth is attributed to a huge influx of retirees, a boom in the construction and development industry, and a cheaper cost of living than other
places in the country. The most recent census of 2000 showed the median income of a family in
the city at $38,190 with 18 percent of families in the city living under the poverty line. The
largest employer in the county is the public school system with over 6,000 employees.

During my first visit to Central Elementary, it was easy to imagine the school as it was in
1914 when it was first built as the town’s only high school. The grey Spanish moss hung
gracefully off the live oaks and sweet gum trees shading the tall, three-story historic brick
school. I walked by the flag pole surrounded by brick pavers and paused to read the engraved
names of former and current students, community members, and businesses who had invested in
the school’s restoration efforts. Over to one side, the children ran around a small track and
swung on the mulch lined playground. Neatly manicured beds of azaleas squatted by the front
steps which led to the red front door of the school.

Since its inception in 1914, the school served as the town’s high school, junior high
school, a primary school, and then an elementary school since 1952. In fact, Central Elementary
is the oldest public school in continuous use in the entire state of Florida and is listed on the

The school library held a collection of scrapbooks and PTA (Parent/Teacher Association)
minutes dating back to 1919. Interestingly, the 1932 minutes record the school population at 300
students in K5, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades during the years it was a primary school—just 55 student
less than attend currently. In the same year, the PTA funded the installation of electric lights and
playground equipment. They also recorded funding free lunches, tonsillectomies, and eye
glasses for underprivileged children. A decade later in the 1940’s during and after World War II,
the minutes record the lunchroom being managed by the Federal Government’s WPA (Works
Project Administration) and report a grave shortage of teachers. In the 1970s, the county
administrators talked about tearing the school down and building a modern facility. The community responded and made it clear they didn’t want a new school and rallied to save the original one.

In 1998, the school began a 2.6 million dollar renovation effort supported by the state of Florida and the school district. Former alumni and other community members also donated funds to complete the project. The head of the renovation effort was a beloved principal of 20 years and the city named the street that runs beside the school in honor of her after the renovations were completed. Sadly, she died unexpectedly shortly after the completion of the project in 2002.

At the November 2001 ceremony and dedication of the newly renovated school, there were alumni present from each decade, including the oldest surviving student who was 103 years old and whose great, great grandchildren were currently attending the school. Central Elementary has had over 34,000 students pass through its doors, including two former Florida governors. There was a wonderful feeling in the school of community, of history, and pride in the staff and students. Over the years it has been equipped to meet modern standards with computers, Elmo projectors, an elevator, and Internet access, but it still felt like a step back in time with its polished maplewood floors, huge windows and 18 foot ceilings.

The small front office was decorated with the red, white, and blue school colors and boasted several pictures and statues of the bald eagle mascot with the motto, “We soar above all others.” It held the four members of the secretarial staff, the principal and assistant principal’s offices, and the teacher mailboxes. The school receptionist, who also acted as the school nurse, warmly greeted visitors to sign in with their driver’s license. Recently passed laws in Florida required identification to be scanned through a machine that could immediately identify anyone
with a criminal record. Notices for parents and student work were displayed in the office along with the school character pledge that was recited each morning after the pledge of allegiance:

“Respect, responsibility and citizenship too,
They bring out the best in me and you,
Trustworthiness and being fair,
Helps show others that we really care.
We all know what’s right, we all know what’s good,
We will all do the things we know we should.”

There were three classes per grade level and students began their academic career in Kindergarten on the first floor referred to as “the basement” and through the years “move up” both academically and literally to the second floor and then third floor.

The first day of my data collection, my feet found grooves worn in each wooden step made by countless feet ascending and descending each school day over the past 94 years and I wondered how many of those feet found success within these walls and how many found failure. I thought of my boy writers who were coming back from their PE class climbing the steps beside me and realized they were not concerned with what happened in this school over the past 100 years. They were much more interested in what was going to happen in the next hour when they were back in class. I, too, was anxious to begin my research and wondered what was happening within these classroom walls that helped or hindered boys to become better writers.

**The Writing Classroom**

The first thing I noticed was a sense of calmness in the room and an absence of the frantic pace and fragmented time sequences I frequently experienced in other classroom observations. Routines and procedures were in place and space was carved out of the day for the writing class. Even though the curriculum was still fairly “cluttered” with required weekly testing, remediation, computer remediation and test preparation, Mrs. Green’s demeanor created a barrier between the frenetic pressures of the school institution and attempted to keep it from affecting the students in
a negative way. She said her philosophy was not to “teach to the test” and she took care not to
scare students or threaten them with the writing test.

The classroom was situated on the southwest corner of the third floor and the two outside
walls contained three eight foot windows each. The view through the windows was into the tree
tops and then over the playground and the front street. Being an older school, the classroom had
no closets or counter space but held one, small, built-in corner cabinet behind the teacher’s desk.

The physical lay out of the classroom is shown in Figure 1.

![Classroom Layout](image)

The ceilings of the classroom were 18 feet high and the walls were painted a light beige
color. Student work was displayed outside the classroom door in the hallway, on the walls on
the inside of the classroom, and also hung from the ceiling from string and clothespins. A television set was mounted on the wall in one corner of the room. The two back corners were used for sitting areas. The one on the left was used for carpet-time reading and mini-lessons. The back right corner was used as the classroom library where there were approximately 200 books housed in a standing carousel and colored plastic tubs.

Four student desks were pushed together to form tables. The brown desks had openings in them under the top part for student books and supplies. The students were assigned seats which changed each nine weeks or more frequently as determined by Mrs. Green. She said she tried to place student strategically so she could get their best performance in class. At the beginning of the year, the tables were segregated into boy tables and girl tables with most of the boys sitting in the back of the room. During the second and third quarters, the students were mixed at the tables by gender. Figure 4.1 shows the participants’ seats during the third quarter lasting 9 weeks in January through March.

**Adult Influences in the Classroom**

The four boy writers in the study were part of a writing classroom that had several significant adult influences. Studies show that the teacher is the greatest factor in determining a classroom culture (Wong & Wong, 2004). A close look at the teacher and her teaching styles and beliefs about the teaching of writing was necessary when studying students’ experiences within the classroom context. There were three adults in the role of teacher that had a significant impact on the experiences of the boy writers: the classroom teacher, the writing coach, and the university intern.

**The Classroom Teacher**

Mrs. Green was the primary teacher in the classroom and had the greatest impact on determining the classroom culture. She was 35 years old, born and raised in Florida, and went to
school locally to earn her Bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education. She taught for seven years in the public school system in the third and fourth grades. She had worked at Central Elementary for the past six years. Mrs. Green was married and had three children: a daughter in 10th grade, a son in 5th grade and a daughter in 1st grade. She was of average height, has dark, short hair, fair skin, and was very slim and stylish in her appearance.

Mrs. Green was a self-motivated teacher and worked at building community among students and a productive, calm classroom from the moment students arrive. From the very first day of school she, “tried to build bridges with parents and feels parent support is the most important factor in a child’s success.” She held a parent meeting one evening during the first month of school and explained her policies and procedures. She also had a working website which held weekly assignments and upcoming events for both student and parent use. She worked a lot with her students the first month on building community. One example of community building activities was a four-foot wooden cut out of a painted tree that stands by the door and featured a “Treemendous Student” of the week throughout the year. The students posted pictures of themselves, family, hobbies, awards or anything else they wanted to display during this week and they were the teacher’s helper and line leader.

Mrs. Green expected and required her students treat each other with respect and asked that they say, “Yes, Ma’am” and “No, Ma’am” when they spoke with her. She said she did not yell or shout but kept control by being organized and consistent and by giving lots of positive feedback to the students. A weekly folder was sent home with graded papers and other notices and was to be signed by a parent and returned each week.

Mrs. Green was the teacher, director, and decision-maker in the classroom. She determined the layout of the year, the month and the day’s curriculum based on the requirements
of the state, district, school, and her students. She also had the freedom and expertise to allow her teaching philosophy to drive the implementation of the curriculum in a way that she felt was beneficial to her students. She said she tried to stay, “up on the newest research” and incorporate this into her teaching. She utilized classical music throughout writing workshop times and set her classroom up in tables to facilitate as much cooperative learning as possible.

She also was a firm believer in “connections” both within the school and outside the school and partnered with a university class of Elementary Education majors as “writing buddies” for the year. Her students also partnered with a Kindergarten class in the school as “reading buddies” and visited the class each week serving as mentors for reading and writing.

Teaching Practices

Fourth grade in Florida is the year all students are tested in writing skills using the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test) writing test. The pencil and paper writing test was given throughout the state on a mandated day in February and consisted of a 45 minute timed writing. Students received a random prompt that may be narrative or expository and had the allotted time of 45 minutes to plan, write and revise their work. The test was scored independently by two different scorers who assigned a holistic number. Students must receive a 3.5 to pass the test.

Mrs. Green said she felt “tremendous pressure” for students to pass and said it was difficult to maintain a healthy balance in teaching for the test and teaching the way she felt, “was best for students in real life application.” The students who don’t pass are allowed to progress to 5th grade but will be placed in remediation. These scores also factor into the formula that determined the school’s “grade” which was given each year by the state. In 2006-2007 and 2007-2008, Central Elementary was an “A” school which meant the students showed significant
improvement in their standardized test scores. The school grade only factored in test scores from
the FCAT exams in math, reading, writing, and science.

Mrs. Green had reservations in teaching writing in fourth grade because of the writing
test and her lack of experience teaching the subject. Previously, the grade level was
departmentalized and she only taught math and science, the subjects she called her “true loves.”
Three years ago, the school changed its policy and she taught all subjects, including writing, to
her classes. At that point, she sought out better ways to teach writing through district workshops,
district in-services, and her own reading and research but said she still felt, “like I have a lot to
learn.”

Over the past three years, she began to form her own philosophy and beliefs about the
teaching of writing. The first year she taught writing, she just worried about test preparation and
said the year was, “monotonous for me and the students.” As her beliefs and knowledge about
teaching writing changed so did her teaching methods. The purpose for teaching writing grew
from just test preparation in expository and narrative prompt writing to the purpose of writing
instruction to include writing for a variety of purposes and audiences. She now believed that
writing workshop was the best method to reach those objectives. She said that teaching in a
writing workshop format caused a change in the students’ willingness to write and their ability to
write for more meaningful, purposeful reasons rather than to “just pass the test.”

Another change in her writing workshop students’ was their levels of self-efficacy. Mrs.
Green believed students were proud of their writing and considered themselves to be writers.
They used the vocabulary and lingo of a writer such as, “audience, conferencing, revision,
narrative, similes, metaphors, descriptive detail, and onomatopoeia” in their conversation with
her and their peers. Students believed they grew as writers since the beginning of the year, and because they wrote regularly, Mrs. Green felt writing became more natural and less intimidating.

This past year, Mrs. Green implemented a full writing workshop for the first time and modeled her class structure after Lucy Calkins (1998) and Donald Graves (1983). Once she read about this type of teaching, she said, “My feelings towards writing changed. I know I feel more confident about teaching writing and writing workshop allows students to write about what they’d like to write about instead of me giving them pieces to write about.” Last year, Mrs. Green said that she taught writing but it was more “hit and miss” and she was very disappointed when her students’ writing scores came back. She says “I had one 5 and no 6’s and felt it was a reflection of my teaching and took it really hard. I decided that was something I wanted to focus and work on.”

This year, Mrs. Green said she, “is really excited about teaching in a writing workshop method because my students are excited about writing. There is lots of energy in the class.” She felt writing workshop was more effective because it allowed her to individualize instruction and teach according to student need rather than a preset curriculum. She said last year, “It was stressful and it was like I had to do this and that and was always rushed. The students were always rushing and it’s just not like that this year. It has been calmer.” Newkirk called this “stripping away the curriculum clutter” to focus on teaching and learning and making learning as natural as possible.

**Challenges**

There were also challenges to the first year of writing workshop. Mrs. Green was the only teacher in her school teaching process writing in a workshop format and she felt it would have been nice to have someone to talk to, observe, or mentor her through the challenges of teaching workshop style. She felt pressure from other teachers and administration because she
knew they were all watching her and waiting to see if her FCAT writing scores reflected the change in teaching style in a positive or negative way. Mrs. Green said she really didn’t get much feedback from the administration about her teaching until the test scores came in each year. In previous years, she said the administration analyzed the scores and then went over them with her in an individual conference but never came in to the class and said, “Great job!” She said in past years she always felt like, “my best wasn’t good enough.”

Mrs. Green said her biggest challenge for the year was having the school writing coach, Mrs. London, come into the class two days a week to supplement her writing instruction. Mrs. London taught on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:00 to 10:30 a.m. for the entire year and went into all the third and fourth grade classrooms. Mrs. Green said that last year she loved Mrs. London coming into the class because it was a time that she could leave the classroom and just let Mrs. London teach writing. This past year was completely different for her because of her change in the way she taught writing and the necessity of having a continuity in her week for the children to complete their pieces and her to continue her teaching and conferencing. When Mrs. London came in this year, Mrs. Green felt it disrupted the flow of the writing workshop because Mrs. London had her own lessons and assignments. There was not a formal time to plan together so Mrs. London brought in her own novel to read to begin class and followed her own schedule for teaching writing skills to the children. Many weeks the students were listening to two different novels and working on two different writing pieces for two different teachers.

Mrs. Green felt obligated to continue the schedule as it was because the administration had set up Mrs. London’s position using Title 1 money and the schedule had been set the previous spring. Mrs. Green also worried about hurting Mrs. London’s feelings and also being viewed as not being a “team player” if she said she would rather her not come into her class.
However, she did think about trying to change the schedule for the following year and have Mrs. London visit her class less frequently so that she could have more continuity in her writing workshop.

Both Mrs. Green and Mrs. London expressed concern over the flip-flop of the structure. Even though Mrs. Green admires the passions and knowledge that Mrs. London has for teaching writing, she found it difficult to give up the class two days a week and maintain the momentum she desired. Mrs. Green said, “I really like the way it is going with the kids and to have someone else come in and shake it up a little bit two days- it kind of breaks up what I have going.” With similar feelings, Mrs. London wished she could have more continuity in the classes so she could see more results from her lessons and student writing. She said, “I am more of just support for the writing instruction because this job only allows me to go in twice a week. I would love to go in everyday and get to see the follow through from teaching.”

**Wednesdays**

On Wednesdays, Mrs. Green detoured from her usual writing workshop format and devoted writing class to prompt writing in preparation for the state writing test. This day students either learned specific strategies for test taking and test scoring, or they practiced writing a 45 minute timed writing in response to an expository or narrative prompt that Mrs. Green provided. She assessed all writing products, both from workshop and from prompt writing, using the state mandated, holistic writing rubric from 1 to 6 with 6 being the highest score.

Mrs. Green began the year focused on narrative prompts because she felt, “these are easier for students to write.” She then began to spend time on expository prompts because these were the weakest area in her test scores last year and she felt it was harder for the students to
write an expository piece, especially when it, “doesn’t connect to their schema” or their own life experiences.

**The Writing Coach**

Another adult of significant influence, previously mentioned in the writing classroom, was the school’s writing coach, Mrs. London. She described her role as, “supporting the writing teacher.” She visited different classes, modeled teaching strategies, and also taught lessons to the class. She devoted five hours a week to staff development and one hour a week to parent involvement. A school-wide program that Mrs. London implemented to get more parents involved in writing was called, “Eagle Authors” which recognized several students from each homeroom each month in a short ceremony held by the flagpole where students read their writing for their class and invited parents. Their pictures and names were then hung in the school hallway.

Mrs. London was a tall, slender lady with striking green eyes and auburn hair. She has been in education for many years and had a Bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education and a Master’s degree in Early Childhood. She said she had always loved teaching writing and implemented writing workshop in her own kindergarten classroom years ago.

Mrs. London was familiar with writing workshop and was supportive of Mrs. Green and her teaching strategies. She said that Mrs. Green told her what the class was working on and she tried to implement those into her lessons. She said, “With Mrs. Green’s class, they pull out their notebooks and can refer to them and they always have some writing to work with. In the other classes, they are always just beginning something.” Mrs. London hoped for her role in the classroom to be, “the topping on the ice cream” and add a little something extra to classroom instruction with a different voice and new ideas.
University Intern

The third significant adult in the writing classroom was a university intern. Mr. B began his senior sixteen week internship with the class on January 20 and ended on April 18th. He was a pre-service teacher who was engaging in his final internship before graduation with his Bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education in May. He was expected to work a teacher day and gradually take over the classroom responsibilities from Mrs. Green until he taught full time for at least six weeks. After this, he was to wean the class back to Mrs. Green. He was responsible for maintaining the classroom structure and curriculum set forth by Mrs. Green and continuing student progress in all subject areas.

Mr. B was a white male in his mid-twenties and wore his blond hair very short with a goatee. He was of average height with a slim build and also was an assistant coach to the junior varsity football team at the local high school. He had a quick smile and a laid back way with the class. While he didn’t raise his voice much, he was very aware of the students and was able to effectively manage the class.

The first few weeks, Mr. B mainly observed and got to know the children. He reached out to parents with a letter introducing himself and explaining his role in the classroom. He caused a lot of excitement at first and the boys were delighted to have a male figure in the class. Miguel said, “It is cool to have a man as our teacher. He is the only male teacher in the whole school!” This was true. At that time, the teaching staff and administration was made up entirely of females and the only other male figure at the school was the custodian.

Mr. B began teaching different subjects in February but was not responsible for writing class until after the state assessment at the end of February. During the first two months of the year, Mr. B supported Mrs. Green’s teaching by circulating among student and helping them on an individual basis when needed. Mr. B had also been trained in the teaching of process writing
through writing workshop and was comfortable assisting the students and supporting Mrs. Green in the writing class.

In March and April, Mr. B was in charge of the planning and teaching during writing class for six full weeks and started with a unit on poetry, something the students did not experience during the first part of the year. Mrs. Green supervised his planning and implementation of the lessons. He said he, “felt very comfortable teaching writing” and didn’t mind having me in the classroom collecting data for the study.

No matter what day of the week, the students enjoyed several adults in the classroom during writing class and rarely had to wait long if they raised their hands or needed help from an adult. While the students definitely gravitated toward Mrs. Green as the top authority figure in the classroom, by late February they gradually began to also want to talk to Mr. B as he gained their trust, confidence, and respect.

The following section moves to an overview of the writing class beginning with the curriculum for the year, then a weekly schedule and finally a sample of a typical day in the writing class taken from field notes.

**General Structure of Curriculum for Year 2007-2008:**

- **September:**
  - Literature: *Hiawassee Summer* by Melissa Forney
  - WW: Introduction to Writing Workshop and Finding a Topic
  - Prompt Writing: Introduction to Holistic Scoring and Narrative

- **October:**
  - Literature: *The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo
  - *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* by DiCamillo
  - WW: Beginnings, Adding detail, and Descriptive Writing
  - Prompt Writing: Narrative

- **November:**
  - Literature: *Rising Tiger* by Kate DiCamillo
  - WW: Story Focus, Parts of a Story, Word Choice
  - Prompt Writing: Expository and Melissa Forney assignments
December: Literature: *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Robinson
WW: Setting Writing Goals, Revision, Publishing
Prompt Writing: Expository and Narrative

January: Literature: *Wayside School is Falling Down* by Sachar
*Quake: Disaster in San Francisco* by Karwoski
WW: Quotations, Endings, Word Choice, Mechanics
Prompt Writing: Narrative and Expository

February: Literature: Poetry of Prelutsky, Silverstein and others
WW: Poetry: Techniques and Forms
Prompt Writing: Narrative and Expository
Florida Writes Exam

March: Literature: Poetry Continued
WW: Poetry Unit: Techniques and Forms, Poetry Books
Prompt Writing: Review for FCAT/ Take FCAT test

April: Literature: *Old Yeller* by Fred Gipson and Steven Polson
WW: Dialogue, Genre Exploration, Writer’s Celebration
Prompt Writing: None

May: Literature: *A Land Remembered* by Patrick Smith
WW: Genre Exploration, Writer’s Celebration
Prompt Writing: None

**Weekly Schedule**

Because there was both a classroom teacher, Mrs. Green, and a school writing coach, Mrs. London, the student weekly schedule varied from day to day. An outline of the students’ typical weekly schedule for writing class was as follows:

- **Typical Monday and Friday with Mrs. Green:**
  - 10:00-10:10 Reading Literature on Carpet
  - 10:10-10:20 Mini-Lesson
  - 10:20-10:45 Writing Workshop
  - 10:45-11:15 Lunch
  - 11:15-11:25 Writing Workshop
  - 11:25-11:30 Author’s Chair/Sharing

- **Typical Tuesday and Thursday with Mrs. London and Mrs. Green:**
  - 10:00-10:10 Reading Literature on Carpet with Mrs. London
  - 10:10-10:30 Writing Lesson with Mrs. London
  - 10:30-10:45 Writing Workshop with Mrs. Green
A Day in Writing Class

The following description of a typical day in the writing class was taken from my field notes on January 22, 2008.

10:00-10:10: The writing class time formally began with “carpet time” when reading and writing connection were made during the oral reading of an ongoing novel. The red-faced and sweaty students made their way into the classroom after P.E. They were allowed a quick drink in the hallway and then jockeyed for position on the reading carpet. Samson was the last one in the room and quietly shut the door before sitting down at the back of the group. Mrs. Green was seated in a rocking chair in the back corner of the room waiting for the students and began to read at 10:02 a.m. After a descriptive passage from Quake: Disaster in San Francisco by Gail Larwoski, Mrs. Green stopped to ask, “How did the author create the mental image of this scene by using sensory words?” She chose three students to relay words and phrases they remembered from the passage and the class determined what senses the passages were referencing. Mrs. Green then tried to make a reading-writing connection when she said, “This is the type of sensory language that can create mental images for readers. It is what you want to try and do when you are writing your stories.” She continued to read the story and then stopped for the day at 10:10 causing a chorus of complaints from students who wanted her to continue. Gabe blurted out, “They always do that on the TV too. Like if someone is going to die, they always go to a commercial so you don’t want to leave or miss it. Like in books, they always
leave you hanging so you want to keep reading.” Several students agreed and then Mrs. Green directed their attention to her mini-lesson for the day.

10:10-10:20: The students remained on the carpet for the mini-lesson. Mrs. Brown began, “I was looking at your essays from yesterday and noticed some of you are still telling what is happening rather than showing the reader what is happening by describing with super sensory words.” The class identified the five senses and noted most writers mainly use sight and hearing. Mrs. Green continued, “If I told you that you were in the middle of a swamp and you described it, what would you smell, touch or taste?”

Many of the students raised their hands to share and most of the students were allowed to share a phrase with their classmates. Gabe said, “The buzzing of mosquitoes and the smell of dead cypress trees.” Miguel said, “A freakishly nasty smell and the slippery, slimy ground.”

Mrs. Green then read the last lines from three trade books: Strega Nona by Tomie dePaola, Robin Hood by Roger Lancelyn Green, and The Little Red Hen illustrated by Jerry Pinkney and the students discussed how the stories end. The students transitioned back to their desks and Mrs. Green put a sheet of ending lines onto the Elmo projector. The image was projected to the front of the classroom on the wall above the whiteboard. She called on students who raised their hands to read an ending and then evaluate whether it is good or not. None of the boy participants raised their hands for this exercise.

The students kept a “writing notebook” which was a 1” 3-ring binder and used this as a place for everything that was accomplished in writing class throughout the year. Students had their writing drafts and revisions, final drafts, notes from class, handouts, and prompt writings in the notebooks. Unlike some definitions of the “writer’s notebook” as a place to journal or free write, these students used the term “writing notebook” as the place to store all writing products.
They did not engage in free-writes or journal writes in the writing class. They put the handout about story endings into their writer’s notebook and then took out their individual writing pieces for workshop time.

**10:20-10:45:** Writing workshop time was spent allowing students to write. The first 10 minutes was uninterrupted and silent so the students could reread their pieces and become engaged in their own writing pieces for the day. During this time, Mrs. Green wrote with the students and also played classical music softly because she believed the music helped to “calm and focus the students.” After a silent 10 minutes, the students knew began to talk quietly for peer conferencing and Mrs. Green circulated to desks or called students to the carpet for individual conferencing. The class wrote quietly and then began to confer with each other. Many students continued to write by themselves.

**10:45-11:15:** Lunch in the cafeteria. Students left all materials on their desks and lined up for lunch.

**11:15-11:30:** After lunch, the student entered the room, sat down at their desks and began reading their writing papers. Engaging in writing workshop was more difficult for some than others and it took the class five minutes of settling and lots of motion before everyone had reengaged with their writing. During the last five minutes of class, Mrs. Green asked for three students to share their writing and allowed two to three students to give them feedback. She was explicit in her directions about giving constructive feedback to the writers so that the students felt safe sharing in front of their peers. During this time she gave out stickers for outstanding writing that she called “jewels.” The three sharers put these jewels on a bulletin board that had their names on cut-out crowns. Mrs. Green said, “This helped to motivate students who might be
reluctant to share in front of others.” Students put away their writer’s notebook until the next day.

**Curriculum Standards**

Mrs. Green used the Sunshine State Standards for 4th grade Writing and Language Arts as a plumb line for her teaching curriculum, and she was responsible for teaching all the required skills during the year. Her general format for each month was to focus on specific skills and genres but to always remain recursive in her teaching and to individualize instruction in her conferencing and student goal setting. In addition, Mrs. Green also decided to participate in the Melissa Forney’s Race around Florida because her school sent her to a professional development conference led by Melissa Forney in the fall term. This writing program merged writing and Florida history and consisted of eighteen writing prompts that featured different areas and aspects of the geography and history of Florida. When these prompts were completed, Mrs. Green sent them to Forney and was entered into the state wide writing contest which awards funds to a classroom teacher. Some of the writing prompts were given on Wednesday for test preparation and some were completed during social science class.

**Summary**

This chapter describes the fluid, layered, multi-dimensional context of the boy writers as they experienced the writing class. The boys were part of a classroom curriculum influenced by national, state, and school standards as well as a writing class influenced by the beliefs and practices of the classroom teacher, university intern, and writing coach.

In the opinion of the researcher, the boy writers enjoyed an ideal writing classroom experience. The teacher, Mrs. Green, was experienced and knowledgeable in research-based practices supported by the National Council for Teachers of English. She created a positive and safe learning environment both physically and academically for the boy writers and treated
students equitably. Boy writers were immersed in writing workshop for 80 percent of the week and test preparation for 20 percent of the week. The writing class included literature, mini-lessons, time to write, author choice, feedback from teacher and peers, and sharing and publishing.
CHAPTER 5
RELEVANCY OF BOYS’ WRITING EXPERIENCES: RELATIONSHIPS, EMERGING IDENTITIES AND TEST-TAKING

If they say to write about this, then I think I hate writing. If they say to write about something you want, then I think I love it. Miguel

The overarching question fueling this study is, “How do 4th grade boys experience writing instruction in the writing classroom?” To flesh out this question, this chapter addresses several sub-questions: What do boys view as important components of writing class? What motivates boys to engage in the writing instruction? How do boys view themselves as writers? These questions helped to frame the interview questions and observations throughout the school year as I watched and listened to the boy participants work their way through writing class each day.

Relevancy was a theme that IS firmly grounded in the raw data. Boys’ writing engagement and fluency was directly connected with the relevancy of the writing assignment. The strength of boys’ relationships within the writing classroom and strength of the boys’ identities as they connected to the writing was proportional to their motivation to engage in the writing task. Analyzing the boys’ writings and interviews made it clear; boys’ writing was only as relevant as it related to each individual’s life- what they did each day, what they felt was important to their relationships with others, and their own personal emerging identities. The writing class experience was both personal and creative. In this classroom, boys experienced positive relationships with authentic audiences which motivated the boys to engage in the writing.

Mrs. Green brought writing into that moment-to-moment experience so boys just didn’t talk about writing (or listen to the teacher talk about writing) or plod through exercises designed to make them better writers somewhere down the road. The teacher actually fostered positive
relationships, increased relevancy, and allowed adequate amounts of time, choice, feedback, and practice writing during the writing class.

The second factor is that boys were given the freedom and support to mesh their emerging identity of a boy writer with the other identities in their lives such as being a male, friend, son, and student. This chapter will address the strategies boys utilized to meet these two criteria in the writing classroom.

**Relationships and Relevancy**

Relationships make a powerful difference in our learning processes. Vygotsky (1978) believed that we are social beings who learn through our social interactions with others. Anyone who spends time in a fourth grade class will agree, 10 and 11 year olds are very social. Boys will disengage or engage in the writing act depending on their relationships within the writing class. Since the focus of this study was the writing experiences of boys during the writing class, the analysis of the impact of relationships on the writing experiences of the boy writers will also focus primarily on the relationships within the writing class. In addition to healthy and motivating relationships, boys’ engagement was also dependent on the compatibility of their emerging identities. This chapter illuminates that boys must successfully meshing their emerging identities of male, friend, student and son with that of being a writer for the writing to become relevant to their lives.

The boys indicated the first and most important relationship within the writing class was between student and teacher. Mrs. Green set the tone, the rules and procedures, and determined whether the boys felt physically and psychologically “safe” enough to take academic risks with their learning, ask questions, give feedback and feel important and empowered.
Classroom Relationships

Over the course of the academic year, I identified five relationships within the writing class that impacted the boy writers: teacher, classmates, school, kindergarten literacy buddies and university writing buddies. These are divided into three layers of relational roles the boys experienced. The boys experienced the relationship of mentee primarily with their teacher, Mrs. Green. They also experienced this type of relationship with their university intern and their college writing buddy. Boys were able to learn from “experts” and increase their knowledge through the scaffolding this relationship provided. The second relational role the boys experienced was that of mentor. In this relationship, the boys were the experts who were helping their kindergarten buddies become more literate by sharing their knowledge and skills on a weekly basis.

![Relationship Diagram for Boy Writers in the 4th Grade](image)

The third relational role was that of a peer relationship with their classmates and the school audience as they shared their writing and knowledge as equals who could learn from each other.
All of these layers of relationships were unique and important because they were established and maintained by the boy writers. This chapter will explore both how and why these relationships impacted boy writers and their engagement in the writing class.

**The Teachers**

The many positive attributes of Mrs. Green’s teaching and her ability to form positive relationships with her boy writers has previously been established with numerous examples and quotes. She, as established in Chapter 4, created a positive work environment with rules and procedures of the writing workshop and taught the students how to conference with her and their peers. Students had input and power over their writing choices and revisions and had authority in responding to others in the class. Throughout the year, the boy writers all expressed their respect and affection for Mrs. Green and indicated they also felt she believed they were capable of achievement. When asked the question, “What makes you want to write?” Miguel said, “The teacher. She makes it sound like so much fun” (M57:34-35).

Mrs. Green also was the determining factor in creating opportunities for other positive relationships between peers, the school, the kindergarten literacy buddies and the university writing buddies. In addition, she also hosted a senior intern, Mr. B, in her class during the spring semester which gave the students another teacher to learn from in the writing class.

Gabe was the most vocal about Mr. B. being in the class. He said, “Now that Mr. B. is here, he has been helping me a lot. I like that. It’s nice having a man because I can relate to him. And every school, since I’ve been going to school, has no man teachers- no male teachers” (G56:37-41). Our schools today, especially elementary schools, are female dominated. Gabe’s experiences are not an isolated event; most teachers today are female. Many boys, like Gabe, are living in single parent homes and are experiencing the absence of a male role model (Fletcher, 2006; Tyre, 2006) that leaves boys with little or no male literacy role models at home or in the
classroom and has been shown to negatively impact literacy achievement. Mr. B built a positive relationship with the boys and was a good literacy role model. Because the boys liked and respected Mr. B, they were more apt to engage in learning during class.

An essential part of writing workshop that fostered a positive student-teacher relationship was the teacher conference. During this type of teacher conference, the teacher met individually with the students for two to five minutes to talk about their current writing projects. In Mrs. Green’s room, Mrs. Green sat in the chair in the carpet area of the classroom and called students over to talk. During the conferences the students reported the conversations helping them continue to write. Gabe said, “Well, she was helping me be creative here and here (pointing to the paragraph) she said these sentences are very creative and describe things good” (G1:26-28). Jon said, “Sometimes I go with Mrs. Green and conference and she’ll tell me to add something. She’ll call me over and then I’ll think of ways to use better words in my writing” (J1: 4-5).

Miguel said he talks to Mrs. Green when he is stuck and, “It helps me a lot” (M55: 41). Miguel went on to give me a specific example of a writing piece where he added information after conferencing and was very happy about it. “Sometimes she [Mrs. Green] gives us ideas and helps us think of things to add. Here, instead of ‘drank the water’ I added this, ‘I slowly sipped the cold, refreshing water and felt re-hydrated.’ I could see it in my mind. Mrs. Green loved it” (M59:20-27). Miguel was very proud of his revision and attributed it to his conversation with Mrs. Green during the conference. The teacher conferences were viewed by the boys as a positive experience that helped them in their writing pieces most of the time. Junior expressed that the teacher conferences could also be hard when the teacher wanted him to continue to revise and he didn’t want to, “Sometimes when I go to conference and she says I need to add a little more, I’m, like, Ughhhhh because I think it is done” (J57:18-20).
When the boys were asked, “What makes you become a better writer?” they responded with answers surrounding both the teacher’s feedback and their peers’ feedback. Samson responded, “I become a better writer by going back over my paper and listening to what Mrs. Green says in class. And I can listen to what my friends say and work on parts to make it more interesting for the reader” (S55:31-33). While friends are very important to the pre-adolescent boys, Mrs. Green’s approval for the boy writers was the most important to them because she was the authority figure in the room who Samson said, “gives the grade” (S43:46). The boys were aware of the grading process and would refer to their own writings a “4” or “4.5” which is the holistic scoring grade Mrs. Green used in the class. Throughout the study, none of the boys ever questioned the grade Mrs. Green assigned to their writing. When I asked them how they would describe themselves as writers, all four mentioned they saw improvement and referred to the writing scores that Mrs. Green assigned during the year, “At the beginning of the year, I would get, like, 3’s and now I’m getting 4’s and 5’s and one 6” (G43:6-9). Jon echoed this type of self-analysis based on Mrs. Green’s grades, “I am better now. Sometimes I get 4s and 5s on my writings” (J43:12-13).

Classmates

Within the writing class, there was always much interaction between classmates during the writing workshop and this proved to be an important component for writing to all the boys. The classroom desks are arranged in cooperative learning groups (Figure 4.1) so the students were expected to assist each other in their learning. The boy participants were taught how to respond to each others’ writing in a positive way by modeling Mrs. Green’s responses and having several mini-lessons on the subject. I asked Sampson what he was talking about with his table during the writing workshop, “We are reading to each other about what we be writing. And
the other person, they listen. They tell us the good stuff and if they see any mistakes and things like that” (S60: 8-10).

Gabe said his table interactions helped to combat writer’s block, “If we can’t think of what to write, our table helps us” (G60:13). Jon said his table helped him not be nervous about writing and sharing because of their positive responses, “Now I don’t get as nervous because I know what to do. We get to talk to each other and read our papers. Our group discusses it and gives me advice” (J60: 14-16). Miguel was also relied on his classmates for his writing improvement, “I listen to classmates and then make it better- like putting in better words to get the reader who is reading my writing more interested” (M55: 37). The boy participants were enthusiastic about the peer interaction that went on during writing workshop and helped them remain motivated to write and share.

The boys did acknowledge the drawbacks of peer conferencing and that sometimes other did not want to listen to their advice, “Peer conferencing is good but sometimes there is someone that isn’t so good. Sometimes I’m just trying to help and they just say, ‘no’ to my advice” (G55:43-44). Junior also experienced some negative peer conferencing within his table, “So some people in my group right now don’t want to share and I’m the only one who wants to do it. So I just move over to another group and conference with them” (J55:45-46).

Beyond conferencing, classmates provided a daily, authentic audience beyond the teachers. This proved to be very motivating for the boys as all four liked to share orally with the class and receive feedback from their peers. Typically, Mrs. Green allowed for three responses to each sharing before the next person went up to the sharing stool in the front of the class to read the next piece. Mr. B said, “The enthusiasm I saw when the students were able to share their work each day is what sold me on implementing writer’s workshop in my own classroom when I
graduate. They are so excited to share with their classmates rather than only having the teacher read it. I think it makes them put more into the writing” (MB 55:13-15). The relationship of the writers to their audiences and the responsiveness of the audience to the writing was an important part of the writing motivation. Miguel said people should write because, “Everyone has a head full of imagination and they just want to get that stuff out of their minds. Instead of just keeping it held in there, you can just let it out so everyone can enjoy it, including you, so you can be even more happy about it and so can everyone else” (M54:41-43). Miguel described the satisfaction writers get from sharing ideas with others. Junior had a much more concise answer to why he is motivated to write that was in direct connection to his audience and their responsiveness. His answer was, “to make people laugh!” (J57:25). Mrs. Green saw a difference in the engagement levels of the boy writers because of her increased sharing time, “They like to read their writing out loud and I have never done that as much as I have this year. They read it where they are, not just completed pieces, and they are proud of what they have done” (MG56: 11-14). When the boys were asked what was the best thing about the writing class. Jon said, “Reading out loud to the class. It lets me show it and then it makes me a good writer (J58:5-7).

School

The boy writers enjoyed motivating relationships with audiences outside their classroom walls within the larger context of the school itself. The one on-going school-wide event centered on writing during the school year that impacted the boy writers was called “Eagle Authors.” Once a month each classroom teacher chose two students to read writing pieces to an audience of peers and parents in a ceremony held outside by the flagpole on a brick patio. The writing coach, Mrs. L., organized and facilitated the event each month. The students read a piece of their writing in a microphone in front of the audience and received a certificate saying they were in the Eagle Author Club. They also had their picture taken and displayed in the hallway by the
front office for the remainder of the school year. When I asked the boys how they would motivate younger students to write, Gabe said to, “let them share their writing in Eagle Author to make them feel good about it” (G62: 3-4). When Junior was chosen for Eagle Author, he was very excited. Mrs. Green said, “It is a big honor to be able to read their writing in front of their parents and peers” (MG5: 8-9). Junior read about his trip skiing in the mountains and he said he was chosen because he used, “juicy adjectives and word pictures” and that “both parents came to listen.” (MG5: 11).

Publishing beyond the classroom was also a motivation for the boy writers. Miguel was excited to have his writing displayed in the school halls for all students to read as they passed by, “I liked the poems we wrote last week and mine is hanging in the hallway. That is something I’m proud of because it is about my dad” (M58: 41-43). On two different occasions, Gabe showed me his writing pieces displayed in the hallway on our way to interview. Even though I had already read the piece during the writing class, he wanted me to see it hanging in the hallway and read it again there (FN3.26). Samson said this was a big motivation for him, “When Mrs. Green put our writing out in the hallway I was encouraged, and I wanted everyone to read it, and everyone was talking about it. It was a good thing because it made me want to write more and more” (S64:5-6). When Mrs. Green posted the entire class’s work in the hall, the students seemed more proud of the displayed work when it had the larger audience of the entire school and the other teachers.

Kindergarten Literacy Buddies

In addition to the relationships between student and teacher, classmates, and school, Mrs. Green’s class partnered with a Kindergarten class and they were “literacy buddies.” Gabe, Junior, Samson, and Miguel were each assigned a kindergartener and they would meet for a half an hour after lunch each Friday. The fourth graders would visit the kindergarten room and the
buddies would share writings and they would read books together. In this relationship, the
typical hegemony shifted because now the boys were the experts and helping out a younger child. Mrs. Green said, “Gabe and Miguel really seemed to respond to their buddies, probably more than the others because a relationship grew over the year” (MG4: 3-5) She also saw the students respond to writing to a specific audience with great attention to the words they choose and the level of readability for the kindergarteners. “My students often wrote cards to their buddies. They paid attention to the words and used lingo their buddies could understand” (MG4: 7-8). Samson said he “loved” his Kindergarten buddy Joe. He talked about him after every visit and would relate all the things they did and said, “I like my writing buddy. He is in Kindergarten and is a good reader and writer. We kind of help them out when we visit after lunch on Fridays. We read to them and then we write things for them and read it to them. When we are with them, we act like the teacher and ask them things” (S34: 6-28).

The boys were excited to write different things to take and give to their buddy. During the poetry unit, Samson decided to write his buddy an acrostic poem using his name. He said, “I’m writing him an acrostic poem today” (S34:29-33). The audience of the buddy was real and authentic. He explained word choices, “I put ‘runner’ and ‘eager to run fast’ in the poem because he is the fastest kid in his class and I put ‘giggler’ because he likes to tell me a joke when I come there and then he giggles a lot” (S34: 35-39).

The teaching part of this relationship also helped the boys internalize good writing practices. Articulating and modeling good writing practices to the younger students forced the fourth graders to think about how writers learn best as well. Miguel said, “I just tell them to write all the words and start off with a rough draft. Then you can cross out and add words on the second draft (M57:9-10). Gabe also wanted the kindergartners to have an experience similar to
the one he was having in writing workshop, “I would say make the writing fun so they didn’t want to stop. We would share our writings and do some other stuff that makes it fun and not boring” (G58: 1-3). This relationship increased the boys’ engagement in the writing class because they were writing for a specific audience and they also had to take on the role of the expert and teach the younger students about writing and literacy.

University Buddies

Boys were not only empowered through their relational roles with the younger students but were also empowered through a relationship with older students by partnering as writing buddies with students in a university Language Arts Methods course. Mrs. Green’s students and the college students introduced themselves through a letter writing activity and then wrote letters back and forth throughout the school year. The students shared drafts of writing and gave feedback via letters. Junior said he liked writing because, “we have our writing buddies. I like writing to them and then getting letters back from them and then we are talking about our writing. They like to know what we are writing and they are writing things too” (M61:32-34).

Near the end of the year, Mrs. Green’s class took a field trip to the campus to meet with the university writing buddies for a writer’s celebration. The boys met their “buddy” and they shared writing pieces with each other. After this, they all participated in a shared writing activity and had refreshments.

Miguel was excited to talk about this experience, “I was happy at the celebration, it was fun. I got to meet my buddy, Jane. I was a little nervous, I admit it. But she was real nice” (M60: 33-35). Samson was glad to meet his buddy as well, “I liked the part that I met my college buddy to see what she looked like. And I like sharing my writing with her. She made compliments about my writing” (S61:7-9).
The boys were surprised and encouraged as they discovered all writers go through the writing process, even adults. “I thought only our class had to go through the writing process but I was surprised that in college you have to do that too!” (G61:17-19). Jon also found a similarity in their writing process, “My buddy said she can write about whatever she wants to and we get to do that too. She did a “writing territory” (a pre-writing activity) and I did one too” (J61:42). Miguel also enjoyed learning from his buddy, “I like to talk about my writing with another person and I like my writing buddy. She is in college and I’m in the 4th grade and she can help me out a lot” (M61:2-4).

This relationship was motivating to the boys because it provided them with another authentic audience with a person they came to know and like. They enjoyed the understanding that what they are doing will be valuable to them after the fourth grade and that students in college were writing, sharing, and publishing “like them.”

**Relationships and Success**

I believe the immediacy and strength of the relationships were crucial to the boys’ success. While all students, both girls and boys, benefited from relationships such as these in the writing class, Mrs. Brown noticed an increase in the engagement of the boys in her class because of the immediacy of the relationships. I speculate that, in general, boys have a lower tolerance level for irrelevancy in the writing class and a lower threshold for frustration in the area of writing. Boys seemed to quickly distance themselves from being a boy writer, possibly because of biological and social influences, if relevancy and relationships are not in place.

In all of these writing classroom relationships, the boy participants demonstrated positive attitudes and reflections. They willingly participated in the activities and interactions provided by the teacher, classmates, the school, and the kindergarten and university buddies. These relationships increased engagement in the writing class and kept the learning fresh and exciting.
throughout the school year. The relationships strengthened the relevancy of the writing class and their identities as boy writers by providing opportunities to write and talk as experts, equals, and students.

**Relevancy and Emerging Identities**

Boys must negotiate how they will become socially literate while protecting their emerging masculinity. Social filtering informs the boys’ relevancy levels and it goes beyond topic choice but also at the way relevancy is connected to the emerging identities of the boy writers. By framing a boy’s mental processes in a hierarchy of identities, it becomes clear that a boy must mesh together multiple facets of his identity in order to be able to happily engage in the writing process and identify himself as a successful boy writer.

![Diagram of boy writer identities](image)

**Figure 5-2 Relevancy of Emerging Identities for Boy Writers**

**Boy Writers and the Theory of Relevancy and Emerging Identity**

To engage in the writing class, boys must first fit their identity as a writer comfortably under their identities as a male and their social roles as a son, friend, and student. A conceptual representation of these identities is represented in Figure 5-2. If being a boy writer cannot fit comfortably under the larger roles of being a male, son, friend, or student in the identity
hierarchy because of social or biological resistance, then the writing will continue to be irrelevant to their lives and be ignored or resisted. The conceptual representation in Figure 5-2 is correct only if we remember that the boy himself is creating these identities. The role of son or friend is not defined by the school or the peers, but it is created and defined by the perceptions and ideologies of the boy himself. If the emerging identity of a boy writer can coexist within the other, possibly stronger identities, then the boy can engage in the writing task with less internal resistance or conflict. In this way, the success of the boy writer is also a sign of the successful intermeshing of the roles and identities created by both social and biological forces. In Figure 5-2, a hierarchy is created to show boys’ emerging identities as first a male, then a friend or son or student and finally a boy writer.

The term “emerging” identities signals that the boys being studied are in the fourth grade and range in age from 10 years old to 11 years old. At this stage in physical, cognitive and emotional maturity, the boys are only beginning to become aware of their individuality and their ability to make choices that define and build their identities as young men, sons, friends, students and writers. At this early stage of their lives, the boys are negotiating with emerging identities because they are on the cusp of adolescence and only beginning to be able to think reflectively and metacognitively about themselves and their lives. Another term of “son” is a generic term I used to include a boy’s relationship with the closest adult or adults in his life who have the primary responsibility for his welfare and guidance. Beyond a mother or father, this could include grandparents, aunts, uncles, foster parents or guardian.

When writing is more relevant to these emerging identities, it is much easier to have a higher engagement in the writing classroom. In this context, relevancy of writing and being a boy writer is defined as the strength of the relationship between the hierarchies of identities. For
example, if a boy’s family is telling him in direct ways that real men do not spend much time reading and writing or in indirect ways such as the lack of any literate male role models, then it is very likely he will choose low engagement in the writing classroom because the relevancy of the new identity as boy writer is very low. Friends demonstrate this same concept by banishing a boy from the social group if he is perceived to be too literate. In this case, if the identity of being a friend or a member of a specific social class is more relevant to the boy’s life than being a writer there will be low engagement in becoming a boy writer. The school itself may send direct or indirect messages to boys through teachers who consciously or unconsciously transfer gender biases to their students and the class. The more conflict between the identities, the less relevant the writer identity becomes. Unless boys can shape the most basic beliefs of their culture about what it means to be a male, a son, and a friend to include literacy and writing, it will remain irrelevant to the boy’s life manifested by disinterest and even resistance.

Junior’s identity as a “son” was the most important for motivating him to do well in school. He said, “My mom worries the most about my school. She wants me to do good in school. She doesn’t always specifically talk about writing but says, ‘You better do your best’ and ‘You know what you need to do’” (J63:4-5). Junior’s own perception of himself as a good student and son also was a big motivation to work hard in school, “I mainly like to do good for me so I could get a good grade and pass the 4th grade” (J63:41-43). He felt like his peers and friends really didn’t have much of an impact on his performance during the writing class and really didn’t influence him one way or the other.

Samson also said that his relationship with his mother and his identity as a good “son” was the greatest influence on his school performance, “I’ll have to go with my mom for the biggest reason that I want to do good in school. She says general things, not just about writing. She
wants me to get high scores. My dad helps too but mainly in math” (S63:50-51). Samson strongest motivation was his identity as a son.

He also mentioned his friends but said they really, “they don’t really care one way or the other. If we get good grades, they don’t care and if we get bad grades, we don’t care but just say to try harder next time” (S64:1-2). On the other hand, Samson also sounded like he had to distance himself from certain friends to be able to do better in school. He said he made decisions to be a good student and try hard, “I motivate myself too. Other years I didn’t get good grades and I used to be mad. I used to blame myself. Then, I tried real hard not to be influenced by others and my grades came up. I want it to be that way” (S64:29-30). In this case, because he identified strongly with his role as a son and student, he had to make choices about his friends that allowed him to do this.

Miguel said his dad was his biggest influence and that his father says, “He says, ‘do good in school’ and he teaches me things that I don’t learn in school” (M64:40-41). Miguel wants to be a better writer, “for myself.” (M64:47). Throughout his writing, Miguel strongly identifies with being a son and brother and these influenced everything he did more than anything else.

Gabe’s biggest influence was different than the other three because he was being influenced by a relative who had already passed away, “My great grandfather pushes me. He never pushed but he is the one who makes me want to get all the way through school, do college and some classes at the community college and become a science teacher. He was a professor at UF” (G65:10-12). Gabe identified with his great grandfather and even though he wasn’t physically present, his legacy had a great impact on Gabe’s motivation to write and do well in school. Later in the interviewee, he also talks about his mother, who motivated him by telling him not to follow the path she took in her life. Gabe said, “My mom never finished high school.
She didn’t like her teachers and dropped out. Then she couldn’t move until she was 18 years old and by that time she was married and had me. Then she was a working mother. My mom motivates me and says, ‘You go to college and get your education’” (G65:48-50). Gabe was determined to find a way to follow his dream. He was worried about money and told me that he had heard if you go in the army, you could go to school for free. Gabe’s identity was that of a good son and grandson who could fulfill his mother’s dream and follow in the footsteps of his grandfather with his education.

During this research, I was able to notice how the four boy participants were successful in creating their emerging identities as boy writers and each boy meshed this identity with existing ones in different ways. In the following section I explore each boy writer and the relevancy of his emerging identities.

**Defining Relevant Identities**

Each boy writer expressed unique identities through his writing choices, his interviews and his classroom interactions. While the boys share many connecting points in their lives such as all being male, Americans, Floridians, living in the same town, and attending the same school and classroom, they also have many differences such as race, family, socio-economic status, friends, and hobbies. By examining their writings and analyzing their words, individual profiles emerged.

**Samson**

Samson loved sports, especially football. He wrote about sports, talked about sports and fantasized about sports. His hobby of playing sports, watching sports, and talking about sports defined a big part of his identities and who he wanted to become. A list of his writing pieces in Table 5-1 will help to illustrate this point. Five out of seven free-choice writing topics had
something to do with sports or football. Another free choice was about his dog and the final free choice was about a personal injury when the car door slammed on his finger.

When Samson wrote about himself playing football, he was the hero and accomplishing great things. He created an identity of himself as he was and also how he wished to be: good in sports, loved by his family and friends and coaches. He wrote, “I love scoring touchdowns because the crowd cheers for you. My team jumps on me because they are proud of me getting the winning touchdown. I love scoring touchdowns and playing football” (S3). Sports was

Table 5-1  Samson’s Writing Pieces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Free Choice</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>Trip to Miami</td>
<td>Describes a trip to Miami to watch the Dolphins play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Free Choice</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>My Broken Finger</td>
<td>Story of breaking his finger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Free Choice</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>My First Football Game</td>
<td>Describes his game in the city league.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Free Choice</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>My Dog Duchess</td>
<td>Describes his dog.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Free Choice</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>The Race</td>
<td>A story of a track race where he is the hero.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Free Choice</td>
<td>Acrostic Poem</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>Describes what he likes about football.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Prompt</td>
<td>Expository</td>
<td>Red Lobster</td>
<td>Explains why a restaurant is his favorite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Prompt</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>My Weekend</td>
<td>Describes the sports he plays.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

something the whole family was involved in and valued. Samson told me his cousin was a professional football player and one of his writings is the story of his whole extended family traveling to Miami to watch a football game. He writes, “Me and my cousins are going to watch the Kansas City Chiefs play the Miami Dolphins. I’m getting picked up by a charter bus. My cousin invited me down to see his football game and we are all getting on the bus” (S1). In his
piece about what he would do with his allowance money, the first thing he would buy was special shoes to play sports, “The first thing I would buy are shoes. The shoes I would buy are Dwayne Wades [an NBA player]” (S10).

His family also supported Samson’s love of sports. His emerging identity of being a good son and an integral part of his family meshed very well with his identity of being an athlete, “I love football because it’s in my blood and part of my family” (S3). Samson wrote about the things most important to him in his autobiographical poems. He loved his, “mother, father, brother, and family” and he felt “emotional about football.” The people he would most like to meet were, “Percy Harvin, Tim Tebow, and Tom Brady,” all talented football players, two were local college players that were in the paper regularly. Samson also protected his male identity when he wrote that “I’m not afraid of anything” and his nickname was “Speedy.” (S7). In a different prompted piece, he began the story, “Beep,beep! As my alarm goes off I know today is Saturday and you know what that means. I have a chance to play football, basketball, and baseball” (S12). In Samson’s acrostic poem, he again created an identity of a great athlete and team leader:

“Famous for touchdowns
Outstanding
Outrunning
Tackle
Big hits
Able to gain yards
Leader of the team
Lineman” (S6)

Samson’s felt he was a successful writer because he was able mesh his emerging identities of what he thought it meant to be male, a friend, son, student with Mrs. Green’s and the school’s ideas about what it meant to be a boy writer. Writing, in many cases, exposed and strengthened his emerging identities which seemed to revolve around being good at sports, being
liked and respected by friends and teammates, and being tough. Other ways he described himself in his poetry were, “never scared, runner, yard gainer, never quitting, eager to learn” (S6).

Going hand in hand with sports was Samson’s consistent portrayal of himself as not afraid of being hit or hurt and being able to handle pain. In one piece he writes, “Where I come from, we love to tackle. I also like to hurt people on the other team. It makes the coaches happy when you hurt the other team” (S11). The second thing he wants to buy with his allowance money is a video game where the people shoot each other. He writes, “I choose to buy Halo 3 because when you shoot people in the head you hear a loud noise that sounds like “capow.” I bust a cop in his head” (S10). His value of aggressiveness was displayed in his sports and games. In his book, Misreading Masculinity, Newkirk builds an argument that illuminates boys’ struggle to be masculine and completely embrace the institutional beliefs and procedures and risk losing their individuality and sense of self, “We must, on occasion, step out of the role of dutiful employee of student- or risk losing a sense of selfhood. Boys are often in the difficult position of maintaining their standing as sons and students while at the same time distancing themselves from ‘sincere’ behaviors and language they see as threatening” (p.155). In this way, Samson could demonstrate his writing skills while using aggression and violence in a way that met the demands of both school and society.

Samson’s identities as a son and a brother were reflected in the things he told me about his family and family life. Samson lived in a two parent family with one younger brother and family references are threaded through his writings while not in the forefront of topics and attention. When he wrote about allowance he said he would save some money so he could, “stop my parents from turning their money that they work hard for into dust,” (S10) and when he broke
his finger and was in the emergency room he wrote, “while I waited for the doctor I talked to my family and friends” who were there to support him. His parents were not described as literary models and Samson said he “doesn’t write much at home because I get home at 6:00 p.m” (S5:14). He attended after-school care until his mom or dad picked him up after work. He said, “Sometimes I want to write but my mom says to go to bed and I don’t get to” (S516). His dad worked in the concrete industry and his mother worked at a bank. The family was not on the free and reduced lunch plan at the school and was considered lower middle class by income. Samson said his parents liked for him to get good grades in school.

During his writing experiences, Samson was able to engage in writing and create an identity as a boy writer. This identity co-existed with his ideologies of what it meant to be male, black, son, friend and student. His writing both created and expressed his emerging identities and illustrated what he feels is important and most of all, relevant. Sports, being tough and aggressive, never quitting, being respected by teammates, family and cousins were all evidenced in his writing and emerging identities. Because of the relevancy of his emerging identity of being a boy writer, Samson felt excited to share his writings with his friends, parents, and teachers and to engage in the writing class.

Miguel

Unlike Samson, who was the quietest in the group of four boys, Miguel was always ready to talk. He was the most gregarious but also the most reluctant to write. It was easiest for Miguel to write about what was most relevant to him and his emerging identities- his family. His family consisted of his mother, father, older brother, and himself. His two half-sisters were mentioned but had moved away to New Jersey and Orlando and did not have the influence over his life that his parents and brother did. Miguel’s family and home life was evidenced in everything he did at school. He was very animated and expressive in his speech and would insert
Spanish words into his writing and his speaking and then always stop and tell me what they meant. He was telling me about his brother one day, “You know, Mrs. Ergle, he’s ‘loco.’ You know what that means? Crazy! [he laughs]” (FN 14).

Miguel was proud to be from Ecuador and enjoyed telling me and the other students about the country. At home, his family spoke Spanish and at school, Miguel spoke English. He said his mother liked for him to practice his English with her but his father did not know much English, “maybe just about 20 words” according to Miguel (M1:25). Mom and dad wanted Miguel to do well in school and make good grades (M1: 30). His mother was the one to help Miguel with his homework when he needed it and to talk to the teacher. Miguel’s family owned a Dollar store and he said, “The store is a very good store that has a bunch of good stuff in it. I sometimes work there” (M1: 19-20). In one of his poems Miguel wrote, “I wish for my mom to have more customers because she owns a store” (M7:5). Miguel’s dad travelled back to Ecuador regularly but Miguel had only been there two times, once when he was a baby and then again when he was five years old.

Table 5-2  Miguel’s Writing Pieces

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Free Choice</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>Summer Vacation</td>
<td>Describes summer with family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Free Choice</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>Trip to Busch Gardens</td>
<td>Story of family trip.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Free Choice</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>My Grandma</td>
<td>Helps his grandma rake leaves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Free Choice</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>Getting a Puppy</td>
<td>Describes his grandma rake leaves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Free Choice</td>
<td>Poem</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>Describes his dad giving him a dog.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Free Choice</td>
<td>Acrostic Poem</td>
<td>Juan</td>
<td>7. Free Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Prompt</td>
<td>Expository</td>
<td>Chili’s</td>
<td>Explains why a restaurant is his favorite.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In his collection of writings, the most popular topic for Miguel centered around his family and things he did with his family. His father, mother and brother were his favorite topics to talk about and write about this year and were present in all but one of the writings I collected. The only piece that did not bring in his family was a prompted expository piece that asked the student to choose an animal and explain why it was their favorite. Other than this exception, all the pieces have the element of family. This was Miguel’s way to make writing more relevant to his emerging identities.

When Miguel thought of the upcoming summer vacation and the most fun things that were to happen, they included family, “This is going to be the best three months of my life. Today my family will see my brother graduate and after graduation, me and my whole family will have a big party for my brother and a celebration dinner with all my aunts and uncles” (M1). When he defined himself in an autobiographical poem, the entire poem centered himself in the middle of his family. The things he said he was scared of are also a threat to himself and his family.

“Miguel
Short, weird, skinny and funny
Son of Juan Miguel Paulo and Celeste Paulo
Brother of Roberto, Tina, and Jolene.
Loves Mom, dad, brother, two sisters and two nephews.
Scared of burglars, serial killers, and cannibals.
Paulo” (M7).

In his acrostic poem, he chose to write about his father. He said, “I’d written about my mom a couple of times already so I wanted to write something about my dad” (M7:23-24). In the poem, he describes his dad in these terms, “Awesomest dad in the whole world, Ultimately cool; loving; successful; outstanding; out of town a lot; zooming to the rescue; only dad for me; and necessary” (M6). When I asked Miguel what the best thing that happened was recently in
writing class near the time he wrote the poem, he said, “I liked the poem I wrote last week and mine is hanging in the hallway. That is something I’m proud of because it is about my dad and I love him very much” (M4:36-39). The relationship he had with his brother, both loving and frustrating, was revealed in his poem when he described him as both, “obnoxious” and “sweet” and “amazing” and “loco” (M5). When I asked Miguel what he was going to write about next he said, “I thing I might write a story about my family and how I spend so much time with them. I was thinking about writing a little book, like a kindergarten type book titled, “My Family” and how they make me feel, and how they make me feel special” (M5:4-8).

Miguel’s emerging identity as a boy writer was very intertwined with his identity as a son and brother. He successfully meshed the two identities and was able to write positively about this important part of his life. He both expressed his identities as a son and brother and also defined them through his writing topics and content. When I asked Miguel, “What makes it easier to write?” he again circled back to his family and answered, “Well, if it about your dad, how he helps you, or write about mom or brother, I just have a lot to say. If it is different and about something that I don’t think much about, then I just kind of blank out” (M2: 21-24). His story about getting a puppy is as much about his father as it is about the new dog, “My dad brought me a puppy at night and it was very hard to see him. He is a black lab and his name is Hokie. When my dad let him in, I finally saw him. He was camouflaged real good” (M4). Being able to write about his family is an essential part of Miguel’s identity as a boy writer and this relevancy is what motivates him to engage in the writing act.

The boys in the class accepted other males showing love and emotion if the writer was writing about his family, especially mothers, fathers, grandparents, and siblings. It was more common for them to express frustration, humor, or parody when describing siblings. For
example, Miguel writes, “I have the greatest dad in the world” (P10) but starts another piece about his brother showing his emotional bond through the “aggressive” writing that is a typically male way to show affection, “Nano (which means brother), shouldn’t you be taking out the trash, you lazy mutt?” (P26). Here Miguel defined his beliefs about his identity as a male writer- it is okay to express feelings of love directly if it is your mother or father, but feelings of affection and friendship should be expressed indirectly through coded writings of violence or aggression.

He then goes on to describe how he ends up taking out the trash which, “smelled like a baby diaper and it smelled like my brother’s dirty laundry. I almost passed out” (M10). This writing fulfills Miguel’s need to write about his family life and also impressed his peers who found it very amusing when he read it out loud in class (FN 16). Affection for parents and put-downs for siblings was an acceptable cultural practice for the boy writers.

In a prompted narrative about an animal with a problem, Miguel created a clever play on the name of the vegetarian lion and named him Broc-Lee. Broc-Lee wasn’t accepted because he didn’t eat meat. In an interview, Miguel tells me about the piece and how he solved the lion’s problem, “Then Broc-Lee is meeting his dad because he hadn’t met him before and he was coming for dinner. His dad says, ‘You can’t eat vegetables. You better go out there and start eating meat!’ and I say, I mean he says, ‘But Dad’ And his dad makes him try meat and he likes it. After that he does all the things lions do” (M12). In this piece, Miguel again makes it relevant by writing about the relationship between a dad and son. The father figure teaches the young lion how to behave properly according to the lion culture. At one point, Miguel speaks as if he were the lion and then corrects himself, “and I say (putting himself as the young lion), I mean he says” (referring to Broc-Lee). When Miguel wrote the piece, he was putting himself, his values, and emerging identities and understanding of these roles as father and son, into the
piece. He also again puts in some clever humor that will be appreciated by his peers and teacher with the name of the lion referring to the vegetable broccoli.

Miguel’s favorite sport is soccer (M11). He makes this prompt relevant to himself by linking it to his family heritage and his father, who played soccer for the Ecuadorian soccer team. Miguel writes, “Soccer is the number one sport in my country” (M11). He demonstrates a connection to his identity with Ecuador and his father coming before his identity as American. He was proud that, “People say soccer was invented in Ecuador. I can’t wait to see the Ecuador team and my dad play against Brazil” (M11). Soccer is a huge hobby of his father and his family and a big part of his after-school life. Just as football was intertwined in Samson’s family world, soccer is intertwined in Miguel’s family world. Miguel plays soccer in a city league and said, “I play forward center. I’m the one who makes the goals. Soccer is my favorite sport and it’s a good time to think about good things in life” (M11).

The “good things” in life for Miguel seem to be his time and experiences with his mother, father, brother, and extended family. Through these types of writings that Miguel says he is “proud” of, he successfully created his emerging identity as a boy writer. His writing identity co-existed in a hierarchy of his identity as a male, Hispanic, son, brother, friend and student. The more relevant his existing identities are with his writing identity, the stronger motivation and higher engagement Miguel experienced in the writing class. Family and family experiences are the relevant topics for Miguel and he makes writing relevant by connecting his emerging identities as a son, brother, friend and student with the topic of family and family events.

Junior

Junior was not quite as single-minded about a writing topic as Samson or Miguel, but his writing showed patterns which reflected his emerging identities. The first was the reoccurrence of a moral or character value that was expressed and the second was that he liked to be funny and
the use of humor was a motivation for him to write. In one of his “About the Author” sections of his free write he says, “Hi, my name is Junior and I go to Central Elementary. My favorite type of writing is narrative. I wrote this story because I like funny stories so I thought of a story that would be funny” (J1). In Table 5-3, it is evidenced that Junior’s topics are more varied than the other participants and do not center around one reoccurring theme.

Table 5-3  Junior’s Writing Pieces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Free Choice</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>The Ugly Fairy Society</td>
<td>A story about a dumb fairy taking over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Free Choice</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>My WebKinz</td>
<td>Describes himself playing Webkinz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Free Choice</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>My Mean Sister</td>
<td>Describes his frustration with his sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Free Choice</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>Disney World</td>
<td>Describes a trip to Disney. Junior had to tell his mom he ripped a page in a special book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Free Choice</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>The Ripped Page</td>
<td>Describes himself and his personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Free Choice</td>
<td>Autobiographical Poem.</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Prompt</td>
<td>Expository</td>
<td>Favorite Restaurant</td>
<td>Explains why Sonny’s is his favorite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.Prompt</td>
<td>Expository</td>
<td>My Chore</td>
<td>Explains why he takes out the trash.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Prompt</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>The Soccer Game</td>
<td>Describes the sports he plays</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From analysis of his writing and his speech, Junior seems to be the participant who is most immersed in the mainstream of American life. He is a white, middle-class boy with two working parents. In his poems, he describes himself as, “helpful, hard-working, and intelligent” and a boy who loves, “family, fun, and being alive” (M7). He fears, “death, sharks, and snakes” and would “like to see an albino alligator” and “be rich” (J7). The albino alligator was a reference to a new attraction at a nearby local theme park. His family traveled together to theme
parks and these were some of the topics he writes about such as his trip to Disney World. At Disney World, he said they stayed at a “nice hotel resort.”

Junior also wrote about playing a popular game called “Webkinz” which meant that he bought or was given a Webkinz animal and also meant that he had access to a computer with Internet capabilities. None of the other three participants ever mentioned being on the Internet or email. Samson referenced an X-Box game he liked to play but Miguel and Gabe do not reference any computer, Internet or X-Box type games in their writings. Junior said, “I like to play Webkinz and mine is called Wendy, the golden retriever. We play lots of exciting games. After you put your Webkinz to sleep and log off, then ring, ring, time to get on Webkinz in the morning” (J2). While there was no evidence that Junior was wealthy, he did seem to have the most cultural capital through his experiences traveling with his family, objects that he owned, his tutoring after school, and in his writings. One example is some of his “writing territories” that he listed as possible writing topics such as “my family buying a river house,” or “Snow Shoe Mountain” or “Going on the Boat” (J13). These writing topics illuminated some of the opportunities and experiences Junior is able to do outside of school with his family that some of the other participants were unable to experience.

Junior’s self identity was glimpsed through his autobiographical poems and his acrostic poem. He valued many of the same traits that the “official” school valued that were listed in the school pledge and taught in the school character education program such as respect, responsibility and citizenship. The school defined its “official” values with their character pledge that the students said each day after reciting the pledge of allegiance:

“Respect, responsibility and citizenship too,
They bring out the best in me and you
Trustworthiness and being fair,
Help to show others that we really care,
We all know what’s right; we all know what’s good, 
We will do the things we know we should.”

I saw Junior aligning himself very closely with these same characteristics in his writing and his actions in the writing class. For example, in his acrostic poem, Junior chose to write about himself and described himself as, “obedient, never mean, funny, interesting, healthy, athletic, chatty, and nice” (J6). The adjective “obedient” was interesting because it demonstrated Junior’s value of this trait that his culture had taught him to show towards those in authority. He also reinforced his identity as being “funny” in several of his stories (J6). Junior also valued his peers and their friendship and said he was “never mean” and “nice” (J6).

He didn’t mention his family specifically in the autobiographical poem but the illustration by the poem about himself was a picture of Junior and his dad with the caption “My Dad and Me” on top of the people. In other writings he also portrayed a positive relationship with his parents. Junior seemed very secure in his relationship with his mom and dad and wrote about a time that he had to tell his mom he ripped a page in a special book. He said, “I tried my best not to rip the page, but one came out of the special book.” After he told his mother he, “shut my eyes waiting for her to shout but instead she said just because you told the truth you are not in trouble” (J5). He ends the story with a moral about telling the truth, “I learned one thing. It’s always good to tell your parents and not to lie. Just tell the truth and you won’t have to worry” (J5).

When Junior wrote about his twin sister, it was with a mixture of frustration and also love. He could not go to her birthday party and said, “My sister is so mean she won’t even let me go to her birthday party and she knows I’ve never been to the Melting Pot [a restaurant]” (J3). He said, “Whenever she does something horrid, she blames it on me” (J3). But at the end of the writing, he leaves the reader with his hope they will have a better relationship in the future, “But
however my sister may be hard to get along with, maybe someday we will become good friends” (J3). Whether he really felt this way, or just felt obligated to put this in because he had just ranted about her behavior throughout the piece, it showed what Junior believed the relationship with his sister should be in a perfect world. He felt it was okay to talk about her and vent his frustration but also monitored himself. In his first draft of the same piece he ended with, “I think now it’s my time to get back at her” (J3) but then he crossed it out and did not put this in his final draft. He said it, “just didn’t sound good” and “he did want to get back at her but not in a really mean way” (FN8). I believe he had the thought of revenge but knew that his parents or teacher would not approve of the revenge message in his writing and so he self-corrected according to what he felt was most acceptable.

When Junior wrote about getting an allowance, he said kids should, “save their allowance and they will have more money to spend. Also kids could buy what they want as long as their parents approve” (J10). He again defined his identity and obedience as a son and believed he needed to earn his allowance by doing his chores and then get parental approval for spending it. He valued being frugal and said, “Some might spend their money as fast as a cheetah or a slow as a turtle like me” (J10).

Through his writings, Junior also demonstrated his desire to be funny to his peers and also himself. When he describes his sister he said, “My sister is as mean as an ugly alligator starving and crawling at you” (J3). His friends really liked that line when he read it in class and they all laughed (FN 15). He also showed his humor in his free write about the Fairy Society when he named the characters “Dum Dum.” He and his peers liked the part when he described just how dumb the character was, “They didn’t call him Dum Dum for nothing. He was an idiot. He could not tell left from right, ground from sky, or night from day” (J1). Through these types of
writings, Junior helped to create an identity of being funny and entertaining his friends and also enjoyed using the humor himself when he was writing.

Junior’s writings became more relevant to his emerging identities when he inserted his beliefs and value systems into the pieces. He was able create an identity as a boy writer by creating pieces that reflected and defined his culture and roles as a son, brother, student and friend. In some pieces, he inserted his values into the pieces through moralistic writings that sometimes resembled a fable in their teachings about character and values. Junior seemed to have the easiest time creating a strong identity as a boy writer. His parents were very supportive of his writing and even paid for after school tutoring with the writing coach before the state test. The emerging identity as a boy writer was heavily influenced by his parents and home culture and became more relevant to Junior when he could express his values, morals and sense of humor through his writing.

Gabe

Gabe’s writing and writing ideas centered around the media and television. When Gabe was out of school, he was at home with his sisters and watching television. Gabe was on free and reduced lunch at school. He lived in a single parent home with his mother and her live-in boyfriend. Gabe had a sister who was a year younger than he was but he also had his mother’s boyfriend and his two daughters, ages two and four years old, living with them as well. His mother worked “in a construction job” and he said she “drives a fork lift now” (G1: 17-19). She was gone to work when he rode his bike home from school. When he and his sisters got home, he watched out for them if the boyfriend wasn’t there. During our second interview, Gabe talked about his family and, unprompted, he told me why he likes being a big brother. His speech gave me great insight into the character of Gabe, who did not feel sorry for himself but looked forward to the day he could make life better for his sisters. He said, “The best thing about being an older
brother is that when I’m older, I can make life better for my sisters. My mom, she works a lot, so she never gets to take me to any birthday parties and stuff. We just usually miss them. By the time my sisters are old enough to go to parties, I’ll be old enough to drive them there. I’ll be able to do all the things I’m not able to do for them” (G2: 20-24). He was not an angry child but he was very aware of the socio-economic differences between himself and some of the other boys in the class. He talked about how he was unable to participate in city league sports like soccer or football but he said, “I am really good riding my bike so I do that a lot” (G1: 52-55). Gabe really took his job as a brother seriously and seemed to have more responsibilities than most boys his age. He did see his father and grandparents on some weekends and said his dad “loves to cook and so do I” (G2:28).

Gabe was a very friendly and outgoing child and his imagination was active. He craved attention more than the other boys and so was more demanding of Mrs. Green during the writing class (FN 8,9,10). He read and talked about books more than the other participants and tied many of his writings to the television shows or books that he read. His writings were the most imaginative. Gabe’s writing topics varied from Samari sword-making to inventing a rocket and becoming a world famous scientist.

Table 5-4  Gabe’s Writing Pieces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Free Choice</td>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>The Simpsons</td>
<td>Describes Simpson TV characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Free Choice</td>
<td>Personal Narrative.</td>
<td>Making Swords</td>
<td>Describes his hobby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Free Choice</td>
<td>Autobiographical Poems</td>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>Describes himself, wishes, hopes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5-4 Continued.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Expository</td>
<td>Books a Million</td>
<td>Explains why the store is his favorite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Explains his chore of throwing away Halloween pumpkins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>My Favorite Subject</td>
<td>Explains his thoughts on allowance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Allowance</td>
<td>A story of a shark who is vegetarian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>Tom A. Toe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gabe’s writing circled around the books, movies, television, and games that were a big part of his life. He gleaned many ideas from their plots and characters. His favorite writing piece from the year was his poem book on the Simpsons. The characters were described in detail that came from hours upon hours watching and re-watching reruns of the Simpsons over the past five years of his life. In his concrete poem of “Maggie” he included show trivia such as, “Saved Bart’s life three times” and “turned into and alien” and “got drunk more than once” (G1). Gabe explained to me, “Of all the shows I’ve watched, I counted that she saved Bart’s life three times and I’m not sure how many times she got drunk so I put ‘more than once’ in there” (G25: 9-11). In the poem about Bart Simpson, the same detail is evidenced with details about Bart’s character, “Loves Crusty. Was converted at least five times” and “awesome skateboarder” (G1). He is proud that he “watched it more than anyone I know” (G1). The other boys liked Gabe’s topic because this is a show that is a parody poking fun at adults, schools and society with Bart Simpson as the irreverent hero. At the end of Gabe’s Simpson book on the Author’s page, he wrote why he chose this topic, “I have always loved the Simpsons. I thought that it was the funniest show on TV” (G1).

In his autobiographical poem, Gabe said he fears “Dawn of the Dead,” a movie that he had watched that scared him enough to include it in the top things that he didn’t like. For his acrostic poem, Gabe picked Wayside School as his topic which was the book Mrs. Green was reading.
aloud during carpet time. He described the book enthusiastically with words such as, “Wacky and weird, silly, enchanting, super fun, contagious laughter, hilarious kids” (G6). His six illustrations to the poem were pictures of things that happened in the story and demonstrated his comprehension of the story. He, unlike many boys in the class, was very verbal about his enthusiasm for books and felt his masculinity was not jeopardized by literacy. One of his pieces was titled, “Books-A-Million” and described his first trip to the bookstore and why it was his favorite, “It had all different kinds of trading cards and all different kinds of books like history books and comic books and how to draw books and books about movies” (G9).

Another book that Gabe read and referenced was the Bible. In his piece about sword-making, he said, “I like swords because almost every place in the world has swords. Even the Bible, there are swords” (G5).

Gabe’s prompted story of an animal with a problem is about a shark who is a vegetarian. Gabe sat at the same table as Miguel during this writing prompt and the two of them worked on their names together and their story lines were similar as well. Both were very proud of the clever names they created for their vegetarian characters. Gabe’s shark was named Tom. A. Toe and he “wasn’t a killing machine” and “ate sea grass when is family went out to eat in the Atlantic” (G13). While he was writing, Gabe talked to me about this piece, “Have you seen the movie Shark Tales? You know how the shark hates the thought and taste of fish? And this is kind of like that” (G4:1-5). I asked, “Did you think of that when you were coming up with the idea?” and Gabe answered, “Well, I didn’t think of it at first when I was writing but now that I’m thinking of it- it is helping. If you can think of a movie that is like what you are writing, that can help get ideas and then writing” (G4: 9-13). Media and books both unconsciously and then consciously influenced Gabe’s writing by supplying writing ideas, plots and characters for him to
use in his own pieces. In this way, Gabe’s writing became more relevant to him and had a stronger connection to his identities outside of writing class.

One interesting piece that had a very different tone from the other participants was Gabe’s writing on the prompted piece about Allowance. While the other boys talked about saving it and spending it, Gabe didn’t get allowance at all. He wrote, “Even though my friends get an allowance and I don’t, I don’t mind because you just get spoiled rotten with money” (G12). He wrote as if he were talking to his peers, “Doesn’t your mom pay for your cable, your Christmas presents, your birthday presents and your food? It’s your house and you should do chores. Money will most likely not make you kids responsible, it will make you greedy. If you get $10.00 a week for allowance, your mom will be sucked dry” (G12). It was interesting that the first item listed is the cable TV bill placed in front of presents and food that his mother provided. Second, it is important that Gabe’s perspective on money reflected his home culture and identity as a son. In this piece, it is evidenced how differently the boys’ identities can be even though they are all in the same class at the same school. They all had different ideas about the roles and responsibilities of a male, son, friend, student, and boy writer.

Gabe wrote a wide variety of genre with poetry, narrative, fantasy, and expository pieces. In his fantasy, he created a story with his father as the hero who saved him, “My dad grabbed the shot gun and dad shot the spider in the head. Green globs of blood fell on me” (G4). He also described a good relationship, “Then Dad said I really needed a shower and we laughed” (G4). This story was relevant to Gabe because he knew his peers would really like the action and gruesomeness of the spider and also very relevant to his wishes that his dad was there to save him and be his buddy.
His family and their importance in his life was threaded throughout the writings as well. His piece about the Booger Birthday Cake was a hilarious story about his sister helping him mix a cake for his cousin and all the things that ended up in the batter such as boogers, a gum wrapper, a squashed fly and some egg shell. He says, “Take my advice. Never let a four year old sister or brother help you make a cake” (G3). In addition to writing about his sisters, he wrote about helping his grandmother set up a Christmas tree after she fell and hurt her leg (G3), and he wrote about his great-grandfather’s influence on his desire to become a great scientist, “I love science because my great-grandfather taught at the University of Florida. I have always wanted to know what made the solar system and to make a rocket that will go higher than anything else” (G11).

Even though Gabe’s world might have been the most restrictive of the participants and he wasn’t able to participate in the sports that Samson did, or the trips that Junior went on, or the travel and family gatherings that Miguel enjoyed, Gabe’s writing is rich and varied because of his reading, his imagination, the media, and his own experiences as a brother, son, friend, and student. Since Mrs. Green encouraged and celebrated all different types of writing topics and pieces, all the boys were able to construct writing identities that meshed with their existing identities.

Self Esteem and Self Assessment as Boy Writers

How did the boys view themselves as writers? My boy participants all expressed confidence that they were much improved as writers this year and all expected to pass the test before they took it. I asked the question, “Do you see any changes in your writing from the beginning of the year until now?” The four boys all expressed a high amount of confidence in their growth and abilities as writers and their satisfaction with their progress. Gabe said, “At the beginning, I wasn’t that good. I was used to writing to a prompt and demand writings. I would
be a 2,3, or 4 at the beginning and a 7 now” (G43:16-18). Miguel also said he had improved from a “3” at the beginning of the year to an “8 or 9” now. He said he doesn’t remember doing much writing in 3rd grade, “I think I’m a better writer than last year because we really didn’t do writing last year” (M44: 1-2).

Junior was a little harder on himself than the others and said he would rate himself both “bad and good.” He said he was a “2” at the beginning of the year but would rate himself a “6” now. Junior also echoed the fact that he doesn’t remember doing any writing before this year in school. I asked how that made him feel, “Nervous, kind of nervous. Now I don’t get nervous because I know what to do. We write in workshop and get to talk to each other and read our papers. Our group discusses it and gives us advice” (J44: 30-35). Samson was the only participant who would not quantify himself with a number score. I asked him on three different occasions to rate himself as a writer and he would give me a more qualitative answers that showed his feeling of improvement such as the following: “At the beginning of the year, I was kind of slacking but then about the middle and end of the year, I was doing better and my scores got better. At the end, I’m way better than I used to be. I think I’m still average in my writing because sometimes I get good grades and sometimes I can get bad grades in writing” (S44: 20-25).

All the boys talked about how they can’t remember doing any writing before 4th grade, other than the demand writings that the school administers four times a year to all students. They expressed their anxiety or “nervousness” when Mrs. Green introduced them to writing workshop approach because it was so radically different than any type of instruction they had previously encountered. Gabe said, “The first time we did writing workshop I thought, ‘This is weird. We’ve never done this before. We never did this in 3rd grade. I wonder if I’m going to do this
next year.’ I was thinking this was a brand new concept to me” (G40: 35-39). Mrs. Green saw
the boys become comfortable with the new process quickly and then start to become empowered,
“The first week, some of the kids just sat there but then they felt more comfortable and felt less
stressed. Now they feed off each other and help each other out with the peer conferencing.
Students definitely have a greater belief in themselves as writers because of workshop” (MG40:
7-12). The boys self esteem as writers increased this year because of the classroom and
curriculum structure of writing workshop. Their belief in their own progress as writers was
positive in all the participants and it was also mirrored by their progress and collection of
writings in their writer’s notebooks.

Teacher and Boy Beliefs about Gender Differences

Research shows that teachers and parents tend to believe girls are better writers than boys
(Palardy, 1998; Fletcher, 2002). In Mrs. Green’s class, both she and Mr. B did express their
beliefs that writing was “easier” for girls and they were “stronger” writers. Mr. B. said he,
“didn’t want to betray his sex!” but that he felt girls were stronger writers, “especially depending
on the topic” (MB20:6-8). He said the girls in the class use, “more detail, more description and
were more focused. They are more elaborate and create better word pictures.” Then he
speculated, “Maybe girls are more prompted to use their imagination? Boys are taught to go out
and play football and the girls use their imagination to play tea party” (MB20: 14-18).

Mrs. Green saw a big difference in girls’ ability to choose a topic and begin writing and
similarly to Mr. B, attributes differences in writing ability to social roles. “I think girls are
stronger writers. I think they role play at home more. Girls seem to have an easier time, even if
it is something that doesn’t interest them, they can make it up. Boys have a hard time making it
up” (MG21:43-46). Both teachers attributed writing differences between genders to social roles
that have been imposed on the child by society, family, and cultural capital. Mr. B said, “I
believe it is more social than anything. Like when I was little, I went to the store with mom and went with dad to baseball games and fishing. I can see how the social roles are ingrained in everyone” (MB20: 31-33). Boy writers were viewed by both teachers as situated in complex social roles that were imposed by society, family, and even the teacher. These social roles impacted the relevancy of the writing class in both surface ways such as choosing a topic to write about but also on deeper ways such as creating a hierarchy of importance for their time and energy between academic and physical activities.

The teachers both said they tried to create an equitable classroom atmosphere and help boys raise their self-esteem and confidence in their own writing ability. Even though the teachers revealed their beliefs about gender and writing during classroom conversations, the boy participants never hinted they thought either teacher favored the girl writers in the class by having higher expectations for them or with their praise or attention. In my field observations, I did not see an inequity in the time spent in questioning or conferencing between genders. Both teachers utilized a method where they alternated between calling on boys and girls during whole class instruction and for writing conferences (FN5,6,8,15).

While the four boys unanimously showed high self esteem and confidence in their writing abilities, three boys expressed their beliefs about gender differences in writers. Samson still believed girls were better writers. He said, “I kind of think girls are better writers because when they write, like Sue and Jane, they know what to write about. They get better grades than the boys in our class” (S19: 14-19). He also followed this statement up with a conditional statement that it is boys’ choice when they don’t write and again echoes the implications of irrelevant topics and boys’ feelings of entitlement or resistance that allows them to choose not to write, “Some boys try hard but some others think poorly about writing. If they never
experienced what the prompt is about or relate to it, they won’t write. Some people do that, but not me” (S19:28-31). Purcell-Gates (1995) documents this type of disengagement and thinking “poorly about writing” from literacy events when boys experience racism, classism, or sexism. The relevancy gap that is between a student’s home life and school life widens even more if students are minority, such as Samson, who was the student to describe this intentional disengagement even though he clarified that he chooses not to disengage himself. When Samson described others he knew who refused to write, both irrelevancy and entitlement may contribute to their choices.

Miguel responded very differently when talking about gender differences and felt defensive even thinking that girls might be better writers and replied, “Girls aren’t any better writers. There have been a lot of boy writers that are great authors. One book I read by a woman, I hated it” (M19:7-10).

Junior thought the best writers, boy or girl, was whoever had “the best experiences in their lives. They probably have the biggest imaginations and they’ll have a better chance of writing a better paper” (J19:1-4). Junior didn’t believe in gender differences making a difference but instead picked up on the differences that a students’ “cultural capital” or the knowledge and life experiences that enable greater success and can make in the academic achievement of students (Hinchey, 1998). Junior later said that he did think his twin sister, who was in another fourth grade class, was a better writer than he was, “I think Jane is a better writer than me because it is easy for her to think of a story and she writes a lot more than me. I can write fine but sometimes I need a little help” (J1:24). In general, Junior did not see a gender difference but he offers the example of his sister as a case when he felt a girl was a better writer than he was.
Gabe, like Junior, felt boys were equal to or better than girls in writing but acknowledged, like Samson, that he felt many boys choose not to be good writers because of social pressures. He said, “Girls are better writers because they have open minds. They think about things boys don’t think about” (G4B:24-25). Gabe, who seemed to watch more TV than the other three participants, felt the media also portrayed writing as a female activity, “I think TV shows all the time that boys are that way [more interested in sports and activities]. Most books are made by women and most children’s books are made by women. There’s cartoons that show that boys should be more manly. They should go outside and play football” (G5B:7-14). Gabe addressed the question in more global terms and instead of talking about the girls and boys in his classroom, he compared the social influences of television that shape public opinion.

In this research, the boy participants had a high self-esteem and were given “mastery experiences” (Pajares, 2007) in the form of successful literacy events that encouraged interactions, a feeling of competence, and self-awareness. The boys were mixed in their evaluation of gender differences in writing and cited social roles, cultural capital, and relevancy as significant factors. The teachers held certain gender beliefs and expressed those beliefs but organized the writing workshop in a way that was equitable and the boy participants did not express any feelings of discrimination or marginalization.

**The Relevancy of Topic Choice**

Are boys limiting themselves to a relevant yet narrow array of topic and genre choices because of perceived social rules and if so, is this hindering their writing achievement? Having choice in the classroom meant having power to make decisions. Making decisions means being actively engaged in the work. From beginning to end, the boys unanimously and consistently agreed that the best thing about writing class was when they had some choice in their writing assignments. When they didn’t have choice in their assignments, the writing motivation went
down and the anxiety about writing went up. Miguel described his feelings during the writing test when he had zero choice in the topic choice, “It [the writing prompt] was about something that I don’t think about much so I was like, ‘What do I do?’ I was just stuck, like going crazy. I finally thought of something in the last 20 minutes and I had to write it down. And after I finished I was like, ‘Oh, my God.’ And I was exhausted” (M3: 22-25). Because Miguel had no connection with the writing prompt, he was unable to write. He described the internal anxiety he felt, the stress of finding writing ideas, and his inability to write for the first 20 minutes of the writing time. He described his emotional anxiety during the test as he knew he had to write something in response to a prompt that was not relevant to his life experiences. In this experience, the writing test was not testing Miguel’s ability to write a focused, descriptive or expository essay as much as it was testing Miguel’s ability to make connections to a prompt that was irrelevant to his life experiences within a 45 minutes time period.

When the assignment was relevant to Miguel’s life, he says he has plenty to write and say, “If you say write about this, then I think I hate writing. If they say to write about something you want, then I love it. Like when I write about my mom and dad” (M23: 27-30). Writing became easier and more engaging to the boys when they chose a topic that allowed them to draw details from their own cultural capital and their own life experiences. Dyson (1993) called this type of curriculum “permeable” and advocated allowing the “social worlds” of children to intersect with the “academic worlds” of the school. Miguel’s experiences working in his mother’s store after school were going to be very different than Gabe’s experiences watching his little sisters after school. While Junior wanted to write about his recent trip skiing in West Virginia, neither Gabe nor Miguel had much to say about an experience like that. Samson gave a concrete example of relevance in writing prompts, “I like to write because she [Mrs. Green] doesn’t make us write on
one thing. Like if she told us to write on having a class president, it would be hard because we
don’t have class presidents at this school. It would be a hard thing to write about. I like to write
about stuff I’ve been through in my life” (S23: 31-36).

When the boys felt disconnected with the writing assignment, they verbalized their
inability to write and said they sometimes chose just not to write. Gabe described this attitude,
“When they tell you what to write about and then, like, 20 minutes later, you are just sitting there
with nothing and I’m like, ‘I just don’t want to do it now.’ So I didn’t. Last year, I was like
that” (G23: 16-19). Gabe took a comfortable stance in refusal to do an assignment and was very
matter of fact. If the writing was relevant, he would write and if it wasn’t, he didn’t write.

**Writing Choice and Fluency**

When boys were given topic and genre choice for the writing, their word production
doubled. Table 5-5 is a summary of the word production for the four boy participants in each
writing assignment. The engagement level of the boys when given more choice in their writing
assignments is illustrated by their word production. In Chapter 5, word production was an
indicator of what was happening during the first minutes of the writing workshop and the impact
it had on the fluency of boys and girls. In this section, a comparison of the word production in
two different assignments gives a concrete illustration of the difference in fluency and
engagement when the boys were given a choice of topic and genre. In an analysis of the writing
assignments, one an expository writing in response to a given prompt and the other a free choice
writing assignment with no prompt, the word production differences were dramatic.

| Table 5-5  Topic Choice and Word Production |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Assignment      | Day 1           | Day 2           | Total Words     |
| Prompt Word     | 172             | 129             | 301             |
| Production      |                 |                 |                 |
| Free Choice     | 242             | 256             | 704             |
| Word Production |                 |                 |                 |
Samson, Miguel, Junior, and Gabe not only verbalized their preferences in having writing topic choice in their classroom writing assignments, they also demonstrated a huge difference in engagement during the writing class. In the assignments that were prompted, mimicking the Florida Writes test format, the boys continued to write but their relevant connections to the topic decreased and their word production decreased. In assignments that were free choice within the writing workshop format, the relevancy increased, engagement and word production increased. This small set of data shows, both in words and actions, the relevancy of the topic and the power of choice makes a dramatic difference in the fluency of classroom writing for fourth grade boys.

**Relevant Genre and Topic Choice**

A quick analysis of one free-choice writing assignment for the fourth grade class illustrates gender differences in topic choices (Table 5-6). This analysis is not meant to be an exhaustive look at the genre and topic choices by gender, but to support the argument that boy writers have restrictions placed on them by their culture when choosing appropriate writing topics and these social restrictions may contribute to boys’ lagging fluency levels in the writing class. Throughout the year, the boys limited themselves to an arena of topic choice that was stereotypically male.

In Table 5-6, Topic Choice Analysis, 6 out of 10 boys chose to write a fantasy and 5 of those 6 stories featured the author as the hero of the story, a very masculine type of story. In these fantasies, the boys’ defeat the nemesis through the use of physical prowess in the form of fighting, guns, swords, and magic. Violence and aggression was used appropriately in the context of the story and Mrs. Green allowed them to explore the topics of weapon use, killing, and fighting in the stories. Research supports this stance and Fletcher says he believes, “violent writing is actually important to their [boys’] development” (p.57) This type of writing allows boys, “understand and express the basic male narrative: they are young men growing toward the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girl Writing Titles</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Asian Girl</td>
<td>Realistic Fiction</td>
<td>An Asian girl describes her fears as she adjusts to American life with the help of a friend (in the class).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Adventure of Emotions</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>A girl describes her emotions during different events such as the death of a relative and her birthday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Adventures of Ali</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>Three girls (in the class) have an adventure on a magical island.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What Happened in Room 204?</td>
<td>Horror</td>
<td>A girl figures out the murder that happened at the school. Author as hero.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Rachel Discovers America’s Freedom</td>
<td>Realistic Fiction</td>
<td>A young girl describes her adjustment to America as a new immigrant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Ella Enchanted</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>A retelling of story with author as the main character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Magical Adventures</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>Two girls (in the class) are granted a wish from an elf and have an adventure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Beware of Mrs. TwiddleThumbs</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>An eccentric teacher makes life hard for her students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Someone Please Help Me</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>A young girl describes her feelings about her family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Freedom of the Wolves</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>A girl helps to set wolves free in a national park.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boy Writing Titles</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The Last Ride</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>A boy describes his bravery on a roller coaster ride.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Attack on Tiki Island</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>A fantasy about the Tikis protecting their island from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Adventures of the Missing Items</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>A fantasy based on Pokemon ideas and characters. Author as hero.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Slay the Dragon</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>A medieval story with author as hero who slays the dragon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Alien From Mars</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>A beer-drinking alien is aided by earthling (the author) to fix his ship and return to Mars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Simpson’s Poem Book</td>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>Concrete poems describing each character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Summer Vacation</td>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>Descriptive piece about upcoming summer plans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. The Ugly Fairy Society</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>An evil fairy tries to take over the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. The Race</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>A boy enters and wins a world championship race. Author as hero.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

age when many men around the world must go to war. They must take their places in a
dangerous world” (p.57). While everyone agrees there must be commonsense limitations and that
teachers must figure out what is acceptable and unacceptable in the classroom, boys who incorporate violence in their writing may just be trying to mesh the conflicting roles of maleness and institutionalized student.

The girls wrote many pieces about the relationships between characters in the stories, about friendship and the building of friendships, and emotional topics such as sorrow, frustration, and joy, while boys in this class shied away from these types of stories. Seven out of the ten stories the girls wrote (Table 5-6) included strong themes of emotion and relationship. Two stories were about an immigrant girls coming to America and adjusting to their new life with the help of a friend. Two other stories, “Adventure of Emotions” and “Someone, Please Help Me” are both writings that just feature a description of the emotions the girls felt during different significant events in their lives. Showing a variety of genre, “What Happened in Room 204?” is a horror story and “Beware of Mrs. Twiddle Thumbs” is a story modeled in the style of a class read aloud, Sideways Stories from Wayside School (Sachar, 2004). Girls, in this fourth grade class, felt free to write about action, fantasy, and even horror with approval from their peers. The boy participants and the other boys in the class chose to stick with genre and topic choices that were universally considered stereotypically male. The one topic exception was Miguel’s poem and story that centered around his family, what they were going to do and the acrostic poem that described his brother.

Test Demand Writing

Right now we are doing prompt writing and all this FCAT stuff so we can get used to it. When it’s over, it will be really good. Then we can get back to writing. Gabe

Relevancy is important to the engagement levels of the boys in two arenas: the first was the strength of the identity of the writer was only as relevant as it coexisted comfortably within the hierarchy of emerging identities of the boy such as being a male, friend, student and son.
The second application of relevancy was in connection to the writing assignment itself and the connection between the amount of choice and power the boy writers had in choosing topic and genre and their subsequent engagement.

In the state standardized test-writing exam, the boys were placed in a situation when they didn’t have these components of relevancy. In our interviews, the boys compared the writing experiences during the writing class and the writing experience during the prompt writing test, Florida Writes.

**Test Structure**

The Florida Writes test is a 45-minute timed, prompt-driven writing test given to all fourth graders in the state of Florida. It is holistically scored on a scale from 1 to 6 with 6 being the highest score. Two scorers grade each paper independently and the scores are averaged. A passing grade on the Florida Writes exam is a 3.5 or higher.

The Department of Education issued two prompts for the fourth grade writing exam, one expository and one narrative. The prompts were distributed at random to the students and supposedly half the class received narrative and the other half received expository. In this case, all four boys received the expository prompt. The prompts are not labeled expository or narrative so the student must read the prompt during the test and correctly identify the genre and write accordingly. The scorer does know whether they are scoring expository or narrative and grades accordingly. The prompt the boys’ received read:

“Students often help by doing a job in the classroom. Think about your favorite classroom job. Now write to explain your favorite classroom job.”

**The State Mandated Scoring Rubric for Test-Writing**

The Florida Writes test is scored based on four writing elements: 1) focus, 2) organization, 3) support, and 4) conventions. Each paper is graded holistically, meaning the four
elements are viewed as integrated and only one score is given per paper. On the Florida Department of Education website (www.fldoe.org) there is an informative and thorough 88 page document titled “Florida Writes!: Grade 4” explaining what the Florida Writes test is and how it is administered, a scoring rubric, sample prompts and sample student papers used as “anchor” papers. These anchor papers are examples of each scoring level from 1 to 6 with additional comments about the papers explaining how they were scored.

**Standardized Tests and Relevancy**

The Florida Writes test overshadowed and influenced the writing instruction throughout the year until the test was completed in February. Students were taught holistic scoring methods and had examples of writings that were scored one through six for references. The testing language was internalized by the boys who referred to their own pieces in terms of holistic scoring as well. “I think this piece is about a 5 or 6” (Miguel) or “Mrs. Green gave me a 4.5 on my last piece” (Samson). The entire class had been taught what those numbers represented and the scoring process so they could converse using this specific vocabulary. Anxiety around the school built during the months of February and March and then dramatically lowered following the test. Junior summed up the boys’ fears about the test when he said, “I didn’t know what I was going to get on the test or what I was going to write about. It could’ve been horrible or something good” (J15:1-3).

Mrs. Green tried to minimize the testing stress and did not constantly threaten the students with the upcoming test. Even so, the boys’ reactions were similar in that all the boys dreaded it and were nervous about it. No one had any positive feelings about test writing but the boys did express confidence in their performance. Gabe says, “I was kind of nervous on the test day but once I got started, it was fun. It was like any other day but I was writing in a book” (G11: 8-9). Junior also had a similar experience, “It was kind of scary because I didn’t know what I would
get. But after I got the story, then it was kind of easy. I wanted to pass the test and get a 3.5” (J12:25-27). He felt confident in his performance, “After a few minutes I wasn’t nervous because I thought I was doing good on everything” (J13:1-3). Miguel says he also felt prepared and ready, “I felt great. I ate a big breakfast. My mom made a special breakfast. I slept good and got my sleep” (M13:9-11).

Later, after we got the results, we learned Miguel and Gabe did not pass the Florida Writes test with a 3.5 or higher. They were two of three boys that did not pass the test in Mrs. Green’s classroom. The test scores contrasted the perception of the boys self assessment. Gabe had said of his paper, “I think the one I did for the test was one of my best” (G11:16).

The boys transferred their experiences in the writing process classroom to the test writing experience and expressed a strong desire to have more choice on the test. I believe the boys had experienced more success in the writing workshop classroom where they were given some power in topic choice and they were trying to figure out a way to make the testing experience a more accurate measure of their writing abilities. The boys had individual genre preferences for expository or narrative and also wanted to have several prompts to choose from during the test. Gabe explained, “If kids get to chose from prompts, they are better at it. I was hoping for a narrative but when I got it, it was expository. If you don’t write about something you like, you don’t get a picture of what a kid can do. They could have a story, better than a 6, if they get something they love” (G12:1-4). Miguel said he wanted a choice and was hoping for expository, “It would be better if I had a choice of expository or narrative” (M13:23-28). The boys suggested two prompts on the test, one expository and one narrative and allowing each writer to choose one. This way, the writer would double his or her chance of finding a relevant prompt that would more accurately measure writing ability.
Test Results Support Writing Workshop

The boy writers were very positive about the relevancy of writing workshop and Mrs. Green noticed higher engagement and energy levels with all of her writers, both girls and boys. Before the test, she was already gearing up to defend her teaching methods regardless of the test results which we both agreed were generally flawed and subjective and the quality of scorers has been questioned in the past. The South Florida Sentinel reported, “Temporary workers hired to grade Florida's standardized test for public school students are as likely to be doctors and lawyers as they are video-store clerks, janitors, homemakers or even individuals with degrees from foreign universities” (South Florida Sun-Sentinel, June 12, 2006). The only requirement was that the grader has a bachelor’s degree, but a legislative investigation into these criteria led to some questionable claims by applicants, “One lists his education background as a psychology degree from a school in an unidentified nation. The school: Senatus Universitatis Xaverianae. His only work experience since May 1990 has been as a janitor, and previously he was a shipping and receiving clerk” (South Florida Sun-Sentinel, June 12, 2006).

Mrs. Green wondered if Gabe and Miguel, who she assessed as average writers capable of solid “4” papers, were unable to pass the test due to time constraints, lack of relevant prompt, or the subjectivity of a grader with no educational background. By October, she said regardless of the upcoming test scores, she had decided that the process writing classroom really did work and was more beneficial for her students, “Last year was so monotonous with so much test prep. This year we are focusing on the writers and all my students whether they are high or low, seem to be responding” (MG3:5-12).

When the test results did come in at the end of the school year, the results reinforced what Mrs. Green had already noticed- teaching writing in a writing workshop format improved writing skills and therefore students performed better on the standardized test. What the test scores
didn’t show was that Mrs. Green, more importantly, helped a class of children learn to enjoy the
classroom process and believed they were writers able to write in the real world for authentic
purposes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even though Miguel and Gabe did not pass the Florida Writes exam with a 3.5 or higher, the class as a whole improved their writing test scores from the year before. Boys, taken as a subgroup, also increased their scores from the previous years from a passing rate of 58% to a passing rate of 70%. Girls also increased their passing rate to 91% this year. While these scores represent different students, Mrs. Brown still felt justified in continuing to teach writing in a writing workshop format in the future. The scores highlighted the positive classroom growth that she had noticed during the year. While boys improved dramatically on the test and matched the 70% passing rate of the girls from the year before, they did not close the achievement gap since the girls improved as well. The boy average for Mrs. Green’s class was higher than the average for all students in the school district.

Boys, having experienced the relevancy of writing in writing workshop, were better able to endure a writing task with much less relevancy such as the state writing test. Junior explained, “I like writing workshop because we are learning about writing and after we write, we get more words in our heads and get better at it. When it comes to demand writing and Florida Writes, we can get those words out of our heads and be better” (J16:1-6).

**Relationships, Relevancy and Testing**

In the spring of 2008, for the first time, the state of Florida sent each school a DVD containing scans of the students’ Florida Writes test papers. This was an opportunity for the
school and teachers to review the papers themselves and assess whether the holistic grading was done accurately according to their expectations. For this research, the test was an opportunity to see the boys’ writing samples when many of the important motivational aspects of the writing class were absent. In the analysis of the experiences of boy writers in the fourth grade writing class in Table 5-8, the following items were identified as important for the engagement and motivation of boy writers. Each item has been previously discussed in the dissertation. Table 5-8 compares the strength of the item as it existed for the boys in the writing class and the strength of the item as it existed for the boys in the test writing.

The test situation was very artificial compared to the writing workshop and writing process writing. First, the “think-time” that is needed for boys to begin the writing process hinders their fluency levels on the test because they only have 45 minutes to complete the entire task. The test becomes less relevant and possibly irrelevant, because it doesn’t allow any choice of genre or topic. It is taken in silence, forbids any type of conferencing, and it is collected and sent away without the teacher or anyone at the school reading the work. These factors negates the powerful motivations of relationships and audience. The relationships that are very relevant and usually are helpful and supportive of the writing identity now become a source of stress as the boys worry about their parents and teacher’s reaction if they were to fail the test. Table 5-8 helps to visualize the components identified by the boys as important to a writer’s success and engagement and the force of their impact during the writing class writing workshop compared to their impact during the state mandated Florida Writes test.

During the Florida Writes exam, the structure of the timed, prompt-driven writing experience eliminated most of the engagement and motivational aspects of writing. The few remaining aspects identified by the boys were the relationship with a teacher and the school, their
emerging identities of son and student, and a very small window for reading over their writing and editing it before the time expired. The boys could not make a connection between the test-writing and any type of “real world” connections. Gabe said, “On the test, they just give us 45 minutes, but in real life you would always have longer” (G2.44-46).

I believe it was because of the artificial nature of the test, the lack of any relevancy to emerging identities, lack of audience and feedback, and the very limited time structure that contributed to two out of four boy participants writing pieces that did not earn a 3.5 passing score.

Even though Mrs. Green had identified these boys as “average” for my research purposes and I knew they were average to above average writers from being immersed in their work for the year, only two of the participants passed the writing test. Samson passed with a 4.0 and Junior passed with a 3.5 score. Miguel failed with a 2.5 and Gabe also failed with a 3.0 score.

Table 5-8 Important Aspects of Boys’ Writing Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Important Aspects of Writing</th>
<th>Writing Class</th>
<th>Florida Writes Testing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think-Time</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice of Topic</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice of Genre</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing Time</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publishing Time</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Conferencing</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Conferencing</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Sharing</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Audience</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevancy to Male</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevancy to Friend</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevancy to Son</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevancy to Student</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships to Teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to Peers</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to K5 Buddy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to University Buddy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to School</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Florida Writes test illustrates the boys’ performance in a situation when the tools they need to be successful were withheld. Another discrepancy can be seen by comparing the boys’ Florida Writes scores with their report card grades for writing class.

Table 5-9 identifies each boy participants and his Florida Writes test score and compares this with the report card grades for each grading period of the year. Table 5-8 highlights the discrepancy between the abilities of the boy writers to perform in the writing class structure and their ability to perform in the testing structure. Gabe earned the highest grades throughout the school year for his writing and yet, did not pass the test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Test Score</th>
<th>Pass/Fail</th>
<th>1st Quar</th>
<th>2nd Quar.</th>
<th>3rd. Quar</th>
<th>4th Quar.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Samson</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Samson earned the only “C” and no “As” on his report card, earned the highest score on the Florida Writes. Samson said he thought the prompt was easy because he had been the “tremendous” student in Mrs. Green’s class and wrote about that.

Typically, Black, Hispanic, and poor students earn lower grades and score lower than the majority of white students on testing data. In this data, this was not the case. While Gabe, a lower SES student, did score the lowest on the state writing test, he earned the highest grades in writing for the year. Samson, the Black student, earned the highest test score of all the participants. Miguel, the Hispanic student, had a solid B average in the writing class but scored a 2.5 on the writing test. I do believe Miguel was hindered in his writing from a smaller available vocabulary in English than the other boy participants. While he communicated effectively in the classroom, the results of no English being spoken in the home or English books being read to him throughout his childhood would have some impact on his accumulated and accessible
vocabulary during a writing test. However, a comparison of Miguel’s paper and Junior’s paper shows very few differences in focus, organization and content. Junior, a white, middle-class boy, scored the average score of 3.5 on the test and he most likely benefited from the tutoring he received regularly after school. The other boys could not afford tutoring or did not seek it. Overall, I speculate that the relevancy of the prompt to the boys at that particular time and day had greater impact on the testing than did their SES or race.

**Word Production or Fluency on the Writing Test**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Total Test Word Count</th>
<th>Average Word Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>1980 words</td>
<td>198 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>2973 words</td>
<td>270 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Differences</strong></td>
<td><strong>993 words</strong></td>
<td><strong>72 words</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the Florida Writes test, fluency and word count seemed to foreshadow test score in most cases. While there were some exceptions, in general, the higher the word count the more likely the test would earn a passing score. In Mrs. Green’s class, three out of the four failures wrote in the 100-199 word range. The lowest score of 2.5 also had the lowest word count and the highest score in the class of 5.5 had the highest word count.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6.0</th>
<th>5.5</th>
<th>5.0</th>
<th>4.5</th>
<th>4.0</th>
<th>3.5</th>
<th>3.0</th>
<th>2.5</th>
<th>2.0</th>
<th>1.5</th>
<th>1.0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>456</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>227</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>190</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5-11 shows the distribution of holistic test scores and word count of each paper. Though there are several exceptions, this break down of fluency, word production and test scores allows the pattern to emerge that in general, higher word production leads to higher test scores.
Conclusion

Relevancy of the writing topic and genre has long been established by others as an important component of a successful writing workshop. In this chapter, the relevancy of the writing to boy writers was explored in a new way by framing the relevancy in the relationships within the writing classroom. Relevancy is also framed in a hierarchy of identities for boy writers. The Florida Writes demand test taking experiences of the boy writers served as non-relevant experience and the boys did not endorse this type of writing either verbally or by their performance on the test.

The relationships within the writing class allowed the boys to play different relational roles such as mentee, mentor, and peer. The boys were scaffolded in their learning through their mentors of Mrs. Green, Mr. B, and their college writing buddy. The boys engaged as equals with their peers and the wider school audience during the writing class and Eagle Authors. They also were the experts when they mentored their kindergarten literacy buddies and meet with them weekly to help them read and write throughout the school year. These relationships made the writing class more authentic, meaningful, and relevant.

In this chapter we move beyond the obvious assumption that relevancy means it is easier for the boys to write about a familiar topic. The theories of relevancy and emerging identities enables a deeper understanding of the way an identity of a boy writer must fit comfortably in a hierarchy of identities that are existing and emerging. First a boy is a male as defined by the individual’s culture including race and socio-economic status, a son as defined by the family unit, a friend that belongs to a social network, a student who must negotiate the official school expectations set forth by the teacher and school climate. If being a boy writer cannot exist comfortably within this hierarchy of identities, being a boy writer become irrelevant. The stronger the connections are between the emerging identities of the boy writer, the higher the
engagement in the writing class. Having choice and power in the writing class over topic and genre allowed boys to make writing more relevant to their emerging identities and the beliefs of the boys and their teachers impacted their creation of identities.
CHAPTER 6
COMPLEXITY OF THE WRITING PROCESS: TIME AND FLUENCY, SOCIAL, AND BIOLOGICAL LANGUAGE PROCESSING

They just need more time to get started and filter through their thoughts. I’m not talking about the special education kids, just boys in general. They just seem to need to go through a thought process and then finally get it down on paper. Mrs. Green

This study found that relevancy of the writing experience, how the writing meshes with boys’ existing and emerging identities and how boys negotiate the relationships within the writing experiences, is not the only factor that hinders or helps their success. This chapter focuses on the ways that boys utilized their time in the writing classroom and how boys differed from girl writers in their productivity and fluency of writing.

While relevancy of writing encompassed the perspective of a wide angle lens overview of the writing classroom, this chapter begins with a close look focusing on a specific time within the writing class: the first ten minutes of writing workshop. The first ten minutes of writing began after the students had completed the mini-lesson and when they sat down to put pencil to paper and work on their individual writing pieces. This research found an amazing discrepancy in behavior and writing production between boy and girl writers during this small but crucial writing time. Boys tended to take an average of five to ten minutes longer than girls to begin writing each day of writing workshop. In my numerous classroom observations, I noticed a difference between the boy and girl writers. In an interview with the intern, Mr. B., he also noticed similar behaviors:

I’ve noticed that the majority of the boys take a little bit longer to get started. They kind of sit there with that blank look on their face and it takes a little shove to get them off. The girls you just stop teaching or talking and their words are just flying out on their papers. Not all of them, but in general. I’d say out of the ten boys, 8 or 9 of them take a few minutes and seem to have to go through a thought process; maybe they are kind of mapping out the story and where it is going to go. The girls just start getting things down and they will just go back and just cross it out. Boys seem to need more time at the beginning before writing (B1.21-40).
Mrs. Green also noticed that boys tended to take a longer time getting started on their writing. She felt boys had a lot to share but, “They just need a little push. I think boys have a lot to share. Once they get it going, they are able to express themselves. The girls just start right off and get going a little bit quicker” (G3.20-28). The four research participants, Samson, Miguel, Gabe and Junior, all showed a pattern of significant starting-delay time in multiple instances throughout the data collection.

These comments led me to begin a close, pointed observation of the behaviors of the boy participants during the first few minutes of the writing workshop. The following excerpt was taken from my field notes entry of Monday, March 17, 2008, and focused on the first part of the writing workshop as the boys began an expository piece focused around their favorite place to eat.

Excerpt from Field Notes and Memos on 3/17/08:

Mrs. Green’s Writing Classroom, Central Elementary, 4th grade

10: 10- 10:20 a.m. The students return to their seats after listening to Old Yeller on the reading carpet and pull out their writing folders. Mrs. Green begins the mini-lesson by prepping the class to begin an expository writing about their favorite restaurant or place to eat. She says, “Remember yesterday, we started our story boards about our favorite restaurants or a great place to eat? I’m putting mine up on the Elmo for you to see.” She puts her story board on the projector and the class analyzes what she has drawn in each of the four boxes. She reminds the children they can choose any place they want such as grandma’s house or a restaurant. The boys pull out their story boards and look at them. Miguel and Junior begin adding details to their pictures. Mrs. Green asks all students to begin writing their first draft of the expository paper during workshop and then they will share with the class after lunch. Students have 25 minutes until lunch. Mrs. Green signals the beginning of writing workshop time by turning on soft classical music and sits down to write at a desk. During the first 10 minutes of writing workshop, students are silently writing at their desks.

10:20-10:45 a.m.:

Junior: He looks around the room for 1 minute. Then he gets up, walks casually to front of room, gets paper from the paper pile and returns to desk. Next, he taps his pencil on his paper and then does fake writing (moves the pencil across page but is not making any marks), stretches, and looks around room for 2 more minutes. After 4 minutes, he begins to
color in the holes of his notebook paper. After 7 minutes, he begins to write sentences on his paper. He finishes writing workshop with 70 words of a first draft.

Miguel: He sits and looks at his storyboard for 2 minutes and then begins to draw some more detail on the 4th square. After this, he closes his eyes and puts his head down on the desk for 5 seconds and then picks it back up again. He has not gotten notebook paper out yet. He continues to look at his storyboard pictures and put his head up and down intermittently for the next 4 minutes. Mrs. Green circulates and stops by his desk at 10:30 and says, “You having a hard time?” She asks him what his paper is about and he verbalizes the story about the restaurant Chili’s to her while he looks at his storyboard. At 10:32, she walks away and he gets out a piece of paper and begins to write. He alternates between writing and putting his head down, talking to neighbors, and staring around room until lunch. At 10:42 he announces to class, “Three minutes until lunch.” Mrs. Green tells him he will be at the end of the lunch line for causing the disruption. He finishes writing workshop with 28 words of his first draft.

Gabe: He stares around room for 2 minutes, looks at neighbor’s storyboards, chats with neighbor for a moment and then shades in a picture on his storyboard page with his pencil. After 4 minutes, he gets up and gets a piece of paper from the pile in the front and sharpens his pencil. After 7 minutes, at 10:27, Gabe is running his hand through his bangs and pushing them back and forward on his forehead. After this, he picks his teeth with the pencil. He puts pencil to paper and begins writing at 10:32 a.m. He rotates between writing and running his hand through his bangs until lunch. Gabe finishes writing workshop with 42 words of his first draft.

Samson: He looks around the room and looks at his storyboard for 3 minutes and then begins to add detail to the 4th square. He talks to a neighbor quietly for a few seconds and then puts his chin on his desk, closes his eyes, opens them and picks his head up. He taps his pencil on his knee and looks at his paper again. He stares around room for a while longer and taps his pencil and another finger on his knee like he is playing the drums. After 9 minutes, he begins to write on his paper and then alternates between writing, staring around room and putting his chin on his desk until lunch. Samson finishes writing workshop with 32 words of his first draft.

Later that day as I typed up the field notes, I was intrigued with what I had observed in the classroom earlier. The following excerpt from my Memo writing led me to closely analyze my research data and begin to question the causes and implications of this starting delay.

Memo (3.17.08): During the first minutes of writing workshop, my boys were exhibiting the same behaviors as most of the other boys in the class. This is in stark contrast to the girls in the class who began to write almost immediately and were engaged in their writing ever since. Why is it taking the boys longer to get started? I would have thought they had plenty of time for pre-writing and rehearsal activities with the creation of the storyboard the day before.
I wondered if I would see a difference in the quality of their storyboards compared to the girls. With a quick walk around the room, I didn’t see any difference and thought the girls’ drawings were even more detailed and complete than the boys’ drawings. I think this time (5-10 minutes) difference in the ability to get started with a first draft of writing is significant for achievement levels of the boys. Are they processing differently than the girls? Do they think and then write rather than write and think at the same time? What social and biological influences can be attributed to the starting delay? It doesn’t seem to be a behavior issue or a leveled issue (high and low level boys are all taking more time to begin).

I wonder what impact this time difference might have in the course of a writing assignment or the course of the year of instruction. What are the actual differences in word production in each step of the writing process? What happens if boys don’t have this time to think and process before writing? How do word production and quality relate in this scenario?

**What is happening during the first 10 minutes of writing time?**

Over the course of several months, boys showed a constant tendency to take more time than girls to begin writing. By recording the start times of the research participants over multiple writing assignments focusing on different steps of the writing process, it was established that the boy writers took an average of five to ten minutes longer to begin writing than the girls in the class. The boys had a longer starting-delay on the first day of a writing project as they began their first drafts. One subsequent days of writing, either finishing the first draft or revising and writing multiple drafts, the starting-delay time was reduced but still significant.

The following behaviors were observed during the first ten minutes and are listed in no particular order of importance except for the first one of “staring.” Staring around room, out the window, or at the paper was the most common behavior observed and one that all four of the research participants engaged in regularly.

**Externally Observed Behaviors:**

- Staring
- Looking around
- Head in hands
- Playing with hair
- Reading or rereading paper
• Drawing or doodling
• Erasing
• Sharpening pencil
• Organizing items on or around desk
• Tapping pencil
• Tapping fingers or hands
• Picking at skin, ears, teeth, nose
• Forehead on desk
• Chin on desk
• Conversing quietly with neighbor
• Looking or reading neighbor’s work
• Walking to get paper, dictionary, thesaurus
• Biting nails or pencil

In contrast to the boy writers, on the first day of a writing assignment most girls in the writing class engaged almost immediately with their writing or were engaged within the first two minutes of the start time and stayed engaged with the writing during the entire workshop. Most girls were not observed taking extended breaks from their writing to engage in the same behaviors as the boys such as staring and putting their heads on their desks.

**Internal Processes**

Through the process of interviewing participants, informally and formally, internal processes were made visible and understandable to explain why boys took significantly longer to begin writing than girls. At times, it is helpful to define what is not happening in order to define what is happening. The beginning of this section will eliminate some common causes of student-delay in working on assigned tasks in the classroom setting.

**The Elimination of Management and Motivational Reasons for the Starting-Delay and Think-Time Phenomenon**

Delays in students beginning and completing work in the classroom can be both teacher caused and/or student caused. A common cause for loss of instructional time or time on task is poor organizational skills of the teacher (Emmer et al., 2006). In this research setting, Mrs. Green had excellent organizational skills. The procedures and routines of the writing class, as
described in Chapter 4, were well established and the students transitioned from one task to another easily. She had verbal and non-verbal cues for transitions so they were calm and orderly and not accompanied by teacher nagging or idle threatening. Assigned tasks were given in clear, direct terms with a thorough explanation and time for questions. None of the research participants expressed frustration or confusion that could be attributed to lack of teacher organization.

When the boys spoke of writing workshop, their words reflected an understanding of the workshop concept and the process of writing. Miguel explained the writing process in his own words said if he had to teach others he would use the same strategies,

If I had to teach others, I would start by letting them write whatever they wanted. If they had a writing prompt, I would help them feel comfortable and let them study with me. If they have a problem they can ask. I ask Mrs. Green about my writing when I am stuck and she’ll say, ‘What did you mean here?’ and ‘What happened here?’ and then I think, ‘Wow!’ and tell her, and then I’ll add that to my paper. It helps me a lot. At the beginning of the year, I wrote a paragraph and was done, and now I write a whole paper or even two (M2.17-29).

Samson demonstrated his understanding of writing several drafts when he said, “Start off with a rough draft and write all the words down. Then later you can cross out and add words on the second draft” (S2. 31-32). There was no evidence the boys were confused or frustrated by the writing workshop procedures or routines.

The motivation of student writers can also be greatly influenced by the classroom community, student-teacher relationship, and the curriculum (Calkins, 1998; Graves, 1983).

The classroom climate, as was established earlier in chapter 4, was a safe, orderly, friendly place and the classroom community was nourished from the first day of school. Throughout the term, all the boy participants were eager to share their work with the class and Mrs. Green which demonstrated their confidence in their peers to respond appropriately.

Samson said sharing was his favorite part of the writing process, “I like reading my writing out
loud to the class. It lets me show it and then everyone comments on my paper. That makes me a better writer” (S1. 46-49). The students were always seated in cooperative learning groups of four desks facing each other and were trained to ask each other for help, complete cooperative learning tasks, and treat each other with respect.

In general, the boy writers did not engage in misbehavior that would cause a classroom disruption or hinder the learning or working of the other students during this first ten minutes. Any classroom disruptions that I observed were minor in nature and were all handled by Mrs. Green and Mr. B. using appropriate verbal and non-verbal strategies with a minimum amount of disruption to the flow of the lesson or writing workshop.

The student-teacher relationship was a positive motivation for the boy participants and motivated them to write. The boys all expressed affection and respect for both Mrs. Green and Mr. B. They felt that Mrs. Green was sincere in her desire to help them become better writers. Miguel said, “Mrs. Green makes it [writing] sound like so much fun and she tries to make it fun. So the more and more she makes it fun, the more I want to do it. We get to write what we want; she doesn’t tell us what to do” (M1.42-47). Gabe indicated that even when he didn’t want to write, he tried because he didn’t want to disappoint his teacher, “When I don’t want to write, it makes me feel bad because it makes me feel like a party pooper. So, even when I don’t feel like writing, I write anyway” (G4.29-31). Junior said that positive encouragement and sincerity from his teachers motivated him to write, “Teacher always makes us happy by saying we are all writers and authors. And she believes it” (J1.47-49).

In this research setting, the classroom context was conducive to writing and students were in a classroom community that was organized, supportive, and safe. The student-teacher relationship was healthy and motivating for the boy writers and I did not gather any evidence that
these factors greatly contributed to the starting-delay or think-time of the boy writers during the first part of writing workshop.

**Elimination of Pre-Writing as a Significant Factor in the Starting-Delay Phenomenon**

Another possible cause for the starting-delay phenomenon that needed to be examined was the amount of time devoted to pre-writing activities. Beginning a new piece of writing takes some kind of planning and pre-writing whether it is internal or external. Mrs. Green taught the class several types of pre-writing strategies throughout the year. Sometimes they were mandatory and sometimes they weren’t. For the two sets of data analyzed for the starting-delay phenomenon analysis, an *entire day* of pre-writing was taken before beginning the first draft.

Types of pre-writing I observed in the class and in the boys’ notebooks were storyboards, webbing, writing territory lists, and museum walks.

For the expository writing assignment, Mrs. Green assigned a “story board,” the pre-writing strategy that was most frequently used throughout the school year. The story board strategy incorporated drawing or illustrating the story in a series of squares on a folded piece of white paper. Mrs. Green felt this pre-writing strategy was beneficial to the students and aided them in organizing their thoughts in a non-threatening way while forcing them to include all required parts of the story or writing piece such as beginning, supporting reasons, and conclusion. Students were allowed the entire writing workshop of 20 minutes to create and illustrate their storyboards. On this same pre-writing day after their lunch break, students had a “museum walk” where they walked around the room and looked at everyone else’s storyboards. This also aided student in their pre-writing rehearsal and brainstorming. During the museum walk, students were able to ask each other questions, discuss the storyboards, and revise their own storyboard. Miguel said the storyboard, “helps because you draw pictures of what you do and that will remind you of your story” (M1.29-30).
For the narrative assignment, students utilized a brainstorming list called “writing territories,” a pre-writing strategy gleaned from Nancie Atwell’s *Lessons That Change Writers* (2002). Students brainstormed topics of interest and list them in their writing notebooks for reference throughout the year. Mrs. Green reviewed the novels and genres that had been read during reading circle and the books were used as springboards for writing topics. For example, *Old Yeller* was listed as an “animal story” and students jotted down any relevant ideas about their own possible animal stories. Mrs. Green also reviewed other genres students could choose from such as fiction, non-fiction, poetry, fantasy, mystery, comic, and suspense.

In both the expository and the narrative writing assignments, the boy writers had spent the day before engaged in a class of pre-writing activities. They knew they were going to be writing a first draft during the next writing workshop and had 24 hours or more to continue to think about their writing pieces. For this reason, I do not believe a lack of pre-writing time or an understanding of pre-writing strategies was a significant factor in the time discrepancy between boy and girl writers.

**From the Boys’ Perspective**

If classroom management problems, an ineffective teacher-student relationship, or a lack of pre-writing time was not the cause of the starting-delay phenomenon, what was? Why were the boys taking extra time each day to begin writing? What internal processes were happening during this time? The data harvested during interviews with the participants suggested the boys were engaged in advanced mental processes during that first ten minutes of writing workshop.

Samson described what was happening “inside his head” during this time, “I think about the story I am writing about. What to put in there and what to not. It takes a lot of work. You can’t just rush through it in two minutes because you have words on there. Once I get it, it gets easier, but it takes me five or ten minutes to get ready to write it. I am thinking of, like, ten ideas
and I pick the best three and put it in my writing” (S4. 19-25). Samson indicated that he used the first 10 minutes of writing workshop to internally process information and eliminate and filter ideas before he began to write.

Samson then continued his explanation of what happened during this “think-time” in great detail by explaining the process of internal revision on his topic choice for this narrative piece. “At first I started with summer training and talked about Jupiter [a friend] but it [the piece] was going from one thing to another and just didn’t make sense to me. Then I just wrote about the race and this other person I had to beat and how I won” (S4. 28-32). When Samson described the idea of the summer training story and how it jumped from “one thing to another and didn’t make sense to me,” he is referring to an internal draft he wrote in his head. He never wrote anything down about a summer training story on paper. After he internally focused the topic, Samson decided on the story map of the race, the characters (“this other person”), conflict (“the race” and “I had to beat”), and conclusion (“and how I won”) before he began to write. This was an amazing amount of “thinking” and processing that happened during the ten minutes he externally looked like he was “staring” and “putting his head on desk.” Internally, Samson took the first minutes of workshop to work through a mental pre-writing process and draft his piece from beginning to end before he put the pencil to the paper.

Junior reinforced that he also processed ideas and filtered writing choices during this time period. “[During the ten minutes] I was thinking. I wanted to write a funny story so I was thinking about all the things I could write about. I finally thought of one and decided to write about it and then started to write. It helped to have the time from yesterday to think about my writing” (J4. 6-12).
Junior indicated that the ten minutes was used for producing and filtering ideas for writing internally. Gabe described his internal processes during think-time with great detail. He is describing an internal mental process of filtering ideas but referred to his ideas in a very concrete way when he said he, “crumpled it [the writing idea] up and threw it away.”

R: What was going on in your head during the first ten minutes of writing workshop today before you put your pencil to paper?
Gabe: I was thinking, throwing some out, and then thinking again. My original thought was that I was going to do it [concrete poems on] all of the Simpson characters and then one extra one that said ‘The Simpsons” on one big sheet of paper. Then I decided, no, that’s not going to work, so I crumpled it up and threw it away. Then I thought-

R: Did you really crumple up paper and throw it away?
Gabe: No, it was in my mind. Then I thought, Maggie, Bart, Lisa, Marge. There would be two at the top (shows me with his hands) and the name The Simpsons in the middle and two at the bottom. Then I knew it would be too long. Then I thought I could do a small book and I started with a poem about Bart. Poetry is a lot easier than writing a full fledged story and I’m good at it. I could’ve done a narrative. It’s harder to do a story about this without copyrighting and I don’t want to get arrested. So I’m doing a free verse/concrete poem and that’s my very best so I can express my feelings about the characters.

Gabe talked through the process of finding a topic and genre by thinking through different choices. He visualized the finished product and the layout of poems on the page, revised this several times, and decided on a small book format with one concrete poem on each page. Externally during this think-time, he spent minutes running his hand back and forth over his bangs, doodling, staring, and getting up to get paper. These types of behaviors are easily misinterpreted by a teacher as ploys of resistance to get out of working on the writing assignment and in many cases, boys are scolded and punished for the perceived laziness. Mrs. Green allowed boys to engage in think-time and Gabe ended the day with 38 words shaped into a concrete poem spelling “Bart” and had begun on his next concrete poem titled, “Lisa.”
**Starting is “Hard Thinking”**

The greatest amount of think-time among the boy participants occurred during the initial stages and first drafts of the writing process. All the boys agreed; starting is the hardest part of writing. Gabe said, “I was kind of frustrated trying to find out what to write about and I was like, ‘What am I gonna do?’ until I can figure it out” (G1.27). Miguel said the hardest thing about writing is, “When my teacher tells me to write a story about whatever we want. We have to think about what to write. Then even when we write it down, I think of something else and then it is hard to decide which one to pick. That is hard” (M2.54-58). Samson said this beginning writing is, “hard thinking” and he tried to get “all the thoughts out of my head.” He said it’s hard to have, “one sentence down and not know what to do and so I have to ask the teacher to help me get back on track” (S2. 81-84). Junior also says the hardest part about writing is getting started, “It’s hard. Sometimes she [Mrs. Green] says you can write whatever you want and all the ideas come into my mind of things to write about.” He said writing is “sometimes easier once you have an idea” (J1. 45-46).

The difficulty the boys expressed in getting started on a writing piece was evident in the amount of think-time they utilized on the first day they began their drafts in comparison to the following days. For example, on the first day of the expository writing assignment, Miguel and Gabe both began writing after a think-time of 12 minutes. Samson began writing after 9 minutes of think-time and Junior began after 7 minutes. On the next day of writing workshop, the boys were finishing their first drafts and the think-time decreased. Samson and Gabe took 7 minutes less to begin to write and both were engaged in their writing after 5 minutes. Samson began to write after only 1 minute but then stopped and did not begin to write again for 5 minutes. Junior decreased his think-time from 7 minutes to 5 minutes. Miguel decreased his think-time from 12 minutes to 5 minutes. Even though the think-time was smaller after the initial day of writing, it is
still larger than the think-time of the girls in the class and over a two-day accumulation, is a significant amount of writing workshop time.

### Table 6-1 Think-Time for Expository Assignment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boy</th>
<th>Day One</th>
<th>Day Two</th>
<th>Two Day Total Think-Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Samson</td>
<td>9 minutes</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>14 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>12 minutes</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>17 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>12 minutes</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>17 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>7 minutes</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>13 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Synthesizing the patterns found in observations and interviews, the following theory of boy writers attempts to explain the external and possible internal processes occurring during the writing class.

**Boy Writers and the Theory of Think-Time**

Boys’ writers in the writing workshop classroom setting, regardless of race, socio-economic, or ability levels, were more successful when allowed to engage in “think-time,” an internal and mental processing time averaging five to ten minutes before the writing act began. Boy writers, possibly influenced by biological and social constructs, used think-time to mentally process and filter ideas, create mental story maps, decide on story genres and formats, and anticipate audience reactions. External behaviors during think-time included staring, fidgeting, or other rhythmic behaviors such as tapping or doodling. While think-time was deemed necessary by the boy writers, taking more time than girls to begin writing each day translated into a significant difference in word production by gender. Boy writers had less time to write, revise, and publish writing pieces. If boys take more time to internally process ideas before beginning to write, time constraints during the state writing assessment may be a significant cause for the underachievement of boy writers.
Possible Causes for Think-time: Social Filtering and Language Processing

Up to this point, we have discussed the “whats” surrounding think-time: the external behaviors observed during think-time and the internal behaviors metacognitively described by the boy writers. But why is it happening? This next section will describe possible biological and social factors that contribute to the need for a longer think-time for boy writers.

My sister-in-law lives outside the city limits and they get their water from a well. When I turn on her kitchen spigot, it takes the water a while to work its way through the thick filter on her faucet. The stream of water, having to progress through the filter’s dense layers inside, is delayed and less intense than the water leaving a faucet without the filter on it. In the same way, boy writers may have a thicker and more constraining social filter placed on them by society and culture that must filter their writing ideas before they begin to write. Possible social and biological filters will be further discussed in the following section.

Biological Differences in Language Processing

Recent research in the area of biological influences on brain operations may also help to explain a difference between the way boys and girls process language. The last 20 years of research shows gender differences in behavior, once thought to be primarily socially programmed, are more heavily linked to biological factors than suspected (Sax, 2005). In language operations, women’s brains use both hemispheres of the brain while men’s brains only used the left hemisphere (Gilbert, 2000). Girls have a larger language processing center in the right frontal lobe, which seems to enhance their capacity to process language (Gilbert, 2000; Booth, 2002: Sax, 2005). “In females, the corpus collosum (the part that connects the two hemispheres of the brain and allows them to communicate with each other) is about 20 percent larger than it is in males” (Fletcher, 2006, p.21). It is clear from my research into the area of
gender and literacy that biological differences in the brain and its operations have some degree of influence that causes boys and girls to learn in different ways.

These biological differences may put boys at a disadvantage in writing class because the dominant school strategies, schedule, and curriculum are more girl-friendly. While Mrs. Green did her best to protect her students and create an effective learning environment, I constantly saw the fast-paced schedules, timed assignments, and constant classroom disruptions had a more negative effect on the boy writers than the girls. Mrs. Green also saw boys affected and more distracted by the disruptions and identified her biggest challenges as scheduling and disruptions, “Having lunch in the middle of class is very hard. Sometimes the kids are really into the writing and have really just gotten started and we have to break. When we come back it takes them a few minutes to get back into the writing, especially the boys. Most of the time we take that time to share from the author’s chair” (G4.34-38). The boys’ use of extended think-time, while necessary for mentally processing and preparing for writing, puts them at a disadvantage when there are disruptions (such as the lunch break) because they take another few minutes to return to the writing after the mental break from it. Boys declining achievement in school literacy may be partially caused by, “the school’s inability to accommodate and capitalize upon boys’ natural behaviors and learning styles” (Sax, 2005) which may include a more relaxed or flexible time schedule for on task work period in the classroom.

Another main distraction identified by Mrs. Green was having another teacher come into the writing class several days a week. “It really disrupts the flow and then she is reading a novel and I am reading a novel. She does a writing assignment and then I’m doing writing workshop with them. I think the students would get a lot more accomplished if I could just teach them all
week. I think I could really have time to work more continuously with the writers that way” (G4.46-49).

People walking in and out of the room, children pulled for remediation or other reasons, schedule changes, and the absence of any uninterrupted, extended time-on-task are common occurrences in American classrooms. In the area of writing, a complex mental process of putting internal thoughts and oral language into external words and paragraphs, these occurrences may have a more serious effect on boy writers whose brains are wired differently for language operations.

Teachers, who are primarily female, may not recognize gender differences or gender bias in their classroom layout, structure, schedule, and time constraints. Even when teachers do recognize boys’ need for more time on task or a different type of scheduling, changing the status quo may be difficult. Mrs. Green had little choice of when to teach writing, when to go to lunch, when her students would be pulled for remediation, or over the constant disruptions of adults walking in her classroom for a variety of reasons.

While there may be biological differences that require boys have more time than girls to write, read, speak, listen and process language, this does not mean that boys are any less intelligent than girls or have less potential than girls as writers. For example, when I pulled up the Best Books of 2007: Editors 100 picks list from Amazon, eight of the top ten recommended best selling books were written by male authors (www.amazon.com). In the “real world” outside of timed writing prompt tests and fragmented curriculums taught at a frenetic pace, male writers seem to be doing just fine.

**Complex Social Filtering**

In Chapter 2, I ask the question, “Can a young boy follow the expectations of our culture and be highly literate and fully masculine?” If gender is as much a social construct as it is a
biological one, then boys not only are processing language differently in their brains, but boys also must negotiate how to become literate socially while not compromising their emerging masculinity (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006; Newkirk, 2002; Booth, 2002). In interviews with the research participants, finding suitable topic choices was difficult and the boys used their think-time to not only brainstorm and organize ideas but also percolate the ideas through a complex social filter. Psychologists such as Kindlon, Thompson and Pollack, outline cultural constraints for boys that may be a deterrent to becoming highly literate. Pollack (1998) defined a “boy code” that is made of stereotypical and preconceived behavioral rules that force boys to act in certain ways. If boys try and break free or deviate from the code, their masculinity is challenged.

With over 40% of boys in school being brought up by single mothers (Maynard, 2002), the “missing male” phenomenon (Tyre, 2006) continues to leave boys with female teachers during the day and their single mothers or grandmothers at night. Many boys are left to frame ideas about masculinity from television, video games and other popular media sources. Tension between masculinity and literacy is easily identified in adolescent media and literature with literacy becoming synonymous with females or feminine qualities.

Gabe verbalized the tension he felt between masculinity and literacy, topic choice constraints in writing, and the media’s depiction of masculinity that demonstrates the type of social filters boys negotiate during writing class. “You never really see any boys that are artistic. You never see boys that actually pay attention to writing. It’s cause they are always writing about the same thing every time. They are always writing about football, except me. Everyone is always writing about football and video games. Going to football, baseball games and track and playing video games. They are always doing the same things” (G3. 15-20). He saw the great societal divide between topics that are acceptable for girls and topics that are acceptable for
boys and recognized that sometimes boys give up literacy skills to be considered more
masculine, “Sometimes boys are good at something but they say they don’t like it. That happens
a lot. I think boys can do well but just don’t, because they want to be more manly. They think
writing is for girls and stuff because most books are made by women. They think that writing is
for girls so they write about the boys’ stuff, which is less interesting than the girls’ stuff” (G3.
32-36). When I asked him if boys can be manly and good writers, Gabe responded, “Yeah,
anybody can. It’s the boys that think they can’t. They have to be one or the other. You have to
be a football player. You can’t be both. You can’t be compassionate and soft and be this tough
player on the field. They think they can’t have something like that” (G3. 39-42).

Here we see Gabe’s struggle with the social pressure of choosing an accepted writing
topic and the dichotomous relationship between “boy stuff” and “girl stuff” when it comes to
writing topics. He is quite articulate and mature in his analysis of the tension between
masculinity and literacy and doesn’t see himself falling into the category of the stereotypical boy
writer in his class.

However, while he verbalizes his impression of the media’s depiction of literacy as
feminine and the requirement of being “compassionate” and “open minded” to be a good writer
and “tough” to be manly. He also believes, “most books are made by women.” Even though
Gabe expressed he sometimes felt the “girl” topics are more interesting, throughout the year he
chose very masculine topics such as plots based on CSI: Miami and The Simpsons, to write
about throughout the year.

The other boys also chose topics that were typically masculine. Junior wanted to make
the class and his friends laugh. He wrote stories that used bodily humor, stupid adults, and
surprising plot twists to produce the desired results. For example, his last piece’s characters were
named “Mr. Doctor Professor Dum Dum” and his wife, “Mrs. Doctor Dong Dum.” Sampson wrote only about sports related stories. He began the year with a story about a trip to Miami to watch a cousin play professional football for the Miami Dolphins and ended the year with a piece about himself being the, “strongest, fastest person in the universe.”

Miguel consistently framed his stories around his family life. He wrote personal narratives, poems, and expositories about each member of his family and his own experiences. He began the year with a story about raking his grandmother’s yard and ended with a story about his brother’s high school graduation and an acrostic poem using his brother’s name. My data remained consistent with Pollack’s assertion that, “When boys do write, they will often pick topics that assert their ideas of masculinity and avoid expressions of affection because they feel it might make them look weak or vulnerable (Pollack, 1998).” Another socially constructed filter the boys have to put their writing through is the accepted “hierarchal map” of accepted writing topics by their teacher and the academic culture of the school. Newkirk (2002) says, “It is a map that places most of the genres boys love near the bottom” (p.79). Stories that include violence, taboo topics, parody, and bodily humor are popular with boys. Many like to write fantastical stories about characters borrowed from popular culture but these are not accepted as good writing in the classroom setting. Even though the boys in Mrs. Green’s writing workshop had considerable freedom in their writing topics, these constraints still existed and had to be considered while writing. In an interview with Junior he understands the classroom expectations even though he can’t verbalize the reason for them.

R: Who do you think is a good writer?
Junior: Like the person who wrote Harry Potter books and the Magic Trio books. They are good writers. I’ve read all of them. I really like the Chronicles of Spiderman too.

R: Are you trying to write like those?
Junior: No, she doesn’t let us write like that.
R: Why not?
Junior: I don’t know (J1. 13-19)

Topic choice was filtered through a social lens of acceptable gender stereotypical choices, and also a social lens of acceptable academic constraints. This type of mental work takes time, in the case of the writing classroom, this “think-time” took an average of 5-10 minutes.

**Think-Time and Word Production during an Expository Assignment**

Table 6-1 shows that the boy writers used a total of 13 to 17 minutes for think-time over a two-day writing assignment period. I am not advocating taking this time away from boys; on the contrary, I hope I have proved the necessity of this time for validated and important thinking and processing. However, what effect does this think-time have on the writing pieces of boy writers? To answer this question, I analyzed two writing assignments: one expository prompt writing and one free-choice assignment that turned out to be primarily narrative in nature. I counted the word production each day of the writing workshop and compared the boys in the class to the word production of the girls in the class. All students in the class, all levels, races and socio-economic statuses, were included in this analysis.

**The First Day of Writing Workshop**

To determine the impact the think-time difference might make on a writing piece, I collected student papers each step of the writing process; first day, subsequent days, and final drafts. The first point of comparison was word production- how many words did the student write during the specified writing workshop time each day? While word production doesn’t always translate into assignment quality or writing skill level, it does give an indication of student ability to put thoughts on paper in written form which is the first and most important skill of a writer.
For the first set of data, students wrote an expository piece in response to a given prompt asking them to describe their favorite place to eat. Table 6.2 (located at the end of the chapter) gives a breakdown of the word production for the first and initial day of the writing workshop for the research participants and the rest of the class. In the 25 minutes of writing time, the nine boys in class that day wrote an average of 49 words on their first drafts while the eight girls in the class that day wrote an average 83 words; this means the girls in the writing class wrote an average of 34 words more than the boys in the class. Junior was the only boy participant above the class average for boys and finished the day with 70 words on his first draft. He also was the boy who had the shortest starting-delay time of seven minutes.

The Second Day of Writing Workshop

On the second day of writing workshop, all the boy participants were completing their first drafts. Starting delay time was still present, though lessened due to the continuity of the writing task. In the second day of writing, the students had 15 minutes of writing workshop from 10:30-10:45 a.m. They took out their writing notebooks, their storyboards and first drafts from the day before. There were several short conversations among the boys but were all centered around mechanics such as spelling or a technical question to others at their table. The other conversations centered around their opinions about the restaurant that someone else was writing about.

Four boys, Miguel and three other boys in the class, wrote more on the second day of writing than they wrote on the first day. Even though the boys were finishing their pieces and still mainly focused on writing text, the word production average of 25 words was still 14 words below the word average of the girls.

On the second day of the writing piece, word production for the girls was a 39 word average. The word average was almost half of the first day average due to the smaller time
frame. Many girls finished their first drafts on the first day and spent the second day in the
revision of their completed first drafts. All but two of the girls engaged in revision activities and
shared their drafts with a friend in a peer conference, reread their pieces to themselves, added
and deleted words or looked up words in the dictionary. Most of the boys in the class were still
completing their first drafts.

The second day of writing lessened the difference between girl and boy writers’ word
production but still emphasizes the impact of the starting-delay of the boys on day one. The boys
did not “catch up” with the girls’ production on day two of the writing process and had less time
for revision and conferencing activities.

**Quality verses Quantity during an Expository Assignment**

While the quantity of the boys’ work differed from the quantity of the girl’s work, the
quality of the boys’ first drafts was satisfactory. The boy writers created acceptable
introductory sentences that indicated they understood the expository genre and had internalized
the five paragraph essay taught to them by Mrs. Green. Miguel and Samson, who wrote the least
amount of words, also use descriptive adjectives and onomatopoeia in their sentences.

“Munch! Munch! Munch! That’s me eating some crunchy fries at Chili’s my favorite
restaurant. I love Chili’s because they have yummy foods like hamburgers, fries, slushies
and deserts” (Miguel 3.17.08).

“Ahhh! I set foot into my favorite restaurant, Red Lobsters. I like Red Lobsters because
they have soothing atmosphere, tasty lobsters and crabs, and don’t forget desert” (Samson
3.17.08).

Gabe’s rough draft had drawings in the margin of a skull and cross bones and an ape
looking monster. These did not seem to have any reference to his writing topic but were drawn
during the delayed start time. The first day, he wrote a few sentences to introduce the restaurant.

“One day my parents decide to spend a week in Daytona. We look in a tourist “Hot
Spot” book and keep finding Hog Heaven. When we arrive in Daytona, we stop at Hog
Heaven. It was the best BBQ pulled pork I’ve ever had” (Gabe 3.17.08).
Junior, who wrote the most, utilizes specific detail and colorful adjectives in his sentences. He doesn’t follow a strict expository format in his topic sentence.

“As my family and I debate on where to eat, we end up picking Sonny’s. When we walked in the yummy restaurant we could smell the fresh chicken, ribs, steak, and much more. A kind lady took our name and seated us. She seated us at a red, cherry colored booth. She took our order and next thing I know my food is steamy hot right in front of me” (Junior 3.17.08)

After the second day of writing workshop, the student could volunteer to share their work in the “author’s chair” in the front of the class and get feedback on the writing. All four boys raised their hands enthusiastically in hopes of being chosen. Miguel shared his piece about Chili’s and read it with expression. One of the girls said she liked the beginning when he says, “Munch, munch, munch.” Another girl said it was descriptive and Mrs. Green liked the sentence, “Every single time I go there, my mouth drools until I get my order.” She gave him a jewel sticker to put on his writing crown.

Mrs. Green did not publish these expository assignments. A total of three days was spent on this assignment over the course of one school week: the boys had one day to create their storyboards and two days of writing workshop time.

**Think-Time and Word Production during a the Narrative Assignment**

The next set of data was collected during a free choice writing assignment in May 2008. Students were free to write whatever they wanted in whatever genre they wanted. There was not a required prewriting strategy such as storyboards but students were free to do as much prewriting as they wished. Students worked on the pieces for three days and then began to publish during the last two days. This assignment culminated in a “Writer’s Celebration” when each student read their published piece to the class and then had refreshments.
The First Day of Writing Workshop

The excitement and energy level for this assignment was much higher than with the prompted expository piece. The boys were completely engaged in the mini-lesson and verbalizing ideas to each other. When the students remembered reading *Wayside School is Falling Down* by Louis Sachar, Gabe asked, “That’s a TV show too. Can I write about a TV show?” and Junior asked, “Can it be funny like that? I like funny” (FN 5.7.08). They both said later that they had already started to conceptualize a writing idea at that point in the class. Gabe knew he wanted to write about The Simpsons, his favorite TV show and Junior said he, “started to try and think of something to write that would be funny.” Miguel and Sampson both chose topics that were repeating themes for them all year when they had free choice. Miguel usually wrote about a member of his family and Samson usually wrote about sports.

For this assignment, Samson chose to write in a different genre and wrote a fantasy about himself becoming the strongest and fastest man in the world. Miguel used multiple genres in his piece and wrote a descriptive piece about summer and an acrostic poem about his older brother. None of the participants used any kind of written pre-writing strategy such as a storyboard or webbing and out of the entire class; only one boy used any kind of written pre-writing strategy.

Table 6-3 (located at the end of the chapter) gives a breakdown of the word production for the first day of writing workshop. In the 30 minutes period of writing, the boys had a much, much higher word average of 97 words than with the expository assignment where they only had a 49 word average. However, in the same time period, the girls in the class were over double the boys’ word average with 217 words. The boys averaged 10 minutes of think-time on the first day of the writing assignment while the girls averaged 3 minutes.
The Last Day of Writing Workshop

Again, the average think-time decreased to an average of 5 minutes on subsequent writing days but throughout the process, the boys did not decrease the word production difference with the girl writers in the class. The final writing totals in Table 6-4 (located at the end of the chapter) show the narrative assignment with 1873 words for the boy writers and 3643 words for the girl writers with an average word production being 208 words per boy writer and 364 words per girl writer. Three of my boy writers, Samson, Miguel, and Gabe, were slightly below the class average for boys and Junior was quite a bit above with a word production of 312 words.

Just as it is difficult for one runner to catch up with another who started before him, it is hard for the average boy writer to “catch up” with the average girl writer who begins writing 5 to 10 minutes before him and does not stop. A visual representation of the effects of think-time is represented in Figure 6-1 The Cone of Productivity. This graphic shows that boy writers do not catch up to girl writers after a delayed start. The difference in beginning to write and the use of think-time is represented at the top of the figure. Once the boys and girls began writing, the word production is represented by the triangular lines moving down and out. These lines end when the writing piece is due by the teacher and the difference in word production is represented in the bottom line of the figure. Since the girls are starting to write before the boys and producing more words during the writing class, boys experience less time to engage in revision within the time constraints and fewer words to work with during the revision process. For example, in this assignment Gabe, Miguel, and Samson did not make any revisions on their pieces and Junior only made two revisions.

Time Factors and Testing

This difference between the genders and think-time also translates into boys having less time to spend conferencing with each other and publishing their final pieces. I speculate that the
necessity of think-time for boy writers has serious consequences for their school achievement because of the time constraints within the school setting, even within a very ideal setting that utilizes writing workshop methods. These consequences would worsen in a classroom that does not utilize writing workshop methodology and does not give the students time to think, conference, and revise their work over the course of several days.

When asked what would happen if he did not have the “think-time” at the beginning of writing workshop Junior answered, “Well, that doesn’t really help me if I’m rushed.” (J4.18). And then later he added, “I might just have to wait to finish it. I might just have to finish it at home or something” (J4.26-27). None of the boys said they could hurry if there was a sense of urgency about the writing and they didn’t have time to think. Miguel said sometimes he just “gives up” and “just don’t worry about it that day” (M2.41-43). Gabe described a huge
disconnect that he sees between the artificial testing situations and the outside world, “On the test, they only give you 45 minutes and in real life, you have longer. They are not going to say, we need this in an hour. Even one day would give you long enough. You can do a story in a day” (G11:26-29).

Conclusion

Boys’ writers in the writing workshop classroom setting, regardless of race, socio-economic levels, or ability levels, were more successful when allowed to engage in “think-time,” an internal and mental processing time averaging five to ten minutes before the writing act began. Boy writers, possibly influenced by biological and social constructs, used think-time to mentally process and filter ideas, create mental story maps, decide on story genres and formats, and anticipate audience reactions. External behaviors during think-time included staring, fidgeting, or other rhythmic behaviors such as tapping or doodling. While think-time was deemed necessary by the boy writers, taking more time than girls to begin writing each day translated into a significant difference in word production by gender. Boy writers had less time to write, revise, and publish writing pieces. If boys take more time to internally process ideas before beginning to write, time constraints during the state writing assessment may be a significant cause for the underachievement of boy writers
### Table 6-2  Word Production Chart for Expository Prompt: Write About Your Favorite Place to Eat

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Words Written</th>
<th>Word Average</th>
<th>Words Written</th>
<th>Word Average</th>
<th>Total Words</th>
<th>Daily Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Boys (9)</td>
<td>442 words 49 word avg. 227 words 25 word avg. 669 words 37 word avg.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Girls (8)</td>
<td>581 words 83 word avg. 351 words 39 word avg. 932 words 58 word avg.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samson</td>
<td>32 words 23 words 55 words 28 word avg.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>28 words 32 words 60 words 30 word avg.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>70 words 32 words 102 words 51 word avg.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>42 words 42 words 84 words 42 word avg.</td>
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</table>

### Table 6-3  Word Production Chart for Free Choice Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Words Written</th>
<th>Word Average</th>
<th>Words Written</th>
<th>Word Average</th>
<th>Words Written</th>
<th>Word Average</th>
<th>Total Words</th>
<th>Student Average</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total Boys (9)</td>
<td>877 words 97 wd. avg. 655 words 73 wd. Avg. 341 words 38 wd. avg. 1873 words 208 wd. avg.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Girls (10)</td>
<td>2173 words 217 wd. avg. 1023 words 102 wd. avg. 447 words 45 wd. avg. 3643 words 364 wd. avg.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samson</td>
<td>81 words 54 words 27 words 162 words 54 wd. avg.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>26 words 26 words 64 words 116 words 38 wd. avg.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>97 words 131 words 84 words 312 words 104 wd. avg.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>38 words 45 words 31 words 114 words 38 wd. avg.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Day One</td>
<td>Day Two</td>
<td>Day Three and Four</td>
<td>Totals</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>114</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Samson</td>
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<td>166</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>312</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>116</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
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<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>E</td>
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<td>62</td>
<td>313</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>877</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>1873</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divided by # of Boys</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Words a Boy</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>208</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>92</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
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<td>117</td>
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<td>79</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>449</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>18</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>I</td>
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<td>310</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>449</td>
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<td>447</td>
<td>3643</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divided by # of Girls</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Words a Girl</td>
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<td>102</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>364</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 7
FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Everyone has a head full of imagination and they just want to get that stuff out of their minds. Instead of keeping held in there, you can let it out on a piece of paper. So not just you can enjoy it but everyone else, too. Miguel

The purpose of this study was to explore how four 4th grade boys experienced writing instruction during the writing class. The struggle of boys in writing is currently an important issue in our nation’s educational discussion because of the discrepancy between boys’ and girls’ scores in national standardized tests. National studies show boy writers falling significantly behind girl writers in their 4th, 8th and 10th grade literacy scores. The NEAP administered tests in 1998, 2002, and more recently in 2007 when over 165,000 students were tested in a prompt writing format. The 2008 Nation’s Report Card indicated boys scored an average of 18 to 21 points behind girls (Salahu-Din et.al., 2008). In national, state, and local assessments, the difference in achievement between boys and girls was much higher in writing than in any other subject area including math, reading, science, and history. The gender achievement gap in the area of writing was even significantly larger than the achievement gap between blacks and whites (www.nationsreportcard.gov).

On the Florida state writing test, administered yearly to 4th, 8th and 10th graders, the gender difference was similar. The 2007 Florida Writes scores indicated girls scored 12 percent higher than boys, and in 2008 there was a 10 percent gap in the passing rates between boys and girls with girls achieving an 86 percent passing rate and boys achieving a 76 percent passing rate (fldoe.org, 2008). The state gender gap also remained wider than the achievement gap between whites and blacks (fldoe.org, 2008).

Locally at Central Elementary and Mrs. Green’s classroom, the writing scores mirrored both state and national trends. In 2007, Central Elementary boys’ achievement gap was even
wider than the state average with only 58 percent of the boys passing with a minimum of 3.5. Girls demonstrated an 87 percent passing rate for a huge achievement gap of 29 percent. In 2008, boys and girls in Mrs. Green’s class both improved their passing rates and because of this, the gender achievement gap remained large.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The literature suggests both biological and socially constructed differences may affect boy writers, their motivation, and their engagement in the writing classroom. The social construction of gender created by culture affects boy writers because it shapes how they define being a male, being literate, and the possible tension between the two (Booth, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Tyre, 2006). The social construction of gender also supports the examination of teacher beliefs about boys (Palardy, 1998) and cultural connections and disconnects between school and home worlds (Dyson, 1993). Gender constructions and cultural definitions challenge institutional beliefs about literacy and call for a close examination of the narrow definitions of the official school literacies (Newkirk, 2002).

On the other hand, brain-based research has illuminated biological differences in the processing of language and in human development that may put boys at a disadvantage in school literacy events (Gurian, 2005). Males have been proven to use different parts of their brains during language processing, reach developmental milestones at different ages than females, and have some differing physical needs in the classroom (Sax, 2005). Those who support biological differences as the primary reason boys are underachieving believe schools, with a majority of female teachers, employ strategies, methods and curriculums that are not “boy-friendly”
These social and biological gender differences may merge in complex ways and manifest themselves in the writing classroom.

Current literature about the teaching of writing advocates the use of a process writing approach framed in a writer’s workshop where children write on a daily basis and have agency, choice, and power over their writing decisions (Fletcher, 2006; Gurian, 2005; Newkirk, 2002). Schools can broaden official literacies to include genres, topics, and teaching methods that are boy-friendly. Some strategies that are proving effective in teaching boy writers are providing male literacy role models, incorporating the use of technology and popular culture, and insisting on an examination of teacher beliefs and expectations. A greater understanding of the experiences of boy writers may affect the success of boy writers and begin to overcome the disenfranchisement of the young men in our schools (Collins, 2003: Newkirk, 2002).

In this chapter, I will first discuss how my research findings extend the existing literature base. I will also present implications for teachers, teacher education, state and national assessment policies, and the research community.

**Extending Existing Literature**

Findings from this study extend our research knowledge about the experiences of boy writers in the writing classroom. Quantitative data gives us proof of an ongoing gender achievement gap in writing, but qualitative research gives insight and illumination to experiences within the writing class which may cause or eliminate this gap. Just as new nanotechnology looks inward toward the workings of the atom, the findings have implications for the workings of the universe. It is as William Blake (1805) described so many years ago when he saw, “the universe in a grain of sand.” With the inductive nature of quantitative methods, research takes an inward and systematic look at a few boy writers in a specific context and asks what can be
applied in the larger context. The in-depth understanding of four boy participants may reveal patterns that help educators better understand the writing gap phenomenon.

While there has been a plethora of research studies devoted solely to the reading side of literacy, there are not as many devoted to the subject of writing. A small but powerful group of studies in the area of boys and writing has examined home and school literacy connections and the impact of the authenticity of these reading and writing experiences (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, 2006). Others questioned the narrow definition of the official literacy of the school institution, school’s resistance to popular media and technology in the writing classroom, and the tension that exists between being a male and a writer (Fletcher, 2006; Newkirk, 2002).

I believe a qualitative study of boy writers and a closer look at what is happening inside the classroom to boys during writing instruction is of great value to the field. In the field, there has been little qualitative research taking place within the classroom setting that studies the process boys go through in becoming engaged and successful writers. This study focused on the daily writing classroom and the intersecting factors (such as the students, teachers, peers, teaching and assessment methods) that promote the achievement or underachievement of boy writers. With this approach, the writing products were observed during composition and creation. Important interactions taking place within the context of the classroom were observed over a prolonged period of time for a richer and deeper understanding of the experiences of boy writers. A qualitative study of boys within the context of the writing classroom is warranted if we, as teachers and teacher educators, are to begin to understand how we can help the boys in our writing classrooms experience needed growth and success in writing.

A Fresh Look at Time

Daily time to write and work through the stages of the writing process was advocated and deemed necessary over 20 years ago with the Ford Foundation research of Donald Graves (1983)
focused on the process student writers go through in creating a piece. Since then, the writing process classroom was further shaped and defined by teachers and writers such as Nancie Atwell (1998), Lucy Calkins (1998) and others. Time for brainstorming, drafting, conferencing and revisions during the writing class has become a foundational belief for the National Council for Teachers of English who understand how students in our schools learn most effectively to become writers.

The issue of time has also been applied to education achievement gaps in the area of ESL (English Second Language) students and for ESE (Exceptional Education) students in the form of accommodations to teaching and learning. Giving ESE and ESL students more time to complete tasks in the classroom has improved their rates of success. The connection between time and success has been applied in the theory of “wait time,” a teaching strategy when teachers wait three to five seconds after asking a question before calling on a student (Borich, 2007) and proven to increase the quality and correctness of student answers. In *Boys and Girls Learn Differently* Gurian (2001) found positive results with a 60 second wait time for boys when they did not answer right away both in academic and behavioral interactions with the teacher.

This research extends existing literature by exploring time in relation to gender differences in the writing classroom. In Chapter 6, I described a starting delay pattern of behavior of the boy participants during the first few minutes of the writing workshop that was different than the girls in the class. The Theory of Think Time emerged from classroom observations and the boys’ interviews about their internal processes during this time of class

**The Theory of Think-Time**

Boy writers, regardless of race, socio-economic status, or ability levels, were more successful when allowed to engage in “think-time,” an internal and mental processing time averaging five to ten minutes before the writing act began. Boy writers, possibly influenced by
biological and social constructs, used think-time to mentally process and filter ideas, create mental story maps, decide on story genres and formats, and anticipate audience reactions. External behaviors during think-time included staring, fidgeting, or other rhythmic behaviors such as tapping or doodling. While think-time was deemed necessary by the boy writers, taking more time than girls to begin writing each day translated into a significant difference in word production by gender during the writing classroom and during timed writing assessments. Although self-induced by the use of think-time, boy writers had less time than girl writers in the class to write, revise, and publish writing pieces during the writing class. If boys take more time to internally process language before beginning to write, time constraints during the state writing assessment may be a significant cause for the underachievement of boy writers. When boys were allowed “think-time” in the writing classroom, their writing engagement and achievement rose.

Through interviews and observation analysis, classroom management issues and motivational issues tied to confusion, frustration, or resentment were eliminated. Prewriting issues were also eliminated as the participants were given several different prewriting activities and an entire day to complete them before being asked to begin a first draft. If classroom management problems, an ineffective teacher-student relationship, or a lack of pre-writing time was not the cause of the starting-delay phenomenon, what was? Why were the boys taking extra time each day to begin writing? What internal processes were happening during this time? The data harvested during interviews with the participants suggested the boys were engaged in advanced mental processes during that first ten minutes of writing workshop. The boys described the processing of possibilities for their writings and also a filtering process that was done before they put pencil to paper.
Think-time may be a result of biological gender differences in language processing. Leonard Sax (2005) has examined brain-based research and suspects the biological factors contribute more to classroom behaviors than once believed. His book applies this knowledge to school in general while this research looks at applications in the writing classroom. In language operations, women’s brains use both hemispheres of the brain while men’s brains only used the left hemisphere (Gilbert, 2000). Girls have a larger language processing center in the right frontal lobe, which seems to enhance their capacity to process language (Gilbert, 2000; Booth, 2002; Sax, 2005). Boy’s tendency to have a starting delay in writing class may be due to biological differences in the brain and the processing of language in different ways.

If gender is as much a social construct as it is a biological one, then boys not only are processing language differently in their brains, but boys also must negotiate how to become literate socially while not compromising their emerging masculinity (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006; Newkirk, 2002; Booth, 2002). Topic selection was not a casual task for the boy participants. Gabe, especially, struggled with the desire to write on one topic and then reject it because of social constructs about what is or is not masculine. He struggled with the social pressure of choosing an acceptable writing topic and the dichotomous relationship between what he called “boy stuff” and “girl stuff” when it comes to writing topics.

Recent research highlights topic choice for boys as a major concern and advocated the conservative literacy circle to “widen” and include media, video game plots, fantasy and science fiction into the “official” writing curriculum (Newkirk, 2002; Fletcher, 2006). However, in my research, I saw a different type of tension arise with topic choice. There was not so much dissatisfaction with topic choice being narrowed- the boys were able to write on these “taboo” topics and seemed to know just how much violence or vulgarity would be accepted in the
classroom setting which was quite permeable. For example, at one point in the year during a 
writer’s celebration, Mrs. Green was tested by a student who wrote a science fiction fantasy 
about an alien invasion. The student read about his alien who dismounted his ship carrying a 
“six pack of Miller Lite” and “smoking a Pal Mal cigarette” (A1). The students all looked at 
Mrs. Green for a reaction to this taboo subject but she continued to listen to the story and did not 
comment. Later when I asked her about the incident she said she decided to let it go and she 
related that this boy’s mother was a bartender and he spent time in the evenings with her at the 
bar. Mrs. Green believed it was this influence that led him to put alcohol and smoking into his 
writing piece (FN5). While no one advocates an “anything goes” attitude, the classroom is 
dominated by female teachers who tend to gravitate towards the personal narrative and 
relationship based plots (Newkirk, 2002). By allowing writing that a boy feels is important to 
him; teachers are encouraging writing to become more relevant to the boy and his identities as a 
male, friend, son, and student. This relevance did increase motivation and participation and 
resulted in higher boy success in Mrs. Green’s classroom.

The boys did, however, articulate an internal tension that was embodied in the process of 
filtering ideas that would fit into their preconceived gender profile and be acceptable to their 
peers, parents, and cultures. Many times, this filtering of ideas seemed to push them more 
towards those stereotypical male genres and writing styles. The filtering of ideas also took time 
and manifested itself in the starting-delay. The theory of think-time encapsulates how these 
types of both biological and social gender differences affect boy writers in specific ways in the 
writing classroom.

The effect of think-time was positive in that boys were given time to process language 
and engage successfully in the writing class. They reported high self-esteem and self-efficacy
about themselves as writers and their perceived growth as writers over their fourth grade year. The negative effect of think time was the consequential starting delay resulted in a significant difference in word production and fluency results. While the effects of gender writing differences does not seem to translate to the real world professions of men and women in a field of writing, it did translate into differences in the achievement and fluency levels of boys and girls under the constant and sometimes severe time constraints in the writing classroom.

**Time and Teaching Practices**

How do these findings impact classroom teaching and the greater success of boy writers? First, teachers can counteract the negative impact of think-time by structuring the writing class in a longer, uninterrupted block of time. Boys showed the greatest discrepancy with girl writers in their fluency during the first ten minutes of the writing workshop as they started to put pencil to paper and get their ideas onto the paper. Chapter 6 demonstrates this phenomenon in the cone of productivity that indicates the word production and fluency of boys never catches up with that of the girls in the class. The word difference during the starting delay time of five to ten minutes each day, translates into a significant amount of writing in the course of the week, month, and year. In Mrs. Green’s class, this difference was exaggerated even further by the boys breaking for lunch during the middle of the hour long writing class. Since the pattern of behavior indicates it takes boys longer to negotiate the complex cognitive act of writing, then it makes sense for boys to have an extended amount of time for writing once the cognitive faucet of composition has been turned on and is flowing. This research indicates these fourth grade boys would be more productive and fluent and decrease the discrepancy between the boy and girl writers in the class if the class was restructured with only one start time and if the writing time of the workshop was extended.
The Theory of Emerging Identities, Relationships and Relevancy

Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social construction of knowledge proposed the necessity of interactions for cognitive growth, specifically thought, language and reasoning processes. Boy writer’s did not exist within a vacuum in the school or classroom but were a part of a complex fabric of the classroom culture. In Chapter 5, the strength of boys’ relationships within the writing classroom and their identities connected to the writing was explored. The boy’s ability to become identified and successful as a boy writer was found to be proportional to their ability to mesh this identity with their identity as a male, student, son and friend. The writing most relevant to each boy addressed a need in the boys’ social and academic lives and supported him in defining their emerging identities.

Relevancy of the writing experience and writing topic and genre has long been established by others as an important component of a successful writing workshop. In this chapter, the relevancy of the writing and boy writers was explored in a new and powerful way by framing relevancy in the relationships important within the writing classroom and also within the theoretical construct of meshing the identity of becoming a boy writer with the emerging identities of being male, son, friend, student and boy writer.

Relationships

The boy participants were very motivated to write because of their relationships with the teacher, their classmates, the school culture, their kindergarten literacy buddies and their college buddies.

In this classroom, the boy writers not only had a positive relationship with their teachers, they were also involved in relational roles as a mentor, mentee, and equals. The different relationships deepened the layers of experiences in the writing class and strengthened the relevancy of the writing class by providing opportunities to write and talk as experts, equals,
students, and friends. Being a boy writer was more authentic and real because it was a part of many different types of relationships.

While the relationships of the boy writers were a large motivation for boy writers to engage in the writing class, their ability to connect writing with their emerging identities was crucial. By framing a boy’s mental processes in a hierarchy of identities, it becomes clear that a boy must mesh together multiple facets of his identity in order to be able to happily engage in the writing process and identify himself as a successful boy writer.

Theory of Emerging Identities

To engage in the writing class, boys must first fit their identity as a writer comfortably under their identities as a male and their socially constructed identities as a son, friend, and student. Successful boy writers must fit being a boy writer comfortably in a hierarchy of identities of being male as defined by the individual’s culture including race and socio-economic status, a son as defined by the family unit, a friend that belongs to a social network, a student who must negotiate the official school expectations set forth by the teacher and school climate. In this way relevancy becomes more than the need for boys to write about something they like, but rather relevancy becomes a necessary ingredient describing how important the writing is to their identity.

The stronger the connections were between the emerging identities of the boy writer, the higher the engagement in the writing class. If being a boy writer could not fit comfortably under the larger roles of being a male, son, friend, or student in the identity hierarchy because of social resistance, then the writing was irrelevant to his life and was ignored or resisted. Much of the existing research demonstrates this need through examples of boys who feel writing is irrelevant to their lives.
For example, if a boy’s family was telling him in direct ways that real men do not spend much time reading and writing or in indirect ways such as the lack of any literate male role models, then it is very likely he will choose low engagement in the writing classroom because the relevancy of the new identity as boy writer is very low. Friends may demonstrate this same concept by banishing a boy from the social group if he is perceived to be too literate. In this case, if the identity of being a friend or a member of a specific social class is more relevant to the boy’s identity than being a writer there will be low engagement in becoming a boy writer. The school itself may send direct or indirect messages to boys through teachers who consciously or unconsciously transfer gender biases to their students and the class. The more conflict between the identities, the less relevant the writer identity becomes.

In Mrs. Green’s class, the opposite was true. The boy writers were constantly bombarded with positive feedback about writing from Mrs. Green with high expectations for success. She created a community of learners so they were also supported by their peers and the school culture in their writing. The boys had more freedom and choice than in most other classrooms and were able to craft writings that defined them as males and sons and brothers and friends and so were very relevant to their identities.

The four boy participants articulated their identity as a son was the most important identity for them. Viewing the parent-child relationship as most important in their lives is in alignment with their age of 10 to 11 years old and their developmental levels. They all identified themselves as a “good son” and “good student” who wanted to make their parents proud. Two boys specifically spoke of their mother, one of his father, and the last of his grandfather as having the most influence over their motivation to write and do well in school.
Gabe identified a tension between his identities as a boy writer and male mainly when he spoke of topic choice. None of the boys identified a problem meshing the identity of boy writer with their identities as a friend or part of a social group at this point in their lives.

The teacher, Mrs. Green, allowed the boys to express and define themselves through their writing and each boy’s identity emerged as the year progressed. They all exhibited patterns in their writings that extended their writing identities. For example, Samson was able to engage in writing and create an identity as a boy writer because his writing co-existed with his ideologies of what it meant to be male, black, son, friend and student. His writing both created and expressed his emerging identities and illustrated what he felt was important and most of all, relevant. Sports, being tough and aggressive, never quitting, being respected by teammates, family and cousins were all evidenced in his writing and emerging identities. Because of the relevancy of his emerging identity of being a boy writer, Samson felt excited to share his writings with his friends, parents, and teachers and to engage in the writing class. In his pieces, he writes with love and affection about his mother, father and brother.

Family and family experiences was the central and relevant topic for Miguel. He made writing relevant by connecting his emerging identities as a Hispanic boy, son, brother, friend and student with the topic of family and family events. Affection for parents and put-downs for siblings was an acceptable cultural practice for the boy writers. When Miguel wrote his pieces he put himself, his values, and his understanding of his the roles of father and son, into the pieces.

Junior’s writing had a reoccurrence of moral or character values that were expressed, but he also enjoyed the use of humor and having others laugh was a motivation for him to write. Junior seems to be the participant who is most immersed in the mainstream of American life.
Junior’s identity as a boy, student and son was glimpsed through his autobiographical poems and his acrostic poem. He valued many of the same traits that the “official” school valued that were listed in the school pledge and taught in the school character education program such as respect, responsibility and citizenship.

Gabe’s writing and writing ideas centered on the media and television. He read and talked about books more than the other participants and tied many of his writings to the television shows or books that he read. His writings were very imaginative and he wrote about many different things such as Samari sword-making to raptors to inventing a rocket and becoming a world famous scientist. Even though Gabe’s world was the most restrictive of the participants because of his low socio-economic status, his writing was rich and varied because of his reading, the media, and his own experiences as a brother, son, friend, and student. Since Mrs. Green encouraged and celebrated all different types of writing topics and pieces, all the boys were able to very different but very relevant writing identities that meshed with their existing identities.

Testing and Relevancy

When the boys were placed in a standardized testing situation where they didn’t have the components of think-time and relevancy, they expressed a very negative view of writing. Chapter 5 illuminated the boys’ reactions to the 45 minute, standardized, Florida Writes prompt-writing test in February of the school year. The test was less relevant and possibly irrelevant, because the prompt hindered the boys’ abilities to make the writing relevant to their lives and identities. Relational roles were also absent in the writing process; it was taken in silence, forbade any type of conferencing, and it was collected and sent away without the teacher or anyone at the school reading the work. The relationships that were normally very relevant, helpful, and supportive of the writing identity now became source of stress as the boys worried about their parents’ and teacher’s reactions if they failed the test.
The very strategies and structures in the writing class that promoted engagement and achievement among boy writers were taken away and were absent during the state prompt-writing test. For example, in an in-class expository writing described in Chapter 6, the difference in fluency between boys and girls for one day of writing was only 21 words (Table 6-2), yet in the testing situation of Florida Writes, the gender differences in fluency ballooned into the much greater 71 word fluency difference (Table 6-10).

One thing the test did do was reinforce what Mrs. Green had already noticed in the writing classroom- teaching writing in a writing workshop format improved writing skills and therefore students performed better on the standardized test. Boy passing rates increased by 12% from 2007 to be above the county average for all students. Mrs. Green’s total class pass rate in 2008 increased by 17% and was well above the school, county, and state average. What the test scores didn’t show was the affective impact of the writing class. Mrs. Green helped a class of children learn to enjoy the writing process and believe they were writers able to write in the real world for authentic purposes. Boys, having experienced the relevancy of writing in writing workshop, were better able to endure a writing task with much less relevancy such as the state writing test.

**Why Does the Gender Gap in Writing Still Exist?**

The interest for this study began with this question and the statistics that highlighted the tremendous difference in boy and girl writers. In the Literature Review, other researchers tried to answer this question and determined that schools could reach out to boys by allowing them to write beyond the personal narrative in genres they enjoyed. Mrs. Green allowed this to happen. It was suggested that school institutions loosen the topic parameters and allow boys to use the violence, sarcasm, humor, and more media based plots they are watching and playing with outside of school. Mrs. Green allowed this to happen to some degree. The literature advocated that the writing be more authentic and purposeful. Mrs. Green also encouraged this through
multiple relationships. Because of this, a question remains: Why, after a year in this context, was there still a discrepancy between the fluency and scores of the boy and girl writers?

Biologically, boys are one to two years behind girls in their physical development as demonstrated by items such as their speech development, fine motor skills, and the onset of puberty. Could these biological and developmental differences in gender be manifesting themselves in the writing class? If so, why are boys not behind in all the subject areas, especially in the ones related to the language arts such as reading and social studies?

It could be that writing is a more complex cognitive skill that pulls together multiple language processes. In the writing act, the writer must create an internal thought and then it must become external, not just in verbal form, but in written form which is one step farther removed from its origin. Writing is more abstract and adult in form than reading. While the reading act of decoding and comprehending is complex, writing must build upon these skills and extend them to creating internal thoughts into the external and constraining forms of the English language. If girls and boys process language differently, maybe these processing differences become most obvious in the area of writing and less obvious in the areas of math, science and social studies. Biologically speaking, is comparing boys and girls in the same grade level a fair comparison in this respect?

Socially, it has been speculated that there are different expectations for girls and boys that may influence their engagement in writing. The writing structures in place in Mrs. Green’s classroom were beneficial for all writers, not just girls. However, could it be that boys are less tolerant of an irrelevant structure such as a test prompt they do like while girls are more compliant and choose to engage whether they find the material relevant or not? This could be supported by the fact that the boys improved their writing in the “ideal” setting of Mrs. Green’s
classroom. Girls also made huge improvements when they experienced an ideal writing class, but girls were able to succeed even in a more irrelevant writing class environment and on the standardized tests. Why is this the case?

While my hope was to find the answer for the cause of the gender achievement gap and solve the problem, I find instead I have opened more questions than solutions to this complex phenomenon. Because of the findings of my research, hard questions have to be answered about boy writers. Just “widening the circle” for boys and making writing more relevant to their lives and identities did not dissolve the gender gap. Why were boy writers still not as successful as girls when they did experience writing in a fairly ideal situation? On the other hand, maybe congratulations are in order for the boy writers because, if viewed as an autonomous group and not in comparison to the girls, these boys made noteworthy gains in their writing scores, good grades in the writing class, and surpassed the school district average in writing for all students.

Implications

Despite this uniqueness of writing classroom context, or maybe because of it, these findings do have important implications for teacher educators, teachers, testing, and the research community. With these questions in mind, the implications for the study will be two pronged. First, because of the positive results of the boy writers and Mrs. Green, this classroom can serve as a model for other teachers who wish to create a boy-friendly writing classroom and increase the participation and motivation of their male students. Second, the research implications must extend this research in an effort to continue to push forward, better understand this phenomenon, and dissolve the gender achievement gap.

Implications for Teacher Educators

Because we want to continue improving our educational system and better meeting the needs of all students, knowing and understanding more about the differences in gender and
writing achievement will be helpful for teacher educators teaching language arts and English methods courses. The college classroom is where pre-service teachers begin to form their epistemologies and paradigms of teaching and learning so it is imperative that they receive the most current research and applications. A better understanding of the needs of boys, both biological and social, when applied to the writing classroom, will enable teachers to have a higher engagement and success rate for boys and help to shrink the achievement gap between genders. Learning how to structure a class to give think-time to all students, but especially boys, and practicing teaching strategies that make learning more relevant to the emerging identities of boys will be invaluable to the pre-service teacher.

Currently in teacher education, in language arts methods courses and English education courses, time is spent on content, techniques and teaching practices, teaching diverse students such as English speakers of other languages and minority groups. A quick look at some of the recent text books used at a state university for the Language Arts in the Elementary School demonstrates a complete lack of gender specific information. In Developing Voice Through the Language Arts (Henn-Reinke & Chesner, 2006) from Sage Publications there is one page devoted to “diversity” and groups gender in one sentence with race, religion, ESL, and special education. In another popular text, Patterns of Practice (Tompkins, 2005) by Pearson/Prentice Hall, there is no mention of gender and writing achievement at all. The only specific information about gender differences is one paragraph stating boys’ enjoy different reading genres than girls. The text books in these areas neglect to mention differences in gender achievement or language processing differences in any meaningful depth or breadth to help the pre-service teacher begin to understand the problem and solutions. Future textbooks in this area must increase awareness
of this achievement gap and include research and applicable teaching practices that will help better prepare pre-service teachers to better support the male half of their future classrooms.

Since the gender achievement gap in writing is only getting fairly recent attention in the national news and research community, and since No Child Left Behind legislation divorced the natural marriage of reading and writing skills, many professors have focused solely on reading as literacy and neglected writing instruction. Others are not well-informed about gender and writing and may be unconsciously neglecting this topic. By incorporating gender differences and gender research into the language arts and English methods classes in colleges of teacher education, and reconnecting reading and writing as skills that naturally support and merge in the writing classroom, pre-service teachers would learn valuable strategies, teaching methods, and knowledge that would greatly affect at least 50 percent of their future classroom populations. Methods text books need to support this effort by infusing the most current research and information about gender and writing into their chapters.

**Implications for Teachers and Schools**

Research suggests that the teacher is the determining factor in a classroom culture (Borich, 2007) and this was true for these fourth grade boys. If a healthy relationship between students and teacher does not exist, boys are more likely to disengage and become unmotivated (Borich, 2007). Unfortunately, boys have the most behavior violations in the classroom setting, receive the most negative attention from a teacher and feel that the teachers like the girls better (Gurian, 2005). In a 1990 unpublished report by the AAUW, 79 percent of the students (both girls and boys) said teachers think girls are smarter and 78 percent believed teachers like to be around girls more in school (Sommers, 2000, p.42). Whether teachers are consciously or unconsciously sending this message, it is having an impact on our boy writers.
Michael Gurian (2005) believes teachers and parents can change the current relationship status between schools and boys through teacher education about the social and biological differences between girls and boys. Students are not always logical and if the relationship becomes adversarial or unhealthy in other ways, the student may choose to disengage and refuse to write or learn. While Gurian research gave examples of boys who chose to disengage from school because of unhealthy relationships, the boys in this study were involved in very healthy and motivating relationships in an ideal writing classroom and these relationships impacted their writing in positive ways.

Much of the existing research in this area highlights practices that are hindering boy writers and advocates practices that will help boy writers. Mrs. Green’s classroom utilized many of the practices that were suggested to promote engagement and achievement in boy writers. The boys were successful in writing according to their self-assessment of skills and growth; they were successful according to Mrs. Green’s assessments on the quarterly report card grade and their in-class writing assignments; and they were successful according to their collective passing rate on the Florida Writes exam which was higher than the district’s student passing rate.

**Teacher Awareness and Practices**

Not many classrooms like Mrs. Green’s exist in Florida schools and unfortunately, many schools have reduced the teaching of writing to a test preparation course for students to complete in the 4th, 8th and 10th grades. In this classroom, there was a daily opportunity for boys to write, choice and autonomy over their writing and positive relationships on multiple levels. From the analysis of a successful classroom, many practices can be applicable for other teachers and classrooms. Since research has shown that teacher expectations affect learning (Palardy, 1998) the greatest implication for teachers, as the deciding factor in classroom learning, is to first examine themselves for any gender bias in their teaching. The next implication is for teachers to
be provided with professional development and knowledge in the area of gender and learning, specifically writing. When teachers understand gender differences, it will increase awareness and self-reflection to enable changes in their classroom teaching. For example, allowing boys think-time rather than assuming they are procrastinating or misbehaving, can make a difference during the beginning of the writing process.

Without being provided with knowledge and support through their school districts, teachers may feel helpless and alone. Teachers need to have a strong support system from the district and school administration for professional development in class scheduling, and teaching methods and strategies.

The boy participants all needed time, think-time, to be successful in beginning and revising their pieces of expository and narrative works. Teachers can first work to carve out time each day to provide a writing workshop or process writing classroom that has components needed to make writing relevant to boys: time to write, choice in writing, peer and teacher conferences, mini-lessons and instruction, and sharing. Teachers can understand the need for “think-time” and the external behaviors and internal processes that are at work during that crucial time.

In this research, the relationships the boys had that began in the writing classroom made the writing very relevant and meaningful. Teachers can take time to set up positive relationship opportunities within the writing classroom between teacher and student, and student to student through modeling writing, participating in writing workshop and sharing with the students and teaching mini-lessons on proper and productive ways to conference with other writers and focus on the improvement of a writing piece. All the boys responded to being the “teacher” in their relationship with their kindergarten literacy buddy. This authentic audience and the ongoing
relationships with a buddy made writing an exciting and fun task. Teachers can create these types of opportunities by collaborating with other teachers within their schools and creating younger or older literacy buddies within the school. Having a chance to read their writings in front of their peers and parents was also a motivation for the boys. Teachers can encourage some type of outreach to the community such as college literacy buddies or pen pals, and a forum for the school community and parents to celebrate writing with their students. Beginning each writing class with a 10 minute time of reading from an ongoing adolescent novel was a pleasurable experience for the boys. Literature can be a daily part of the writing classroom so students begin to see the connections between reading and writing skills.

To help create a more gender equitable classroom, teachers can scrutinize their own writing preferences and widen the circle of acceptable or honored writing styles beyond the personal narrative and include genres boys tend to like such as fantasy, media based plots, and humor based on sarcasm, violence, taboo subjects and, of course, bodily functions. By allowing writing that a boy feels is important to him; teachers are encouraging writing that is more relevant to the boy and his identities as a male, friend, son, and student.

**Implications for Testing**

Student outcomes based on standardized tests are currently a permanent part of school and teacher realities. While these quantitative results can be valuable in identifying patterns and trends in achievement, they are unable to identify causes as accurately as qualitative studies. This study unearthed the very real possibility that many boys underachieve on the writing test, not because they cannot write proficiently, but because they do not have adequate time to process ideas and language to write and because the artificial nature of the timed prompt test is irrelevant to them.
The first implication is for the state Department of Education to reassess the procedure and assessment of qualified scorers. I advocate for scorers to be required to have some classroom teaching experience so they have first hand knowledge of children’s writing and are used to reading handwritten pieces. Training for the scorers should be increased and the scoring process monitored closely for quality. An appeal policy should be in place for papers that the school administration feels were scored unfairly or in discordance with the guidelines set out by the state.

To raise the quality and consistency of the test scoring, current writing classroom teachers, preferably fourth grade, should be trained, hired, and paid to score the tests. Currently, anyone who meets the minimum requirements from the state and attends their brief training is able to be hired as a scorer. In addition, test preparation and test results should be minimized in the classroom and in the school. Rather, teachers should focus on the teaching of writing in an authentic way for a variety of purposes and audiences. I advocate the 80/20 approach (Fu & Shelton, ) adopted by Mrs. Green.

**Boys and Testing**

While there are multiple ways the boy writers could be considered a success, they can be considered unsuccessful in two ways. First, even though the boys were in what is considered an effective writing classroom situation, they were unable to close the gender achievement gap. At the end of the year, girl writers were still more fluent with higher word production on their writing pieces and the girls in the class still had a higher passing rate. Only one girl in the class didn’t pass the test while three boys in the class failed the test. Two of those boys were participants in the study. While I believe that this classroom structure had a very positive effect on boy writers, I will also argue it is effective for all writers and therefore the girl writers in the
class benefited and improved their writing and passing rates during the year. Because of this phenomenon, the achievement gap still existed but to a lesser degree than in other years.

The second lack of success was experienced by Gabe and Miguel on their Florida Writes exam. Even though two participants did not pass the Florida Writes exam, both boys showed much greater competency in their writing skills in their classroom work. Neither I nor Mrs. Green advocate for more than one day a week be set aside for test preparation and demand writing format. Rather, I believe this situation carries an implication for the inaccuracy of the test and calls for a further investigation. This may reveal the testing situation is more discriminatory towards boys than girls because of both the tendency for scorers to focus on surface level skills such as handwriting and because of biological and social gender differences in language processing.

A positive result of the testing assessment is Mrs. Green and I both look to the great improvement of her male passing rate from last year to this year and note that the boys’ success rate increased from 58 percent to 70 percent. We believe that the teaching practices demonstrated in the writing classroom this year had a positive effect on the ability for boys to better endure the irrelevancy and artificial nature of the timed writing test. This, along with the affective feedback from students and parents, supports the continuation of the writing workshop format, the opportunities for relationships, and an increased relevancy of writing in the years to come with the hope of continuing the trend eliminate the gender achievement gap in writing.

**Test Reform**

From the findings of this study and a review of the literature in gender and literacy, there are several recommendations I can make for test reform. Overall, I call first for an increase in the time allotted for the Florida Writes. By adding 15 to 20 minutes to the testing time, boy
writers could take the starting think-time they require and have more time to write once they got started.

All the boy writers called for more choice and time on the test and felt these factors would improve their performance. Test creators should experiment with more choice of prompt and genre on the writing tests and increase the time allowed for test taking. By giving a choice of prompts, students will feel more empowered and they will also have a better chance at finding a prompt that is more relevant to their lives. While both of these suggestions will benefit boy writers, they will also benefit all writers and not cost the state any more for testing once the tests have been written.

Last, I call for the minimization of the importance of the Florida Writes scores and an increase in the importance of a student portfolio demonstrating competency in the writing skills defined in the Sunshine State Standards and the NCTE national standards.

Future Implications for the Research Community

This study has exciting implications for the research community in terms of identifying areas that warrant further investigation. Hard questions were raised about boy-writers that call for increased attention and deeper level understanding into the gender achievement gap in writing.

This study took place in an ideal setting so that I could study boy writers in a potentially successful situation. In the future, I would like to conduct a comparative study that examines boys’ writing experiences in two different writing instruction environments. I believe a study with this focus would help validate or invalidate many of the practices for the teaching of writing that were discussed in this research. In addition, it would be interesting to compare boys to girls on year younger or approximately the same developmental age and see what the gender difference is in writing. A double standard already exists for tests that are physical in nature,
such as the presidential fitness tests, where boys have an advantage in gross motor skills, strength and speed. Could such a double standard be put into place for academic tests, recognizing there are gender differences that exist until after puberty?

The rise of single-sex classrooms (Meehan, 2007; Sommers, 2001) in America calls for new research in this area. It will be fascinating to study the experiences of boys and girls in single-sex writing classrooms and determine the effects of this type of classroom climate on writing process and gender achievement.

In future studies, I believe girl writers need to be examined to better understand their experiences in the writing classroom and the internal processes that promote their high achievement levels. I would like to specifically focus on the Theory of Think Time applied to both sexes and continue the exploration of gender differences in processing and writing. I would also like to extend my research in the area of Relevancy and Emerging Identities by incorporating both boys and girls into the study. Conducting future qualitative studies for an entire school year will also give a more complete picture of the experience and growth of boy and girl writers. Conducting similar in-class research in 8th grade and 10th grade will highlight the similarities and differences between the grade levels and the application of theories developed in the 4th grade.

While the focus of this qualitative study was on the experiences of the boy writers during the writing class, the interviews with the teachers were important for secondary data and triangulation purposes to provide evidence and insight into the boys’ perceptions. However, in a study based on constructivist principles, the role of the teacher in the experiences of the boy writers is a very important one. Future studies focused on the teachers in the writing classroom
and how their pedagogical beliefs and practices influence boy writers would be beneficial to better understand this phenomenon.

Because teachers begin to form their teaching philosophies and epistemological and pedagogical beliefs during their preparation in colleges of teacher education, future studies of interns’ and beginning teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about gender equity and writing will be necessary and beneficial to understand if new teachers are feeling prepared for the challenges of the classroom. In addition, a more formal study of textbooks for language arts methods courses and professor knowledge of the research in this area would pinpoint gaps in the colleges of education that could be resolved.

I believe these future studies in the area of gender and writing will continue to deepen and broaden the collective knowledge of the research community and be beneficial for all stakeholders in education as we strive to shrink and ultimately dissolve the gender achievement gap in writing.
APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

First Interview Focus: Explanation of the Writing class experience.
Second Interview Focus: Process writing and Test writing influences
Third Interview Focus: Motivations to Engage in Writing Class
Fourth Interview Focus: Reflections on Becoming Writers
Fifth Interview Focus: Reflections on Florida Writes Experience

• First Interview Questions: Explanation of Writing Class Experience (Jan)

1. Tell me what you’re doing in writing class.

2. What is helping you become a better writer?

3. Are there some things in writing class that you do that don’t help you so much?

4. What is the best thing that happened recently?

5. Think back to the beginning of the year…Have you become a better writer? Why or Why not?

6. Can you tell me the important parts of writing instruction that go on during your writing class?

7. How would you help a younger child become a better writer?

8. What are the most memorable moments of writing class this year? Why?

9. Is writing class connected to what you do or who you are outside of class? How?

10. What do you think your goals are in writing class?

• Second Interview Questions: Process Writing and Test writing influences (Feb)

1. Tell me what you’re doing in writing class.

2. What is helping you become a better writer?

3. Are there some things in writing class that you do that don’t help you so much?

4. What is the best thing that happened recently?

5. How do you feel about the Florida Writes test you recently took.

6. Can you describe those couple of days?
7. What is the difference between writing for the test prompt and writing in your writer’s notebooks?

8. What do you like about each? What do you not like about each?

9. Did your writing class change before the test? How?

10. Do you think the test is a good way to test writers? Why or why not? Do you have a better or different way to test writers?

- **Third Interview Questions: Motivations to Engage in Writing Class (March)**

  1. Tell me what you’re doing in writing class.
  
  2. What is helping you become a better writer?
  
  3. Are there some things in writing class that you do that don’t help you so much?
  
  4. What is the best thing that happened recently?
  
  5. What makes you want to write in writing class?
  
  6. What makes you not want to write in writing class?
  
  7. Can you think of a time you were really excited to write something? Please tell me about that.
  
  
  9. Choose a piece from your writer’s notebook that you really like and tell me about that.
  
  10. How would you help younger writers be excited about writing class?

- **Fourth Interview Questions: Reflections on Becoming Writers (April)**

  1. Tell me what you’re doing in writing class.
  
  2. What is helping you become a better writer?
  
  3. Are there some things in writing class that you do that don’t help you so much?
  
  4. What is the best thing that happened recently?
  
  5. How would you rate yourself as a writer at the beginning of 4th grade? How would you rate yourself now? Why?
  
  6. How did you become a better writer this year?
  
  7. What does it mean to be a good writer?
8. Can you think of ways that being a writer will help you in other areas of school and your life outside of school?

9. What is the greatest force behind you wanting to become a good writer?

10. Why should anyone care about becoming a good writer?

11. Do you think good writing ever becomes easy? Why or why not?

- **Fifth Interview Questions: Reflections on Florida Writes Experience (August)**

1. After rereading your test paper from the Florida Writes test, what do you think of the piece?

2. Do you think this piece represents what you can do as a writer? Why?

3. As you think back on 4th grade, what were the best things about writing class? Why?
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Roberta Brown Ergle is a fifth generation native Floridian. She grew up in the small, historic town of McIntosh located in North Central Florida. She attended high school in the neighboring city of Ocala and then moved to Gainesville to attend the University of Florida. She received a Bachelor’s degree in August 1989 while she was in London, England in the Summer Abroad Program. She worked for the Agricultural Extension Office in the 4-H Program for one year and returned to school on a scholarship to earn a Masters in English Education from the University of Florida in 1991.

Robbie began her teaching career at Ft. McCoy K-8 School in the middle of the Ocala National Forest. She taught 6th grade for four years and received the Rookie Teacher of the Year Award in 1993. She then taught another four years at Belleview Middle School in 7th and 8th grades and was in the first class of Marion County School District teachers to earn her National Board of Professional Teaching Standards Certification in 1998.

Robbie began teaching as an adjunct instructor for Central Florida Community College and Florida Southern College and discovered a passion for teacher education. In 2003, she took a full time teaching position with the University of Central Florida in their Elementary Education program at the regional campus site in Ocala. This same year, she began her journey as a doctoral student at the University of Florida pursuing a doctoral degree in the field of Curriculum and Instruction with a Language, Literacy and Culture specialization.

She has taught a wide variety of classes at the university level such as Language Arts Methods, English Methods, Children’s Literature, and Professional Teaching Practices. She also enjoys the role of Clinical Supervisor for pre-service internships in the public schools. For her graduate research, she followed her interests in the area of Writing and Language Arts and has presented her gender and literacy research at national and international conferences.
Currently, Robbie lives in Ocala with her husband and four children and enjoys their school and sporting activities and fantastic family adventures. In the future, Robbie plans to continue her teaching career and research in teaching and learning. She hopes to continue to collaborate with the research community, students, and teachers to improve the possibility for every student to reach his or her full potential.