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**Department of Teacher Education, Special
Education and Curriculum and Instruction**

**FINDING FREEDOM AS A WRITER
GENRE, GENDER AND IDENTITY IN A
FIRST GRADE WRITER'S WORKSHOP**

Dissertation

by

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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

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ABSTRACT

Finding Freedom as a Writer Genre, Gender and Identity in a First Grade Writer's Workshop

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Across the country, there is currently a literacy gender gap, especially in writing where girls at all grade levels achieve higher levels of proficiency than boys. A growing body of research suggests that boys and girls have differing literacy interests and that boys are disadvantaged by the content of the writing curriculum in schools. For example, according to the traditional model of "Writer's Workshop," commonly used at the elementary school level, the curricular emphasis is on writing personal narrative for the duration of the school year, a genre that girls prefer. Some researchers have suggested that this disadvantages boys.

This year-long qualitative teacher research study examines what happens when a classroom teacher alters the writing curriculum to make room for more "male" interests and provides learning opportunities for these interests to develop. Data sources include student writing samples of each genre (personal narrative, letter writing, comic book writing, fiction and poetry) over the course of the year, student interviews concerning each genre, and bi-weekly teacher research journal entries. The analysis takes three different perspectives: the whole class perspective, my own perspective as teacher researcher, and an in-depth look at 6 focal children.

My analysis suggests that there were gendered literacy interests in the class and that most students felt more free, more motivated to write, and performed at higher levels when experimenting with genres of interest.

I theorize that learning to write is a social and complex process that involves the interaction of genre with identity, gender, individual learning styles and social disposition. Due to this

complexity, each student was different in how he/she experienced the demands of each genre and the social processes of the classroom. Each genre provided scaffolding and support for some while it limited or inhibited others. I discuss the powerful role teacher researchers can play in schools and argue for a writing curriculum that is appealing to the interests of both genres, especially if this shift is going to motivate our boys to write more.

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This work is dedicated to my family: my wife, Ayanna and my daughter, Cecilia. I owe you both many, many heartfelt thanks. I could not have done this without your endless love and support.

In loving memory of my parents, Robert and Linda.

Mom and dad, words cannot even begin to express how much I miss and love you. Thank you for everything. I have learned so much from you both and you continue to be an inspiration.

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CHAPTER ONE THE PROBLEM OF BOYS AND WRITING

For some time now there has been emphasis in educational research on gender differences, as well as racial/ethnic differences, as a way to help us better understand disparities in educational achievement and opportunity. For the last several decades reading and writing have been academic areas in which boys have encountered considerable difficulty, especially relative to their female counterparts. The U.S. Department of Education (1997) characterized writing as a fundamental skill and indicated that a deficiency in writing skills was likely to undermine one's academic success as well as one's prospects for a meaningful career. Overall, throughout the country, females have done much better than males in reading and writing. The Department of Education report entitled *The Condition of Education 1997*, concluded that for the last thirty years, females of all ages have outscored males in writing proficiency. According to this report, girls are approximately one and a half years ahead of boys in reading and writing competency. This advantage exists at all levels, not just the highest (Gurian, 2001).

Pollack (1998) asserts that boys' weaknesses in the basic skills of reading and writing lead to a variety of problems at school. By the time they reach eighth grade, boys are 50 percent more likely to have been held back a grade than are girls. Boys also make up three quarters of all children categorized as learning disabled today and are put in special education at a much higher rate than their female counterparts. Once students are placed into special education, they rarely switch into college or other academic tracks (Pollack, 1998). Furthermore, the percentage of men graduating from college has been steadily

decreasing since 1970. Currently, the majority of bachelor's degrees and master's degrees are awarded to females, and fewer than 50 percent of all boys in the United States take the opportunity to attend college and pursue a college degree (Mortenson, 1998).

Since the inception in 1969 of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which is a standardized exam given to nine-, thirteen-, and seventeen year olds in the U.S., girls at all grade levels have scored much higher than boys, on average, in language skills. According to the 2003 NAEP scores, a higher percentage of females scored at or above the basic and proficient achievement levels, as well as at the advanced level, than their male counterparts. Differences in male and female writing achievement are relatively large, with male 11th-graders scoring at about the same level as female 8th-graders in 1996 (Freeman, 2004).

In the 1996 NAEP assessment for eighth graders, for example, females outperformed males by 25 points on a 500 point scale. One way to look at the magnitude of this gap is to compare it to differences in scores for writing performance between ethnic and racial groups. On this same assessment, white students outperformed black students by 29 points and Hispanic students by 21 points. Similarly, in the 2003 NAEP at the 12th grade level, females outperformed males in writing achievement, with a gap of 25 points between female and male scores. The important point to note here is that this gap between genders is as wide as the gap between white and black students at the same grade level and even wider than the gap between whites and Hispanics. Comparing scores on the 1998 NAEP with those for the 2003 NAEP, Jerry and Ballator (2003) pointed out

that the proportion of the 12th grade males reaching the proficient level remained at 14 percent while the proportion of female students reaching the proficient level rose from 29 percent in 1998 to 33 percent. What all of this indicates is that the gap between females and males in writing performance is as significant as the achievement gap between whites and racial/ethnic groups that have suffered systemic social and economic discrimination in this country (Newkirk, 2002, p 35). Furthermore, according to NAEP scores, this gendered pattern of females outperforming males is consistent when examining all racial/ethnic groups. Recent PIRLS scores based on the 2006 data suggest that the gender literacy gap is an international phenomenon with girls outperforming boys on literacy scales world-wide, not just in the United States (Retrieved February 18, 2008, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008>).

This is not meant to suggest that as educators or as a nation we should not be celebrating the levels of academic success that girls are attaining, especially since girls have traditionally been under-served by the educational system in the United States. This is also not to suggest that boys are not encountering academic success in other areas. For example, again according to NAEP scores, boys achieve higher scores than girls in both science and mathematics. The gender gap in science and math has prompted researchers (Kafai, 2004; Sadker & Sadker, 1995) to study how girls can encounter greater success in both mathematics and science. Similarly, the current gender gap in writing has also prompted researchers to study how boys can encounter greater success in literacy, particularly in writing.

The current gender gap in writing raises some serious questions about our commitment as educators to providing effective and equitable educational experiences for all students regardless of gender, race or socioeconomic background. As a result of the growing academic gendered gap in writing, and given the Department of Education's claim that a deficiency in writing skills is likely to undermine one's academic success, a sector of the research community is beginning to dedicate more attention to boys and their educational experiences.

Differing Gendered Literacy Interests

A number of researchers (e.g., Newkirk, 2002; Sommers, 2000; Pollack, 1998; Paley, 1984) argue that schools tend to gear writing curriculum and instruction more to the way girls learn and that boys are suffering because teachers do not acknowledge gender differences in their students. This perspective, although debatable and provocative, is gaining momentum as new theories and research methods begin to shed light on potential learning differences between boys and girls in writing and other areas of literacy.

Many researchers (Newkirk, 2002; Gurian, 2001; Somers, 2000; Pollack, 1998) are advocating a more open approach to literacy instruction, which includes activities that are geared toward the child's interest level and temperament. These advocates theorize that the manner in which literacy, especially writing, is taught is too narrow and is not captivating and appealing to boys. In addition, many genres and styles that are appealing to boys (e.g., comic books, adventure stories, silly fictitious stories, sports pages) are considered low-status and are not welcome in many classrooms during writing time

because they are either “inappropriate” for school or deemed not worthy of instructional time.

With the current instructional model that biases certain literary interests over others, many boys come to realize that their interests are not worthy of attention in the classroom and as a result, come to view writing as more of a female activity than a male activity. Newkirk (2002) argues that this problem—the construction of literacy as feminized—cannot be countered if schools fail to be self-critical about what counts and does not count as valid literacy activity.

In the end, a broadening of the literacy spectrum will not only benefit boys; it will benefit *any student* whose primary affiliation is to the “low status” popular narratives of television, movies, comics, humor, sports pages, and plot-driven fiction. But I would argue that the more tightly we draw the circle of acceptability, the more students are left out. If literacy instruction defines itself *against* these more popular forms of narrative, we lose a resource, a lever, a connection. As Anne Haas Dyson has so brilliantly argued, the issue is not simply widening the circle; we are not just bringing in this outer culture unchanged. Dyson (1997) argues for a “permeable curriculum” where these popular culture affiliations form the cultural material that children employ (and transform) in their stories. (p 172).

Similarly, Pollack (1998) asserts that boys, just like girls, do best in schools that give them the chance to participate in learning activities that correspond to their personal interests and competencies, enabling them to express their authentic voices and thrive as individuals. This also gives them an opportunity to connect their lives and interests outside the classroom to the writing curriculum. In an attempt to reach more students, both Newkirk and Pollack urge teachers to look more critically at whose interests are catered to in the curriculum and how writing is being taught in the classrooms.

So called “boy advocacy” scholars maintain that boys have differing literary interests from girls and that they are currently not getting the help they need when it comes to writing instruction because of popular and dominant literacy classroom practices that cater to girls. Despite decades of statistical evidence indicating that boys are not as proficient in writing as girls, writing programs designed to take this into account and explicitly aid boys have taken very low priority. Boy advocate scholars are calling for balance in curriculum and instruction, fair treatment, and a concerted national effort to get boys back on track. Specifically, boy-advocacy scholars argue that curricular changes should be made in order to offer a writing curriculum that is more appealing to the literacy interests of boys. They argue that boys will be more motivated to write within a curriculum that offers genres of interest to them.

This Teacher Research Study

This dissertation focuses on the experiences and writing development of first grade boys and girls during “Writer’s Workshop¹” in a classroom where I functioned as both teacher and researcher. This study was specifically designed to capture the teacher-researcher perspective and provide an emic qualitative lens into what happened in a classroom when I deliberately broadened the literacy spectrum and redesigned the writing curriculum to include genres that were aligned with the literacy interests of both boys and girls. Throughout this study, I was both the teacher in the classroom and the researcher generating new local knowledge that came from studying my own practice. Throughout

¹ Writer’s Workshop is a term widely used in elementary schools to explain a particular approach to writing in which students develop an understanding of the writing process by selecting their own topics and developing their own voices as writers. The works of Donald Graves and Lucy Calkins have greatly influenced the Writer’s Workshop approach.

this year-long study, I listened to and validated the boys literary interests, provided opportunities for all the students to discuss and pursue their own writing interests, and also focused part of the direct writing instruction on units dedicated to what might be thought of as male interests.

This study was conducted in my first grade classroom during the entire 2005-2006 academic school year. This study was specifically designed to address the problem of the current gender gap in writing by richly documenting what happened when a classroom teacher changed the curriculum to incorporate male literacy interests and, hopefully, enrich everybody's literacy development. Specifically, this study explored the following major research question:

- What happens when a classroom teacher broadens the writing curriculum to make room for more “male” interests and provides opportunities for these interests to develop?

These sub questions were also explored:

- How do the children, boys and girls, respond to this broadened approach to writing, both in attitude and writing progress?
- What changes occur in classroom atmosphere and culture?
- What are the implications of these changes?

Organization and Arguments of This Dissertation

This dissertation argues that, in addition to other social components, gender should be taken into consideration when creating a writing curriculum and deciding which genres to include. My analysis showed that the boys and girls in my classroom were “differently

literate” and had different literacy interests. They had different successes and struggles with a writing curriculum that featured multiple genres. Throughout this study, I show that both boys and girls were more motivated and excited to write when experimenting in genres that were of interest to them. In many instances, the students also achieved at higher levels of writing proficiency when writing in genres of interest. I argue here for a writing curriculum that is appealing to the interests of both boys and girls, especially since it may be that shifting the curriculum from focusing on a single genre to including multiple genres may motivate boys to write more. What I found was that many boys in my classroom were more motivated to write when they working with genres that do not currently figure prominently in writing curricula for young children across the country. Therefore, it seems possible that a multi-genred writing curriculum may help to address the problem of boys and writing and help to lessen the gender gap in writing that currently exists throughout the country and internationally.

This dissertation is organized into nine chapters. In this chapter, I frame the research problem by discussing the gender gap in writing that exists in elementary schools across the country. I review the body of research that suggests that boys and girls have differing literacy interests and that currently the writing curriculum in many elementary schools is not aligned with male literacy interests. In chapter 2, I review three bodies of relevant literature related to boys and issues of gender in education. This review of the literature can be thought of in terms of three concentric circles, which are progressively more narrow in scope. The literature review begins at the outer and most general circle by

focusing on research about broad issues pertaining to boys and schooling. A section of this outer circle addresses the consequences of the “gender blind” stance some teachers take in the classroom. These teachers believe that gendered differences do not exist so their classrooms and curricula are constructed without consideration of these differences. Research that indicates that boys and girls have biological differences is also explained as part of this outer circle. In addition, I review research on teacher interactions and interruptions, which indicates that boys receive more attention than girls in the classroom but some argue that most of this attention is negative. The middle circle of the review of the literature focuses on the research of gender and literacy in elementary schools. In this section, I review research focused on gendered differences in writing as well as teachers’ gendered perceptions and beliefs about student writing. I also review the research on differing gendered literacy interests and discuss the concept of gendered literacy in general. Researchers exploring this concept argue that boys and girls have different gendered ways of knowing and these differences influence literacy development. They argue that boys and girls tend to be differently literate. The inner circle and most specific piece of the literature review focuses on Writer’s Workshop theory and research and analyzes how and whether current Writer’s Workshop theory addresses the differing literary needs of both boys and girls. This section discusses the traditional Writer’s Workshop model, multiple intelligences and learner centered classrooms. It also explains the evolution of Writer’s Workshop and argues that this approach may benefit some students more than others.

In chapter 3, I provide an overview of my research design. I introduce teacher research as the methodological framework that guided the study. I argue that the local knowledge that is generated from teachers researching their own practice has value to the local context and to the larger research community. Due to its emic perspective in the classroom, teacher research is unique and is able to ask and answer research questions in a way that other research paradigms cannot. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the concept of “trustworthiness” in teacher research as a reconceptualized notion of validity that is more appropriate to this form of research. I also address the question, “Is teacher research real research?” and explain why teacher research methods were appropriate for this study. Then, I provide an overview of this study and describe the research site, researcher access, participants, methods of data collection and sources, and methods of data analysis. In particular, I describe a multi-layered level of analysis including a three-dimensional analysis scheme—chronological, generic and thematic—which enabled me to analyze themes and differences among genres and between genders.

In Chapter 4, I describe the “lay of the land” of my first grade classroom at the onset of this study. This chapter includes an overview of the writing curriculum that I created and implemented. This writing curriculum featured direct instruction on five genres: personal narratives, letter writing, comic book writing, fiction writing and poetry. An in-depth description and a rationale for including each genre is included. This chapter also provides a description of *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers* rubric, which I used to assess my students’ writing throughout the year and to analyze the students’ writing levels prior my implementation of the new writing curriculum. In this chapter, I

also provide a detailed description of the six boys who were the focal children in this study. I describe each of them as I saw them at the beginning of the year both as writers and as social members of the class, and I describe how I selected these six boys for this study. Thus this chapter serves as a baseline to observe growth and change regarding writing development and children's attitudes and motivation towards writing during different genres. This initial description helps to inform my understanding of the boy's social experiences during Writer's Workshop and provides insight into why they brought certain issues and interests into their writing.

Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 are organized chronologically and by the genres of the writing curriculum. In each of these chapters, I describe three different perspectives: the whole class perspective, an in-depth perspective of the six focal boys, and my own perspective as teacher researcher in the classroom. In each of these four chapters I explain both the social and academic issues that were unique to each genre. Taken together, these three perspectives provide an in depth look at classroom life during Writer's Workshop in my first grade classroom. These perspectives work together to tell a story about the experiences we had as a class with a broadened writing curriculum. Upon analysis of all the data sources and the three differing perspectives, I theorized about how gender, identity and genre are all components that influence writing development.

In chapter 5, I provide a detailed description of the personal narrative unit and chronicle what happened when I implemented this unit with my first graders. From the perspective of the focal children, I capture their attitudes towards writing personal narratives and the issues that arose when they wrestled with deciding what to reveal about

their personal lives. I discuss three main points based on my observation and analysis of their learning to write personal narratives: Learning to write was important to these 6 boys, although they felt it was not important to learn how to write personal narratives about their own lives. Personal narratives are “windows into the self” and many boys were deliberate about what they chose to reveal about themselves in their stories. Finally, the boys in the class had differing literacy interests than the girls.

Chapter 6 provides a detailed description of the letter writing unit and the classroom postal service the class created as part of it. In this chapter, I chronicle and analyze what happened when I implemented this unit with my first graders. I describe three findings that emerged from the data. The first was that many boys thought deeply about the audience for their letters. The second finding was that many boys liked writing letters because writing became an interactive form of social activity. Interestingly, there was a connection between the socially interactive nature of the children and their writing proficiency in this unit. Overall, the more extroverted students achieved higher rubric scores during the letter writing unit than the introverted students. The final finding was that most boys both preferred to write letters over personal narratives and most achieved higher rubric scores during the letter writing as well.

Chapter 7 offers a detailed description of both the comic book and fiction writing units. By design, I combined these two genres into one chapter. Although there were some issues that were unique to each genre, there were also similarities. By analyzing the two genres in one chapter, I highlight these similarities and discuss their impact on my first grade students. I discuss four main lessons learned while observing my students

write comic books and fiction stories. First, the comic book and fiction units gave boys more control over many aspects of the writing process, and they were more excited about writing in these genres as a result. They not only wrote more freely during the units in which they perceived a heightened sense of control, they also performed at a higher level, wrote longer pieces and achieved higher rubric scores. Second, when I opened the door wider to allow room for the male literacy interests, some students chose to develop their literacy interests outside of the structure of the official writing curriculum. Some boys perceived a difference between the official and unofficial writing curriculum and preferred to write about their interests during Choice Time rather than Writer's Workshop. Third, regarding their social development, boys were more expressive in their writing when they could incorporate fictitious elements into their writing. Because the content was fictitious, many boys abandoned the boy code and made more pro-social statements about what they valued socially. Finally, as a teacher, I found that I learned much more about the personal nature of the boys and what they deemed socially important during the comic book and fiction units than I did during the personal narrative unit.

Chapter 8 focuses on the poetry unit. During this unit, there was direct instruction on three different formats for poetry: acrostic poems, rhyming poems and poems with repeating lines. My analysis of this unit indicated that most students, both boys and girls, received lower overall rubric scores during the poetry unit than they did during the fiction unit. Second, the boys struggled more with the imposed formats and structures of the poems than the girls did. Many girls found it freeing to write within these formats while

the boys felt more free while writing prose. Third, the students' overall voice scores declined when we shifted from fiction to poetry. Interestingly this seemed to greatly influence the boys' motivation to write while it did not seem to influence the girls' motivation. In addition, shifting genres from fiction to poetry shifted who encountered success as writers. The students who were structure-oriented preferred this genre and achieved higher rubric scores during poetry than during fiction. This contributed to my analysis that in addition to gender and social disposition, ones' approach to learning is an important aspect enacted when learning to write. Finally, I examined my role as teacher when my students wrote about topics that I found inappropriate or alarming. I found that each genre in the writing curriculum provided motivational support and scaffolding for some students while it felt more limiting to others.

In chapter 9, I step back from close description and analysis of the writing units developed during this year-long study in order to theorize about what can be learned from one group of students and their teacher when involved in an innovative curriculum for beginning writers based on multiple genres with some specifically included to appeal to boys. I develop two main points about young children's writing development. First, including genres in the writing curriculum that are typically considered as having more appeal to boys influences their interest in writing, their motivation to write, and their performance as writers. Clearly, differences in genre both constrain and open up the possibilities for development. Second, although it is true, as many scholars have argued, that gender and genre are important in children's writing opportunities, gender and genre are not the only important aspects involved in opening up the writing curriculum for

beginning writers. As young children work on writing, differing interests based in part on gender and the varying demands and invitations of different genres interact with the complex social processes of the classroom as well as with individual children's social development and their orientations to learning. These two main points contribute to the overall importance of offering a writing curriculum that offers different genres. I argue that offering a multi-genred curriculum provides motivation for a larger student population than the traditional Writer's Workshop model that focuses mainly on personal narrative. This increased motivation may lead to boys' higher levels of writing proficiency which would contribute to closing the gender gap in writing. Finally, I discuss how teacher research can be used to facilitate change in schools. I explain that this teacher research study has prompted other teachers at my school to investigate their own practices and start conversations about gender and writing in schools. Upon learning of the local knowledge generated from this study, a collaborative pilot group of teachers formed to analyze the content and structure of the writing curriculum school wide, from pre-Kindergarten to eighth grade.

CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE
Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to highlight the existing body of research related to boys and their gendered issues in education and to explain how this body of research has informed this dissertation study. This review of the literature can be thought of as consisting of three concentric circles. The outer circle addresses the research on broad issues pertaining to boys and school. As this literature review progresses, it becomes increasingly more narrow in scope. Because this dissertation centers on boys and their literacy development during Writer's Workshop, the middle circle of this framework focuses on the research of gender and literacy in elementary schools. The inner circle then focuses on Writing Workshop theory and research analyzing if/how current Writing Workshop theory addresses the differing literary needs of both boys and girls.

The Outer Circle: Boys and School

Weaver-Hightower (2003) explains that the body of research focusing on boys and school has evolved out of a variety of different paradigms, drawing on popular-rhetorical literature, theoretically-oriented literature and practice-oriented literature. The popular-rhetorical literature generally argues that boys are disadvantaged or harmed by schools and society and that schools are feminized. The theoretically-oriented literature is concerned with cataloging types of masculinity and examines how schools and society produce and modify masculinities. This segment of the research on boys largely uses

tools of qualitative research. The practice-oriented literature is concerned with developing and evaluating school and classroom interventions in boys' academic and social problems (Weaver-Hightower, 2003).

Researching Gender

The research community has recently experienced a "boy turn" as a number of researchers have focused on boys' experiences in school. These researchers examine gendered differences and experiences that currently exist in schools, and discuss how issues of gender and education overlap and influence one another.

Prior to this "boy turn" much of the research on gender in education (Sadker & Sadker, 1995, Gilligan, 1982) focused on girls' academic achievement and how they experienced school. An equity crisis in the mid 1990s was given national visibility by the AAUW report *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (1992) and Sadker and Sadker's *Failing at Fairness* (1995). These reports documented a set of practices, intentional and unintentional, that consistently favored male students. Consequently, equity came to mean redressing these institutional biases (Newkirk, 2002). Much attention was given to creating educational experiences for female students to encounter greater academic success in schools, mostly in mathematics and the sciences.

Similarly the "boy turn" evolved partially out of this feminist research perspective and also focuses on how issues of gender impact educational achievement. Due to boys' declining academic results, however, such as the NAEP writing scores, attention is now also being given to boys and their educational experiences. Similar to the findings of the research focusing on girls' educational experiences, many of the research findings related

to the “boy-turn” concluded that boys and girls have real differences that impact on their academic achievement and that many schools may not be set up and run in a manner that is conducive to the way boys learn.

It is important to note that this recent boy-turn is not meant to contradict or undermine the feminist work of researchers such as Gilligan (1982) and Sadker & Sadker (1995) who focused on how girls experienced school and created educational experiences where they could encounter greater success. Nor does this focus on boys and literacy imply that boys are now become the overall educational victims. There are certainly social and academic areas in which boys thrive and girls struggle. In fact, the boy-turn can be seen as a compliment to the research on girls in that it increased our recognition that gender inequity is not just a deficiency in girls (Weaver-Hightower, 2003) and may instead be a reflection of institutional and educational problems. Furthermore, the literature on boys has been made possible, in part, by feminist critiques and the research on girls that preceded them.

Researchers of both girls and boys recognized the potential damage of resorting to essentialist claims about gender in their work. The “different voice” Gilligan (1982) described, in her focus on girls, was characterized not by gender but by theme. Its association with women was an empirical observation, and was not absolute. She presented her contrasts between male and female “voices” to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus on a problem of interpretation (Gilligan, 1982) rather than to make deterministic conclusions about either gender. It is important to note that whenever generalizations about gender are made, the research community

must be cautious about essentialist terms. “Essentialism obscures differences that exist within the named group; it elevates a perceived trait into a fixed biological endowment; and because this often negative ‘trait’ is seen as permanent, essentialism allows those in power to rationalize their advantage” (Newkirk, 2002, p22). Generalizations about gender made by Gilligan (1982) Sadker and Sadker (1995) and Newkirk (2001) are not intended to describe deterministic limitations. Of course, not every child fits into every generalization about gender all the time, and it is certainly possible for generalizations about boys to apply to a girl, and vice versa. Generalizations about gender should only be used to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought, to focus a problem of interpretation, or to describe observed patterns or tendencies.

While the claims and conclusions of the recent research focused on boys are debatable, the purpose of this section is to highlight their main issues and research findings, and to explain how some of these issues have been argued and debated. Major issues that emerged from this body of research on boys were teachers’ gender blind stance, biological differences between boys and girls (including differing learning tempos, differences in brain function, in levels of aggression, and in physical behavior, and classroom implications that these differences have on learning and students’ developing sense of self as a student) and teacher interactions and interruptions. The popular-rhetorical, the theoretically-oriented, and the practice-oriented literature collectively helped to inform each of these major issues related to the research on boys and school.

The Gender-Blind Stance

A gender issue that has received considerable research attention (Garrahy, 2001; Zaher, 1996; Doherty & Hier, 1988; Janes, 1979; Brodtkin, 1991) is the so-called “gender-blind” or “gender neutral” stance. In a frequently cited study involving 3 teachers and their perceptions of their own teaching, Garrahy (2001) asserts that many teachers are trained to believe that gender is simply a social function or a social construct, and they acquire a “gender-blind” or “gender-neutral” stance in the classroom. According to this stance, when teachers looked out over their classes, they claimed to not see boys or girls but instead saw students. Because these teachers claimed not to consider their students gendered identities when making curricular or instructional decisions, the assumption was that boys and girls do not have different needs.

Gender blindness, like color blindness, supports teachers’ claims of what they believed to be fair. Lopez-Gerardo (2003) explains that a color blind stance ignores racial issues and facilitates only a partial understanding of conflict and power. When teachers assumed a color blind stance in their classrooms they believed in neutrality which was harmful to students because it promoted fictions about whiteness, objectivity and equality and promoted a simplified, sanitized version of racial issues.

Similarly, when teachers assume a gender-blind stance, they attempt to see generic students and are convinced of their abilities to provide equal treatment for all (Garrahy, 2001). The classroom becomes a “one size fits all” model which does not take gender into consideration. Teachers who accept this model do not recognize that gendered

differences exist so their classrooms and curricula are constructed without consideration of these differences.

Pollack, author of *Real Boys*, (1998) argues that, although teachers may be doing this unintentionally, when they acquired a gender-blind stance, teachers were force-fitting boys into an unnatural mold, especially considering the majority of elementary school teachers are women. Christina Hoff Sommers, author of the popular best seller *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men* (2000) asserts that by attempting to see generic students, and by failing to critically look at their practices in a gendered manner, schools are overly feminizing classrooms and attempting to engineer androgyny. Recognizing the link between child development and education, Brodtkin (1991) interviewed two specialists in child development and child psychology and discussed intellect and gender difference in an effort to address the potentially conflicting issues of gendered difference and equity. Brodtkin provided teachers with suggestions of how to acknowledge gendered differences while still giving boys and girls the same opportunities and judging them by the same standard. These advocates of the newly-emerging research on boys and their learning needs stated that teachers who do not acknowledge gendered differences in their students were doing harm to boys by not considering or exploring that they may learn better under different circumstances. Furthermore, teachers who adhered to the gender-blind stance, created classroom environments and approached instruction in a way that did not take gender into account.

Teachers who do not continually reflect upon gender and question their own practice and beliefs run the risk of creating classroom environments that favor one gender over the

other. Vivian Paley (1984) a kindergarten teacher and teacher researcher, came to the realization that her classroom and curriculum was better suited for girls. She pointed out that, in most elementary classrooms, teachers are the unilateral decision-makers. It is crucial, therefore, for teachers to develop reflective capabilities and remain open to changing their beliefs and practices if/when they realize inequalities exist. Paley urges elementary school teachers to analyze their own practices and behaviors to see which gender they align themselves with because without this kind of critical reflection, teachers run the risk of creating classroom environments and curricula that cater more to the way girls learn, mainly because most teachers adhere to the format or classroom structure in which they themselves learned best.

Despite the prominence of teachers' gender-blind stance, the research community has recently focused on explaining actual gendered differences that exist and describing the impact that these differences have on classrooms and student learning. Embedded in the framework of this section is the assumption that actual gendered differences do exist and that consequentially, boys and girls have differing educational experiences. Furthermore, the experience of one gender can suffer when schools adhere to a gender-blind stance and don't acknowledge gendered difference under seemingly normal, benign school practices. This assumption of gendered difference is informed by the research findings which stemmed from the theoretically-oriented, practically-oriented, and popular-rhetorical literature. The next sections of this literature review highlight recent research findings pertaining to boys and school.

Biological Differences between Boys and Girls

An interesting issue that emerged out of the research on boys was that boys and girls actually have biological differences in form and function. Richard Hawley, former chair of the International Coalition of Boys Schools, posits that there are different “tempos” in learning between the genders; that generally, boys and girls learn at different paces and with different styles (Hawley, 1991). These gender-based variations in tempo and pattern of learning can be identified from the pre-kindergarten through the high school years. During the primary grades, girls generally developed reading and writing proficiency, which also involved motor development, at a different tempo from boys. Hawley asserts that if schools are to provide a successful instructional environment for boys, they must stay in touch with the unique “tempo” and learning style of each student. If the instructional tempo of the classroom is more aligned with the tempo of the female students, the boys could develop low self-esteem and encounter academic failure.

Brain research over the past decade has revealed that boys’ and girls’ brains function differently. Michael Gurian, founder of the Gurian Institute at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and author of *Boys and Girls Learn Differently* (2001) asserts that most educators are not kept current with the recent findings in brain research and developmental differences. Each year, the Gurian Institute introduces hundreds of teachers, preschool through high school, to brain research, educating them on how boys and girls learn differently and how to develop innovations in their classrooms to fit new knowledge of brain research. While the interpretations of brain research on gendered difference is relatively new, Gurian states that most teachers are not trained or well-

versed in how to incorporate brain research at all into their classroom and curricula. From kindergarten on, the educational system rewards self-control, obedience, and concentration—qualities that are much more common among girls than boys, particularly at young ages (Gurian, 2001).

It is important to acknowledge that research on gendered difference in brain function is controversial. If these findings are interpreted using essentialist claims, it could lead educators into dangerous territory. For example, Harvard University President Larry Summers recently questioned girls' intrinsic abilities in math and science. His gendered statements created controversy, attracted national attention, and led many educators to question his authority and leadership abilities as university president. Similarly, while it is important for teachers to be informed on developments regarding gender and brain function, it is critical that teachers do not make essentialist claims about what boys can and cannot do, solely based on findings of recent brain research. Researchers and educators need to be responsible to avoid essentialist thinking when making claims and creating classroom implications based on brain research.

Aggression in boys has been an issue related to behavioral differences in elementary students and researched by educators (Rubin, 1998; Fabes, 1997; Crick, 1997; Periolat & Nager, 1988; Marsh, 1984; Gold, 1984; Ullian, 1979) over the past several decades. Crick (1997) found that girls were generally less overtly aggressive than boys. Similarly, Rubin et al., (1998) concluded that boys are more aggressive than girls. Periolat and Nager (1988) points out the positive aspects of such aggression. They assert that aggressive behavior is often the most immediate way for a child to communicate his or

her desires, and teachers need to try to understand what children are communicating rather than judge their behavior. They assert that boys often used aggressive behavior and play-fighting to make friends, exhibit frustration due to failure at making friends and became more assertive in overcoming their fears. Perolat & Nager (1988) urged teachers to play a positive role in assisting children to express and channel their aggressive behavior.

Similarly, Gurian (2001) advocated for teachers to integrate more physical movement into classroom routines and curriculum. He stated that physical movement in class, especially when rules were promulgated as to what movement was and was not acceptable, not only helped to reduce levels of aggression and manage stress, but physical movement also led to learning advantages, especially in the male brain, because blood flow enhances neurotransmission to limbic (where emotional processing occurs) and left-brain (verbal) areas. "The male brain does not quickly move neurotransmission in the upper limbic areas, nor does it as naturally direct emotional material between the left and right hemispheres for analysis and verbalization. But engaging the whole body in task of emotional processing seems to enhance neurotransmission to limbic and left brain areas" (Gurian, 2001, p 150).

Advocates for more research on how boys learn suggest that teachers contribute to the gendered gap by expecting their students to learn the same things in the same way in the same amount of time. These researchers believe that the reigning sit-still-and-listen paradigm isn't ideal for either sex but it is one that girls often tolerate better than boys. Pollack (1998) states that girls have more intricate sensory capacities and biosocial

aptitudes to decipher exactly what the teacher wants, whereas boys tend to be more anti-authoritarian, competitive, and risk-taking. King (1998) reminds us that students in the primary grades spend most of their time in classrooms where men are almost nonexistent. He described teaching in the primary grades as a female culture, and asserted that during these formative years, students begin to develop self-concept and strong attitudes and affiliations towards school.

Teacher Interactions and Interruptions

Studies focusing on “teacher interactions” during classroom observations and using teacher questionnaire responses reveal that teachers interact differently with boys and girls. (Newkirk, 2002; Field et al, 1994; Sadker, 1993; BenTsvi-Mayer, et al, 1989; Fennema & Peterson, 1986; Sadker & Sadker, 1985; Ebbeck, 1984; Gilligan, 1982). Sadker (1993) found that although teachers claimed to strive for equity and fairness, even those deeply concerned with gender equity tended to interact differently with boys and girls. Sadker states that these differences in interaction had profound effects on children’s self-esteem, academic interests, and ability to become independent, assertive thinkers. The majority of these interactions were described in quantities of time. Especially with regards to behavior, teachers spent more time interacting with boys. In a study that spanned the entire range of elementary schools, Sadker & Sadker (1985) found that male students had more opportunities to interact with their teachers than female students. Similarly, BenTsvi-Mayer found that both elementary school teachers and student-teachers in their study spent more time with their male students. These teachers

also perceived the boys to be their more salient students, suggesting the length of teacher-student interactions affects teachers' perception of their students.

A small but significant body of research on student-teacher interactions (Lindroos, 1995; Hendrick & Strange, 1991; LaFrance, 1991) focus on interruptions that occur in the classroom. Hendrick and Strange (1991) observed primary grade classrooms and analyzed student and teacher behaviors during conversations. They found that boys interrupted their teachers more than girls. In these same classrooms, teachers interrupted girls more than they did boys. LaFrance (1991) also found that teachers interrupt girls more than boys. The teachers in LaFrance's study believed that girls should be better listeners so they interrupt them more when they are not meeting expectations. These teachers expected and encouraged more participation from boys, so they were more patient and tolerant of their impulsive behavior and did not consider their interruptions to be as alarming. Boys' interruptions, by these teachers, were not seen to contribute to their reputation of displaying inappropriate behavior. Lindroos (1995) analyzed discourse in elementary classrooms by comparing teacher reactions involving interruptions with girls versus boys. Similar to the findings of Hendrick & Strange (1991) and LaFrance (1991) Lindroos found that teachers interrupt girls more than boys. They found that teachers also had differing conversational styles when dealing with boys and girls. Mainly, girls were encouraged and expected to cooperate more than boys in class. These studies of interruptions (Lindroos, 1995; Hendrick & Strange, 1991; LaFrance, 1991) were significant in that they revealed that teachers have gendered expectations for their students and these expectations impact how students experience the

classroom and how they viewed themselves as learners. According to this body of research, teachers have gendered expectations, and in turn, interact differently with boys and girls. They allowed boys to be more active and impulsive, and girls were expected to be more cooperative and better listeners. This sent boys and girls differing messages about acceptable parameters for behavior. The students in this study experienced the same classroom differently, depending on whether they were a boy or a girl, and this difference in experience was based partially on their teachers' gendered expectations and beliefs.

Gilligan (1984) and Sadker and Sadker (1985) analyzed the issue of student-teacher relationships from a feminist point of view and showed that girls' self-esteem was lowered because their teachers tended to call on girls less than boys during class discussion. As a result, girls experienced a lack of trust in their teachers and developed a poor self-image of themselves as capable students. According to their research, girls were called upon less than boys resulting in the girls feeling less connected to the teacher, classroom and learning process. This point is controversial and has been argued by both feminist researchers and advocates of the boy-turn. The research on both sides of this issue state that overall, boys receive more teacher attention than girls, but there is not agreement on what this attention means, or who benefits from this teacher attention. Gurian's research (2001) supports the claim that boys, on the whole, receive more teacher attention but points out that the attention boys receive is often negative. "The double edge sword here is painfully clear: boys force us to bond with them in negative ways

during class more than girls do, while many girls hang back during class, often ending up with bonds that are less dramatic and forced but also positive” (p. 140).

Newkirk, a leading advocate for more research on boys in school, is critical of the stance that the more attention boys receive has an advantageous impact on their educational outcome, especially since a large component of teacher attention boys receive is negative. Newkirk’s theories and views are informed by national statistics about gendered difference from the Educational Testing Service (Cole, 1997,) prior empirical research (Ferguson, 2000; Hull et al., 1997; Rist, 1970) and his own empirical research of years of classroom observations in elementary schools throughout New Hampshire and New England. Newkirk questions the educational advantage boys gain from such attention getting behavior. He states that

if this behavior [handraising, bidding for the teachers’ attention, and publicly displaying knowledge] allows boys to monopolize classroom instruction, one might expect some differential in educational achievement. If, as the Sadkers claim, boys are offered greater educational challenges because of their greater visibility in class, there should be some pay-off. Yet the Sadkers note that girls appear to be doing better, they get better grades and receive fewer punishments...If these grades are rewarded for mere conformity, this advantage might seem an illusionary one...The greater attention to boys may not have much of an educational payoff. To the extent that this attention is negative, it reinforces the counterproductive ‘troublemaker’ or ‘clown’ identity that boys come to assume. In a sense, it rewards that identity, which is not the same thing as conferring educational advantage” (p 32-33).

Many of the researchers on teacher-student interactions (Newkirk, 2002; Sadker, 1993; Fennema & Peterson, 1986; Ebbeck, 1984) included suggestions for teachers to identify and correct sexist practices, which involve analyzing their own gendered beliefs about who needs more time, and critically looking at classroom performance.

Pollack (1998) urges the research community to continue to focus on boys in schools. He asserts that boys are not just falling behind girls; they are also falling behind their own functioning and academic performance and they are doing worse in school than they ever have before. He theorized that that boys are becoming aware that girls are more likely to go to college and that teachers consider them to be more capable students. Therefore, he states that the current state of boys' development and academic achievement should be a serious concern for educators and researchers.

The Middle Circle: Gender and Literacy

Continuing with the framework of concentric circles outlined in the introduction of this literature review, the following section represents the middle concentric circle and becomes more narrow in scope. Now that I have addressed the related research on boys and school within the largest concentric circle, this section moves from the topic of boys and school to highlight the research within the middle concentric circle entitled gender and literacy. Interestingly, the gendered differences cited in the outer circle remain and play out within literacy practices. Taking it one step further, this middle circle addresses research that questions not only the physical differences between boys and girls, but if/how boys and girls are differently literate. Main issues that arise from the body of research within this middle circle of gender and literacy are: Differences in writing ability, teachers' gendered perceptions and beliefs of writing ability, differences in literacy interests, and the concept of gendered literacy. Similar to the outer circle, this middle circle was also informed by both conceptual and empirical research and stemmed

from three differing bodies of literature: theoretical-rhetorical, theoretically-oriented and practically-oriented.

Differences in Writing Ability

As shown above, it is argued that under the current instructional models, boys are not encountering as much success in writing as their female counter parts. Many researchers (Gurian and Bellow, 2003; Fisher, 2001; Kanaris, 1999; Pils, 1993; Berniger & Fuller, 1992; Boardman, 1990; Moss, 1982) have examined gendered difference in writing instruction in elementary schools. In her examination of 150 samples of primary school aged children's writing, Kanaris (1999) found that girls generally wrote longer, more complex texts, used a wider range of both verbs and adjectives, and developed their texts with more focus on description and elaboration. Fisher (2001) focused on her own class and conducted a study involving 30 elementary students investigating the relationship between reading and gender and attitudes towards literacy. Based on the results of a questionnaire filled out by her students addressing favorite choice of literary genres, Fisher concluded that boys preferred a wider variety of genres and reading material used in class. He also concluded that boys had shorter attention spans and preferred independent work. Berniger & Fuller (1992) administered measures of oral/verbal fluency (addressing word finding skills using a subtest of the McCarthy scales of children's abilities), written orthographic fluency (using an alphabet identification task) and writing comprehension (using an expository and narrative frame based on Donald Graves' work) to 300 primary grade students: 50 boys and 50 girls in grades 1, 2 and 3. They found that boys performed significantly better than girls on oral verbal fluency and

girls outperformed boys on written orthographic fluency. Furthermore, girls consistently outperformed boys on the number of words and the number of clauses produced in narrative and expository writing. In a review of the research on graphicacy and gender, Boardman (1990) found that boys consistently performed better in map drawing and map reading. According to Gurian (2001) boys also acquire literacy skills best through action, not just talk. Boys generally need more help than girls in developing language skills. Self-directed activities, using the real world, and other strategies useful for spatial development are useful in enhancing their language development (Gurian and Bellow, 2003).

Teacher's Gendered Perceptions and Beliefs

Studies that analyzed teacher perceptions of girls and boys writing competencies (Millard & Marsh, 2001; Peterson, 2000; Thomas, 1994) were consistent with the above mentioned research about differences in writing between boys and girls. Based on student interviews, classroom observations and a questionnaire administered to 97 girls and 104 boys, Peterson (2000) found that, not only did boys and girls have varied literacy interests, but teachers believed that girls' writing was more detailed and descriptive and showed greater conformity to the writing conventions taught in their classrooms. Based on her findings, Peterson stated that educational conversations were needed to question the emphasis on conformity in writing. She urged teachers to explore ways to nurture students' identified strengths in overlooked areas on evaluation rubrics. Peterson noted that these rubrics often overlook boys' strengths in writing, such as creativity and style in favor of conformity and convention.

Similar to Peterson's study, Thomas' research (1994) found that teachers believed that differences in girls and boys writing stemmed from cultural experiences and values relating to their reading and writing. Thomas conducted a teacher research study of his own elementary school. Analyzing the writing of 70 students over the course of 3 years, he found a significant gap between the writing performance of his male and female students. Thomas explained that teachers should not aim to produce de-gendered narrative but instead encourage the complimentary components of assertiveness, reflectiveness, and awareness of opposed values in both boys' and girls' writing. Thomas stated that writing is a method of communicating, which entails that students articulate and express their thoughts using the written word. Thomas encourages teachers to provide opportunities for students to experiment with their preferred writing genres and styles as they develop into literate beings. According to Thomas, teachers should develop a broad writing program which reflects and exposes gendered differences in writing and expression, instead of prohibiting students from writing in certain mediums which advantages one gender over the other.

Instead of encouraging students to write and experiment with their own genres, Millard and March (2001) argue that writing instruction in elementary schools too often emphasizes technical accuracy and neatness in handwriting, which limits the role of drawing in children's construction of text. Based on data gathered from the National Writing project, writing samples and student interviews from 100 primary grade students, Millard and March suggested this current emphasis on neatness and accuracy has adverse consequences for the development of academic confidence, particularly in boys. They

concluded by arguing that teachers need to be more understanding of differences in the modes in which students chose to make sense of their cultural contexts. Hartley (1991) conducted a study involving elementary teachers and 62 students: 30 boys and 32 girls. He asked the students to copy a written passage and then asked teachers to predict the gender of the writing samples. He found substantial differences between the handwriting of boys and girls that participated. According to his study, teachers can determine the writer's gender by examining handwriting and they hold stereotypical views about the writer by analyzing their handwriting. These teachers placed emphasis on "correct" handwriting which prevented boys from developing into confident writers. The current teaching practices in many schools introduced and emphasized technical aspects such as accuracy and neatness at an early age, which resulted in many boys developing low self images of themselves as writers (Hartley, 1991).

Differing Literary Interests

A segment of the research on writing suggests that boys and girls have differing literacy interests and prefer to write about very different topics. Hunt (1985) analyzed the writing of five consecutive first grade classes to investigate the selection of topic in theme and mode in their writing. He investigated 993 Writing Workshop books written by first grade children, observed them during writing time, and interviewed them on their attitudes towards writing and preferred genre. Hunt found that boys wrote often about sports, war, fighting, and catastrophes while girls wrote more frequently about themselves, their feelings, their families and friendships. In a study of 3 primary grade classrooms, Peterson (2001) examined the way in which boys and girls in elementary

classrooms used writing to perform gender roles. She found that the characters in girls' narrative writing demonstrated more emotion and more pro-social behavior (sharing, helping, empathizing) while characters in boys' writing exhibited more aggressive behavior and engaged in more high-intensity, dangerous actions. In another study, Peterson (2000) identified preferred writing topics for 600 students in elementary schools and asked students themselves to discuss the differences between boys' and girls' writing. Results showed that students themselves situated girls writing within primary territory; viewed girls as more competent, conscientious writers than boys; and associated the presence of violence with male writers (Peterson, 2000).

Anderson (2003) states that most teachers privilege girls' writing, with regards to both topic and form. In his teacher-researcher study entitled *Reading Violence in Boys' Writing*, Anderson described how teachers can find value in popular culture and violent writing. By closely examining the writing of a student who laces his stories with explosions and battles, Anderson came to understand that this student used violence to explore themes of good vs. evil and express issues of friendship.

Graham (2001) described an action research case study in which 22 primary grade teachers used a writing scale created by the Center for Learning in Primary Education (CLPE) to assess both the writing competencies and attitudes of 523 students. Based on the results of this study, Graham noted that boys encountered the greatest success in writing when they were able to write about things that mattered to them, write as experts, hear their writing read aloud and work in the company of other boys. Similarly, by interviewing and observing two boys during a Writer's Workshop classroom, Abbott

(2000) showed that when boys were able to control important aspects of writing, such as ownership, genre, style and length, they produced more high quality writing pieces. Harris (1998) also explained that offering boys greater choice over what they learn may help address their underachievement. However, Harris warns that boys may not profit from this unless they are given explicit guidelines regarding how to go about their learning. Graves (1983, 1994) suggests that children should be encouraged by their teachers to focus on the message rather than the form. His findings also show that informal classroom settings promote writing and that unassigned writing seems to stimulate boys' writing and results in longer compositions.

Gendered Literacy?

In her classic ethnographic study of how schools interact with community, Heath (1983) explained that children are literate in different ways and many children used writing in their everyday lives in a way that was not emphasized or consistent with literacy instruction in school. In a teacher-research study of his own second grade classroom, Wills (2002) explained how children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds brought their lived experiences and distinctive cultural ways of knowing to learning literacy. Wills included a gendered way of knowing as cultural capital and urged educators to consider that boys have valid but varied lived experiences that should be included and celebrated in the classroom. This concept of a gendered way of knowing was prominent in the research on gender and literacy.

In her study of 150 writing samples of primary school-aged children's writing, Kanaris (1999) identified a variety of different ways in which boys and girls use language

to construct meaning, and discussed gendered ways of knowing and being that were revealed and constructed. In a frequently cited study, Anderson (2002) spent 6 months in two 3rd and 4th grade classrooms, audio-taping literature groups, collecting student writing, observing Language Arts Blocks and interviewing students in order to examine how gender, identity and literacy were entangled and mutually constitutive. He concluded that students' lived experience and ways of knowing provided them with motivation to write. As a result of boys' languishing writing skills, a sector of the research community has given attention to finding new paths for literacy instruction and discussing the concept of gendered literacy (Peterson, 2003; Thorne, 2002; Sadker & Sadker, 2002; Newkirk, 2002; Barrs, 2000; Bleach, 1998; Thomas, 1994; Wardle, 1991).

In a landmark and frequently cited study entitled *Differently Literate*, Millard (1997) gathered data from 255 students in elementary schools. The data were gathered in three interconnecting ways: direct observation in the classroom, a questionnaire survey pertaining to literacy interests, and semi-structured individual and group interviews about attitudes towards school literacy. Millard found strong relationships between pupils' literacy activities, their leisure activities, and their gender. She concluded that boys in her study were shown to be at a greater disadvantage partly because their literacy interests were not addressed in schools and their favored genres were less in harmony with the curriculum, and also because academic choices were being made for them by their teachers.

In their book, *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) questioned the way literacy was generally taught in schools

and suggested alternatives to traditional instruction. Their findings were based on data gathered from interviews, observations, and the results of various literacy activities. The participants for their study were 50 boys who differed from one another according to race, class, school experience and academic achievement and linguistic background. Building their findings on their understanding of the powerful and engaging experiences boys have outside of school, Smith and Wilhelm discussed why boys embrace or reject certain ways of being literate, what qualities of texts appeal to boys, and highlighted the importance of choice and meaningful social activity for boys learning in schools. Similarly, Alloway and Gilbert (1997) examined issues associated with boys and literacy and argued that literacy, as it is constructed in schools, becomes a domain of knowledge and a set of technologies that run counter to various dominant constructions of masculinity. Newkirk (2000) argued that, rather than seeing gendered differences in writing (such as the use of humor and violence versus sincerity in writing) the cultural materials boys bring to the classroom should be acknowledged and engaged. Arguing that boys and girls are differently literate, Thomas (1994) suggested that teachers should identify their respective discourse and genre strengths. Boys stories, according to Thomas, often have pace and event at the expense of everything else. Their narratives are action packed, lacking characterization and any sense of inner life in the characters. Girls' writing, in Thomas' experience, is more aware of a social and moral context for action, and girls are more conscious of the need to keep their readers involved

It is important to note, however, that this concept of gendered literacy instruction is controversial. In a frequently cited article, Barrs (2000) stated that educators should not

respond to boys lagging behind girls in literacy by dedicating more curriculum time to male literacy interests. Barrs examined patterns of gender differentiation and fears that girls' academic success will suffer if the instructional focus caters to boys. She stated

even if we agree that boys and girls, like women and men, are in several respects 'differently literate' and that boys tastes and preferences need to be taken more seriously into account, it is a long step to the confident design of curricula and assessment procedures which will enable *all* students, both boys and girls, to achieve as well as they can. The substitution of one form of bias for another does not constitute a balance (p 288).

Barrs argued that since reading and writing allowed access to other, wider ways of being, educators need curricula and assessment procedures that enable all children, both boys and girls, to achieve optimally. Similarly, Kowaluk (1999) argued that many educators place an unwarranted emphasis upon the social construction of masculinity and literacy and gave it primacy when outlining a framework for change. Kowaluk pointed out that a literacy program which meets the needs of all students acknowledges that those needs vary greatly within gender groupings as well as across these groupings.

While a common theme across the literature was that boys and girls have differing literacy interests, Kowaluk (1999) and Paley (1984) warned educators not to stereotype, speak too generally about gendered differences, or to lock students into categories because of their gender. Similarly, in their book *Boys, Literacies and Schooling*, Rowan, Knobel, Bigum and Lankshear (2002) responded to the complexity of the current debates associated with boys, gender reform, literacy and schooling by offering a clear map of the current context, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the various solutions put forward, and outlined a range of practical classroom interventions for dealing with what

they call the “boys/literacy crisis.” They stated the ways in which particular views of masculinity, gender reform, literacy, technology and popular culture can either open up or close down new conceptualizations of what it means to be a boy and what it means to be literate. While they recognized the controversial terrain of being differently literate, as mapped out by Millard (1997), Rowan et al. were “primarily concerned with identifying ways in which literacy educators can make a difference to the lives and literacies of boys, while also attending to the needs of girls” (p 57). Their strategies for teachers involved “developing deep knowledge of their particular students and what they bring to particular classrooms and contexts, starting where the students and teachers are, but moving beyond that through making and enabling connections, being brave enough to experiment with learning processes and rigorous enough to assess the outcomes realistically” (p xii). According to Rowan et al (2002) successful literacy education is personal and relational, and involves much more than literacy basics and outcomes.

Recently, the idea that boys are not succeeding in writing because they have different literacy interests and reasons for being literate than those taught in schools has received considerable attention in the research on boys and writing. Newkirk (2002) urged educators to be more pro-active in inviting boys, regardless of their differing literary interests, into what he calls the ‘literacy club’ so that the classroom can be a place which furthers the development of many kinds of being literate. Newkirk encouraged teachers to open their doors wider to their literacy club in order to make more room for male interests. But he also acknowledged that this is not just a matter of being more accepting. Teachers need to be prepared for what happens when boys have the freedom to bring

their gendered way of knowing and differing literacy interests into the classroom. “But the field is crowded, filled with other invitations, and if these boys do choose to come in, they will bring in some pretty weird stuff” (Newkirk, 2002, p 24).

This dissertation explored what happened in a primary classroom when a first grade teacher opened the door wider to the literacy club, and allowed more room for male literacy interests in the writing curriculum within the context of a Writing Workshop classroom.

The Inner Circle: Theoretical framework for Writer’s Workshop

As previously mentioned, this literature review operates from a framework consisting of three concentric circles. The research highlighted within each circle becomes increasingly more narrow in scope. The outer circle addressed the broad research on boys and school. The middle circle then honed its focus to discuss the research pertaining to boys and literacy. This section of the literature review focuses on the inner circle. The inner circle first focuses on Writer’s Workshop theory and then addresses the existing body of empirical and conceptual research which analyzes if/how current Writer’s Workshop theory addresses the differing literary needs of both boys and girls.

Writer’s Workshop is rooted in the writing process, which involves planning, writing, revising, editing and publishing. According to Writer’s Workshop theory, writing is a learned skill that is shaped through practice and constructive feedback. It requires motivation, strategies, skills, and knowledge (Dorn & Soffos, 2001). When children write, they acquire cognitive strategies for attending, monitoring, searching, evaluating, and self-correcting their actions (Clay, 2001). “Characterized by both freedom and

structure, the writing workshop is more like a laboratory or a studio than a regular or traditional classroom. Writer's learn, experiment, share and develop their skills with expert guidance in a safe, supportive environment" (Hughley & Slack, 2001, p4).

Teachers guide students in a Writer's Workshop classroom to become self-regulated writers who learn more about the world by learning to write and express themselves.

According to Harris and Graham (1999) a self-regulated writer is one who knows how to guide and monitor her writing actions towards achieving a specific goal. This implies that the self-regulated writer understands how to use specific strategies for planning, generating, organizing, and revising the writing process. Students acquire these strategies by adapting an "apprentice" role in the classroom and learn how to write by teachers who are themselves writers and model the writing process for the class.

In classrooms whose writing programs are grounded in writing workshop theory, writing is regarded as a craft, not merely a technical or mechanical exercise. Donald Graves (1983) an often cited leader and advocate for Writer's Workshop theory, defines a craft as a process of shaping material towards an end. There is a long painstaking process demanded to learn how to shape material to a level where it is satisfying to the person doing the crafting.

Writer's Workshop theory has evolved out of the process approach to writing which encompasses the expressivist theory of composition. According to this theory, writing is important because it helps students develop an author's voice and learn that they can express themselves using the written word. As students become literate, they learn to spell and write while also learning that they have something unique to say

(Graves, 1994). According to the expressivist perspective, writing is essentially an extension of individual expression which incorporates self-discovery and the creative process (Johns, 1990). Students work to become fluent writers by having the power and control over their own writing process, choosing and experimenting with writing topics pertaining to their own interests. A main goal for all writers, according to the process approach, is to use the written word to help see themselves as creators of self expression and to practice aspects of independent decision-making. While the technical skills of handwriting, spelling and punctuation are also important, according to Writer's Workshop theory these skills are not taught in isolation but within the context of students writing, so they learn these technical skills while engaged in writing topics that stem from student interest.

Writer's Workshop classrooms encompass much more than just teaching students about the structure and stages of the writing process. Writer's workshop theory "sets the stage for writing as an ongoing lifetime skill with multiple audiences and multiple purposes" (Hughley & Slack, 2001, p 4). Crucial to sustaining the atmosphere of intellectual responsibility in a workshop is the teacher's willingness to trust students' abilities to discover their own stances on important questions and willingness to give them time and flexibility for pursuing their own conclusions (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1984).

Graves (1983) explains that giving children choice and ownership over the writing topic is a driving force behind Writer's Workshop theory. He asserts that children learn through making decisions. Students search their lives and interests, make a choice, and

write. Writers who do not learn to choose topics wisely lose out on the strong link between voice and subject. Developing and establishing your voice as a writer is a crucial part of the craft of writing, according to Graves' approach writing instruction. Voice starts with choice of the topic. Writers who learn to choose topics well make the most significant growth in both information and skills at the point of best topic. With best topic, the child exercises strongest control, establishes ownership, and with ownership, pride in the piece (Graves, 1983).

Writer's Workshop and Learning-Centered Classrooms

The Writer's Workshop model occurs in a learner-centered classroom which looks very different from the teacher-centered classroom. According to Friedberg (1996) in a teacher-centered classroom, the teacher is the sole leader. The teacher takes responsibility for organization and discipline. Students are allowed only limited responsibility. Rewards are mostly extrinsic and management comes in the form of guidance. Teacher-centered classrooms often adopt the banking concept of education in which students learn the content chosen by teachers or administrators. Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor (Freire, 1970). In contrast, in a learner-centered workshop, leadership is shared. Students facilitate operations in the classroom. Management takes the form of oversight. Students share responsibilities, rewards are mostly intrinsic, and discipline mostly comes from the self in which consequences reflect individual differences (Friedberg, 1996). Students are given a degree of autonomy to determine their discipline, their choice of content, their styles of learning, their time lines, their requirements and

their outcomes. The teacher takes a back seat and becomes a facilitator (Hughey & Slack, 2001). A prime goal for students in the Writer's Workshop classroom is to become independent writers who can not only write but express themselves (Routman, 1994).

Writer's Workshop, Multiple Intelligences and Learning Styles

Many advocates of Writer's Workshop theory (Hughey & Slack, 2001; Campbell, 1995; Armstrong, 1994; Dunn, 1988; Atwell, 1987; Loper, 1986) recognize individual differences in students and urge teachers to consider Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and learning styles theory when teaching in a Writer's Workshop classroom. Gardner (1997) identifies eight different intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist intelligence. Yet, traditional educational practices value mostly linguistic and logical-mathematical. These two intelligences also drive academic testing and assessment of IQ, and are the basis for many standardized tests such as NAEP, ITBS, SAT, ACT, GRE, and many statewide tests (Hughey & Slack, 2001). While these two intelligences are vitally important to one's ability to learn, they are only part of the learning equation. Intelligence theories like Gardner's raise questions for me as a teacher researcher about how to create and assess literacy activities that connect to various intelligences and provide more equitable education experiences. According to Hughey & Slack (2001) if all classrooms represent a potpourri of all the intelligences then teachers need to teach to all the intelligences so that all students can learn. In their text, *Teaching Children to Write; Theory and Practice* they outline how teachers can accomplish this

goal. Similarly, Campbell (1995) urges teachers to increase the possibility for student success by developing ways to teach and learn engaging all the intelligences.

According to Hughey and Slack (2001) personality, individualized thoughts and feelings also play a major role in learning and learning styles theory identifies personal approaches to learning. Learning styles theory personalize education by connecting students lives to classroom learning (Guild, 1997) puts the learner at the center, and serves as a catalyst for positive student learning (Hughey & Slack, 2001). In a study of 3 schools, Guild described and compared environments which allowed for different learning styles, including visual learning, active learning, collaborative work with others in learning centers, in pairs, and independent learning. In these schools, Guild (1997) explained the importance of teachers being both reflective practitioners and active decision-makers regarding their own classroom. According to learning styles theory, individuals have a preferred learning style, no matter what the subject area, which helps to better comprehend various concepts. Hughey and Slack (2001) explain that learning style approaches that enhance writing workshop include sensory learning modalities, such as visual, auditory and kinesthetic.

In Dunn's study (1988) of elementary students in a Writer's Workshop classroom, students were asked to identify the ways in which they would achieve best. The purpose of this study was to analyze if students' preferred methods of instruction and assessment had an impact on their academic success. This study utilized the Learning Style Inventory (LSI) which was developed through content and factor analysis, rating items rated on a 5 point scale. The LSI was used to assess conditions in which students

preferred to learn in terms of 23 elements of instructional conditions. Dunn revealed that when they were taught as they indicated, students did indeed achieve better than when they were taught in ways that differed from their preferences (Dunn, 1988). Loper (1986) asserted that when teachers teach and evaluate only in one cognitive mode, they adequately serve only those students who preferred to learn in that mode. The choice or mode of presentation can, in many cases, spell the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful educational experience (Gardner, 1993). According to these researchers, it is important for educators to vary the approach they use to teach and evaluate because their students have varying educational needs and learning styles.

The democratic needs of student writers become an important issue in a Writer's Workshop classroom. Teachers are encouraged to create democratic environments where students feel safe and free to learn and express themselves (Hughey & Slack, 2001). According to Writer's Workshop theory, teachers nurture students to grow into lifelong learners, into self-directed seekers. In order for this to happen, teachers need to give students opportunities to practice making choices and reflecting on the outcomes (Schneider, 1996).

According to this body of research, Writer's Workshop classrooms are characterized by flexibility, freedom and structure (Hughley & Slack, 2001) in which teachers can incorporate intelligence theories like Gardner's, and cater to specific learning styles and students' democratic needs. This raised an issue for me about making room for gendered literacy in a Writer's Workshop classroom as well. Since Writer's Workshop classrooms are similar to laboratories or studios where writers express themselves, experiment and

develop their skills and voice (Hughley & Slack, 2001) I argue that there should be enough room for gendered literacy and genres that cater to male literacy interests within the structure of the Writing Workshop classroom.

Evolution of Writing Workshop

It is important to acknowledge that Writer's Workshop theory has evolved over time and theorists such as Donald Graves have made changes to their approach to writing instruction based on their reflections. While the philosophical underpinning of Writer's Workshop theory is still to provide authentic opportunities for students to write in school so that students use writing to suit their own needs (Graves, 1994) Graves adapted his approach to include more direct teaching of spelling, less emphasis on individual conferences, and a greater emphasis on group sharing and teaching more explicitly using mini-lessons, which introduced other conventions and additional tools that writers use to rework their texts. Yet, even though Graves now advises teachers to teach writing concepts more directly and explicitly than in the past, Writer's Workshop classrooms remain learner-centered and the goal is still for students to view themselves as apprentices, learning the craft of writing. As Graves (1994) points out, "Unless children see themselves as authors with something to say, as writers with the power to initiate texts that command the attention of others, they remain as sheep both in the classroom and later in the larger society" (p 45).

In Writer's Workshop classrooms, writing is by nature a social process. It represents the means by which a message can be communicated to someone else. Children learn important lessons about how to become writers through meaningful interactions with

more knowledgeable people (Dorn & Soffos, 2001). Healy (1994) describes the cognitive side of writing and explains that children must understand and pull together their own ideas or knowledge.

This implies that the child must search his own memories for the information he desires to communicate. These ideas can be global representations of feelings, emotions, and images. Language becomes a tool for consolidating bigger ideas into original statements while choosing the best words and placing them in the correct order...If the message is meaningful and personal, the child is less likely to forget it while dealing with the mechanical aspects of writing. The child's ability to orchestrate the social, cognitive and mechanical aspects of writing are mediated by a more knowledgeable person who scaffolds the child at appropriate points in the writing process (p 2).

In classrooms that are guided by the traditional Writer's Workshop model, students are encouraged to write about their real-life experiences while teachers serve as mentors and facilitators of the writing process. The active participation of both students and teachers is a prominent theme in workshop literature (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1985). These workshop advocates attest that a problem arises because traditional school practices do not encourage and sustain this active engagement with writing. Lensmire (1994) explains that writer's workshop theory emphasizes the need for teachers to provide students with the opportunity to explore and learn about writing by writing. Children are encouraged to search their lives and interests for compelling topics (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1991.) The primary strategy of this theory of writing is to grant students increased control or ownership over their own literate activities. According to writing workshop theory, students increased control over their work helps them regain interest in and commitment to expressing themselves in print (Lensmire, p 376).

Is the Workshop Fair For All?

Some advocates of Writer's Workshop theory (Newkirk, 2002; Dyson, 1997; Gallas, 1998; Millard, 1997) are critical of the current emphasis on personal narrative and question whether this instructional decision is fair for all students. In Writer's Workshop students are encouraged to search their own lives for topics to develop into stories so that they become authors of their own personal lived experiences.

In contrast, Newkirk (2002) offers an *obsession theory of writing development*. According to Newkirk's theory, literacy development is dependent upon obsessive interests, ones strong enough to sustain the writer in the laborious task of developing an extended piece of writing. "Writing becomes a way of documenting and employing this allegiance; it piggybacks on these primary affiliations children bring to school" (p 172). Newkirk (2002) asserts that writing about personal experiences may not tap into students' obsessive interests, especially if these interests involve fictional characters found in comic books, movies or television shows.

Newkirk (2002) argues that certain choices or writing topics are not considered worthy of classroom writing due to their low cultural capital. This attitude can systematically disadvantage minority groups and boys. This is a major problem that is not addressed in schools if teachers do not reflect upon their own practices and consider who is served best by the decisions they make regarding instruction. Since Writer's Workshop theory is grounded in the assumption that classrooms and teachers can allow room for multiple intelligences, and varying learning and teaching styles, advocates such

as Newkirk question whether it possible for Writer's Workshop classrooms to acknowledge gendered differences and interests as well.

Newkirk (2002) asserts that a hierarchy exists in classrooms when it comes to literacy topics or activities. Teachers construct this hierarchy within their own classrooms and inevitably put their own preferred interests and genres at the apex. "Some forms of literacy activity have status; other forms are barely recognized as literacy at all" (p 91). For example, comic book writing, writing about TV shows, popular cultural figures or fictional writing about outer space are not highly regarded in schools as potential writing topics.

As it has evolved, Writer's Workshop has come to put great emphasis on experiential and personal narrative writing because these genres allow students to write about their lives and incorporate their interests into their stories. Newkirk (2002) claims, however, that this strong preference for experiential writing and personal narrative is value-laden. This strong preference does not acknowledge the possibility that students may be differently literate or have differing literacy interests, and informs students that certain literacy practices are worthy enough for classroom curriculum and others are not. It sends a message that good writers are those who prefer to write about their own lives, valuing the students' non-technological forms of experience (as opposed to those forms influenced by popular culture) instead of providing opportunities for students to explore other genres of writing that are not necessarily a part of the students' actual lived experiences. Newkirk (2002) critiques Graves' Writer's Workshop approach because it

is too narrow in scope and implies that certain writing topics are not worthy of classroom time.

Graves presents a list of 'good topics' that children in his study chose, and dominating this list are hobbies, pets, and relationships with family. Television was generally perceived as a distraction from the core of life experience that the student should be exploring. In fact, fictional plots of any kind were virtually dismissed in the early descriptions of this pedagogy. The mantra was 'write about what you know and care about.' In other words, write nonfiction (p 81).

Many boys are interested in topics such as television show plots, comic books, action adventure movies such as Star Wars but these ideas are often excluded from Writer's Workshop because teachers have deemed them low capital resources and therefore unacceptable.

But a number of literacy researchers (Heath, 1983; Delpit, 1988; Gallas, 1998, Millard, 1997; Newkirk, 2002) have shown that seemingly self-evident, benign, normal school practices can be quietly discriminating. Delpit (1988) critiqued aspects of progressive literacy instruction and claims that children who were differently literate and did not learn particular literacy conventions at home had difficulty acquiring them at school, even in the presence of well-intentioned teachers wanting to celebrate the differences children bring to school. In *Sometimes I Can Be Anything; Power, Gender and Identity in a Primary Classroom*, Karen Gallas, a teacher researcher, described how some of her male students' stories did not meet expectations and progress in a linear fashion, beginning with a problem and then proceeding logically to a resolution. Instead these stories were circular, creating intertextual relationships among many aspects of the students lives. Gallas (1998) realized that a few of her students were differently literate

and approached narration in a manner different than expected. These boys “used story telling as a social action that reached out and embraced classmates and were completely dependent on the responsiveness of the audience” (p 93).

Newkirk (2002) argues that many boys come to regard literacy practices as “feminized” due to the emphasis on literary realism and moral sensitivity as the ultimate goal of instruction. A fundamental aspect of Writer’s Workshop theory is that children have control over their writing and write about meaningful topics to them. However, many boys incorporate aspects of violence or plots involving battle into their writing and teachers ban such writing topics instead of engaging in conversations about writing and violence with their class. Newkirk encourages teachers to resist narrowness when it comes to literacy activity during Writer’s Workshop and accept youth genres, allow cartooning as serious business, and recognize that although boys may have differing interests than the classroom teacher, their interests can still be developed into acceptable writing topics. Newkirk insists that schools need to widen the circle of acceptability of literacy activities in order to make room for male literacy interests. This will create a permeable curriculum which more accurately reflects the lives and interests of the students involved in the writing process. Dyson (1997) argues for a “permeable curriculum” where these popular culture affiliations form the cultural material that children employ and transform in their stories.

Newkirk (2002) argues that “the problem of the construction of literacy as feminized cannot be countered if schools fail to be critical about what counts and what does not count as valid literacy activity” (p 170). Given the current gap between male and female

literacy achievement, Newkirk and other literacy researchers ask schools to make every effort to build upon the existing male narrative preferences.

Where Do We Go From Here?

This literature review of concentric circles helped me frame this dissertation study. The framework described helped me outline main issues stemming from prior research on boys in school, gender and literacy, and issues revolving around Writer's Workshop theory. Each concentric circle informed my thinking, and allowed my focus to become more narrow in scope. This framework enabled me to stand on the shoulders of prior researchers and raised questions for me related to Writer's Workshop theory and instruction and how to meet the differing interests and needs of boys and girls in my Writing Workshop first grade classroom:

If, as suggested by Hughey and Slack (2001) Writer's Workshop classrooms are truly characterized by both freedom and structure, and are more like laboratories or studios than traditional classrooms in which writers learn, experiment, share and develop their skills and ideas in a safe, supportive environment, I wonder what messages we send to children about literacy when we value some literacy interests, genres or writing styles over others?

If writing is essentially an extension of individual expression that incorporates self-discovery and the creative process, by valuing certain literacy forms or genres over others, are we prohibiting the writing development of boys by excluding their preferred genres or modes of expression from the writing curriculum?

I argue that there is enough room within a Writer's Workshop curricula for boys' gendered literacy. In this dissertation study, I show what happened when the door to the literacy club is opened wide enough to welcome the boys literacy interests in. This study answered what happened when a classroom teacher broadened the writing curriculum to make room for more "male" interests and provided opportunities for these interests to develop.

CHAPTER THREE RESEARCH DESIGN

The previous two chapters provided a rationale for this study and explained the related research connected to boys and writing. In a sense, these two chapters set the stage by explaining the problem of the gendered gap in writing and reviewing prior research on boys' experiences in schools, gendered issues as they relate to literacy development, and Writer's Workshop theory, its traditional model with a curricular emphasis on personal narratives, and whether this model is fair for all students.

This chapter describes and justifies the design of this study. I explain the teacher research perspective and why it was appropriate for this study. This chapter lays out a framework and a method for exploring and answering the research questions I posed.

Research Questions and Their Origins

As stated in Chapter One, the over-arching question for this research study is:

- What happens when a classroom teacher broadens the writing curriculum to make room for more "male" interests and provides opportunities for these interests to develop?

These sub questions were also explored:

- How do the children, boys and girls, respond to this broadened approach to writing, both in attitude and writing progress?
- What changes occur in classroom atmosphere and culture?
- What are the implications of these changes?

This study employed a teacher researcher approach, using ethnographic and other qualitative forms of data, where I was both the teacher of the class and the researcher.

Hubbard (1999) states that “teaching is filled with researchable moments- those instants when a question suddenly snaps into consciousness. As observers of classrooms, we can unearth our questions by reflecting on what we see” (p 23). My research questions stemmed directly from my own experience as a teacher. These questions evolved out of my decade of teaching experience. I have been the only male teacher in an elementary school, experienced this mostly-female climate as a professional adult, and wondered how the male students in this setting were experiencing school. I have seen boys represent the majority of the students in special education as well as those who are considered to be the school’s discipline problems. As a male educator, I see myself as a role model for boys and have reflected on how to make boys’ educational experiences more positive.

I received my Master’s in Education from the University of New Hampshire, where Donald Graves, Donald Murray and Tom Newkirk have been key faculty members promoting Writer’s Workshop and literacy instruction. I was schooled in Writer’s Workshop theory and believe in its philosophical underpinnings about writing. I have noticed that boys and girls have differing literacy interests and paces in writing, and I have also seen boys lose interest in the writing process and turn away from the task of writing in class. As noted earlier, boys’ NAEP scores in writing have been steadily declining and I have observed boys in my own class perform poorly in writing. As a teacher, I have questioned whether my approach to writing instruction has served boys and girls equally and wondered what would happen if I changed my writing curriculum to make it what Dyson (1993) calls “more permeable,” welcoming more literacy interests

into the classroom, thus opening the door wider to the literacy club. Writer's Workshop traditionally focuses on personal narrative for the duration of the year. As described in the review of the literature, it has been argued that boys have certain literacy interests that are not connected to the genre of personal narrative. What would happen if I broadened my writing curriculum to include other genres and writing forms? What would my students think about writing if there was more room for their literacy interests to develop within the classroom and the curriculum?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I designed a teacher research study where I analyzed my own practice. As an initial step to answering these questions, I created a writing curriculum for my first grade Writer's Workshop. This writing curriculum featured direct instruction on five genres: personal narratives, letter writing, comic book writing, fiction writing and poetry. An in-depth description and a rationale for including each genre is included in chapter four of this dissertation.

Before describing how I addressed and answered my research questions, in this chapter I elaborate on my teacher research position and discuss the local knowledge and emic perspective unique to the teacher research paradigm. I also discuss concepts of validity and trustworthiness as they relate to teacher research and I address the question of whether teacher research is "real" research. At the end of this chapter, I explain the research design of this study and its methods for data collection and analysis.

Research Perspective: Why Teacher Research?

Considering the nature of my study, and the questions I investigated, teacher research and the epistemological traditions that go with it were appropriate for this study, which

was intended to explore the questions I had raised and generate local knowledge about young children learning to write. I was the teacher in this classroom and wanted to capitalize on the insider perspective and knowledge I had of my own practice, the classroom culture and the students. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) define teacher research as “systemic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers about their own practices.” Goswami and Stillman (1987) explain that when teachers conduct research as a regular part of their roles as teachers,

their teaching is transformed in important ways: they become theorists, articulating their intentions, testing their assumptions, and finding connections with practice. They become rich resources who can provide the profession with information it simply doesn't have. They can observe closely, over long periods of time, with special insights and knowledge. Teachers know their classrooms and students in ways that outsiders don't. (p ii).

Teacher research differs from other research paradigms in that it provides a unique perspective into classroom research, generates new knowledge and offers fresh connections between theory and practice.

Local Knowledge and Emic Perspectives

Conception of knowledge, knowledge sources, who is considered a legitimate knower, and the relationship between knowledge and practice are key points that distinguish various epistemologies or paradigms involved in the research on teaching. In more traditional forms of research, a divide often exists between research and practice. The researchers generate knowledge on teaching and the practitioners are supposed to receive this knowledge and use it to improve their teaching. Traditionally, teachers are expected to play a very limited role when it comes to generating knowledge.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) outline three different conceptions of the relationships between knowledge: knowledge *for* practice, in which experts outside the classroom generate the knowledge for teaching and the teachers implement this knowledge into their classroom practices; knowledge *in* practice, which emphasizes teachers' practical knowledge based on their own experiences in the classroom; and knowledge *of* practice, which does not accept formal knowledge and practical knowledge as comprising the universe of knowledge, but instead emphasizes practitioners generating knowledge based on systemic inquiry about questions that arise from practice. Teacher research falls under the knowledge *of* practice frame, in which knowledge can be generated when teachers treat their own classrooms as sites for intentional investigation.

Teacher research seeks to bridge the divide between theory and practice, or between research and practice, by emphasizing that practitioners can be knowers and generators of local knowledge for their own communities. A significant point is that practitioners can generate knowledge, not just receive it. However there is also emphasis on the potential of local knowledge generated by practitioners to be useful more publicly and to be of interest to those beyond the local community

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) explain that this type of knowledge is valuable and unique because it is "constructed in the context of use" (p 273). Teacher research is conducted in the classroom and incorporates the teacher's perspective into the research design. Teacher research allows teachers to study their own practice and construct practical knowledge in the context of their own classrooms. This type of research is valuable because it emphasizes that teachers can know their practice, their students and

their classroom culture in ways that traditional researchers who are not teachers cannot. Advocates of the teacher research stance “propose to relocate or at least co-locate, the sources of knowledge about teaching (Fenstermacher, 1994, p 18). The knowledge that stems from teacher research could not be produced if the teachers themselves were not conducting their own research. Teacher research elevates the position of teachers as “knowers” of their craft and helps to validate the knowledge that teachers have.

From a teacher researcher stance, teachers raise questions about the conventional relationships that exist in the research community among teachers, research and knowledge. Teacher research provides a view from within the classroom, or an emic perspective. The emic perspective provides both a local and a public knowledge that could not be generated by traditional research. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) state that through inquiry “individual teachers, and communities of teacher researchers, realign their relationships to knowledge and to the brokers of knowledge and also necessitates a redefinition of the notion of a knowledge base for teaching” (p 43).

Teacher research is often done so that teachers themselves can question and learn from their own practice and for other teachers to learn from the experience of fellow practitioners. Zeichner & Noffke (2001) suggest that teacher research is both about changing practice as a result of study and about changing practice to understand it.

Through changing practice, teachers and other educational practitioners become producers, as well as mediators and consumers, of knowledge. For many advocates of [teacher] research, the concept of practice as knowledge production is essential in that it can both embrace the value of individual development and move beyond the local and private context to contribute more broadly to educational and societal improvement (p 306).

Teacher research is in contrast to many other research paradigms, mainly due to its emphasis on teachers' roles in generating knowledge on teaching. The knowledge generated from teacher research is considered "local knowledge" and serves a different purpose in the research world than other more formal forms of knowledge. The local knowledge that is created from teacher research not only advances the teacher researcher's own understanding of his or her own practice, but it also empowers the teacher researcher as a change agent. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999) explain that teacher research is valuable because it can serve to

provide ways to link teaching and curriculum to wider political and social issues. When this happens, teacher research creates dissonance, often calling attention to the constraints of hierarchical arrangements of schools and universities, as well as to the contradictions of imperatives for both equity and excellence. This kind of dissonance is not only inevitable, it is also healthy and necessary for change to occur (p 22).

Similarly, Erickson (1986) argues that not only is teacher research a justified way of knowing, but that more teachers need "to take on the responsibility of conducting educational research, of investigating their own practices systemically and critically, by methods that are appropriate to their practice if teaching is going to come of age as a profession" (p 157).

As a teacher researcher, I believe that local knowledge produced by teachers is both practical for classroom teachers and powerful in that it contributes to the knowledge base of research on teaching. This study generated local knowledge by questioning what happened when I broadened the literacy spectrum to make room for more male literacy interests in the writing curriculum. In the final chapter of this study, I explain how the

local knowledge generated from this study provided a catalyst for broader school change and led to the formation of a teacher research collaboration at my school designed to examine our approach to writing instruction school wide.

Validity, Trustworthiness and Design Standards

This teacher research study drew on ethnographic and other forms of qualitative data collection and analysis. Ethnographic research is rooted in the experience of those who are present and members of the community being studied. In teacher research that employs ethnographic data, teachers and students are the essential sources of information. The nature of this kind of study places the practitioner in the center of a different kind of research (Martin, 1987).

Martin (1987) suggests that ethnographic research in education sets out to describe not only events in classrooms which occur as students work, speak, write, interrupt and question, but also describes all that can be observed and reported about the context of the lessons, that is events in the school and in the students' home lives which bear on what goes on in the classroom. Essentially, the contexts for learning and teaching are seen as major elements in the learning process. Gallas (1998) explains that in teacher research, data takes many forms: talk, field notes, classroom artifacts and personal journals. These data sources seek to capture the subtext of the classroom.

Teacher research differs from more traditional forms of research, not just in its way of knowing, but in also in terms of assessing its quality. Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (1994) define teacher research as

'insider' research done by practitioners using their own site (classroom, institution, school district, community) as the focus of their study. It is a

reflective process, but is different from isolated, spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systemically undertaken, and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions (p 2).

Although teacher research may borrow appropriate research methods from academic research, it is inherently different from academic research because it represents insider knowledge or local knowledge about a setting.

Validity is one of the key concepts used to justify the legitimacy of most research studies. Many educational policies and programs are informed by research studies that stand up to rigorous standards of validity to justify their findings. While some researchers have worked to broaden the definition of validity and to define types of validity relevant to various forms of research, others have argued that validity is not a relevant concept for all kinds of research and have urged the research community to use other terms for determining the legitimacy of certain research studies. For example, Maxwell (1992) states that “understanding” can be a more fundamental concept for qualitative research than validity. Maxwell argues that the purpose of research is to understand, and that qualitative researchers rely on a variety of understandings to answer their research questions. Recognizing that not all questions can be answered or understood using the same procedures for validity, Maxwell outlines five types of understanding and validity used in qualitative research.

Zeichner and Noffke (2001) use the term “trustworthiness” as an alternate to the term validity for its invocation of knowledge in relational terms. They suggest that teacher research is deeply contextual and its claims on truth are integrally related to its realizations in practice. The term trustworthiness “better captures the need of practitioner

research to justify its claims to know in terms of the relationships among knowers and knowledges” (p 314-5).

Similarly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) also advocate for an entirely different set of standards by which to judge the quality of naturalistic research. They urge the teacher research community to abandon the term validity and adopt the term trustworthiness as a more appropriate for conducting teacher research. Lincoln and Guba define the term as follows:

The basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple. How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worthy of paying attention to, worth taking account of? What arguments can be mounted, what criteria invoked, what questions asked, that would be persuasive on this issue? (p 290).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that the term trustworthiness is more appropriate for naturalistic inquiry because of the different ontological and epistemological basis of naturalistic research. The main issue is being able to show that the researchers’ interpretations are credible. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also argue against the conventional view of external validity and favor naturalistic generalization when it comes to teacher research. Similarly, Zeichner and Noffke (2001) assert that the potential users of research must determine for themselves whether their own contexts are sufficiently similar to the context of the research to make the transfer of results possible and reasonable.

In an effort to reconceptualize the idea of validity, Eisenhart and Howe (1992) proposed a set of general standards to cut across all forms of educational research. According to them, “the validity of educational research, regardless of the specific design

used, can be determined by how carefully the study is designed, conducted, and presented: how sensitively it treats human subjects; and how well it contributes to educational issues, including debates about educational theory and practice” (p 93).

Eisenhart and Howe (1992) designed five standards for determining the validity of educational research. They are as follows:

1. A good fit must exist between research questions, data collections and analysis techniques.
2. Data collection and analysis techniques must be competently applied in a “more-or-less” technical sense.
3. Educational research studies must be judged against a background of existing theoretical, substantive, or explicit practical knowledge.
4. To be considered worthwhile, a study must deal with important issues and problems that arise for practitioners, and it should be accessible to the general educational community.
5. A study must be comprehensive in that it has the overall clarity, coherence and competence of the research; balances the overall technical quality of the research with the risks to the participants; and is able to use knowledge from outside a particular perspective as well as to consider various explanations for what is discovered in a study (p 94).

Using these broader standards for design in order to determine the validity of a study, teacher research is able to use the term validity in assessing its quality. Whether teacher researchers embrace the term validity or trustworthiness, it is important to note that

teacher research methods have accepted established standards for persuading their audiences that their findings are worth paying attention to.

Is Teacher Research "Real" Research?

Some critics do not consider teacher research to be "real" research for several reasons. Some consider the researcher to have a conflicting role because he/she is also the teacher of the participants in the study. Also, as explained above, teacher research, similar to other forms of naturalistic research, does not employ traditional standards of validity as quantitative research. There is much debate over the value of teacher research and whether or not the knowledge it generates really counts as "research." It is not my intention to question the value of other research paradigms or other ways of knowing. Each is important in its own way and can provide relevant information about teaching and knowledge to the research community. While I do not attempt to resolve these debates, it is important to state that teacher research differs from other research approaches due to its emphasis on local knowledge and context.

Gallas (1998), for example, states that teachers' contextualized perspectives lead to a unique understanding of how classrooms operate and how students and teachers learn. Because teacher research generates from the world of practice and features questions which originated with teachers, it is important is to challenge teachers' understanding of their own practice and classroom community (Ballenger, 1999). Teacher research is appropriate for this study because I address and answer questions about my own practice and capture the voices and opinions of my own students in this research project.

A teacher research perspective provided me with a lens to analyze and understand the classroom happenings as fully as possible, giving me a unique research/practitioner perspective to examine the events of my own classroom. As a teacher researcher, I analyzed the data through my own lens, as a male teacher, while understanding that my interpretation was somewhat biased. I acknowledge that my role as teacher, my close involvement with my students, and my gender leaves my analysis open to question and scrutiny by other researchers who would have a more removed perspective and an entirely different research agenda altogether. Teacher research was appropriate for this study because it allowed me to investigate my own research questions that could not be asked by other research paradigms. Teacher research offered me a unique practitioner perspective that helped to inform my own instructional approach. “Doing classroom research changes teachers and the teaching profession from the inside out, from the bottom-up, through changes in teachers themselves. And therein lies the power” (Bissex and Bullock, 1987, p 27).

Research Site and Participants

“Taylor Academy” was the site for this study. It is a coeducational, independent elementary school in New England. The majority of the families that send their children to this school have achieved a high socio-economic status. Taylor Academy is committed to educating a diverse population and students of color represent 30% of the student body. The school educates students ranging from pre-Kindergarten to 8th Grade.

I have been employed at Taylor Academy since 2003 and have established myself as a committed, caring professional who has an excellent rapport with parents, students and

colleagues. I have taught both first and second grade at this school. During the year this study took place, I taught first grade, but then “looped” up to second grade with the same group of children the following year. I co-taught 23 students with Fiona, another full-time teacher.

Twenty three first grade students assigned to our class participated in this study. These students all signed assent forms to participate in this study. Also, each student was granted permission by their guardians and signed a parental consent form to participate in this study. Informed consent procedures followed the Boston College Human Subject Review process and Institutional Review Board Approval was granted in 2003. (See Appendix A for Informed Consent Forms).

Data Sources and Data Collection

This teacher research study took place over the course of one academic year and focused primarily on classroom observations, student written work, whole class and individual interviews, and entries in my teacher research journal. It is important to note that the data throughout the year was gathered systemically. An overview of the data sources is represented in the chart below and then elaborated in the discussion that follows.

Data Source	Participants	Frequency/Time Frame	Totals
Writing Pieces from Whole Class	23 first grade children	All student writing produced throughout the year	All student writing produced throughout the year
Audio-taped Whole Class Conversations about Each Genre in the Curriculum	Teacher and Whole Class	One 20-30 minute conversation per unit at the end of each genre	5
Audio-taped Conversations with Focus Children during Writing Conferences	Teacher and Focus Children	One 20-30 minute conversation per genre with each focus child	30
Teacher Research Journal	Teacher	At least twice a week over the course of the year. (2 entries per week for 35 weeks.)	Approximately 70 entries

Taken together, these data sources and my analyses of these helped me understand the writing development of my students, how they preferred to express themselves using writing, and their opinions about different forms of writing. Because I used a variety of data sources, I could capture participants' experiences and their expressions of those experiences in multiple ways whole class discussions, individual writing conferences, and in their own writing. Each data source contributed to my deeper understanding of what happened when my students experienced the multi-genred writing curriculum in my classroom.

By design, this study was intended to consider three different but complimentary perspectives on young children's writing development as it occurred within a revised writing curriculum: the teacher's perspective, the whole class perspective, and the in-depth perspectives of six focal boys.

Each data source was chosen because it specifically helped to inform one or more of the perspectives in this study. The following chart outlines how each data source was used to inform one or more of the different perspectives in this study.

Data Source and Perspectives

Whole Class Perspective	Teacher Research Perspective	Perspective of the Six Focal Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher Research Journal Entries • Student Writing • Whole Class Interviews about each Genre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher Research Journal Entries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher Research Journal Entries • Student Writing About Each Genre • Individual Interviews about each Genre

Teacher Perspective

To capture the teacher’s perspective, I focused on my own thoughts, experiences and the questions that arose for me as a result of participating in this study of my own practice. In this study, I not only documented the change in the writing curriculum and the experiences my students had during Writer’s Workshop, I also focused on my own perspective in order to show how this study informed my own teaching and changed the way I view writing instruction as a result. The main data source for this perspective took the form of regular twice-weekly entries into my teacher-research journal, which I kept

over the course of the year. These journal entries provided me with an ongoing and systematic opportunity to reflect on student conversations and interactions, the major events that occurred in the classroom, individual student's responses to various writing opportunities and activities, and the general tenor of the classroom. All of these helped me make informed decisions about how to guide the students as they developed as writers. Writing in a journal at least twice a week for the whole year gave me the opportunity to record factual details of student interactions and narratives about classroom happenings, but it also allowed me and to record my own questions, hesitations and reflections about the children, their writing, their social and emotional development, and the classroom community. These journal entries also provided me with an opportunity to theorize about the importance of classroom culture, knowing children socially as they practice writing, and the various social aspects of identity that are enacted when young children learn to write, based on my experience in the classroom.

Whole Class Perspective

This study also focused on the whole class perspective. As a responsible educator, I wasn't interested only in the boys. I also wanted to know how all 23 members of the classroom experienced and responded to the new multi-genred writing curriculum I had designed and implemented in my first grade class. Although I initially became interested in this study by wondering what could be done to help boys encounter greater success in writing, I fully recognized that teachers are always responsible for the writing development of all our students, both male and female. For this reason, I included the whole class perspective into the design of this study. In addition to my own teacher

research journal entries that focused on the feel of the class during each genre, I also collected and analyzed writing samples from every student for every genre, which were evaluated according to the rubric described below. In addition, for each writing genre, I conducted a whole-class interview about the experience. These conversations were audio-taped and transcribed.

All of the writing produced by every student in the classroom for each of the five genres in the curriculum was a major data source for this study. This included both finished and unfinished pieces, both pieces that the children “published” and pieces they simply kept in their folders. I charted the writing development of all the students throughout the year using *The Six Trait Assessment for Beginning Writing*, an established rubric for writing in the primary grades (See Appendix B). In Chapter Four of this dissertation, I provide a detailed description of *The Six Trait Assessment for Beginning Writing* and an explanation of all six traits and the five stages of writing development. Using this rubric, I investigated changes in writing proficiency for each student, and I was able to explore how writing proficiency interacted with shifts in the writing curriculum from genre to genre throughout the year. I used *The Six Trait Assessment for Beginning Writing* to score every sample of student writing I collected and to assess their writing development throughout the course of the year.

A third data source for the whole class perspective took the form of whole group conversations among all 23 students, Fiona, and myself. Each of the five conversations addressed a different genre in the writing curriculum. These whole group conversations took place at the end of the instructional unit of the writing curriculum that focused on

each genre. These conversations provided opportunities for the whole class to reflect upon their learning of each particular form of writing, the challenges and areas of enjoyment within each genre, and how each genre differed from others. These conversations captured the voices, attitudes and opinions of my students as they reflected on their writing from each genre. In addition to audio-taping these conversations, I also transcribed and coded the data from these conversations to analyze themes that emerged.

The Perspective of Six Focal Boys

Using purposive sampling, I selected six focus students for this study, who were selected according to their scores on a writing assessment administered at the beginning of the year. I scored every students' response to an initial writing task using *The Six Trait Assessment for Beginning Writing* rubric and then chose six boys who represented a range of writing abilities. I selected two from the each of the stages of writing development that the rubric designates emerging, developing and capable. This was done intentionally in order to capture the experiences that male students at different levels of writing development had with a multi-genred curriculum.

Three different data sources were used to capture the perspectives of the six focal boys. I wrote in my teacher research journal about the experiences of each of the six focal boys, as described above. I also analyzed and assessed every piece of writing these six boys produced using *The Six Trait Assessment for Beginning Writing* rubric. The perspectives of these six focus children were also represented in the audio-taped whole-class conversations about genres, since I was able to identify individual speakers among the whole class discussions. A third data source aimed at capturing the perspectives of

the focal boys in this study was individual interviews with each of the six boys about each of the genres featured in the curriculum. This produced a total of 30 individual interviews with the focal children about writing genres and experiences. In addition to focusing on writing goals and student's writing development, these conversations informed my own teaching and my understanding of the male literary interests and attitudes towards writing of the six focus students. These individual conversations with the six focal boys took place during each genre and lasted for approximately 30 minutes. In addition to audio-taping these conversations, I also transcribed and coded the data from these conversations to analyze themes that emerged.

Data Analysis

Like qualitative research conducted by university-based researchers, a strength of teacher research is that it often entails multiple data sources that can be used to confirm and/or illuminate one another. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993) suggest that when teacher researchers analyze the patterns and discrepancies in the data of practice, they use "an interpretive framework of practitioner research to provide a truly emic view that is different from that of an outside observer" (p 18). Along similar lines, Gallas (1998) suggests that many teacher researchers develop conceptual frameworks which guide their thinking and help them write about selected classroom issues descriptively rather than interpretively. In this study, my journal entries focused on the concepts of my students' writing preferences and their attitudes towards writing. These journal entries were pivotal because they captured my emic perspective and helped me make connections between research on gender and genre and my own practice. In my journal, as well as in

the audio-taped conversations during whole class conversations and the individual writing conferences, I captured the voices of my students as they experienced this new writing curriculum and came to view themselves as writers as the year progressed.

Ballenger (1999) points out that taping classroom interactions and discussions is a valuable method for analyzing data in teacher research. “With the tape recorder, we create texts that allow us to stop the relentless pace of the school day and think about what has happened, and what has been said, again. Almost regardless of the topic or what has been said, this ability to stop time is useful” (p 84). In following Ballenger’s suggestion, after the data were collected from this year-long study, I transcribed all the interviews conducted during each of the five genres. Five interviews, one about each genre, involved the whole class. In addition to these whole class interviews, I also transcribed an interview with each of the six focal boys that we had during each of the five genres. Thus, in total, I transcribed 35 interviews. Although transcribing the interviews can be rightly thought of as data collection, it was also a preliminary form of analysis because it helped to identify patterns in the children’s responses to the various demands and opportunities that each of the writing genres provided.

Herr and Anderson (2005) suggest that in teacher research, there are multiple layers to the data analysis process: the initial meaning making and then a revisiting of the data for a deeper, more thorough understanding. “This latter analysis takes the researcher beyond the initial level of understanding” (p 81). In this study, there many “revisitings” to the data and thus there were multiple layers of analysis woven together that allowed me to

develop deeper and deeper interpretations of what happened in my classroom and answer my research questions from various perspectives.

The first layer of data analysis was actually multi-layered itself. It involved reading all the data collected during this year-long study in four separate ways: once chronologically, once by gender, once by student, and once by data source. Each of these readings enabled me to look at the data from a different perspective. When I read through the data chronologically, I saw how the students writing developed over the course of the school year. When I read through the data by gender, I was able to observe gendered differences in the content of the children's writing in each genre. I was also able to observe gendered literacy interests, preferences and opinions about each genre, as captured in interviews and teacher research journal entries. When I read through the data by student, I was able to observe particular themes in specific children's writing and focus on the individual experiences that children had with the writing curriculum. Finally, when I read the data through by perspective, I was able to observe issues that emerged for the teacher, for individual focal children and for the whole class. These perspectives were both uniquely different but also complementary. Taken together, these three perspectives led to a deeper understanding of young children's writing development as it occurred within a revised curriculum.

These multiple readings resulted in my decisions about how to organize the data sources for the second major layer of data analysis, which involved a three-dimensional analysis scheme—chronological, generic and thematic. In other words, I arranged all of the data in keeping with the rhythms of the school year, from September to June, and, at

the same time, because the writing curriculum shifted genres five times during the course of the school year, I dealt with the data in chunks that coincided with each genre. I decided upon this organization structure in order to look closely at the writing development of my students over time. This structure enabled me to analyze themes and differences among genres. In particular, I looked for differences in students' attitude and motivation towards each genre. I also looked at differences in quality and quantity that each gender produced during each genre. Within each genre, I looked for general themes, but also for themes in the writing of each of the 6 focal boys.

All interviews, student writing and teacher research journal entries were sorted according to the curricular genre in which they were related. Once my data was grouped and categorized by genre, I then tried to better understand my data by analyzing themes that emerged within each genre. I used triangulation of these data sources to see which stories emerged according to each of the three different perspectives and to look for confirmation of emerging themes and ideas.

From the whole class perspective, I used *The Six Trait Assessment for Beginning Writers* rubric to analyze the writing development of my whole class. I scored every piece of writing produced by the 23 students throughout the year. Within each genre, every piece that each student produced was averaged together to produce student averages for each of the six traits described in the rubric. Additionally, within each genre, total scores for each student were created by adding these averages together. These averages and total scores were then analyzed by gender to observe differences in genre. I also analyzed issues that stemmed from the writing produced by the whole class,

to analyze gendered differences in writing for each genre, and to analyze the experiences and attitudes of the six focal boys within each genre.

It is important to note that Fiona and I were both responsible for the teaching of writing to all of our students. During writing time, Fiona and I were both in the room. Although I was the main teacher of writing, and responsible for creating the writing curriculum and implementing the lessons, Fiona and I were both responsible for assessing and documenting our students' growth and development. Throughout the duration of this study, Fiona provided input and another point of view on assessment for each student's writing development. My role in this study was one of both teacher and teacher researcher. Fiona's role in this study as fellow teacher was important because her involvement helped to address issues of reliability when assessing our students' writing development. Fiona and I were in agreement of the assessment of the writing proficiency of each of the 23 students documented in each genre throughout the year. Without Fiona, there would be potential reliability problems and issues of bias with this study because of my role as both researcher and teacher.

I used memo writing (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) which led me to understand some preliminary findings about each genre. Memos or "think pieces" as Glaser and Strauss (1967) called them, represented what I thought emerged from the data. These memos focused on identifying patterns that existed within each genre of the writing curriculum. I used the relationships I found between the data sources to identify these patterns. For example, during the personal narrative unit, by analyzing and connecting student writing with the content of my teacher research journal entries and the student interviews

conducted during this genre, I discovered that many male students were reluctant to disclose true personal information in their stories because they were aware of their social reputation in the classroom. Organizing the data chronologically and triangulating the data within each genre allowed these themes to emerge about each particular genre.

From the perspective of the six focal boys, within each genre, I triangulated the data from their writing, their interviews and the teacher research journal entries that focused on their experiences with the specific genre. Triangulation allowed me to deeply understand the rich experience, the successes and struggles, that each of the six focal boys had throughout the year. I wrote memos based on what I learned from the triangulation of the data on each of the six focal boys. In a sense, these memos told a story of how each focal boy experienced writing as a first grader with a multi-genred curriculum. I used these stories to compare their experiences with one another. These stories contributed to themes I developed in Chapter Nine about the complex social processes involved when young children learn to write.

According to Leininger (1985) themes are identified by the “bringing together of components or fragments of ideas which are often meaningless when viewed alone” (p 60.) Within each genre, I pieced together the themes that emerged and formed a comprehensive picture of our collective experience as the curriculum shifted genres and the year progressed. Leininger (1985) argues that the “coherence of ideas rests with the analyst who has rigorously studied how different ideas or components fit together in a meaningful way when linked together” (p 60.) These theme statements were then used to

develop my argument about why it is important to incorporate multiple genres into a writing curriculum for the primary grades.

As stated previously, this study focused on three different classroom perspectives. These three perspectives are described in each of the four findings chapters. The first perspective represents my own perspective as teacher researcher in this classroom. This perspective featured my reflections, thought processes, and decision making about the curriculum, the classroom culture and the tone of Writer's Workshop during each genre. The second perspective focused on the experiences of the whole class. Using this perspective, I reflected upon the range and variance of the writing taken from every student throughout the year, analyzed gendered differences within each genre and highlighted the overall progress of the class with regards to writing proficiency. Main themes unique to each genre which emerged during whole class discussions were also included in this whole class perspective. The third perspective focused on the individual six male focal children. This perspective addressed themes that emerged from conversations with the focus children during our individual writing conferences. Using this perspective, their individual writing development, based on their evaluations using *The Six Trait Assessment for Beginning Writers* was documented. In addition, I captured their individual attitudes towards writing within each genre.

Taken collectively, these three perspectives provide an in depth look at classroom life during Writer's Workshop in my first grade classroom. These perspectives work together to tell a story about the experiences we had as a class with a broadened writing curriculum. Upon analysis of all the data sources and the three differing perspectives, I

theorized about how gender, identity and genre are all components that influence writing development.

CHAPTER FOUR “THE LAY OF THE LAND”

In this chapter, I provide a description of the “lay of the land” of my first grade classroom at the onset of this study. As this chapter unfolds, I describe the landscape in my classroom as it was at the beginning of the year. This chapter includes four components. First, I provide an overview of the writing curriculum that I created and implemented. Second, I provide a description of *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers* rubric that I used to assess my students’ writing throughout the year. This rubric was used throughout my school to chart the writing development of students in the elementary grades. Third, I provide an initial assessment of the writing development of each of the students in my class (using *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*) before I implemented my writing curriculum. Finally, this chapter provides a detailed description of the 6 focal children (both as writers and as social beings) and an explanation of how I selected them to be in this study.

As a whole, the 4 components paint a picture of my classroom which focused on writing ability and social development; including both the academic writing curriculum that I created, the specific writing stages that my students were on at the start of first grade, and a brief description of the personalities of my 6 focal children. This chapter served as a baseline I used to observe growth and change regarding writing development and children’s attitudes and motivation towards writing during different genres. This chapter provides a social description of the 6 focal children to explain the character of these boys, as I saw them at the beginning of the year. This initial explanation helps to

inform their social experiences during Writer's Workshop and provides insight into why they brought certain issues and interests into their writing.

Overview of the Writing Curriculum

The Writer's Workshop model traditionally focuses on story writing for the duration of the school year. More specifically, the instructional focus is on personal narrative, allowing students an opportunity to retell their own experience-based, personal stories and to develop writers by connecting their writing to their own lives. This curricular emphasis is more aligned with female literacy interests (Millard, 1997). I revised this traditional Writer's Workshop curriculum to include writing genres that were more aligned with the literacy interests of my male students.

Writing samples for this study drew from each of the five units for which I provided direct instruction throughout the year. A rough breakdown of the units we covered during Writing Workshop appears below:

September-October: Personal Narratives. This unit was typical of what most traditional Writer's Workshop classrooms focus on for the entire year. My students wrote about their own personal experiences, which were designed to focus on their feelings and emotions. These stories were works of non-fiction and the emphasis was on retelling them accurately and truthfully.

November-December: Letter Writing. As a class, we studied the local post office and then tried to replicate within our own classroom what we had learned about writing letters and postal delivery. We created a classroom mail service in which my students wrote letters to one another and to others within our school community. I chose to include this

unit because, as my students wrote letters, they were able to control the writing topic, choose their audience and see how writing can be a meaningful, social activity.

According to Abbott (2000) and Smith & Wilhelm (2002) these components are important because they have potential to promote successful writing opportunities, especially for boys. Abbott (2000) interviewed and observed two boys throughout their traditional Writer's Workshop curriculum. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) interviewed, observed and analyzed the writing development of 50 elementary school boys. In their book, *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*, Smith and Wilhelm discuss why boys embrace or reject certain ways of being literate, what qualities of texts and genres appeal to boys, and they highlight the importance of choice and meaningful social activity for boys learning in schools. Based on the findings of the empirical research of both Abbott (2000) and Smith and Wilhelm (2002), I included letter writing as a genre so the students could have control and choice over audience and content and see writing as an interactive and meaningful social activity.

January-February: Comic Book Writing. I chose to include this unit because of its ability to tap into "male" interests, to connect writing with children's popular culture affiliations, and for its ability to address humor and violence in writing. According to Hunt's (1985) analysis of five consecutive first grade classrooms, boys were more interested in writing about war, fighting and catastrophes than personal experiences. In his teacher-researcher study entitled *Reading Violence in Boys' Writing*, Anderson (2003) stated that boys preferred to write about violence in order to explore themes of good vs. evil and express issues of friendship. For two months, my students studied comic books

in order to write their own comics and to learn how this form of writing differs from letter writing and personal narratives. In this genre, we explored issues such as illustrating and writing about violence, using border-line inappropriate humor, and how to appropriately depict these concepts in their writing.

March-April: Writing Fiction. I chose to include this unit because many boys are interested in writing about action and adventure. Thomas (1997) found that boys' stories often have pace and event, at the expense of everything else. Often, there is not a lot of character development in these exciting tales. Many boys I have taught throughout my career were interested in writing stories that have *Star Wars*-like themes. Other boys were interested in writing stories that were similar to TV shows or movies that they liked to watch at home, such as *Looney Tunes* cartoons or *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Newkirk (2000) asserts that this cultural capital that boys bring to the classroom should be acknowledged and engaged. This unit allowed my students, both male and female, to write about any fictional topic of interest to them.

May-June: Poetry. This unit was chosen because of its creative nature and for the flexibility in choice of topic selection that it gave to all my students. According to Peterson (2001) the characters in girls' narrative writing demonstrated more emotion and more pro-social behavior (sharing, helping, empathizing) while characters in boys' writing exhibited more aggressive behavior and engaged in more high-intensity, dangerous actions. In this study, students had the freedom to create poems about topics and characters that were of interest to them. Some students created poems containing

action and adventure, which was more typically “male” while others expressed personal emotions and feelings in their poetry, which was more typical of girl’s writing.

By the end of the academic year, my students explored and experimented with a variety of writing genres; some that tended to appeal to the literacy interests of girls, some that were more aligned with the boys’ literacy interests. Each of these genres differed from one another, either in terms of audience, length, character development, pace, form, or function. My hope was that I provided a curriculum that was appealing to more students, particularly those that did not encounter success and were not interested in writing about themselves and their own experiences. I was curious to observe the social development and identity of my students when they wrote about topics that were more appealing to them.

Throughout the upcoming chapters, I use the term “social being” to describe my students’ self-identity, the personalities they presented within the realm of our classroom, and to show how this informed what I knew about their social and personal experiences in the classroom. I also use this term to explain what I learned about my students as people, not just as students of writing. I wanted to gain more insight into who my students were as social beings as they were writing about topics of interest to them. I believe that knowing who a child is as a social being allows them to feel safe and trusted, more connected to the classroom and more comfortable taking academic risks. I was curious to see if the writing curriculum I created would shed some light on who the boys in my classroom were as social beings.

Description of the Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers

I used *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers* to assess each piece of writing my students created during each genre throughout the year. This rubric, which was used throughout the school, served as a standardized observational protocol.

The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers was created by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL). NWREL's goal is to make a positive difference in the lives of students and teachers by linking educational theory to practice. For over 40 years, NWREL has been committed to issues of educational equity and worked directly with educators in the field to develop and test research-based strategies that improve learners' results. *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers* is an established rubric that is widely used throughout the country in the primary grades.

Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (1994) explain that research tools such as checklists or rating scales are valuable because they have built-in, predetermined observational categories that are weighted appropriately. They help the researcher, who has already decided what to look at, because of its static nature and ease of completion. These tools help the researcher analyze the results and code the data into predetermined categories. The predetermined observational categories described in *The Six Trait Assessment for Beginning Writers* helped me assess my students' writing development throughout the course of the year as they participated in the writing curriculum (See Appendix B for the complete *Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers* rubric and checklists).

The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers describes five different stages of writing development, which they call experimenting, emerging, developing, capable and

experienced. Within each stage, the rubric describes six traits in which to assess: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. Each trait is described below:

Ideas. In essence, this trait provides the overall heart for the writing. It captures what the writer has to say. According to the rubric, students should choose a topic that is important to them and their idea should be small enough to handle within the scope of a single piece. In order to score high on the ideas trait, students need to express their ideas clearly so that every reader can understand and it should provide the reader with interesting insights. Ideally, their piece should be held together with a well-defined theme or flow to the story.

Organization. This trait directs the reader through the piece. Organization gives writing a sense of purpose and structure. Students' writing samples that are well organized should begin with a strong lead or hook that catches the reader's interest from the start. The middle section of a piece should add to that lead and should help build toward the conclusion, pulling the reader along right to the very end. Students should use smooth transitions to move easily from one idea to another, so that collectively they form one cohesive piece.

Voice. This trait allows the personality of the writer to come shining through on the page. Voice gives the writing a sense of flavor and unique style, and gives the reader the sense that the writer is talking directly to him/her. A strong sense of voice indicates that the writer has made a commitment to the writing. In these pieces, the reader will feel some sort of a connection to the author, whether the reader knows the writer or not.

Word Choice. This trait involves having a wide variety of vocabulary words to choose from in order to use them on the page. Students with strong word choice can look critically at nouns, verbs and adjectives and select those that are appropriate to the style and tone of the piece. Students need to be able to choose just the right words in order to make their writing sound natural. Word choice gives precision to details and helps the writer paint memorable pictures in their writing.

Sentence Fluency. This trait involves creating a sense of rhythm with the sentences and a flow that the reader finds enjoyable. While it is true that there are many possible ways to write any sentence correctly, there are usually a few options that will sound better than others within the context of a piece. Sentence fluency may involve using long sentences when they would be best and short sentences when they would suit better. A writer with a strong sense of sentence fluency is able to select appropriate sentence style and use it frequently. Strong sentence fluency can be quite noticeable when a piece of writing is being read aloud.

Conventions. This trait is concerned with the rules of the language. It is the most mechanical of the six traits and requires writers to learn editing and proofreading skills. Writing conventions appropriate for first grade involve the common patterns of grammar, spelling, ending punctuation and capitalization. These conventions make writing easy to read and understand. A reader may not even notice when conventions are well done, but would be distracted if they were absent from the piece.

As shown in Appendix B, within each of the six traits, *The Six Trait Assessment for Beginning Writers* rubric offers a checklist to fully describe the criteria for each trait. For

example, a child is at the “experimenting” stage for the trait of organization if he/she attempts (but does not do so consistently) to write left to right, attempts (but does not do so consistently) to write top/down, has no sense of beginning and end yet, and experiments with spacing between words.

I used *The Six Traits for Beginning Writers* to assess student growth and writing proficiency throughout the year. It was helpful in informing my instruction in that it helped me determine the areas in which each of my students were strong and in which areas they needed help. It was particularly interesting for me to use the rubric scores to observe gendered differences in my students’ writing during each genre.

My Students as Writers at the Beginning of First Grade

In order to gain a clear understanding of the writing development of all my students at the onset of my study, I gave them a traditional open-ended writing prompt during the first week of school. The directions were to write about a favorite memory from summer vacation. I wanted to determine the writing stage of each of my students in order to know where they were as writers before they experienced the writing curriculum. This baseline would help me observe and assess the students’ writing development and growth throughout the year. I scored each written piece using *The Six Trait Assessment for Beginning Writing*.

The results are as follows:

Initial Writing Prompt (Boys)

- 1 = Experimenting
- 2 = Emerging
- 3 = Developing
- 4 = Capable
- 5 = Experienced

Name	Ideas	Organization	Voice	Word Choice	Sentence Fluency	Conventions	Total Score
Peter	2	2	1	2	2	1	10
Oscar	2	1	1	2	1	1	8
Hunter	2	1	2	1	1	1	8
Stuart	3	2	3	3	3	2	16
Mark	2	2	2	2	2	2	12
Tim	2	1	2	1	1	1	8
James	3	3	4	3	3	2	18
Luke	3	2	2	1	2	3	13
Robert	2	2	2	2	1	2	11
David	3	3	4	3	3	2	18
Nolan	2	2	1	1	1	1	8
John	2	1	2	2	2	3	11

Low Tier (Total score under 10) Nolan, Tim, Hunter, Oscar

Medium Tier (Total score 10-14) Mark, Luke, Robert, Peter, John

High Tier (Total score 15 or higher) Stuart, David, James

Initial Writing Prompt (Girls)

Name	Ideas	Organization	Voice	Word Choice	Sentence Fluency	Conventions	Total Score
Alice	3	3	3	3	2	2	16
Linda	4	3	4	4	2	2	19
Lisa	3	2	3	3	2	2	15
Sarah	3	3	3	2	2	2	15
Julie	2	2	2	2	2	2	12
Karen	4	3	3	3	2	2	17
Erica	1	1	1	1	1	2	7
Barbara	2	1	2	1	1	1	8
Ayanna	3	3	3	2	2	2	15
Liz	2	2	2	2	2	1	11
Nancy	3	2	2	2	1	1	11

Low Tier (Total score under 10) Barbara, Erica

Medium Tier (Total score 10-14) Liz, Julie, Nancy

High Tier (Total score 15 or higher) Alice, Linda, Karen, Ayanna, Sarah, Lisa

Based on the writing scores from the initial writing prompt, the overall breakdown of my whole class according to their writing stage was as follows:

Low: 6 students (4 boys, 2 girls)
Medium: 8 students (5 boys, 3 girls)
High: 9 students (3 boys, 6 girls)

According to these rubric scores, there were twice as many girls as boys in the top tier. And there were twice as many boys as girls in the bottom tier. This is consistent with what National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores have been reporting for decades about the intersections of gender and writing. Since the inception in 1969 of the NAEP all grade levels have scored much higher than boys, on average, in language skills (NAEP, 1997). For more than 30 years, from kindergarten straight through high school, girls have outperformed boys in writing, across the board. Interestingly, there was a similar breakdown in my classroom, despite the fact that I served a relatively privileged population, compared to the norms in the country. This suggests that from the onset, there were some comparisons between my first grade class and other first grade classrooms across the country.

The middle tier was fairly evenly divided, but there were more boys than girls in this tier. Putting the top two tiers together, there were 8 boys and 9 girls. As a teacher, I was not terribly concerned with these students at the beginning of the year but I was very concerned about 2 of the boys (Hunter and Tim) and 1 girl (Erica) in the low tier. I had confidence that the others in the low tier (Oscar, Nolan and Barbara) were going to move once they gained the necessary skills. Tim's anxiety was a barrier, for some reason Hunter appeared to be unwilling to put in the effort to learn to write, and Erica (who was

also dealing with class and cultural differences) had not yet tuned in to the classroom routines and expectations during Writer's Workshop. Overall, the results of the assessment were as I expected. *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writer's* had confirmed what I had thought about my students as writers by watching them write.

Who Were the Students as Writers in my Class?

For the remainder of this section of the chapter I use examples of my students' responses to this initial writing prompt to portray who my students were as writers at the beginning of the year. I purposely selected the following pieces to highlight certain issues (such as topic selection and voice), to explain how I used *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers* to score these pieces, and also to show the range in writing abilities of my students in September. For each writing sample, I included my own narrative analysis of their writing development.

It was interesting to me that even with this initial writing prompt, there were gendered differences in topic selection. Many of the girls chose to write about traditional personal events that featured positive emotions such as happiness. Nancy wrote a very typical story for girls entitled *MY BrTHDaY (My Birthday)*²

MY BrTHDaY WS TaDaY
We Wat To THE jiM
We DiD a PLa
THa LaFD The PrDe
IT Wuz Fun
I LoVE MY BrTHDaY

(My birthday was today.)

² I present and translate my students' writing exactly as they created it. The words I present are theirs, but I have changed their names in order to protect my students' identities. The texts I present are exactly the same as the writing they produced, with the exception for some key words that were changed to protect the anonymity of the child.

We went to the Gym.
We did a play.
They left the party.
It was fun.
I love my birthday).

Linda also chose to write about her birthday, which just occurred before the start of school. The title of her story was *Linda's Birthday Party*:

MY NaM is Linda MY BirthDaY is OmOST Her Bat We HaFto gat rate for IT

Wal I Most Itmit that I didn't wont to gat rate four the prte bat I hatoo
Frst we bought a cac. The stor was fl of tham. We stapt at the pinyata stor
Fal leaves fell to the Graond I codind wate Well You no What Im toking a baot
Don't YoU
A nthn DaY haD past a tiring DaY and Bkas we haD to gat raDe
nao mY BirthDay is so KloS it is so iksiding mY mom kaont wat to
the Big daY was olmost her the haos was rade
Shados danst on The wals it was cool it was blak
SrPrIS avre oan shaotid I falt so gud we plad a gam kald babing For aPls
Wan avre oan had gan I opaind My prasins
I gut a book a ring and a lot of athrs staf to
as We KLEnd up I falt gad

(My name is Linda. My Birthday is almost here but we have to get ready for it.
Well, I must admit that I didn't want to get ready for the party but I had too.
First we bought a cake. The store was full of them. We stopped at the piñata
store.
Fall leaves fell to the ground. I couldn't wait. Well, you know what I'm talking
about, don't you?
Another day had past. A tiring day and because we had to get ready.
Now my birthday is so close. It is so exciting. My mom can't wait too.
The big day was almost here. The house was ready.
Shadows danced on the walls. It was cool. It was black.
"Surprise" everyone shouted. I felt so good. We played a game called Bobbing
for Apples.
When everyone had gone, I opened my presents.
I got a book, a ring and a lot of other stuff too.
As we cleaned up, I felt good).

Although Linda and Nancy both chose the same idea for this writing prompt, their stories were quite different and reflected the fact that they were not in the same writing stage.

Nancy was mainly on the emerging stage, scoring mostly “2’s” throughout the rubric. Her story was very straightforward. It opened on her birthday and it progressed in a linear fashion: going to the gym, doing a play, friends going home. While Linda’s story also progressed in a linear fashion, she provided a hook to the reader which built up the suspense as her birthday approached. Linda also scored high with voice and word choice. She used creative language such as “Fall leaves fell to the ground.” And “Shadows danced on the walls.” She also interacted with the reader in a sophisticated manner when she wrote “I couldn’t wait. Well, you know what I’m talking about, don’t you?” The reader has a real sense of Linda’s personality and sense of humor and feels a connection with her as she described how excited she was about her upcoming birthday. She took creative liberties with her writing and as a result, she added her unique flavor to her story. While Nancy also described how she felt about her birthday when she wrote “It was fun” and “I love my birthday” the reader does not get a real sense of Nancy’s style or personality by reading her story. For these reasons, Linda’s piece received higher scores, even though they chose the same topic.

James and Luke also chose to write about similar topics. They both chose to write about memories of adventurous activities from their summer. James wrote about going rock climbing with his parents and Luke wrote about a time when he was climbing down the rocks to the sea with his dad. James’s story is entitled *TH ROCK KLIMINNG TIP* (*The Rock Climbing Trip*):

THE PATH SPLT WE WIT UP THE WUN THE AT WIT UP THE GRANIT
SLAB
THE FRST WON OV US TO GO UP WAS MI DAD
AFTR HiM i WIT up iT WUZ SERE THEIN MI MOM WIT UP

THER WOS TO ROPS WON UV THEM WET UP A HOL IN THE ROCK
THE OTHER WON WIT UP A GRANIT SLAB
IT WUZ A RULEF WIN WE GOT TO THE TOP!

(The path split. We went up the one that went up the granite slab.
The first one of us to go up was my dad.
After him, I went up. It was scary. Then my mom went up.
There was two ropes. One of them went up a hole in the rock.
The other one went up a granite slab.
It was a relief when we got to the top!)

Luke's story also focused on climbing rocks during the summer. His story was entitled *This is My Dad AND I Climing Rocks IN MAiN (This is My Dad and I Climbing Rocks in Maine)*:

THIS IS MY dad and I stping down steps to the rocks
This is me and my dad going on rocks over the sea
This is My Dad And I standing On A Clif
This Is MY Dad and I siting down and Looking Over The Sea

(This is my dad and I stepping down steps to the rocks.
This is me and my dad going on rocks over the sea.
This is my dad and I standing on a cliff.
This is my dad and I sitting down and looking over the sea).

Similar to Nancy's story about her birthday, Luke's story was very linear and his story progressed from start to finish in a rather predictable manner. His word choice did not accurately depict that Luke actually had a large vocabulary and his sentence fluency score revealed that his sentence structure was rather simple and that he began each sentence in the same way: "This is..." The reader can tell by the pictures that this story was actually quite exciting for Luke and that it was a fond memory of him bonding with his dad, but these sentiments did not come through in his writing. The strength of this piece was the spelling and grammar. Thus, one of Luke's highest scores for this piece was for the conventions trait.

Despite the fact that James's spelling was not as advanced as Luke's, his piece received a higher overall score, mainly because James's voice came shining through and his story was well organized. Similar to what Thomas (1997) showed about boys writing focusing on pace at the expense of everything else, James's story opened at the most exciting part of his hike. He was already half-way up the mountain and suddenly the path splits. The family had to make a decision regarding which path to choose. They chose the steep route and the suspense built as James's dad went first, then James, then his mom. The reader gets a very clear sense of how James was feeling as he was telling the story: he was scared while hiking up the steep part and then he was relieved when he made it to the top. His spelling was mainly inventive and he did not have all the sounds represented in the words he chose to write. He also wrote in mainly uppercase letters which contributed to his getting a "2" for conventions. But, overall, this was a stronger piece than Luke's which is why (based on this one writing prompt) Luke was in the middle tier and James was in the high tier, even though they chose to write about similar tales of summer action.

Based on the rubric scores, Nolan and Erica both were placed in the low tier. Nolan's story *WN I WANT TOO THE TI STOOR (When I Went to the Toy Store)* is as follows:

I WAT RANING WETH MAE KAR
I WAK AP THE STARS
THE TOUE STOOR AEM EXAEDED
I WANT THAT KASL
MAE TOOE AEM WAKING DAWN THE STARS I FEL GD
KASL I GAT A KASL

(I went running with my car.
I walk up the stairs.
The toy store. I'm excited.

I want that castle.
My toy. I'm walking down the stairs. I feel good.
Castle. I got a castle.)

Nolan's story was written entirely in orange marker and he used uppercase letters throughout his piece. Although it was easy to see that Nolan was happy about going to the toy store and excited about the prospect of getting a toy castle, his writing featured many sentence fragments and incomplete thoughts such as "The toy store" "My Toy" and "Castle." Nolan experimented with spelling, particularly with vowel sounds when he wrote "AEM" for "I'm" and "MAE" for "my". There were also some grammatical issues such as "I went running with my car." These factors contribute to his score of "1" for conventions. Nolan's story displayed that his writing was mainly at the experimenting or emerging stages, according to *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*. There were many backwards letters featured in his writing and his story flowed in a very simple and predictable manner, straight from the beginning to end. Most pronounced, when reading Nolan's story, were the illustrations. In addition to every word being written in orange marker, each picture was also drawn exclusively in orange marker. Each picture on every single page was exactly the same: a very rough sketch of the outside of a toy store. The results of this writing piece placed Nolan in the bottom tier.

Similarly, Erica's scores placed her in the bottom tier. In fact, her piece entitled *YaD SaLe (Yard Sale)* was tied for the lowest in the entire class:

MY DaD haD a Yad SaLe
I Wat In to the Moonwoc wif my forans

(My dad had a yard sale.
I went into the Moon Walk with my friends.)

This was the shortest piece anyone in class wrote and even though the story only featured two sentences, her story did not stick with a main idea. She bounced from an idea of having a yard sale with her father to playing on the Moon Walk with her friends. In addition to its shortness in length, her piece was poorly organized and lacked a coherent flow. Similar to Luke's story, Erica's strength was conventions, because she spelled her words correctly or in a manner that was appropriate for the beginning of first grade.

While this was not the focus of this study, I found it interesting that Erica score was the lowest in the whole class and she was also the only student in my class who did not have a consistent, stable home life. Her family was of a lower socio-economic status than the majority of the students in my class. Ballenger (1999) explains that there is often a struggle when children do not have a cultural background and a set of values similar to those that are emphasized in school. Erica immediately stood out to me as one of those students. She was an African-American girl who stated often that her home life was not at all like school. Her father was from Africa, spoke mainly Swahili and was often living elsewhere. Her mother was Caucasian and spoke only English. Erica did not practice reading or writing at home and it was often a struggle trying to reach Erica's parents for conferences. Similar to many of the boys, Erica's home life and personal interests were not aligned with those emphasized in the school curricula. I found it particularly interesting that she was my only student to score lower than some of the boys in my class who were also in the bottom tier and were also struggling with learning to write.

In comparison to Erica and Nolan's writing development, David's story *Renovating the MBTA* was a great example of a strong piece of writing and showed how a student's

voice, personality and spirit can come shining through in his writing. David adored his baby sitter, Anna, who was a high school student. Together they often made forts or castles in imaginary lands out of tables and blankets. One day, David's dad (after incessant begging) said that it was OK for David and Anna to convert an unfinished room in the basement into their own private hide-out, which they quickly dubbed "The MBTA." David was particularly excited about this because this was his own space and his three-year-old brother, Paul, was not allowed to go into the MBTA. His story is as follows:

The MBTA is renovating so it's cLoSEd to the PUBlic becAse it has WALLPAPeR
ON the Floor AND SO-ON
FINALLY ANNA AND ME WENT INTO THE BASMENT
DAVID BUSTID THE LOK!
WE WER MAD! BUT NOT TO MAD
WE FIXT THE LOK! AND KIKT PAUL OTE OF THE ROOM!
THER WAS A PLASTIC HURUCANE!!!
ME AND ANNA GOT ALL BLOODY.
WE WR HURT.
AND THEN WE WENT BACK TO ORE USUAL BISNIS!!!!
THEN MY GRAMA CALLD US iN FOR DINNR!

(The MBTA is renovating so it's closed to the public because it has wallpaper on the floor and so on.
Finally, Anna and me went into the basement.
David busted the lock!
We were mad! But not too mad.
We fixed the lock! And kicked Paul out of the room.
There was a plastic hurricane!!
Me and Anna got all bloody.
We were hurt.
And then we went back to our usual business!!!!
Then my grama called us in for dinner.)

This was a strong piece that revealed David's mischievous side and his creative nature. It was well-organized and had a suspenseful hook at the beginning describing David and

Anna waiting for the renovations to be over and then finding that David had broken the lock. This story also displayed that David had a vivid imagination and a tendency to incorporate violence both into his play and into his writing. The plastic hurricane in his story was really Anna and David throwing his toys at one another and pretending to hurt each other. While his spelling skills were appropriate for first grade, and he certainly knew how to use the exclamation point, he wrote in mainly uppercase letters which is why he received a "2" for conventions, his lowest grade according to the rubric.

Karen was a girl in my class whose literacy interests tended to be aligned with the male literacy interests. She was friends with only boys in class and often participated in the games or sports the boys played out on the playground. In many ways, Karen acted and dressed like a boy. For example, on formal school occasions in which the students are expected to dress up, Karen always wore a coat and tie, instead of a dress. Karen was interesting to me because although she was a strong writer at the onset of this study, she had literacy interests that were aligned with the boys. Below is her response to the writing prompt entitled *My First Time Going Tubing*:

We wre driving to Bill's Houss to go tobing. Rob my brothr was vary ecsided becoce he loves tobing we finly got thar
We prukt in the driveway bill came running out into the drive way I got out of THE car me and bill ran in To the Housis and we want down stars and PLAD and Than my Mom cald to Go ToBing Bill didnt want to ether
and than she came Don sTars and mad us come out and than we got on the muterboT and sat in the front and it starTit to move It want fastr and fastr and it startiD to ZooM We wrint scarD
I want on the tob and fall off
We want back and Drov home

(We were driving to Bill's house to go tubing. Rob, my brother was very excited because he loves tubing. We finally got there.

We parked in the driveway. Bill came running out of the driveway. I got out of the car. Me and Bill ran into the house and we went downstairs and played. And then my mom called to go tubing. Bill didn't want to either. And then she came downstairs and made us come out. And then we got on the motorboat and sat in the front. It started to move. It went faster and faster and it started to zoom. We weren't scared. I went on the tube and fell off. We went back and drove home.)

As a result of the rubric scores for this piece, Karen was in the top tier. It was a strong idea and she worked hard to develop the plot. She had a hook at the beginning and built suspense into the story. Interestingly, she focused much of the story on the build up. The reader is left wondering how she will experience her ride on the tube and she did not give us much information about her actual experience. After pages of building up to the ride, all she wrote about the actual tubing experience was "I went on the tube and fell off." Overall, however, this is a strong piece that captured her voice. As stated previously, Karen's literacy interests tended to be more aligned with the boys. Not surprisingly, like her male friends in class, she wrote about a memory that involved action and excitement. I was curious how she would experience this multi-genered curriculum.

These examples from the initial writing prompt (Linda's *Linda's Birthday Party*, Nancy's *My Birthday*, Luke's *This is My Dad and I Climbing Rocks in Maine*, James's *The Rock Climbing Trip*, Nolan's *When I Went to the Toy Store*, Erica's *Yard Sale*, David's *Renovating the MBTA* and Karen's *My First Time Going Tubing*) indicated to me that I had a wide range of writing abilities in my classroom. Some children struggled to sound out basic high frequency words while others enjoyed the challenge of using big words in their writing like "hurricane" and "shadows" even if they didn't spell them conventionally. It was also evident that there was a range of personal interests and

favorite summer memories in my students; from having a birthday party at a gym to hurting a favorite babysitter in a “plastic hurricane” in the newly renovated MBTA.

The Six Focal Children

By design, this study focused on the differing experiences and perspectives of 6 male students from my class. I chose to highlight their perspectives so I could more fully understand how these boys felt about writing during each genre and how they experienced the Writer’s Workshop curriculum throughout the year. I was interested in both documenting the academic journey these 6 boys had as they grew as writers in first grade and capturing the social and personal experiences they had while they experimented with various genres of writing throughout the year.

In order to observe how boys of varying writing abilities experienced the curriculum, I purposely looked for six male students for this focused perspective: two male students who were strong capable writers, two who were in the middle of the pack, and two who were just beginning to learn how to write. I wanted to see how six different boys at different stages of writing development experienced the multi-genred curriculum. As stated previously, this study was conducted in a first grade classroom at Taylor Academy. It is important to note that the make-up of the student body of the class, particularly the male students, was relatively homogeneous. Thus, while I acknowledge that cultural differences can influence literacy development, the students’ racial background were not considered when selecting the six focal children for this study. All six focal boys were Caucasian.

After looking over the scores of the initial writing prompt, I chose my six focus students: Hunter, Nolan, John, David, Mark and Stuart. According to my initial assessments, Hunter and Nolan were in the low tier, Mark and John were in the middle tier, and Stuart and David were in the top tier.

Hunter

At the start of first grade, although Hunter was just learning how to sound out words and to express himself using the written word, he had already convinced himself that he was “bad” at writing. He knew his letter sounds but his letter formation was shaky and his writing usually consisted of a long string of letters that was illegible to others and that he often couldn’t read back himself. Hunter was used to receiving a lot of attention for the things he was good at, such as math and athletic games. He also had a tendency to avoid the things at which he considered himself to be bad. Students in our class dubbed Hunter “The Wanderer” because, instead of sitting down to work on his writing, he occupied his time trying to look busy (sharpening his pencil, getting more paper, getting a book from the Book Nook, etc) but he was really wandering around the room, talking with friends and procrastinating until Writer’s Workshop was over.

Image was very important to Hunter and it was hard for him to persevere when he thought he was bad at something. His father once told me that he thought Hunter had a *Lord of the Flies* sense about him and that he was continually surveying his social scene to see how he was faring. This was somewhat true, but Hunter also had a rather low self-image of himself. He presented himself as a “cool kid” to his peers in class and he desperately wanted others to perceive himself as such, but he also had a very tender,

vulnerable side that he occasionally allowed me to see. I noticed that there was a great discrepancy between the person Hunter truly seemed to be inside and the way he presented himself in school. When Hunter and I were alone, he dropped “the cool act” and behaved more like a typical 7-year-old. Hunter needed constant positive reassurance from me and I gave it to him. Over time, we developed a strong bond that was built on trust. He often asked me if I thought he was a “good boy” and he informed me periodically that he did not think that he was.

Hunter relied mainly on external stimuli to determine what was “cool” and he looked up to older kids at school that he saw out on the playground or around campus. He idolized his older brother, Michael, a 4th grader at our school. As a result, Hunter spent a lot of his time at school trying to act like a bigger kid than he actually was. At his core, however, Hunter was an extremely nice, sensitive boy. He always had his finger on the social pulse of our classroom. He was often the first child to notice when a fellow classmate needed help socially, and to his credit, Hunter was usually the person to provide that help. I often thought that my biggest challenge regarding Hunter was to somehow get him to realize that he was as great a person as I thought he was.

Hunter’s response to the writing prompt reflected the fact that he wanted to be perceived as cool. He wrote *ME GoinG to the Stadum* and while wandering around the room during Writer’s Workshop, he told all his friends about how cool the experience of going to an Oakland A’s game was and how awesome it was to just go inside a stadium. His story is below:

WEWAT toOKliNd
WEwErdvING to the Stadum

WELaFT

(We went to Oakland.)
(We were driving to the stadium.)
(We left.)

Hunter was not actually “bad” at writing, but he thought he was because it did not come easily to him and because he was not immediately “successful” as a writer, according to his own standards. According to *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*, his writing was mainly at the experimenting and emerging stage, depending on the trait. So, he had a lot of work ahead of him in order to write fluently and there were certainly other students that were more advanced than he was in our class, but his skills were still age-appropriate for the beginning of first grade. Learning to write is a lengthy, time consuming project that Hunter did not seem to have the patience for. (Similarly, it took Hunter a long time to learn how to read. He had convinced himself that he couldn’t read because he was not “good” at it right away.) Instead of investing in the process of learning to write over time, Hunter preferred to think of himself as a “bad writer” and focus on the things in which he encountered more immediate success.

Nolan

Nolan was also at the experimenting and emerging stages of writing at the start of first grade. In contrast to Hunter, however, Nolan was eager to express his thoughts using the written word. He readily wrote down letters on the page, not caring if he really knew how to form the letters. His message was usually indecipherable to everyone, including himself. Nolan also entered our classroom not being able to read. From my initial

assessment, and similar to Hunter, Nolan also had a lot of work ahead of him, with regards to his writing development.

Nolan was incredibly creative and expressive. He had a brilliant mind and was a very capable artist. He marched to the beat of his own drum, however, and he often told me that he really liked the way that his own brain worked. Nolan was silly and had a vivid imagination. He was a rather bouncy boy with a great deal of energy and he often displayed behavior that was socially young and immature, even for a first grader. During class meetings, Nolan usually needed to sit on a teacher's lap in order to stay focused, and this modification was only moderately successful.

Nolan had a very kind heart and was one of the sweetest boys I had ever met, but he didn't seem to have the ability to step out of his own perspective in order to absorb another student's point of view. Naively, it didn't usually occur to Nolan to consider what his peers would think or that decisions he was making would affect them, but he never acted out of meanness or maliciousness. It simply didn't occur to him to think about the majority of his classmates. For example, at recess time, Nolan loved to swing on a particular swing on the playground because if he swung really high, he could kick berries off of a nearby tree with his feet and then gather them up and collect them. Over a few weeks, Nolan filled several gallon juice bottles with berries and then proceeded to sort the berries according to their different attributes. This became one of Nolan's favorite activities during recess. Naturally, it was important for Nolan to have that particular swing and he came to believe that this was indeed *his* swing. He didn't like it when others beat him to that swing because that meant he couldn't collect berries during

that recess time. He had a really hard time trying to understand that other students were also interested in using that swing when we would discuss this during class meetings. Nolan didn't have much use for most of his classmates. He wasn't mean to them, and he always let them do what they wanted, as long as it didn't interfere with his own plan. He embraced a "live and let live" attitude towards his classmates and he expected to be able to live by that mantra as well. He was often confused by complex social interactions such as group games so he kept his peer relationships simple. Nolan had one friend in class, John, and as long as he was friends with John he didn't really feel the need to develop any other friendships.

In some ways, Nolan's writing reflected who he was as a social being, especially his level of immaturity. In his response to the initial writing prompt, Nolan wrote *When I Went to the Toy Store*. Although his entire family (including his mother, father, older brother Justin and little brother Burt) accompanied him to the toy store, there weren't any other characters mentioned in this story besides Nolan. This was typical of the stories that Nolan wrote during the personal narrative as well. Nolan's story was not only told completely from his own point of view, but the other characters that accompanied Nolan to the toy store were omitted and their perspectives were not represented. Nolan's writing was not very deep and despite his level of creativity, his writing was comparatively flat.

As a social being, it was difficult for Nolan to express emotions or to focus on another perspective or point of view, partly because of his developmental immaturity and partly because he did not have a lot of experience of in doing so. His family valued

independence and ingenuity in their children. Prior to first grade, Nolan did not have a lot of experience with processing his own emotions and talking with others about how he really felt about things. Especially considering that Nolan was an incredibly bright, creative and critical thinker, his writing at the beginning of the year was not able to capture the complexity and the humor that were involved in his stories when he orally retold from his own perspective.

John

As a teacher at Taylor Academy, I heard a lot about John before I actually had him in class. His reputation around school preceded him. He was known as a mischievous boy and he was no stranger to trouble. Some parents had reported to me that they thought John was not always nice to others and that his behavior sometimes fell on the improper side of right and wrong. His Kindergarten teachers reported that John was the one student in their class with whom they had not truly formed a solid bond. Upon entering my first grade classroom, John had not felt fully engaged and connected with the school environment. He did not value his school experience and often did not behave like an ethical citizen. I was curious to get to know John better. His reputation was surprising to me because I had taught Rick, John's older brother. Rick was an extremely moral and considerate boy. I wondered if those qualities were inside John and just needed to be brought out.

John was competitive. He excelled at academic activities like math where there was a right answer. He also excelled out on the playground and enjoyed participating in athletic games that involved keeping score. It was important for John to know that he

was achieving his goals and that he was doing well at whatever he pursued. He relied on external indicators such as the score of a game or a quiz to determine if he was doing well.

To John, good writers produced as many pieces of writing as possible. He was always in a race (and in fact, usually won this race) to produce the largest amount of writing. He kept track of the quantities his peers produced. In response to the initial writing prompt, John wrote about going to Fenway Park with his family to see the Red Sox play:

We Wint to Fnway PRC
It Was agist the Cardinals
THE Cardinals won!!!
We Wint HOM

(We went to Fenway Park.
It was against the Cardinals.
The Cardinals won!!!
We went home.)

This piece reflected that John was primarily in the emerging stage of writing. It followed a predictable pattern of arriving at the park, watching the game, then going home. The reader did not get a sense of John's persona because his voice was not strong. The reader got the sense that John was a Cardinal's fan because of the mention that they won the game, and because he included exclamation points, but he never came out and told the reader how he felt about his experience. This piece scored a "3" for conventions because his spelling was strong and because he experimented with ending punctuation. Similar to sports or math, there are rules to spelling and grammar. In addition to writing quickly, knowing and following these rules were how John determined that he was a good writer.

Mark

As a social being, I found Mark a “tough nut to crack.” He clearly had very high standards for his own behavior and was often disappointed in himself when he lost his composure. He held his emotions very tight to his chest. He was hard on himself and was extremely angry at others (and himself) when he lost his temper, which he did frequently in the beginning of first grade. He was stubborn and often found himself locked into a corner emotionally and needed help getting out. As a teacher, I found this behavior was somewhat typical for first grade boys, but what stood out to me about Mark was that he often would not accept teacher’s help during these hard emotional times. Mark had difficulty expressing emotions and spent most of his time appearing to be stoic or with an expression that displayed a far-off look and very little affect.

When things were going well socially, Mark was a fun and even silly boy. He had a few strong friendships with other boys in our class whom he had known for several years. These close friendships seemed to satisfy Mark’s needs for social interactions. He was not very interested in branching out and sharing aspects of himself with everyone in class. Mark had a vivid imagination and loved to play Star Wars and other similar creative-play games on the playground.

Mark was also a keen, abstract thinker who had a strong mind for social justice. He was very concerned about issues of right and wrong. He enjoyed reading books about Martin Luther King, Jr. and discussing events in history such as The Holocaust.

Socially, Mark challenged others, myself included, if they were making decisions that he disagreed with or considered to be unfair. For example, I once decided that the class

was going to play a group game at recess in order to create a fun, common experience for everyone and to foster a sense of community within our class. I told the class that everyone needed to play. Mark found this to be terribly unfair, saying that he should have the right to do what he wanted out at recess. I told him that I understood his point but then explained my reasons for wanting everyone to play a game together. I also said that this was only an experiment and that for most recesses in the future, everyone could go back to playing what and with whom they wanted. Mark argued with me until I finally told him that I was the teacher in charge and I had made the decision. He continued to push until I said “I am sorry that you are upset but I am not asking for your input on this decision.” Even after this, as I was explaining the rules to the game, Mark was muttering under his breath about the injustice of my decision to force everyone to play together. In the end, Mark did not “put his best foot forward” during the game. He was physically present on the field, and technically followed the rules, but did not have any fun and he let everyone know it. His peers, most of whom enjoyed the game, thought that Mark was strange for getting mad and reacting so extremely. They were upset with him because he wasn’t trying to play well. As a result, Mark was angry and disappointed in himself for over-reacting and was quiet for the rest of the day.

When engaged in conversations that Mark thought to be unfair, he was inflexible to consider alternative viewpoints and often needed to have the last word. Sometimes I found it to be a real challenge being Mark’s teacher. I wanted him to approach life with more patience, flexibility and ease. I also wanted him to be easier on himself and allow himself to be more vulnerable, to take risks and to show others his true range of

emotions. Despite his ability to be silly with his few close friends, most of his classmates saw Mark as quiet and guarded, and occasionally volatile and argumentative.

Mark's writing reflected this. Even when responding to the initial prompt, he struggled to choose an event from his summer that he wanted to share with others. It took Mark an entire class period to decide on a topic. Unlike Hunter, Mark did not wander around the room, trying to avoid the assignment. On the contrary, Mark thought deeply about what summer memory he would be comfortable writing. He eventually decided upon MI TRIP TO MAINE:

WE went to Maine to visit my family.
It WaS fun
I likeD it
We went to the oshn.

(We went to Maine to visit my family.)
(It was fun.)
(I liked it.)
(We went to the ocean.)

At first, Mark's story only included the first and final sentence. Just as he was about to hand it in, he said he wanted to add more detail. It then took him another entire class period to write "It WAS fun" and "I liked it." Mark chose his words and his writing topic very deliberately. From his perspective, it was an emotional risk for Mark to include these statements, risks that he was initially not going to take. Similar to Nolan, most first graders propel themselves directly into their stories and make themselves the main central character. Mark's initial draft reflected that he did not want to reveal much about his persona. Instead, he told the story using "We" instead of "I."

Mark's spelling was age appropriate. He knew how to correctly spell many of the high frequency words (such as "we," "was," "the," "my" and "fun") and he represented all the sounds in the words he wanted to write (such as in the words "wint" and "oshn.") He used mostly lowercase letters. He occasionally used capital letters appropriately (for example at the beginning of sentences and in the word "Maine.") The reader did not get a sense of Mark's strong personality from his writing but his story did have a basic flow. He did not include many details, but he wrote in complete sentences. His story did not reveal anything personal but it made sense. According to all six traits, this piece received a "2" and showed that he was at the emerging stage of writing at the beginning of the year.

David

My initial impression of David was that he was a very bright boy. He read quite well and was articulate and verbal. David was used to having the undivided attention of the adults in his life. From what I could tell, his grandmother babied him and his father gave him a tremendous amount of attention, yet discipline and providing structure were not the family's forte. David was a very precocious boy with a sarcastic sense of humor, and this seemed to be celebrated or thought of as "cute" at home. David's mother was a surgeon who was doing her residency in Denver, which meant that she was spending the year away from her family. While his mother was away, David lived with his dad and his grandmother. The school psychiatrist, who had developed a relationship with David's father over the years, indicated that David normally did not spend a great deal of time with his mother due to her work schedule. He predicted that the amount of actual time

that David spent with his mother during the residency year would not be so different from years past, despite the fact that she was living mostly in Denver.

David was a “live wire” who enjoyed testing limits and manipulating situations. At the beginning of first grade, he was obsessed with violence, and both his play and behavior towards others reflected this. David was sometimes physically aggressive towards his peers and was also verbally abusive to certain classmates at times. Many students, and their parents, had spoken with me about David’s behavior and his violent tendencies.

Despite the fact that he craved attention in negative ways, David desperately wanted everyone, both teachers and fellow students, to realize that he was intelligent. There was a large gap between his emotional intelligence and his cognitive intelligence, however, as evidenced by his classroom behavior. He often sat on a teacher’s lap or cuddled up alongside one of us, but was also quick to show us that he was smart by voicing social classroom concerns, or more global concerns such as Hurricane Katrina. In order to get attention, David constantly exaggerated the stories he told to his peers. He craved drama and excitement and he had once told me that it would be the worst thing in the world if people described him as “dull.”

There were parallels between David’s writing and who he was as a social being. Violence, in the form of a “plastic hurricane” appeared in his response to the initial writing prompt. Even though it did not flow with the rest of the story, David included the lines “ME AND ANNA GOT ALL BLOODY. WE WR HURT.” However, David’s animated nature also shone through in his story. He built in suspense to the beginning,

when he and Anna were waiting for the MBTA renovations to be complete. Then he jumped right into an exciting part, when they realized that David had broken the lock. The pace of his story was fast and there was not a dull moment in the piece. David was also a good speller and *Renovating the MBTA* reflected this. He correctly spelled difficult words like “usual,” “plastic,” “bloody” and “finally”. In order to prove to others that he was smart, David often challenged other students to see if they knew how to spell words and he wanted everyone to know that he was an excellent speller.

Stuart

At the beginning of the year, Stuart stood in stark contrast to the other five focal boys in this study and to the other boys in class. Stuart preferred to play with girls and he had developed strong friendships with many more girls in class than boys. He was interested in sports and in some of the other creative play games, such as Star Wars, that most of the boys participated in out on the playground. Yet he had difficulty navigating the social terrain when it involved playing with boys. Stuart was shy and hesitant to engage in play with the other boys in class. Social conflict, which is inevitable in the rough-and-tumble world of boys at play, made Stuart uncomfortable. He much preferred to play with girls. Their realm and their rules seemed to make much more sense to him.

Stuart was fascinating to me. I learned most about him as a social being during one-on-one conversations that happened out at recess or during some down-time in the classroom. He did not often speak up during whole class discussions but was always listening intently. Stuart was quiet, but intense. He was also extremely articulate and

expressive. He often pulled me aside to express his feelings about a particular classroom issue, but was not willing to express these same concerns with the group at large.

Stuart was also passionate and as his mother described, he often “dove head-first” into topics of interest. For example, at the beginning of first grade, Stuart was passionate about nature. He was an avid fisherman with his dad and preferred to spend his free time outside, either scouting for bait or fishing for the trout of his dreams. In response to the initial writing prompt, he chose to write about his memory of fishing in a creek near his home entitled *The BIG TUG*:

The bobber bobbed on the top of the water
Suddenly the bobber went under the glistening surface
There was a big tug on my fishing rod.
The biggest and beautifullest trout I have ever seen leapt gracefully from the creek
It was the trout of my dreams
Then, as the old guys say It was the one that got away

(The bobber bobbed on the top of the water.)
(Suddenly, the bobber went under the glistening surface.)
(There was a big tug on my fishing rod.)
(The biggest and “beautifullest” trout I have ever seen leapt gracefully from the creek.)
(It was the trout of my dreams.)
(Then, as the old guys say, “It was the one that got away.”)

This piece revealed that Stuart was mainly at the developing stage, according to *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning writers*. It opened with a hook, figuratively and literally, and the story stayed with the main idea throughout. It featured creative language such as “glistening surface” and “the biggest and beautifullest trout I have ever seen leapt gracefully from the creek.” He built in suspense and added humor in the end. This piece captured Stuart’s voice and his calm yet intense personality. The area that Stuart needed to work on the most was spelling, which contributed to his score of “2” for conventions.

Stuart's writing reflected his passions and how he chose to spend his free time, fishing in the creek in his neighborhood. Similar to Nolan's stories, but for different reasons, Stuart's stories usually did not contain many other characters. He chose to write about personal experiences that, for the most part, focused on him being alone. This connected with what I knew about Stuart as a social being at the beginning of the year. He often found social situations with his peers complex or overwhelming. Even when he played with girls, it was usually only with one or two girls, and their play normally focused on imaginative scenarios in which they pretended to be wild animals in their natural habitat. Unlike in the wilderness, however, Stuart's imaginative play with the girls usually centered on emotions such as "love" and being a happy animal family.

Karen Gallas (1998) writes about how some students cross the boundaries of gender and experiment with the perspectives of the opposite sex. This behavior is "characterized by a desire to experiment with the point of view of the other. Boys are made into girls, girls become boys; small forays are made into an unscripted terrain where the 'roles' of boys and girls are called into question" (p 131). To me, as I was just getting to know Stuart, he struck me as one of these children who was experimenting with crossing gender boundaries. As I watched him, both out on the playground and in the classroom, he seemed to be more aligned with the girls in our classroom. He was not only adept at expressing feelings, he enjoyed doing so. Stuart was very interested in experimenting with the female first grade point of view. Similar to Karen, described earlier in this chapter, whose interests tended to be more aligned with the boys, I was very interested to see what writing interests Stuart brought into the classroom as the year progressed.

For this study, I focused closely on each of the 6 focal boys (Hunter, Nolan, John, Mark, David and Stuart) during Writer's Workshop for the entire school year. In doing so, I captured their social and academic journey during Writer's Workshop in first grade. I documented both their writing development and who these boys were as social beings as they brought their interests into the classroom and revealed parts of themselves through their writing. I recorded their thoughts, experiences, attitudes and reflections as they experimented with writing each of the genres in the multi-genred writing curriculum I created to be aligned with the literacy interests of both genders.

Organization of the Next Four Chapters

Each of the next four chapters of this dissertation focus on a particular genre in the writing curriculum. Within each chapter, I highlight three different perspectives: the whole class perspective, the perspective of the six Focal Children and my own perspective as a teacher researcher. Chapter Five focuses on the personal narrative unit that took place in September and October. Chapter Six focuses on the letter writing unit that took place in November and December. Chapter Seven spans four months (January–April) and focuses both on the comic book and fiction units. Chapter Eight focuses on the poetry unit that took place in May and June. These chapters are arranged chronologically in order to chart the academic and social growth of the students throughout the year.

In many ways, this chapter served as an introduction. The reader has been introduced to my writing curriculum and to *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*. I have also provided a general overview of the writing developmental stages of all my students,

as indicated by the scores on the initial writing prompt. Finally, I introduced my six Focus Children.

In the upcoming chapters, I describe the social and academic issues that arose around each genre of the writing curriculum. I use *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers* to assess how all of the students fared in each genre. I analyzed the results by gender and saw how the boys and girls performed within each genre. Furthermore, by focusing closely on my six focal boys, I also captured the attitudes and reflections that these six boys had about writing in general, and about each genre in particular. I chronicled the highs and lows of each of my six focal boys, explained where each child succeeded and struggled, and the reasons for why each one of these children thought learning to write was important.

Learning to write, like other forms of learning, is about making connections between new subject matter and prior knowledge. It also requires motivation (Dorn & Soffos, 2001). Children learn best and take academic risks when they feel comfortable and known in a supportive classroom environment. Throughout the year, each of the six focal boys was motivated by different genres. They brought their own interests and their own knowledge base into the classroom as they experimented with various forms of writing. As a result, I got to know these boys well as both writers and social beings. I observed strong ties between their writing and their social development. From the perspective of the focal children, the next four chapters show how I got to know these boys, as writers but also as people through what they revealed to me in their writing.

The next four chapters also tell a story from the perspective of my whole class. As I was just about to implement my new curriculum in early September, I looked over my new cast of first graders. I was excited about the budding young writers that were in front of me. There were 12 boys and 11 girls. They represented a wide range of writing abilities, interests and temperaments. Some were quiet, most were not. Many of my students had a lot of friends in our new configuration of the student body, but some did not. Some readily admitted that they liked writing but some professed that they did not. I wondered which students would experience success with the new writing curriculum that I had created and where these successes would occur. I also wondered who would struggle with writing this year and where these struggles would occur. What issues and interests would these 23 students bring into the classroom when I attempted to open the door wider to the literacy club? Chapters five through eight tells this story and answers this question, genre by genre.

CHAPTER FIVE PERSONAL NARRATIVE UNIT

“Mr McPhail, do we *have* to do Writer’s Workshop today...or is it a choice?” Hunter whined, as he looked at the classroom schedule as he was heading towards his cubby to get out his writing folder.

“It’s not a choice, my friend. It’s a have-to” was my response as I helped my students stay focused on settling in for another writing session, one day in mid-September.

“But I don’t know what to write about...and I don’t want to write about myself” he explained.

“Great,” I thought to myself. “Here we go again...yet another boy who is not interested in Writer’s Workshop. We’ve only been studying personal narratives for a week and already Hunter is beginning to disengage from the curriculum.”

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed description of the personal narrative unit and to chronicle what happened when I implemented this unit with my first graders. In doing so, I explain the issues, both social and academic, that were unique to this genre. From the perspective of the Focal boys, I captured their attitudes towards writing personal narratives and the issues that arose when they wrestled with deciding what to reveal about their personal lives. At the end of the section on the focal boys, I drew comparisons between their six varying experiences to make 3 main points about what I learned as I watched them write personal narratives: learning to write was important to these boys, although not necessarily in the form of personal narratives; personal narratives were “windows into the self” and many boys were deliberate about what they chose to reveal about themselves in their stories; the boys in my class had differing literacy interests than the girls.

From a whole class perspective, I scored all their personal narratives using *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*. I analyzed their writing and their scores to observe how topic ideas varied by gender and documented how the boys and girls fared

while writing in this genre. Towards the end of the section on the whole class perspective, I include a vignette that showcases the strength of including a personal narrative unit in the writing curriculum, particularly one that encourages students to write about a range of emotions. This chapter ends with a concluding statement that summarized what happened in my classroom during the personal narrative unit.

Overview of Personal Narrative Unit

During the second week of school, I introduced the guidelines and structure to writing personal narratives. I explained to my students that for the next two months we would focus on writing our own personal stories and that these stories involved writing about our own feelings and emotions. I wanted my students to think of themselves as authors and that the real-life events in their lives could be seen as the plots to their stories. For homework, I told the children to choose an emotion about which they would want to write a true story from their own lives. I read Issa's first Writer's Workshop story as an example. Issa was a past student of mine. Two years prior to this study, he wrote a sad story called *My Dog's Dead* explaining how he felt when he lost his dog. Then, Issa's next story was called *My New Puppy* which focused on feelings of excitement, surprise and happiness. I reminded the children that they could choose any emotion they wanted.

Interestingly, before Writer's Workshop even officially began, David asked if these had to be true stories. This connected to Hunt's findings (1985) that boys were more interested in topics that were fictitious or that were not focused on themselves while girls were more interested in writing about themselves, their feelings, their families and friendships. I explained to David that, for the purpose of this first unit, everyone had to

write true stories from their own lives, but that they would get the opportunity to write fiction stories later on in the year.

We started off the personal narrative unit brainstorming a list of emotions with the class. I wrote all their suggestions up on the case. Their ideas represented a variety of emotions. I was impressed by the range in emotions and that not all my students wanted to write cute little stories that involved the characters all living happily ever after. I was particularly interested to see that many girls wanted to write about positive emotions while many of the boys wanted to write about more negative ones. Similar to Peterson's findings (2001) some of my boys were excited to write about emotions that were not prosocial or happy, such as anger, jealousy, sadness, etc. For example, Oscar wanted to write about when his cat died and Peter wanted to write about being freaked out at an amusement park. In contrast, Barbara wanted to write about going to her first wedding and Alice wanted to write about winning a skating trophy.

As part of this brainstorming lesson, I explained that using emotions in your writing, either positive or negative, helped to make a story great. I told them that the way I know that any story, whether in a book, movie or TV show, was good was that if it made me feel something. *Harry Potter* was a great story because it made me feel excited and curious about being a wizard. *Faithful Elephants* was a great story because it made me feel sad that the elephants lost their lives and sad because it explained how horrible war can be. *The Cat in the Hat* was a great story because it made me feel silly and playful. Issa's *My New Puppy* was a great story because it made me feel surprised and happy. I emphasized that the actual emotion they chose was not important. Not all great stories

are happy ones. To me, I knew a story was great if it makes me *feel*: something, anything. I explained that I did not consider stories to be good if they left me feeling nothing at all, not caring at all what happens to the characters. I rarely make it through those stories. I wanted my children to create stories that made the reader wanting to keep reading, wanting more, feeling more. However, it was completely up to my students to choose the emotions they wanted the reader to feel.

The process of writing a Writer's Workshop from beginning to end is as follows: first the students designed a cover, depicting a scene from their personal narrative. The cover must also include a title and the author's name. Drawing a picture on the cover allowed the children the opportunity to focus on their personal experience and decide how they wanted their narrative to unfold. Once the cover was done, the children moved on to filling out a story web. The story web helped them flesh-out the key components of their story, including title, author, setting, characters, main idea and story sequencing. The story web is designed as "a check-in" to see if the children were actually interested in developing this idea into text and to check if they knew all the pertinent information to tell their story. If the children had difficulty completing the web, they could abandon the story idea and try to brainstorm another idea. After the story web was completed, the children then moved on to writing their actual story, which was usually around four pages long. At the beginning of first grade, it was the expectation that each page of text included a sentence or two of writing, depending on the writer's ability, and an illustration that connected to the words on the page.

By mid-September, the personal narrative unit was well underway. Some kids had finished their first book and were eager to start their next one. Others were still on their story web for their first book but they knew the topic about which they wanted to write. The purpose of the next section is to show the experiences of each of the six focus boys while they wrote about their own personal experiences.

The Focus Children

In the following section, I describe both the writing development and the social experiences of the focal children during the personal narrative unit. Although I mention each of the six children in this section, I do not focus on their experiences equally, in terms of length. I deliberately focus on certain boys more than others in order to discuss the following findings about personal narratives and boys: These boys believed it was important to learn to write; Boys in my class had differing literacy interests than the girls; and personal narratives were “windows into the self” and many boys were deliberate about what they choose to reveal about their personal lives through their stories.

Hunter

As indicated in the introduction of this chapter, Hunter did not like writing stories that focused on himself. He was aware of the fact that others would be reading his stories and he did not think anything in his own life was worth reading by others. He also did not like writing about his own feelings and emotions. He told me that it was hard for him to write about his feelings and that he did not think they were that interesting. Hunter was always aware of the possibility that other students would read his personal narratives and he wanted to make sure that he was portraying himself as strong and cool in his stories.

This is consistent with who Hunter was as a social being. He was very concerned about his own image and what others think about him.

During the personal narrative unit, Hunter struggled with the process of filling out the story web, mainly because he wrestled with how he was portrayed in his own stories. He always wanted his stories to be more exciting than they were in real life. For example, in his first story, he wrote about when he was learning to swim in a pool. According to the first draft of this story, Hunter's father tried to drown him and he learned how to be a good swimmer because he needed to fight off his father and swim to safety because his life depended on it. After reading this story over with him, Hunter admitted that this was not actually what happened but it represented what he wanted his audience to think happened. He explained "It's more exciting than my real life and I think that the reader will like it better, you know?"

The only time Hunter was excited during the personal narrative unit was when he wanted to write an inappropriate story: *When Lisa Kicked Me In The Crotch*. Initially, he did not think that I was going to allow him to write about this story because of its inappropriate content. An excerpt from my teacher research journal on this story is as follows:

October 3

Initially, Hunter was hard to motivate today. I am noticing that this is becoming a pattern with him. After much discussion with me about other options that he could pursue besides writing, Hunter finally realized that he was not going to get out of Writer's Workshop for the day.

"Hunter, I'll work with you today. Let's go back to the list of brainstormed emotions. Let's pick three to choose from for a writing topic."

"I can't decide," he said quickly.

"OK, I'll decide: happy, sad or mad. Which one do you want to write about?"

"Mad" he answered.

“Great...what makes you mad.”

“Annoying people” he said quickly.

“Excellent. Who pops to your mind when you think of annoying people?”

“Lisa and Simon” (Hunter was one of a set of triplets. Lisa, his sister, was also in our class. Simon, his brother was in the other first grade class.)

“OK, let’s think of a time when you were mad at one of them because they were being annoying.” I said, thinking that we were finally getting somewhere.

After some thought, he said “Well, I have a good one...but I know you won’t let me write about it.”

Thinking this was interesting, I said, “How do you know I won’t let you write about it?”

”Because it’s not something that...well...adults like to talk about.”

“Tell me what it is” I said “and then we can talk together about whether or not it’s something that you can write about.”

“It’s about when Lisa kicked me in the crotch” he says, looking straight at me searching for a reaction of disapproval. He was convinced that this was a taboo topic for school.

“Well,” I said with a smile, “I would certainly be mad if someone kicked me in the crotch so I think it’s a great story that is going to capture you really being mad.”

Then, realizing that he had gone down a road that was actually going to get the green light, he quickly back-peddled: “But, it’s not a very long story. It’s too short. There’s not enough in it to write a whole story...”

“Wait,” I said, “Hold on. This is a fantastic story idea about being mad. I bet that you actually have a lot to say about this. Tell me about it, right from the beginning and we’ll see how we can turn it into a story.”

Hunter then proceeded to tell the whole story: Hunter, Simon, Lisa and Michael (his older brother) were having a pillow fight in the basement of their father’s house. They were all having a great time. Hunter was pounding on Lisa and she lost her pillow. To defend herself, Lisa then kicked Hunter in the crotch. It was at that moment, that the game ceased to be fun. Hunter started to cry, then hit his sister, and then went and told on her. And the story ended with their father coming down to talk to Lisa about kicking boys in the crotch and how much it hurts.

“Are you sure I can write about this?” Hunter asked. “Is it allowed?”

“Well, let’s think about what the rules are for writing personal narratives.” I said.

“It has to be a true story...is it true?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” Hunter said. “I wouldn’t make something like that up. And besides, you can ask Lisa.”

“I believe you.” I said. “The second thing is that it has to be based on an emotion.”

“Mad” Hunter quickly responded.

”Then, I think you’re all set. Why don’t you get started on your cover. Then, I’ll touch base in a few minutes to see how you’re doing.”

With a big smile on his face, Hunter went bouncing back to his work table, eager to tell Lisa what he was writing about.

This was a perfect real-life example of a boy that struggled to connect with the writing curriculum. Like many beginning writers, both male and female, Hunter had trouble thinking about what to write about. He had convinced himself that the only topic that he actually liked would not be allowed in school. If I had not been there to work it through with Hunter, he would have disregarded this story idea, even though he was motivated to write about it.

Newkirk (2002) acknowledges opening the door wider to the literacy club is not just a matter of being more accepting. He warns teachers that they need to be prepared for what happens when boys have the freedom to bring their differing literacy interests into the classroom. "But the field is crowded, filled with other invitations, and if these boys do choose to come in, they will bring in some pretty weird stuff" (p 24). Newkirk could not have been more right. In Hunter's example, it was a story about being kicked in the crotch. And it was that story that kept him engaged for the remainder of Writer's Workshop that week.

Nolan

Despite being mainly in the experimenting stage of writing, Nolan wrote 7 stories during our personal narrative unit. Most boys wrote 2 or 3 stories in this time, and some struggled to complete one full story during September and October. There was only one other boy in our class who produced more stories than Nolan: his good friend, John. John loved writing and was in a race to produce the largest number of stories in the class. A

bi-product of John's drive was that Nolan also became excited about writing. The titles of Nolan's personal narratives are as follows:

MaeFrndJohn (My Friend John)
ILav the Sweng (I Love the Swing)
IHaetSkeing (I Hate Skiing)
MaeLamanaed Sand (My Lemonade Stand)
Mae Toth Fal Awt (My Tooth Fell Out)
WnIWanttootheTeStoor (When I Went to the Toy Store)
MaeBrth Day (My Birthday)

Nolan's writing reflected who he was as a social being and what his personal interests were. Other than his first story about his best friend John, there were not any other characters mentioned in his stories besides himself. Not only was Nolan the main character in his stories, he was the only character. Other character's perspectives were not represented. Nolan's stories were not very deep and despite his level of creativity, his stories were comparatively flat in that they merely recounted a memory, such as *Mae Lamanaed Sand* or *Mae Toth Fal Awt*. His topic selection was rather basic, although they represented a range of emotional experiences. His stories all contained a simple beginning, middle and end. Nolan's stories contained straight-forward sentences that did not usually focus on emotions or feelings. Except for the titles of a few of his personal narratives, there was no mention of feelings at all. As a social being, I believe that it was difficult for Nolan to express emotions. He did not have a lot of experience with processing his own emotions and focusing on how he really felt. Despite the fact that he produced the second highest amount of personal narratives in the class, this impeded him from achieving higher scores in this genre. Nolan received mostly "1s" according to *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*. In contrast to Hunter however, Nolan was

not concerned with how he was being portrayed in his stories. He simply did not know how to express his feelings in his stories so he chose to merely retell dry, factual, linear accounts of his own memories.

John

John loved Writer's Workshop right from the beginning of the year. He definitely considered himself an author with plenty to say. While most students had created 3 or 4 books, John finished his 10th story during the personal narrative unit. He often chose Writer's Workshop during Choice Time and his enthusiasm for writing became somewhat contagious. As described in the section above, was amazed with how happy John was when writing. In order to foster his friendship with John, Nolan also chose to work on his stories during Choice Time and experienced growth as a writer as well. Writing became a bond for these two friends.

The titles of John's personal narratives are as follows:

In the Winter We Do This
Vackaton (Vacation)
Wein i Got My Shert (When I Got My Shirt)
I Play Basball with My Dad
Wen i Webl to Weter Cenre (When I Went to Water Country)
i'm playing hokey (I'm Playing Hockey)
i'm going to the zoo
i play hokey with My Dad
Vakaton in Florida (Vacation in Florida)
Snow

The plots in the books John composed were quite simple. His sentence structure was basic and his word choice was more limited than his actual vocabulary. At first glance, his pages contained only one sentence and what some would consider a minimalist's attempt at an abstract illustration for the picture. Early on, a goal I had for John was to

create more detailed illustrations, which emphasized the importance of the pictures in his stories. Similar to his lack of attention to detail in his illustrations, John did not give much attention to the words he used in his sentences. He mainly relied on words he already knew how to spell instead of taking risks by using larger and more creative words that he didn't necessarily know how to spell.

A typical book of John's is below:

Wen I went to Weter Cenre)

We'r on the car for 2 hoers its vere borig to be in the car
Mi Breter relly wantit to go on Geronimo. It lookt cool. i bet Rick wod of relly likt it.
Ter is a ride tat was relly frekt out.
Water Contre closd at 3:00.

(When I Went to Water Country

We were in the car for 2 hours. It's very boring to be in the car.
My brother really wanted to go on Geronimo. It looked cool. I bet Rick would have really liked it.
There was a ride that was really freaked out.
Water Country closed at 3:00.)

This is a fine story for a first grader at the beginning of the year. It has a beginning, middle and end which all appear in a logical sequence. He used his own words and you got a sense of who the author was by reading his story. However, given John's drive and enthusiasm for writing, I felt he was capable of producing at a higher level of writing. The flow of the plot did not hold up for the duration of the text and he bounced around from one idea to another. It also did not showcase a lot of emotion or feelings. His story had a strong beginning but then fell apart in the middle. This was typical of the 10 stories John had produced. He was more concerned with completing the story than with what he was actually saying in the text. To him, writing was a race and he wanted to win. It was

quantity he cared about, not quality. I realized I needed to teach John what quality looked like in Writer's Workshop and why it was important.

Since John loved writing and was always looking for indicators that he was doing well, I decided to explicitly tell him what a good piece of writing looked like. I told him that I wanted him to write stories from now on with at least 3 sentences on every page. I also told him that writing is not like playing a sport. It's not a race to the finish and I wanted him to know that quantity was not a prime criterion for being a good writer in first grade. In fact, the speedy writers were often the sloppiest writers. John seemed genuinely surprised by this. I told him that I wanted him to focus instead on how creative his writing was and how well he told a story. He then went back to his table with a smile. He said he was going to "get creative" and he did not want any help with his next story, which was already underway. He said he wanted to surprise me and he did not want to discuss anything until he was done with the finished product. The story he came up with is below:

Snow

Ons apon a time Rick and Noah had a playdate at are hose.
Mom fergot her kes. It reley stonk. Then we hade a idea. Snow balls! We therew them. Thrst time Brokey did it. She brok the window.
Noah hit a car rof. But I hit a window of a car. Noah hit a pol many tims.
Then mom calld the compane that opins doors with no keys. Now that was funy.

(Snow

Once upon a time, Rick and Noah had a playdate at our house.
Mom forgot her keys. It really stunk. Then we had an idea. Snowballs! We threw them. The first time, Brookey did it. She broke the window.
Noah hit a car roof. But I hit a window of a car. Noah hit a pole many times.
Then mom called the company that opens doors with no keys. Now that was funny.)

I love the title of this story. Unlike the majority of his other stories, John purposely chose a title that did not give away the story. I was quick to tell him that, in my opinion, which mattered quite a bit in our classroom, this was the best story he had ever written because it was exciting and very creative. John's true voice and sense of humor came shining through in this piece.

Similar to what Hughey and Slack (2001) and Abbott (2000) say about students craving a certain level of autonomy during the learning process, this scenario highlighted how John wanted control over his own writing. He did not want to work with me during the process of creating his text. He was a competitive boy and liked to figure things out on his own. He was fine with receiving feedback on his writing and when discussing future goals, but he also needed a sense of control. He listened for the directions at the beginning but then wanted the space and freedom to go back and create something privately, knowing that he was going to have me as a captive audience when he was done.

Friedberg (1996) explains that many students function best in learner-centered classrooms where leadership is shared. John sought a change in my role as teacher from someone that worked right alongside the writer, every step of the way. Instead he looked for his teacher to be a guide; someone he touched base with, but who also gave him the room to work privately and take risks on his own. That way, John had ownership over his writing and was not seeking my permission for every decision he made while writing his piece. This was fine with me, and it was easy for me to make this accommodation for

John, but this was noticeably different from how some of my other students needed me, and how needy they were for constant direct adult attention during Writer's Workshop.

In order for John to experience growth as a writer, it was important that I gave him some direct instruction on what makes a good writer, but equally as important, John needed more independence than other students in my class in order to take risks on his own and produce a creative piece. He did not want to publicly share the process of writing about his emotions with me, even when he was writing about such a simple and common emotion such as excitement. He wanted the privacy to decide how he was going to express himself on paper and I was happy to give it to him.

David

Similar to some of the other boys in class, David stood out to me, early in the year, as someone that struggled with embracing the personal nature of writing about himself and his own emotions. This was particularly interesting to me, given David's high level of articulateness and large vocabulary. He was a loud, animated boy in class and he enjoyed having the undivided attention of his classmates. Unlike Hunter, David came into the classroom at the beginning of the year with strong literacy skills and a solid working knowledge of how to sound out words. As a writer, his skills were strong. He just did not like the subject matter of writing about himself.

Finally, after spending two entire writing periods "thinking" which, to me, looked more like staring off into space or talking to his neighbors, David finally came up with a very interesting and creative idea for his story. What was most interesting to me was

that, in writing this personal narrative, he did everything in his power to not have his story actually be personal.

David chose “sadness” as the emotion about which he wanted to write. He immediately looked up at me to gauge the look on my face when he chose this emotion, expecting me to be surprised or to convince him to choose a happier emotion. He was the one who was surprised when I said “Great!” and sat down with him to get to work. David and I then brainstormed about times that he felt sad. After producing an extensive list, in which he was still looking up at me for some response after every entry, David decided to write about saying goodbye to his mother at the airport when she left for Denver the first time. As mentioned earlier, David’s mother did her residency in Denver and did not live with him during the course of this study.

David wanted to be portrayed as smart, and emotionally strong. Yet, in reality, he came off as extremely needy. I went back and forth between feeling very sorry for him and being very frustrated with his behavior. Yet, I found it interesting that at such an early age, he did not want to expose his emotional tenderness. He chose to write about sadness so that he could get some adult attention, not because he wanted to process his emotions with me. An excerpt from my teacher research journal on this personal narrative is as follows:

September 17

The cover of David’s story shows an airplane ascending into the sky. The illustration is done completely in black crayon. The title of the story is *Sadness*. David then carefully looked over the various components of the story web (characters, setting, story sequence, main idea, etc). I found it interesting, especially given David’s desire for adult attention, that he decided to fill out his story web alone. Towards the end of a Writer’s Workshop session, David informed me that he was done, handed me his story web and began to walk away.

I called him back and told him that I needed to review his work with him. In the box marked "characters" David had drawn a picture of the airplane and explained that this was the central character of the story. I asked if there were any other characters in the story. He looked at me for several seconds with a strong gaze and then replied, "Yes, my mother is on that plane." I said, "OK, then you need to write "Mom" in the character box. After he did this, I asked him if there were any other characters in this story. He said "no." Then I asked, "Your title is *Sadness*. Who is the one feeling sadness in your story?" He continued by saying "Well...I'm the one feeling sadness...(and then softly) obviously." I replied by saying that he should write his name in the character box as well. "But, I'm not focusing on me in this story, I'm focusing on my mother and the plane" was his quick response. I told him that next writing time we would work together to figure out how to do this but he needed to know that he had to include his perspective into the story because it is a personal narrative and writing about yourself is what personal means." His somber look showed me that he understood.

During the next few days, it became increasingly more obvious to me that David did not want to write down how he felt about his mom being away. "Isn't it obvious?" he said. I had to agree with him. It was, very. He did not want to be a character in this story. He wanted to tell the story his own way. Eventually, I allowed David to run with his own format, one in which he was able to diffuse the personal. His story is as follows:

SADNIS

ONCE MOM GRADUATED FROM MGH
SHE WENT TO LIVE IN DENVER. I COODINT GO
MY MOM ROD A JETPLAN TO DENVER
HER APARTMENT WAS SMALL
IT WAS COOI BECAsE it had a MAIL Slot
SHE HAD A BALCONY. SHE SAID THE SIGHT WAS beautiful
BUT SOMETIMES IT WAS COLD.
THERE WAS A MAIL SLOT
THERE WAS A GARBAGE chute
THERE WAS VACUMING TO DOO!
Then it was time to go! No!

(Sadness

Once mom graduated from MGH
She went to live in Denver. I couldn't go.

My mom rode on a jet plane to Denver.
Her apartment was small.
It was cool because it had a mail slot.
She had a balcony. She said the sight was beautiful.
But sometimes it was cold.
There was a mail slot.
There was a garbage chute.
There was vacuuming to do!
Then it was time to go! No!)

Looking back, he wrote a beautiful piece, one that he actually chose to publish at our end-of-the-year Publishing Party. While being able to protect his emotional vulnerability and “save face,” he was still able to embrace the process of writing about a personal story and have this experience be extremely therapeutic and powerful for him.

I was very curious to watch as David’s *Sadness* story unfolded. In a way, writing this story helped him access some of his true emotions about his mother living apart from him, even though he didn’t write about his actual emotions. The title said it all. He also talked with many students and myself about his mother being away as he was writing. It seemed important to David that we know that his mother was living away from him, even though he was not getting emotional about it. His tone expressed much more than his words, both verbal and written, ever did. The children, almost instinctively, seemed to understand. They just listened as David, in a sad low tone, talked about going to the airport or about seeing his mother’s apartment in Denver for the first time.

As he was writing this story, David was able to diffuse the personal from the text and he managed to maintain somewhat of a strong emotional front with his peers. I do not think he realized how I would be, as his teacher, when he chose sadness as his emotion. I think he chose his story idea for attention-seeking reasons. In the end, he received plenty

of attention for his story, and the process of writing this personal narrative and sharing this part of his life with his classmates was therapeutic for him. He was able to think about his mother being away without actually declaring that he was feeling sad about it. At the beginning of first grade, David did not know how to ask for help but he was trying to make sense of his emotions. David was a very intelligent boy and on some level, he knew that by writing this story his own way, he was sharing a sad part of his life in a safe, comfortable manner. He was letting people know he was sad without actually saying it. His personal narrative became a safe venue for him to share his emotional tenderness without going through the painful experience of writing about his actual emotions. Just by watching David over many weeks as he worked on this piece, I realized that he expressed much more while engaged in the process of writing this personal narrative than he ever did in the text.

Mark

The following excerpt from my teacher research journal shows that I was worried about Mark as he was writing personal narratives:

September 21

I am uncertain how Mark feels about writing. He appeared to really drag his feet during the first few Writer's Workshop periods. After the first period, he did not have an idea about which he wanted to write. This was fine, the brainstorming stage can take quite a while, but it was noteworthy because he was the only one who did not come up with an idea after a 30 minute period. Then, after the second period, he had an idea...and made a cover for it...but then threw it away and decided he didn't want to write about that idea. (And he didn't want to share what the discarded idea was.) Knowing that Mark can be stubborn and is guarded about revealing his emotions, I decided it was time to recruit the help of his dad. I explained the assignment to Steve and asked him to help Mark brainstorm possible emotions and memories to write about. I worked with Mark during the third period and he started off by saying that he wanted to write about

“excitement” and his memory was about the time he saw a shark at the beach. “Great idea” I said and Mark moved on to filling out his story web.

As Mark filled out the story web, I discovered that this story did not actually happen. It became very clear to me that this tale of action and adventure was indeed a work of fiction. Mark’s story was titled *Shark Attack* and the story centers around Mark and his dad at the beach. As the plot unfolded, his dad is attacked by a shark and Mark dives in the water to save him. Mark heroically wrestles with the shark and this aquatic battle ends with the shark retreating and Mark swimming with his dad to safety.

I reminded Mark that we were writing about true stories that actually happened to them so we could describe our real feelings. Hearing this, Mark became defensive and insisted that this story had actually happened...but, in order to save face, he included that he had also dreamed about it. Instinctively, I decided not to shatter Mark’s cover just to prove a point. He and I both knew his story was fictitious. What was the point in engaging in a power struggle over the fact that he was fictionalizing a real-life event? Similar to how he reacts socially, he had backed himself into a corner with this story idea and was now becoming stubborn and was refusing to admit that his story was fictitious.

Mark had already taken three writing times to warm up and pick a topic. He was now excited about this topic and I wanted to keep the momentum going. I told Mark that next time he should pick a story that happened in real life...and only in real life. He looked at me with a knowing smile. I found it interesting that, despite the repeated directions and discussions about personal narrative, Mark only came alive when writing a work of fiction. I’m curious to watch Mark as a writer, especially when we tackle fiction in the winter.

Throughout the personal narrative unit, Mark was consistently more interested in writing fiction than writing about his own personal experiences. This ties in with what Peterson (2001) and Millard (1997) say about boys not wanting to write about personal events in their own lives; that they find it more interesting to write about fiction. It also connects with what Pollack (1998) says about boys not being comfortable talking about their lives and their true emotions. Pollack states that many boys are in a gender straight jacket and feel it is not OK to express emotions because they must present a strong, stoic front. Instead of revealing their true emotional side they learn at an early age to abide by what Pollack calls “The Boy Code” and to hide behind a mask of masculinity. According to

Pollack (1998) boys that abide by the boy code, boys like Mark “often are hiding not only a wide range of their feelings but also some of their creativity and originality, showing in effect only a handful of primary colors rather than a broad spectrum of colors and hues of the self (p 7).

Mark’s writing skills and abilities were age appropriate. According to his rubric scores, he was particularly strong with the conventions trait. He did not hate writing. It was the genre of writing personal narratives that he disliked. During an interview in September, I asked Mark how he felt about Writer’s Workshop so far. He responded with a shrug “Well...it’s not my favorite thing to do. I wouldn’t say that I *love* it, but I guess it’s OK.” When asked what he would write about if he had the freedom to write about absolutely anything during Writer’s Workshop, Mark once again came alive talking about this movie idea that he had been thinking about for several years. He wanted to write a script for a movie idea about aliens coming down from outer space to planet Earth. This entire story unfolded about good aliens and bad aliens and some people that Mark knew personally, myself and his dad included, rallied together to become a heroic human team that defended our planet. I had never seen Mark so excited about an idea for writing. I then told him that he would have the opportunity to write this story, and others like it, when we wrote fiction in the winter time. Mark was very excited about this prospect. This helped me realize that if Mark were in a class that solely focused on personal narratives for the entire school year, he would not have the opportunity to write this story during school. During our personal narrative unit, Mark’s writing interests were not connected to the curriculum but this did not mean that Mark was not interested

in writing. His interests fell outside the curriculum and were not yet supported by how writing was being taught in the classroom.

During the personal narrative unit, the only other story idea that Mark decided upon besides *Shark Attack* was one entitled *My Life*. His idea was to design a series of books about his life. This connected with Fisher (2001) when he stated that boys often prefer to read and write books that are in a series. Mark never actually produced any finished books in this series and in fact was in “the thinking stage” for many Writer’s Workshop periods. When designing this series, however, he was eager to get through volume one, which was about his life from birth to age 7, so that he could get into volumes in the future. Once again, since this part of his life was yet to happen, these volumes were technically works of fiction.

Mark was particularly eager to write about when he became a grandparent. As a personal connection, Mark lived with one grandparent and often saw his other set of grandparents, who were not in great health. This desire to write about being a grandparent spoke to Mark’s need to somehow process how he was feeling about his aging grandparents. Similar to David’s writing about his mother being away, the manner in which Mark wrote about a topic was not always linear or straightforward. David and Mark both wrote about topics that were important to them, but chose to express themselves in more cryptic ways. For example, David wrote about his mom being away, but he was not a character in the book. He focused on where she lived and what her apartment looked like. His feeling of sadness was not directly stated, except in the title, but was consistently felt by the reader throughout the duration of the story. Mark did not

directly state that he was sad, or feeling any other emotions whatsoever, about his grandparents getting older, but he was eager to write about his own experiences of being a grandparent in his book *My Life*. Thomas (1997) states that boys often choose a different pace for their stories. They don't necessarily choose to tell their story following the typical, expected chronology of events, but they still interact with the text in a meaningful, significant way. Mark and David's experiences with writing personal narratives supported this. They both diffused the emotional content of their writing and thus maintained a strong or stoic presence. This allowed them to "save face" and abide by the boy code.

Stuart

Right from the beginning, Stuart stood in stark contrast to the five other focus children. Not only were his interests more aligned with the girls but he loved writing about his life and his own emotions. He was immediately hooked into writing personal narratives. He asked every day if there was time for Writer's Workshop. The following excerpt from my teacher research journal captures Stuart's enthusiasm to write personal narratives:

September 14

Stuart's first story was about when he lost his cat. The title (he was one of the few students who took the initiative to write a title on their first cover) was *MY CAT IS GON*. He approached me during his brainstorming session and asked if it was OK if his story contained two different emotions. I said that it was definitely OK, that I liked the way his brain worked, and that I looked forward to reading his story. "Do you want to have a taste of it right now?" he asked, with a wink and the tilt of his head. "Of course" I replied. He then proceeded to explain the story of how he lost his cat...but then that how it came back after an entire year, during a massive snow storm. The two emotions in this story were sadness and surprise.

It was truly an amazing story, which I confirmed with his mother and it was indeed true.

Stuart was very excited about Writer's Workshop and often told me about stories that he planned to write. In fact, Stuart was the very first student to complete a Writer's Workshop story. He was usually the only person in his stories and most of them involved nature or animals. Stuart wrote four stories during the personal narrative unit:

My Cat is Gon (My Cat is Gone)

Schranjers (Strangers... This story was about meeting a gorilla in a zoo.)

Leping Frum a Buosh (Leaping from a Bush... This story was about a run-in with a neighbor's cat.)

A Big Kut (A Big Tug... This story was about catching a fish in a nearby stream.)

These stories reflected Stuart's intensity and desire to tell a captivating tale. His word choice was quite advanced and the reader always knew exactly what Stuart was feeling because his intense and articulate voice came shining through in his writing. He often thought ahead about how he would tell his story and enjoyed using literary strategies such as suspense and foreshadowing.

Stuart told me that he truly enjoyed writing about personal narratives because it was a good way for him to go back and revisit those memories. He explained that his biggest challenge was deciding which of his many ideas he would write about first. Unlike most of the other boys in my class, it was not difficult for him to express his emotions. Stuart was a very sensitive boy and was well-versed in processing his feelings, especially in a private form such as writing.

Stuart wrote about a range of emotions but his stories always ended happily. Despite the fact that these were supposed to be personal narratives, some of his stories ended using the words "happily ever after." All of his stories end focusing on pro-social

behavior. This is more consistent with the manner in which girls write, indicating that Stuart was, as Gallas (1998) indicates, “experimenting with crossing gender boundaries and exploring the interests of the opposite gender” (p 131).

Lessons Learned from the Focus Children

The purpose of this section is to consolidate and analyze all the data (interviews, writing samples and scores, teacher research journal entries) from the focus children to make statements about how these six boys experienced writing during the personal narrative unit. The following main points explain what I learned from them:

1. These boys thought writing was important. A main point of interest, that was consistent throughout all my interviews and conversations with each of the six focus children, was that each boy expressed that they thought that writing was important, despite the fact that many of them did not have a strong interest in writing personal narratives. They all agreed that it was very important to learn how to write.

Interestingly, when asked why it was important to learn how to write, only one of them (Stuart, who was a strong writer and enjoyed writing personal narratives) mentioned story writing. The five other boys were much more practical with their reasons for why writing was important. They stated that writing is a form of communicating your thoughts to people (especially people you don't see every day) and it was important to be able to write so you can write letters or emails to them. They also all expressed that they wanted to learn how to get better at writing. This consistent sentiment made me pause and think about our curricular emphasis on story writing in the primary grades.

There is an entire population of students that believe it is important to learn to write for practical, interactive reasons, yet our curricular emphasis is almost always personal, reflective and non-interactive. As educators, we are not validating the reasons that these male students think writing is important. Our emphasis is elsewhere. One main reason that our emphasis is elsewhere is because the preference to write personal narratives connects with the interests of the dominant gender of teachers in this country. Girls prefer to write personal stories that focus on feelings and the majority of teachers of the primary grades in this country are female. Writing is being taught in a manner that is aligned with the dominant population of teachers. I don't believe this to be the fault of the female teaching force, but I do believe that our instructional approach caters to the female literacy interests.

The field of research on gendered literacy (Hunt, 1985; Peterson, 2001; Anderson, 2003; Graham, 2001; Abbott, 2000; Harris, 1998; Wils, 2002; Kanaris, 1999) that states that boys and girls tend to have differing literacy interests is relatively new. This research is not yet consistent with the manner in which we educate teachers on how to teach writing in the primary grades. In our training, many teachers, myself included, were taught to emphasize personal narrative because a prime goal of writing is to have students learn how to express themselves personally using the written word.

2. *Personal Narratives are Windows into Self.* There are some true benefits of having a writing curriculum that partially focuses on personal narratives. The students' stories, in one way or another, become windows into who these young writers are as people. As a teacher, I got a glimpse into their lives. But it was also important for me to realize that

these young boys knew this as well. I found it fascinating to think that they were being decisive about what they chose to show. For some students, such as Hunter and Mark, this personal exposure presented a struggle because they needed to decide which parts of themselves they wanted to reveal. They also struggled because they wanted their image to be different than it actually was. They wanted to abide by the boy code and portray themselves as cool, strong or heroic. As teachers, not only can we get a glimpse into our students' actual lives through reading personal narratives, but by paying close attention, we can also occasionally get a glimpse into who our students want to be. Hunter wanted to write a story about swimming for his life when his father tried to drown him because he thought it would be more exciting than retelling a story of when he was learning how to swim. Similarly, Mark changed a simple story of walking on the beach with his dad into an adventuresome tale of man vs. nature and he portrayed himself as a courageous and brave heroic figure. These boys were aware of the fact that they were telling the reader something about their lives and they fictionalized their memories so that they could be larger than life. I believe these were deliberate decisions because they wanted to be perceived by their peers in a certain way.

In a similar way, I believe David liked that he was sharing with the class his sad feelings about his mother living apart from him, even though his writing did not tap into his actual emotions. Writing that story was a way for him to honestly bond with some of his classmates and to show them his genuine self. While David wrote and talked with his nearby classmates about his story, he did not play his usual role of the overly-animated, sarcastic class clown. On some level, David knew that he was allowing

himself to be vulnerable by publicly sharing this personal experience with some of his fellow students. This was a safe way for him to do so without having to state his sadness outright.

Overall, and for different reasons, most of my focus boys did not find it particularly easy to write about their emotions. Nolan was very immature and did not seem to have the scope or experience necessary to process his real emotions. Mark, David and Hunter devised various avoidance strategies so they did not have to write about their real emotions. John was in a race to produce the most stories so these stories were mainly flat and did not contain a lot of personal feelings. Only Stuart, who had social and literacy interests that tended to be more aligned with the girls, seemed to truly enjoy processing and showcasing his emotions in his writing. It would be a mistake however, to think that all these boys did not value writing or think it was interesting. They did not like to write about themselves, partly because they were aware of the image of themselves that they were projecting in their true stories. This dislike of focusing on the true self is not the same as assuming they did not want to write. They simply did not want to write about themselves.

3. *The boys in class had differing literacy interests than the girls.* Hunter displayed his lack of interest in writing about himself by continually dragging his feet and repeatedly stating “But I don’t know what to write about...and I don’t want to write about myself.” On the other hand, many girls in class were excited about writing during this unit. Many wrote about birthday parties, weddings, playdates, and happenings at home. As a collective group, the girls seemed to be much more eager to write, express themselves

and share their stories with others. Although personal narratives dominate the curriculum in the primary grades, many boys in my class did not enjoy writing about themselves and their own personal experiences as much as many girls did. One explanation for this was that the personal experiences about which they were writing had already happened. These boys craved action and wanted to move on to focusing on the next thing. They did not want to process and reflect. This was why many boys preferred to write fiction, so they could engage their imaginations and create fast pace stories that existed in fantasy worlds they had made up in their minds.

Interestingly, a main rationale for emphasizing personal narratives so heavily in the primary grades is that these stories focus on experiences that have already happened. They are easier to write because the author does not have to think about many of the literary components of the story while also taking on the arduous task of writing the actual words. Personal narratives are true stories so they already have a definite beginning, middle and end. They have a setting and characters built right in. The struggling/budding writer does not have to concern him/herself with these details when retelling the story. But I question this and wonder if it is sometimes these exact imaginative choices about such literacy components that are of interest to young writers. It may be that these creative components provide the hook for many young male writers. These choices and this control may provide the motivation for some male writers to want to write more. This is what Newkirk (2002) addressed when he plead with educators to broaden the literacy spectrum. Many boys like to write fiction or comic books because they can make up silly and even somewhat inappropriate stories. If there are indeed

differing literacy interests, I believe it serves us well as educators to change our curricular emphasis and appeal to these interests, especially if it is going to motivate our boys to write more. Many boys may not be able to readily process their emotions or talk about their personal lives with great ease or willingness, but they can learn how to write and learn to use this skill in a meaningful way that helps them connect literacy to their own interests, as different as they may be.

The Whole Class Perspective on the Personal Narrative Unit

At the end of the unit on personal narratives, I used the *Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers* rubric to assess the stories that each one of my students created during September and October. The purpose of this section is to discuss how the whole class fared during the personal narrative unit. In particular, I compare the girls' experience with the boys'. After looking over the class results, I was generally pleased with where all my students were with regards to their writing development thus far.

The results are as follows:

Boys

- 1 = Experimenting
- 2 = Emerging
- 3 = Developing
- 4 = Capable
- 5 = Experienced

Name	Ideas	Organization	Voice	Word Choice	Sentence Fluency	Conventions	Total Score
Peter	2	2	3	2	2	1	12
Oscar	2	2	3	2	2	2	13
Hunter	2	1	2	1	1	1	8
Stuart	3	3	4	3	3	2	18
Mark	2	2	1	2	2	2	11
Tim	2	2	1	1	1	1	8
James	3	2	3	3	2	2	15
Luke	2	3	2	2	2	2	13
Robert	2	2	2	2	1	2	11
David	2	3	3	3	3	2	16
Nolan	2	1	2	1	1	1	8
John	3	3	2	2	2	2	14

Low Tier (Total scores under 10) Nolan, Tim, Hunter

Medium Tier (Total score 11-14) Mark, Luke, Robert, Peter, John, Oscar

High Tier (Total score 15 or higher) Stuart, David, James

Girls

Name	Ideas	Organization	Voice	Word Choice	Sentence Fluency	Conventions	Total Score
Nancy	3	3	3	2	2	2	15
Liz	2	2	3	2	2	2	13
Ayanna	3	3	3	2	2	2	15
Erica	2	1	1	1	1	1	7
Barbara	2	2	2	1	1	1	9
Karen	4	3	3	3	2	2	17
Julie	2	2	2	2	2	2	12
Sarah	3	3	3	3	2	2	16
Lisa	3	2	2	2	1	1	11
Linda	3	3	4	3	2	2	17
Alice	4	3	4	3	2	2	18

Low Tier (Total score under 10) Barbara, Erica

Medium Tier (Total score 11-14) Liz, Julie, Lisa

High Tier (Total score 15 or higher) Alice, Linda, Karen, Nancy, Ayanna, Sarah

Based on the average writing scores from all their personal narratives, the overall breakdown of my whole class according to ability is as follows:

Low Tier: 5 students (3 boys, 2 girls)
Medium Tier : 9 students (6 boys, 3 girls)
High Tier: 9 students (3 boys, 6 girls)

These averaged results were similar to the responses of the initial writing prompt. Once again, there were twice as many girls as boys in the top tier. In fact, more than half of the girls in my class were in the top tier. And the bottom tier was mainly male. When looking at the bottom two tiers, there were nearly twice as many boys as girls. But, when looking at the top two tiers, it was evenly divided: nine boys and nine girls. So, most of the boys, 9 out of the 12, were in the top tier, which I was pleased with. But the girls definitely had higher overall total scores. Also, the same students (Hunter, Nolan and Tim for the boys; Barbara and Erica for the girls) that were in the low tier at the beginning are still there. There was not a lot of movement when comparing the rubric scores of the personal narrative to the initial writing prompt. I partly attributed this to the fact that we had only been in school for two months in between these assessments, but I also contributed these general results to the fact that both the initial writing prompt and this entire first unit were based on personal experiences, which tends to be a female literacy preference.

There were a few surprises, however. I would have predicted that Lisa was in the low tier, basically because of her skills, but her voice and sense of humor came shining through in her stories. She was also great at generating ideas. She loved to write and

loved sharing her stories with others. Without the use of *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*, I probably would have predicted that John was in the high tier and James was in the middle tier.

I would have predicted that John was in the high tier because he had produced such a large quantity of writing. However, since John used mostly simple sentence structures and predictable format, he was in the middle tier. He also had some work to do on letter formation and sounding out words more thoroughly. Similarly, without the use of *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*, I would have predicted that James was the middle tier, because he had only written one piece. Despite James's slow pace, however, he had a great sense of story and you heard his voice shine through loud and clear from beginning to end.

As I stepped back and analyzed the personal narratives, I asked myself the following question: As a male teacher, what did I think of this gendered breakdown that existed in my classroom, according to *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*? I was not terribly surprised by these results, especially that the top tier was dominantly female. I found it fascinating that it connected so tightly to the NAEP scores. I was also intrigued by the fact that these results were for the personal narrative unit. I was very curious to see what happened when I assessed the pieces that my students created during the other genres, particularly those units that are more aligned with male literacy interests.

A Final Vignette from the Whole Class Perspective

As I looked over the variety of emotions that were addressed in my students' personal narratives, I realized that the girls wrote more about positive emotions such as happiness

and love while the boys' stories contained a broader range of emotions, including excitement, sadness, stressed, and being freaked-out. The following vignette shows how it can be powerful to have children write about emotions, even those that are not pleasant.

September 29

Today, at the end of Writer's Workshop, just as we were getting ready for Ayanna, Peter and Barbara to share their writing with the group, I realized that Oscar was looking very sad. He was sitting on the rug in the meeting area, with his head buried in his knees. I approached him and asked him if he was OK. He nodded. I waited a few seconds and then said "Are you sure, because you look kind of sad." He then broke down in tears. He said that he had chosen to write about a sad emotion, when his cat died, and now he can't stop thinking about how much he misses his cat. Tears were pouring down his cheeks as he told me this. I told him that I completely understood how he was feeling. I was incredibly sad when my dog died and it still makes me sad to think about her, even though she died over 10 years ago.

The class was now gathering around Oscar and I, wondering what was wrong. I decided to use this incident as a valuable lesson for all students. I gently explained to the class how Oscar was feeling. I said that part of the reason why he was feeling so sad was because he was reconnecting with the feelings he had for his cat when he was writing his story. I told them that I thought that this was a very beautiful thing, and that it clearly shows us how important Oscar's cat was to him. It also shows how great of a writer Oscar is becoming and how amazing a story this must be. I reminded them that we all know a great story when we read it because it makes us *feel* something. We know Oscar's story was good because it makes us feel sad. This then opened up a student-generated class discussion about how we shouldn't feel that we are bad when we feel some negative emotions. Nancy offered up that when she wrote *My Braslit is Brocen (My Bracelet is Broken)* she was very sad but that it was helpful to write the story because it made her realize how special the bracelet was to her. She told Oscar and the class that creating the story helped her realize that she wanted to make another one that looked just like it. Writing can be like a form of therapy and sometimes it helps us to feel sad or work through our sadness.

I then reminded them about the story *Faithful Elephants*. It is one of the saddest stories I have ever read. It's a story about Japan during World War II. The Japanese were afraid of being bombed and the zookeepers were required to kill the animals in the zoo because the Japanese government was afraid of having wild animals running around the city in case of an attack. I told my class that even though a few children wind up crying every time I read the story, we all agree that it is one of the greatest and most powerful stories that we have ever read. It is a great story because it makes us feel something. I told the children that if they

wanted to write similar great stories, they should probe their minds for memories that involved powerful emotions...and not to be afraid of the negative emotions.

It was very telling of how strong our classroom community was when, after Oscar felt a little more comfortable, many children told him that they would love to hear his story *My Cat is Dad (My Cat is Dead)* when he was done with it. The class had come together and connected socially as a result of discussing a classmate's personal experience. This is truly a strength of including a personal narrative unit into a Writer's Workshop curriculum. Especially if the unit is introduced with a brainstormed list of emotions and feelings, the children have the opportunity to relive some of these experiences and sometimes even find closure with them. With a sharing component built into the Writer's Workshop format, the various members of the classroom community have a chance to strengthen their bonds as they learn about each others' lives, support each other, and offer advice. Afterwards, Oscar not only felt OK about the fact that he had cried in front of others but he felt better about his story-telling and writing abilities. If we, as a class, had not seized the moment, Oscar might have abandoned that story idea because it was a painful memory for him to think about. Instead, because we were sharing our personal experiences with each other, Oscar was excited about pursuing this story idea and translating it into a complete story. And the class was eager to read this work of art from their friend when it was finished.

Lessons Learned from Personal Narrative Unit

As discussed in this chapter, there were five main issues that arose during the personal narrative unit: The girls achieved higher total rubric scores than the boys when writing

personal narratives. The girls' stories also focused on different topics and emotions than the boys' stories. All six focus children felt that learning to write was important, although not necessarily learning to write personal narratives. The personal narratives of my students were viewed as windows into the self. And finally, the boys and the girls in my class had differing literacy interests.

The first lesson learned was that according to *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*, the girls achieved higher total rubric scores than the boys. More than half of the girls in class were in the top tier. In fact, there were twice as many girls as boys in the top tier. There were twice as many boys as girls in the bottom two tiers.

The second lesson learned was that the boys and girls chose to write about different topics and emotions. The girls wrote more about positive emotions such as happiness and love while the boys' stories contained a broader range of emotions, including excitement, sadness, stressed, and being freaked-out.

The third lesson learned was that all six focus children felt that learning to write was an important skill to learn, mainly because it is a way of communicating their thoughts to others. Most of these boys, however, did not name writing personal narratives when providing reasons for why writing was important.

The fourth lesson learned was my realization that personal narratives could be viewed as windows into the self. They revealed aspects of my students' personal lives to the reader. Many boys in my class were deliberate about what they revealed and were concerned about the image they were promoting in their personal narratives. Several

boys in my class presented a strong, stoic front and abided by the boy code and struggled with expressing true emotions in their stories.

The fifth and final lesson learned was that the boys and girls in my class had differing literacy interests. Five out of the six focus children did not particularly enjoy writing personal narratives, while most of the girls in my class did. These boys did not want to process their emotions and share their life events in a public forum with the reader. They much preferred to write fiction where they could engage their imaginations and create fast pace action stories.

CHAPTER SIX LETTER WRITING UNIT

Creation of our Classroom Postal Service

Laying the groundwork for our letter writing unit, and prior to its onset, the class studied the local post office to learn more about what services this institution provided to the community. We went on several field trips to the local post office to learn about this institution first-hand. We interviewed a postman, collected data about how many people went in and out during the course of an hour, sketched the exterior and interior of the post office and went behind the scenes to see the mail being sorted and loaded onto mail trucks. The following entry from my teacher research journal describes our visits to the post office:

Wednesday, December 7

We began our study of the post office by doing the K&W part of a KWL chart, outlining what we Know (the “K” of KWL) and what we Want (the “W” of KWL) to know about the Post Office. [The “L” of KWL is what we Learned as a result of the study and is completed at the end of the unit.] The children’s knowledge of the post office was developmentally appropriate. They knew that people called postal workers helped to deliver the mail. They knew they could be either men or women. They knew that the postal workers delivered the mail in trucks and that if you wanted to mail a letter to someone, you put your letter in a blue mailbox that could be found on some sidewalks.

Questions that they wanted to know involved the finer details of postal delivery: How do the postal workers know where to deliver the mail? How often does the mail get delivered? How do they open those blue mailboxes? What do they actually do to the mail when they take it to the post office? Their list of generated questions went on and on.

To answer some of these questions, and to learn more about the general goings-on of the post office, we took field trips to our local post office. For our first trip, we took a bus, which dropped us off right in front of the post office. We brought our sketch books and we spent an hour observing and sketching the outside of the building. The children noticed that it was an extremely busy place, that many people were always coming in and out, that there was an American Flag hanging, that there were many mailboxes located outside the building. After

we were somewhat familiar with our surroundings, we went inside. Immediately, the children noticed the different components of the post office: the front desk, the store, and the area for the P.O. boxes.

We returned to the post office several times over the next few weeks. We spent time in each area, sketched the interior of the post office, interviewed a postal worker, and got a tour of the back rooms to see what happens behind the scenes. We saw the safe where they keep the stamps, saw the rooms where the mail gets sorted, and saw where the trucks pull up to load and unload the mail. These trips served their purpose: the children now had the answers to their questions. They also had a tremendous amount of local knowledge about what services the post office provides to our community, and what happens there on an average day. We were now ready to return to the classroom to begin to replicate what we had learned and provide similar services to our school community.

These field trips moved the students out of the classroom and into the local neighborhood. Many of the boys were excited to travel to the post office because they were studying something that was “real.” After we had become the resident experts of the local post office, our next goal was to return to the classroom to replicate what we had learned within our own school community: we were going to create a postal service that we would actually use to deliver letters to fellow school members. Self-directed activities and “using the real world” are two strategies that Gurian & Bellow (2003) suggest for boys because they are useful for spatial development and enhancing language development. For these reasons, the study of the post office and the letter writing unit were designed to incorporate the real world and self directed activities such as the KWL chart and choosing the audience for their letters.

In order to create a postal service for the school, we needed to build a mail box. A few students went to the school’s wood shop to make a blue, wooden mail box with a hinged top, so that we could open it and get the letters. There was a slot on the lid, into which my students dropped their letters. We also made stamps using blank labels. Since

letter writing is interactive and depends on the participation of others, I sent an email to the entire school community of Taylor Academy, explaining that the first graders were studying the post office and were creating a school-wide postal service. I explained that if anyone wanted to mail letters to us, we would happily write back. I also stated that we would be happy to deliver school mail to anyone else in the school. The first graders served as the postal workers and were in charge of making sure the school mail was delivered, rain or shine. Once our study of the local post office was complete, and we had all of our necessary provisions (envelopes, mail box, stamps, etc) for our school postal service, the stage was set. We were ready to begin our unit on writing letters.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed description of the letter writing unit and to chronicle and analyze what happened when I implemented this unit with my first graders. In doing so, I explain the academic and social issues that were unique to this genre. From a whole class perspective, I scored all the letters the children wrote during November and December using *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*. I analyzed their writing and their scores to observe how their writing varied by gender document how the boys and girls experiences compared to each other while writing in this genre. From the perspective of the focal children for this study, I captured their attitudes towards writing letters and the issues that arose when they wrestled with deciding what to write about, to whom, and what they wanted to reveal about their personal lives in their letters. At the end of the section on the focal children in this chapter, I draw comparisons among their experiences to discuss three main findings.

The first finding was that many boys thought deeply about the audience for their letters. Being able to choose who would read the content of their letters seemed to matter a great deal to them. This also seemed to heighten their motivation to write. During the letter writing unit, the boys liked being in control of the audience and deciding who would hear their thoughts. When comparing the content of their writing during the personal narrative unit and the letter writing unit, many boys were more personal and felt less vulnerable expressing themselves when writing letters. They liked being able to choose the audience and being in control of who would read their letters. Many boys were more personal when the audience was more private and chosen by the writer. These boys particularly enjoyed the private nature of writing letters to their friends.

The second finding was that many boys liked writing letters because writing became an interactive form of social activity. They enjoyed writing in the present tense, as opposed to writing in the past with personal narratives, because writing in the present had a direct and immediate impact on their social lives. Writing became active as opposed to being reflective. Interestingly, there was a connection between the socially interactive nature of the children and their writing proficiency in this unit. Overall, the more extroverted students achieved higher total rubric scores during the letter writing unit than the introverted students.

The final finding was that most boys both preferred to write letters than personal narratives and most achieved higher rubric scores during the letter writing as well. Five out of the six focal boys preferred writing letters to personal narratives. Stuart, whose literacy interests tended to be more aligned with the girls, was the only one of the focal

boys who preferred to write personal narratives. Importantly, four of the six focal boys achieved higher rubric scores during the letter writing unit. Besides Stuart, Mark was the only other boy who achieved lower scores during the letter writing unit, but this was due more to his guarded emotional disposition than it was to his gender.

Overview of Letter Writing Unit

The following entry from my journal describes how I kicked-off the unit on letter writing:

Thursday, November 1

Today I explained to the class that we would be trying something new during Writer's Workshop for the next two months. As a part of my first mini-lesson, I explained that letter writing differs from story writing in several ways, including the audience. With story writing, the audience is somewhat undetermined. The writer does not have a direct and personal relationship with his/her audience. With letter writing, however, the author is in complete control of the audience. He/she chooses who will have access to the letter. The relationship is interactive (assuming the chosen audience writes back) and much more personal.

I modeled for the class what letter writing would look like. When I showed them the paper we would be using for letter writing, there was a public outcry that there was no room for pictures on the paper. I was quick on my feet and explained that they could use the back for pictures if they wanted to. ("Do we have to?" was the response from the self-proclaimed non-artists of the group. "No, that's a choice" was my reply, and everyone seemed relieved.) I continued to lay down the ground rules: Unlike story writing, they were now expected to fill up the whole page with words, but they only needed to write one page if they wanted. ("Can we write more?" Nancy asked. "Yes, of course." was my reply. "Do we have to?" asked Hunter. "No." I said.)

I then explained the various components of letter writing as I wrote a pretend letter to Luke. I explained that every letter had to include the following components: date, greeting, body (which must include at least one question that will be answered when the person writes back) closing, signature, and P.S. (optional.) The letter that I wrote to Luke on the easel in front of the class is below:

11/1

Dear Luke,

I really like playing with you out at recess. What is your favorite pet? I really like puppies. Hopefully Mrs McPhail will get me one for Christmas. Do you want to have a play date with me?

Write back.
Your friend,
Mr McPhail

I then got an envelope, addressed it with Luke's name and class room name, put the letter in the envelope, put a stamp on it, and dropped the letter into the mailbox. There was nothing more for me to do except wait for a member of the post office group to deliver it to Luke on the first delivery day.

In order to make sure that everyone in the class received at least one letter, my students picked names out of a hat. The chosen name determined the audience for their first letter. After this initial letter, the students had complete choice over their audience and were free to write letters to anyone (child or adult) in the Taylor Academy community. The children were very excited about this letter writing project, especially about being able to control their audience. The children picked the names out of the hat, enjoyed the secrecy aspect of writing to someone, and anticipated getting their first letter from someone in our class.

The following excerpt from my teacher journal shows how this letter writing unit, and creating our own school postal service, was an incredibly fun way for school community members to interact socially and to develop or strengthen social bonds with one another:

Monday, December 19

The response from the school to our Post Office was overwhelming. It only took one email to the Taylor Academy community (explaining the project and inviting participation) and people began to come out of the woodwork.

- Mr. Jones, the Assistant Director of the School, took the initiative to write a post card to every student in our classroom. He explained that he was the father of Peter (a 2nd grader) and what his job was at the school. He also invited any of us to visit his office at any time. This was helpful for most of the people in our class because it allowed them to learn more about one of the most important people at our school. Although some of my students knew who Peter was, no one knew who Mr. Jones was. When I explained that he helped Mr. Hayes run the school, they all knew who Mr. Hayes was (he's practically a celebrity) and many became curious to learn more about Mr. Hayes's right-hand man.

- Mr. Jones went one step further: he had his parents (who live in Denmark) write our class a post card, explaining how excited they were to write to us, how much they love Taylor Academy, and that they would love to hear from any member of our classroom, if they got stuck and couldn't think of who to write to next. Mr. Jones's parents enclosed a picture of what mailboxes look like in Denmark, and discussed how mail delivery is similar/different to the mail delivery in the United States. We then connected this postcard to a prior geography lesson about the continents. (We had taught the kids about the seven continents. They had learned about which continents their ancestors hailed from, and we created a class bar graph depicting which continents were represented in our collective body of ancestry in the class.) We explained that Denmark is on the yellow continent (Europe) and they were quick to volunteer all the other countries they knew that were on the same continent as Denmark.
- Similarly, this letter writing unit lent itself nicely to another geography lesson, that of learning the map of our campus. After the first delivery, it became obvious to me that not all our students knew where all the classrooms were located, especially the classrooms in the middle school. Since one of the prime goals of the letter writing unit, and the post office project in general, was to connect with other members of our school community, I made copies of campus maps used for school tours and set out with the post office group to become more familiar with every building on our campus. Our campus is comprised of 17 buildings on 11 acres of land. The children loved the active nature of this tour and learning more about the different buildings of our school. It was a great way to build...or strengthen...connections within the various grades and departments of our school.
- The outpouring of attention that this project received was unexpected. After our first two rounds of postal delivery, we realized that other students in different grades were quite excited to receive mail from us. We received mail from fifth and sixth graders whom we did not know, asking us to write to them, in order to get to know each other better. Our students were thrilled. They felt like celebrities and were very honored to get the attention of unknown students in the middle school. By the third round of mail delivery, we had written to or received mail from every grade in the school as well as our Music teacher, our Art teacher, our Movement teacher, Ms Smith, Mr. Hayes, Mr. Jones, Nurse Linda, the Asst Head of Admissions and others.
- Some sixth graders even took the initiative to use our class mail service to write letters to other students in the school. When we were sorting the mail one week, we realized that there were some letters that were not to us, or from us. Other students used our postal service to communicate with each other. This made the children extremely proud, that our mail system was like the real US mail service. Students quickly grabbed the letters and delivered them to their rightful owners.
- The level of participation from every grade and department in our school certainly helped to keep the momentum rolling for our letter writing unit. Our students loved knowing that other school community members were engaged in the same

letter writing project that we were, and they truly enjoyed making new connections and strengthening existing relationships.

Another example of a new relationship that was formed as a result of this project was the class's introduction to Mr. Adams. Mr. Adams is the Head of the Art Dept at school and begins working with students in the third grade. At Taylor Academy, art is taught in the classroom up until second grade. Beginning in the third grade, students receive art education in the studio. So, most students in my class did not know who Mr. Adams was prior to this letter writing unit. One day, while we were sorting mail, we realized that there was an enormous (one foot by two feet) envelope in our mail box that was very colorfully decorated and addressed to our class. During our next Writer's Workshop lesson, we opened this letter and found that it was a letter from Mr. Adams. He introduced himself and explained what his job was at school. He also invited our whole class to the Art studio for a special art lesson taught by Mr. Adams. The children were absolutely thrilled to have this opportunity to go to the studio and have a class taught by someone that teaches the big kids.

I was curious to see how my students experienced the letter writing unit. I was also curious to see how this experience compared to the personal narrative unit, especially since personal narrative is the dominant genre in writing instruction in elementary schools across the country. I was interested to see how they experienced the first genre in the writing curriculum that was not aligned with the writing curriculum in the majority of primary grade classrooms.

There were two obvious differences between the two genres. First, the length requirement was different. The minimum length for personal narratives was four pages. It is important to note that, at the beginning of the year, these pages usually only contained one sentence and a picture. The minimum length for letter writing was one full page. The children were also not required to provide an illustration with their letters, while they had to draw a picture on each page of their personal narratives. I predicted

that many of my students would find it less overwhelming to write letters than personal narratives.

Another main difference between the letters and the personal narratives was the nature of the audience. With personal narratives, the children were writing to a more public audience. Their stories were shared with the entire class and occasionally their parents. The author was not in complete control of who would be reading their writing. With letter writing, however, the audience was much more specific and it differed in size. The children wrote letters to one person as opposed to sharing their writing with the whole class. The students decided who would read their writing. I predicted that many students, particularly those boys who were not comfortable with the vulnerable side of expressing their feelings and emotions during personal narratives, would be more motivated to write letters because the audience was more private.

Throughout the letter writing unit, I emphasized two main points regarding convention: correct formation and appropriate usage of capital letters, and ending punctuation. In addition to boosting the interactive nature of letter writing, all letters needed to include at least one question in order to give the students practice using the question mark.

The Whole Class Perspective

At the end of the unit on letter writing, I used the *Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers* rubric to assess the letters that each one of my students created during November and December. The purpose of this section is to discuss how the whole class fared during the letter writing unit. In particular, I compare the girls' experiences with the boys. After

looking over the class results, I was generally pleased with where all my students were with regards to their writing development thus far.

In this section I argue that it is important to include letter writing in a primary grade writing curriculum because it allowed a different sector of the classroom population to enjoy writing and encounter success. Many children who did well during this unit enjoyed the socially interactive nature of this unit. Their letters achieved higher scores regarding voice than their personal narratives. The students also showed me that the audience mattered to them. Most children enjoyed the private, and at times secretive, nature of writing to an audience of one person. They also enjoyed being in control of who that audience was for their letters.

The following charts document how the students fared during the letter writing unit. They also provide a comparison between the letter writing scores with the personal narrative scores for each child for each of the six traits. The first number in each box is the score for personal narrative. The second number is the score for letter writing. The total score represents the total score for the letter writing unit. The results are as follows:

Letter Writing Unit (Boys)

- 1 = Experimenting
- 2 = Emerging
- 3 = Developing
- 4 = Capable
- 5 = Experienced

Name	Ideas	Organization	Voice	Word Choice	Sentence Fluency	Conventions	Total Score
Peter	2/3	2/3	3/4	2/3	2/3	1/2	18
Oscar	2/3	2/2	3/4	2/3	2/2	2/3	17
Hunter	2/3	1/3	2/3	1/2	1/2	1/2	15
Stuart	3/4	3/3	4/3	3/3	3/2	2/2	18
Mark	2/2	2/2	1/2	2/2	2/2	2/2	12
Tim	2/2	2/2	1/3	1/2	1/2	1/2	13
James	3/2	2/2	3/3	3/3	2/2	2/2	14
Luke	2/3	3/3	2/3	2/3	2/2	2/2	16
Robert	2/3	2/2	2/3	2/2	1/2	2/2	14
David	2/4	3/3	3/4	3/4	3/3	2/3	21
Nolan	2/3	2/3	2/3	1/3	1/2	1/2	16
John	3/4	3/3	2/4	2/4	2/3	2/3	21

The breakdown for boys for the letter writing unit was:

Low Tier (Total score 14 or lower) James, Tim, Mark, Robert

Medium Tier (Total score 15-16) Luke, Nolan, Hunter

High Tier (Total score 17 or higher) Stuart, David, John, Peter, Oscar

Letter Writing Unit (Girls)

Name	Ideas	Organization	Voice	Word Choice	Sentence Fluency	Conventions	Total score
Nancy	3/2	3/2	3/3	2/3	2/3	2/2	15
Liz	2/2	2/2	3/3	2/3	2/2	2/2	14
Ayanna	3/3	3/3	3/4	2/4	2/3	2/2	18
Erica	2/2	1/2	1/2	1/2	1/2	1/2	12
Barbara	2/3	2/2	2/3	1/3	1/3	1/2	16
Karen	4/2	3/2	3/2	3/2	2/2	2/3	13
Julie	2/3	2/3	2/3	2/3	2/2	2/2	16
Sarah	3/4	3/3	2/4	2/3	2/3	2/3	20
Lisa	3/3	2/2	2/4	2/2	1/3	1/2	16
Linda	3/3	3/3	4/4	3/3	2/3	2/2	18
Alice	4/4	3/3	4/4	3/4	2/3	2/3	21

The breakdown for girls for the letter writing unit was:

Low Tier (Total score 14 or lower) Liz, Erica, Karen

Medium Tier (Total score 15-16) Julie, Lisa, Nancy, Barbara

High Tier (Total score 17 or higher) Alice, Linda, Ayanna, Sarah

Based on the writing scores from the letter writing unit, the overall breakdown of my whole class according to ability was as follows:

Low Tier: 7 students (4 boys, 3 girls)

Medium Tier: 7 students (3 boys, 4 girls)

High Tier: 9 students (5 boys, 4 girls)

Interestingly, these results were very different from the results of the personal narrative unit. In the personal narrative unit, there were twice as many girls as boys in the top tier. Now, merely by shifting genres, there were more boys than girls in the top tier. This was an important finding because it revealed that the content of the writing curriculum mattered to my students. With letter writing, more boys landed in the top tier, according to their rubric scores. The gendered make-up of the middle tier also varied. With personal narratives, there were 6 boys and 3 girls in the middle tier. With letter writing, there were 3 boys and 4 girls in the middle tier. Overall, the breakdown of the letter writing results seemed much more balanced by gender, compared to the results of the personal narrative unit. Although there were now more boys than girls in the top tier for letter writing, the same amount of girls and boys were in the top two tiers when taken together: 7 boys, 7 girls. Similarly, there was the same amount of boys and girls in the bottom two tiers: 7 boys, 7 girls. Importantly, by merely shifting genre, there were changes regarding which students were in the top and bottom tiers. When considering the boys, John, Peter and Oscar climbed from the middle tier into the top tier. James plummeted from the top tier to the bottom tier. Mark also fell into the bottom tier during this unit. When considering the girls, the shifts were not as dramatic but there were some changes regarding the tier structure of the letter writing unit as compared to the personal

narrative unit. Karen plummeted from the top tier to the bottom tier. Nancy fell from the top into the middle tier. Liz fell from the middle tier into the bottom tier. Barbara climbed out of the bottom tier and into the middle tier. These changes were less dramatic than the changes the boys encountered. When just considering how the girls did compared to each other, there was not much of an overall shake-up when shifting genres. With a few exceptions, the girls tended to hold onto their positions in the respective tiers. Most of the girls in the top tier for personal narratives were the same girls in the top tier for letter writing. The same was true for the middle and bottom tiers. When considering the boys, however, the results were much different. There was much more mobility between the tiers with the boys when the genres shifted. The boys who achieved low scores during the personal narratives were not the same boys who scored low during letter writing. The same was true for the middle and top tiers. Shifting genres had a large impact regarding the tier structure for the boys in our class. Incorporating a letter writing unit into the writing curriculum gave some students the chance to be in the top tier. They may not have had this chance if they experienced a writing curriculum that focused primarily on personal narratives for the duration of the school year.

Although the boys were more motivated to write letters than they were to write personal narratives, the girls produced a great deal more writing than the boys did during the letter writing unit. This was similar to the results of the personal narrative unit and also relates to what the literature says about the intersections of gender and quantity of writing. Kanaris (1999) found that girls generally write for longer time periods and produce more text than boys. In total, the girls wrote 99 letters during this unit while the

boys collectively only wrote 62 letters. The boys produced less than 2/3 the amount of letters that the girls wrote. Regardless of genre, the girls still produced much more writing than the boys. This did not surprise me. I had predicted that many boys would be less intimidated by the minimum length requirement, and this seemed to be true. But interestingly, even though the minimum length was different in this genre, and the children were in control of the audience and wrote private letters, the girls still produced more writing. Even more interesting to me, however, was that although the boys wrote less than the girls did, the boys produced more than they had during the personal narratives. They also achieved higher total scores in this genre. They wrote fewer letters than the girls did but, as a collective group, they produced more writing than they did during the personal narrative unit and their writing improved.

There were also differences in audience between the boys' and girls' letters. The boys, for the most part, took the opportunity to branch out and write letters to people outside of the classroom, both to students and adults in the larger Taylor Academy community. The girls, on the other hand, enjoyed writing letters back and forth to each other, strengthening relationships within our own classroom. When the boys wrote letters to others in class, it was almost always to someone whom they knew very well, and these letters were usually to people of their same gender. The girls did this initially but then quickly branched out and wrote letters both to girls they didn't know well, and to boys in class. The boys also branched out and wrote letters to people they didn't know very well. The difference was that when writing to people they didn't know, the boys chose people who were not in their immediate social realm but were instead in a much bigger social

sphere: the larger school community. Similar to their writing in the personal narrative unit, many of the boys were aware that writing letters was a personal disclosure about themselves and that their social reputation could be impacted. Writing letters, however, gave these boys the opportunity to be pro-active, reach out to chosen important people in the community and boost their reputation. Many boys wrote to older boys at school that they considered cool. Most of the girls did not reach out in this manner. Instead of creating new friendships in the larger school community, most girls strengthened existing friendships by writing letters to their classmates. In this way, the audience for the boys' letters was very different than the audience of the girls' letters. Furthermore, the boys and girls were writing letters for different reasons. Most of the girls were writing letters to strengthen existing friendships while many boys chose to write letters to boost their social reputation with older students at school.

I found it interesting that there was a connection between students' writing proficiency in this unit and how outwardly social they were at school. Karen and James were both quiet, reserved students. They had close friends in class but were not concerned with having a lot of friends. They both were in the top tier during the personal narrative unit and both plummeted to the bottom tier for the letter writing unit. Similarly, three other introverted students slipped down from the middle tier to the bottom tier: Mark, who was very guarded emotionally; Robert, who was painfully shy; and Liz, who was very extroverted but extremely self-conscious and anxious about her social reputation among her peers. Nancy, who did not have many friends in class, slipped from the top tier to the middle tier. Finally, Tim, who was quiet and also incredibly anxious, remained on the

bottom tier for both units. These students did not benefit from the social and interactive nature of letter writing.

On the other hand, some of the more outwardly social students climbed up a tier as a result of the socially interactive nature of writing letters. Barbara and Hunter were very animated students and were always interested in having a lot of friends. They both climbed from the bottom tier to the middle tier. Similarly, Oscar, Peter and John climbed from the middle tier to the top tier. These three boys were loud and enjoyed being class clowns. They loved the social aspect of the letter writing unit and often wrote letters that were silly or mischievous in content.

I found it fascinating that there was such a strong connection between the composition of the top tier during the letter writing unit and how comfortable these students were being outwardly social in our classroom. I was also interested to learn that simply by shifting the genre, many of the extroverted students who were not interested in writing personal narratives were more motivated to write letters and in fact achieved higher relative results when doing so, according to *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*.

By analyzing all the letters they wrote during the two months we studied letter writing, I was impressed that so many of my students strengthened their own voices in their writing. Out of all six traits, the voice trait displayed the highest overall results. This trait also displayed the greatest change in overall scores when shifting genres. With letters, many of my students received a “4” for voice, which meant they were writing at the “capable” stage. It was not surprising to me that my students had higher “voice”

scores than in personal narratives, given the social nature of writing letters. Voice, as a trait, connected directly to the concept of being a social member of the community. Students who achieved high voice scores easily expressed their own style, personality and sense of humor in their writing. When reading a piece of writing that had a high voice score, the reader can tell that it was written by a particular student because it reflects their personality. Pieces that score low in voice seemed more generic and did not reveal anything about the personality or style of the writer. Many of my students did well on the “voice” criterion because they carefully chose their own words and did not, for the most part, stick to the safe words that they knew how to spell. The majority of them took risks, both socially and with regards to their writing development, and their unique voices came shining through in their letters. An example of a letter that achieved a high voice score is as follows:

DiR NRS Linda
I RELE LIKED HOW YO FICT MY FOR HAD. I LIKED HOW YO
SEJASTED I LOC In THE MiR To loc At MY FOR HAD. AND THE CRÈME.
WRITE BACK. SiSSRLE, PETER

(Dear Nurse Linda,
I really liked how you fixed my forehead. I liked how you suggested I look in the mirror to look at my forehead. And the cream. Write back. Sincerely, Peter)

Many of the students stated that they liked the social interaction that was involved in our letter writing unit. The following are excerpts from a whole class interview about this unit in which I asked them what they liked about writing letters:

Oscar: I like the secrets of knowing that only you know what you have written to someone.

GM: So you like the secret part.

Oscar: Yeah And also it's a great way to share your feelings with someone and get to know them better in a private way.

GM: So, there's a part of it that's private...where you can share your feelings with someone and know it's private. I like that.

GM: Karen?

Karen: I liked it because you are not really writing a real story about yourself...you're learning about someone else.

GM: Great. Peter?

Peter: I like that writing letters is kind of like a phone call because you are actually communicating with someone else and they're communicating back. Like a phone call.. Except it's on paper. So, it's like a mail conversation!

Later, I asked the children to consider the two units we had covered so far: personal narratives and letter writing. I asked them to think about which unit they preferred. I was quite surprised by the results: 6 students (4 girls, 2 boys) stated that they preferred writing personal narratives. 16 students (7 girls, 9 boys) preferred to write letters. One of the focus children, Mark (who didn't like either) chose not to vote. I expected the majority of the boys would prefer letter writing but I was surprised by the fact that nearly twice as many girls preferred letter writing as well. This led me to believe that including a letter writing unit in a primary grade writing curriculum appeals to the literacy preferences of both boys and girls.

Interestingly, although there were slightly more boys in the top tier than girls in this unit, gender did not seem to be the defining criterion in determining how well the students did while writing letters, as I predicted. The social disposition of my students seemed to have a more direct relationship with their writing rubric scores than gender. Overall, the extroverts did well in the letter writing unit while the introverts did not, compared to the personal narrative unit. This finding led me to believe that writing letters was not necessarily more of a male or female activity. Instead, it may be a genre where socially outgoing students perform well because it is "like a phone call, except on

paper.” Although the results were different from what I expected, shifting the genre from personal narrative to letter writing did shift which sector of the classroom population encountered success. The girls encountered greater success than the boys in the personal narrative unit. The extroverts who craved social connection with others encountered greater success than the introverts in the letter writing unit. This idea is further explored in Chapter Nine.

The Focus Children

In the following section, I describe both the writing development and the social experiences of the focal children during the letter writing unit. Although I mention each of the six children in this section, I do not focus on their experiences equally, in terms of length. I deliberately focus on certain boys more than others in order to discuss the following findings about letter writing and boys: Most boys preferred to write letters than personal narratives. Importantly, most of the boys achieved higher rubric scores in the letter writing unit as well. The audience mattered and many boys preferred letter writing because they were in control of their audience. Most boys also revealed more about themselves personally due to the private nature of letter writing. They also preferred to write letters because they could write in the present tense. Writing letters became socially interactive and had a direct and immediate impact on their social lives.

Hunter

During the personal narrative unit, Hunter was in the low tier. Socially, he was very concerned with his image and thought deeply about what he wanted to tell others about himself in his personal narratives. The only time he was motivated during this unit was

when he wrote *When Lisa Kicked Me in the Crotch*. He had a very different experience during the letter writing unit. The following entry from my teacher journal describes how excited Hunter was during our letter writing unit and how he used the format of writing letters to reach out socially to others in our school community:

Monday, December 19

It is interesting to me that mixing up the genres of writing (from personal narrative to letter writing) had an impact on some students and not on others. I noticed a definite change in Hunter. He had little to no interest in writing personal narratives, and did not think of himself as a writer during this unit. Writing was hard for him, and he would rather not do it, especially when it came to writing about himself. Letter writing was a completely different story. Hunter is a very social boy and takes pride in knowing as many people (outside of our classroom community) as possible. He idolizes Michael, his older brother who is in 4th grade at our school. Hunter is also intensely interested in the activities that older kids can engage in at school. For example, children are not allowed to play "Ghost" [a game unique to Taylor Academy that is similar to Dodge Ball] at school until 3rd grade, yet Hunter knows all the rules because he can often be found sitting right outside the Ghost court at recess, watching and learning from the older kids. He knows who is good, and cannot wait until he becomes a third grader so he can play as well. (There is no doubt in my mind that he will be a star Ghost player when he is finally allowed to play.) Hunter also knows many of Michael's friends and is excited anytime he sees them (or anyone he knows, for that matter) on the paths or anywhere else on campus. Being social, and being known, is very important to Hunter.

For this reason, it does not surprise me that Hunter's interest in writing increased when the genre shifted to letter writing. He still struggled (there is no doubt about that) but he was much more eager to try when he knew that this was an opportunity to communicate with someone else in the school. The one thing that he was concerned with (and this was something that many of my students were concerned with initially) was that the people he was writing to would not be able to read his writing because he uses inventive spelling and does not know how to correctly spell all his words. (When I interviewed Hunter about letter writing, he informed me that the hardest part of the letter writing unit was getting over his fear that people would not be able to read his thoughts and that they would look at his writing and make fun of him and think of him as a little kid.) We had many conversations (both whole group and individual) about not worrying about spelling words the right way. I emphasized that they should concentrate on thoroughly sounding out all the sounds in the words they wanted to write. I also explained that there weren't any students at school that were perfect spellers so

they shouldn't worry about their spelling being perfect. Some students believed me, but Hunter was reluctant to accept this.

After completing each and every letter he wrote, Hunter approached me wanting to know if all the words were spelled correctly. I praised him on his attempts, and often did tell him the correct spelling, mainly because I knew how important it was to him, and I was excited to see him become more invested in the process of writing. I would do whatever it took to keep him interested...

After Hunter wrote his first letter, he quickly turned to his connections outside of the classroom. He first wrote to Michael. Michael generally thought Hunter was a pest and didn't write back. Hunter then took a more indirect route to connect with his brother and wrote to every teacher that Michael had at Taylor Academy, introducing himself and explaining that he was excited to have them as well in the future. Each of Michael's prior teachers wrote back to Hunter, which thrilled him to no end. Then, Hunter started writing to Michael's friends in the 4th grade, and much to Michael's dismay, they all wrote back to him.

Social interaction was very important to Hunter. He was extremely interested in telling others about himself, which ironically was a main goal for writing personal narratives. Interestingly, with regards to the tier structure, Hunter encountered greater success in the letter writing unit than he did in personal narrative unit, mainly because he could choose his audience. Hunter's desired audience was outside of the classroom community. He was very deliberate about whom he wrote to and he used letter writing to boost his social standing with those that knew his brother well. These samples show how Hunter wrote letters to connect with Michael's circle of friends and teachers at school:

Dear Ms White,
MY favrit game is Superdodge Ball and my gHoSt
What is your favrit game
how longing have you been in Taylor Academy

write back
love
Hunter
p.s do you like having Michael in class

(Dear Ms White,
My favorite game is Super Dodge and Ghost.
What is your favorite game?
How long have you been at Taylor Academy?
Write back.
Love,
Hunter
P.S. Do you like having Michael in class?)

Der John
I want to gang up on mr mcphail in soprddog.
I like playing wif you
want is your fafrit book
p.s. plese write back
sinsers
HUNTER
Want is your favroite frand!!!!!!!!!!

(Dear John,
I want to gang up on Mr McPhail in Super Dodge. I like playing with you.
What is your favorite book?
P.S. Please write back.
Sincerely,
Hunter
Who is your favorite friend?)

DeAr brew
now is 4th grade?
MY favrit game is soprddog and gast. We play soprddog a lot in fist
grade. Wat is your favorite food? What is your favorite sport?
p.s. please write back
sincerely
Hunter

(Dear Drew,
How is 4th grade?
My favorite game is Super Dodge and Ghost. We play Super Dodge a lot
in first grade. What is your favorite food? What is your favorite sport?
P.S. Please write back.

Sincerely,
Hunter)

Drew responded to Hunter's letter, which thrilled Hunter to no end. Below is his response:

December 1,
Dear Hunter,
My favorite game is Old School Ghost and you'll find out how to play new school ghost in 3rd grade. My favorite food is pizza. My favorite sport is basketball and fourth grade is fine, how is first grade?
Sincerely,
Drew

As these samples show, the letter writing unit was a way for Hunter to validate his connections within the school community. Hunter clearly connected to others through sports, particularly Super Dodge. He wrote about this passion in virtually every letter he wrote. It was also clear that social connections were extremely important to him. Trying to stay close to his brother, Hunter wrote to everyone that he knew that was a part of Michael's life. He also wrote "Who is your favorite friend?" in his letter to John, hoping that it was he. Cleverly, John didn't answer the question.

Importantly, Hunter produced a great deal more writing during this unit than during the personal narrative unit. Not only did he produce more and was more excited about writing, but his writing scores also improved according to *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*. His spelling and letter formation were still shaky with many letter reversals, which contributed to a score of "2" for conventions. But his voice and sense of humor came shining through, particularly in his letter to John. Compared to his writing in the personal narrative unit, Hunter's writing in the letter writing unit was more organized and he took more risks with his word choice. Hunter was more invested in the

writing process when writing letters because, even though the letters were still personal in nature, he was interacting with someone else and he could choose whom he was writing to and what he wanted to say. He had control over those aspects. He enjoyed the private nature of his letters and even used this mode of communication to develop a strategy—ganging up on Mr. McPhail—for recess play. Hunter was quick to realize that there was a purpose to writing letters: to connect socially to school community members that were important to him.

Nolan

During the personal narrative unit, Nolan was in the low tier. He wrote seven stories which reflected his immaturity and his apparent inability to consider the viewpoints or experiences of other people. All of his stories focused entirely on himself and did not take into consideration the perspectives of other people. I was very curious to see how Nolan would fare in the letter genre because it involved interacting socially and corresponding with another person.

As I observed Nolan during the letter writing unit, I paid close attention to whom he chose to write letters. He didn't seem to crave social interaction with any of his classmates, except with John. I was curious to see how he would experience writing in a genre that was more social and interactive, by design. I wondered if he would find it challenging to write his thoughts down with the purpose of sharing them with others. I also wondered what questions he would ask, given the fact that I didn't think he considered other people's perspectives very often.

The following samples of Nolan's letters confirmed my theory that Nolan did not have much use for other children in class. He wasn't interested in strengthening friendships or forming new ones through letter writing. Nolan did not write to any children once he was able to control his audience. Instead he wrote to adults that he knew well and with whom he felt safe and comfortable.

Dear Ms Sullivan
How many kids do you have in your clas? We have 23.
Do you now that I trnd 7. May brthday is october 29.
Wot is yor brthday
may birthday wos griet
how was yor thagcs giving?
maen wos griet is it fon to have difrert children its fon
here raet bac Nolan

(Dear Ms Sullivan,
How many kids do you have in your class? We have 23.
Do you know that I turned 7? My birthday is October 29.
What is your birthday?
My birthday was great.
How was your Thanksgiving?
Mine was great.
Is it fun to have different children?
It's fun here.
Write back.
Nolan.)

Dear mr mcPhail my faivit anamol is a dog
Haw old ar you? Mr McPhail aem 7
You ar cool
My hol naem is Nolan Jeffrey Peterson, I like sooprdoj
ar you moving soon? I hope yur new haws is god
from Nolan

(Dear Mr McPhail,
My favorite animal is a dog.
How old are you?
Mr. McPhail, I'm 7.
You are cool.
My whole name is Nolan Jeffrey Peterson.

I like Super Dodge.
Are you moving soon?
I hope your new house is good.
From,
Nolan.

Dear ms Tucker you Are my fivrit tethr and ms Smith and mr McPhail or
my faivrt tethrs too I hope you com to my nacst birthday aim gona be 8
do yo like my cloge ps
rait bac fram Nolan

(Dear Ms Tucker,
You are my favorite teacher, and Ms Smith and Mr McPhail are my
favorite teachers too. I hope you come to my next birthday. I'm going to
be 8. Do you like my collage?
P.S. Write back.
From, Nolan.)

Nolan's letters reflected that he was socially young. They focused on childish themes such as his birthday, how old he was, what his name was and the concept of "favorite." While he didn't branch out socially during this unit as Hunter did when he wrote to older children he wanted to get to know better, writing letters allowed Nolan the chance to say nice things to someone else in a private manner. He would never have asked Ms Sullivan (his Kindergarten teacher) in person if she liked having different children in class each year. Similarly he would never have asked Ms Tucker in person to come to his birthday party. It would have overwhelmed Nolan to express these sentiments face to face but he felt comfortable doing so in the form of a letter. He was able to diffuse the personal, awkward and overwhelming feelings he felt when engaged in social interaction and was still able to say nice comments to someone else. This was evident in his letter to me when he said "You are cool" and in his letter to Ms Tucker when he wrote "you Are my fivrit tithr." He never expressed these sentiments verbally, but felt comfortable stating

them in private letters to us. Because he was writing to someone else, Nolan was forced actually to consider another person's perspective. Writing letters was a form of social activity, which helped to foster Nolan's social skills and development. Instead of always thinking of himself, Nolan began to truly think of others, as is evidenced in his letter to Ms Sullivan, his much-loved Kindergarten teacher. He asked thought-provoking questions that did not involve his own life, such as "Is it fun to have different children?" and "How was your Thanksgiving?" He also took the opportunity to tell her that he was doing fine in first grade when he wrote "It's fun here."

It surprised me that Nolan actually came to enjoy the social aspect of letter writing.

The following is an excerpt of an interview I conducted with Nolan during this unit:

Nolan: Yeah, and I liked that I got to ask good questions...like I did in Ms Sullivan's [letter].

GM: Why do you think you liked asking questions in a letter?

Nolan: Because, well, in a letter...you can just ask anything! And you don't have to worry about anything because you're not there when they read it.

GM: Have you enjoyed asking questions?

Nolan: Oh yeah. It's one of my favorite parts.

GM: And why do you enjoy that?

Nolan: Because asking questions, definitely you're going to get the answers. And its exciting when people answer your questions...(whispering) so you get to learn more about somebody.

GM: When you walk in to the classroom, either after a delivery or the next morning, and you see a letter in your mail slot, how does that make you feel?

Nolan: Great.

GM: Why great?

Nolan: Because we've done this really nice thing, making letters. So people can know things and you don't even have to say it!

GM: And why do you think it's a nice thing to write letters?

Nolan: Because it's like...it feels like you're a grown up, a little.

GM: It feels like you're a grown up, a little?

Nolan: Uh huh.

GM: Why do you think it feels that way?

Nolan: Because like, like, you get to actually mail stuff.

GM: Just like we do in the real world, right?

Nolan: Right.

While he did not write to his peers and instead chose a safe route by writing to teachers whom he knew well, Nolan was pushed socially during this unit. He actually enjoyed taking risks by leaving the security of his own perspective and entering the vulnerable realm of social interaction.

Although Nolan's letters showed that his spelling was still inventive and inconsistent, he not only grew socially during this genre, but he also grew as a writer. His voice was stronger, his letters were more organized, and he wrote in more complete sentences. I felt that Nolan's letters reflected more of his personality than his personal narratives did. Nolan's personal narratives were relatively flat and impersonal. They merely recounted a memory in a very basic manner. By comparison, although his letters reflected his social immaturity, they also displayed that Nolan was a deep thinker and a kind boy. His sensitive and thoughtful nature was felt when reading his letters. This was not obvious by reading his personal narratives. Compared to his peers, Nolan was in the low tier for personal narrative and the middle tier for the letter writing unit. Hunter's experience was exactly same. Shifting the genre from personal narrative to letter writing allowed these two boys to climb out of the bottom tier. When asked which genre they preferred, both boys stated that they preferred writing letters.

John

During the personal narrative unit, John was in a race to complete the highest number of stories in the class. He was more concerned with quantity than quality. He loved

writing but preferred to write alone without teacher assistance. He needed personal space and independence in order to write freely. Socially, John was somewhat silly, even mischievous at times. His personal narratives, however, were relatively flat and did not focus on his emotions.

After a few weeks of the letter writing unit, John entered the classroom one morning, asking if he had time to write a letter to someone before school started. When I told him that he did, he asked if it was OK if he wrote a letter to someone who did not go to Taylor Academy. I said that this was OK, but that he would not be able to use our classroom postal service to deliver it. He said that he would take care of the delivery. He then sat down next to me and wrote the following letter:

Dear Mommy,
i want you to GeT a poupkim to carve today. Plese! We also have to GeT Me a costtome. Plees! Remober to Get in the With costum to NiGith. Macke Shore to say sorry to Gina and Jake that Jakes mom DiDe on SUNDAY. Plese! Were are we GOiNG triker treting tonight? How close is iParty? can we rede Lion at scool toIgth? I want to stay in ower nabehood for ticker treting. I want Dan to come ever today
i Love You
John
Hapey holawen MoMMY!

(Dear Mommy,
I want you to get a pumpking to carve today. Please! We also have to get me a costume. Please! Remember to get in the witch's costume tonight. Make sure to say sorry to Gina [John's babysitter] and Jake [Gina's boyfriend] that John's mom died on Sunday. Please! Where are we going trick-or-treating tonight? How close is iParty? Can we read *Lion at School* tonight? I want to stay in our neighborhood for trick-or-treating. I want Dan to come over today.
I love you.
John
Happy Halloween, Mommy!)

When John was done with this letter, he handed it to me to proof-read. He was very comfortable with showing me the content of this letter. In many ways, the content of this letter was typical for a seven year-old boy in that it showed that he was excited for Halloween and was anxious that the holiday was upon us and he still didn't have a costume, a pumpkin, or know the details of trick-or-treating. This letter stood out to me, however, because it also revealed John's tender and sensitive side, a side that not many people at school knew since John had a reputation for being mischievous. He was genuinely concerned about the fact that his babysitter's boyfriend's father died and he wanted to make sure that his mother expressed their condolences. Similar to the way that personal narratives were "windows into the self" and I learned a great deal about who my students were as social beings by observing them write stories from their own lives, this letter was a window into John's personal life and it revealed that there was a lot more to John's personality than just being a sneaky little kid. This letter showed me that John was sincere and compassionate and that he wanted to reach out to Jake in his time of need. Most people had told me that John was competitive and somewhat mean to others. By reading John's letters, I got to know a softer side of him.

On the other hand, John also expressed his mischievous side during the letter writing unit. The following is an excerpt from an interview with John:

GM: So, according to this letter that Hunter wrote to you [a transcript of this letter appears earlier in the chapter] you and Hunter are going to gang up on someone you call Mr McPhail in Super Dodge?

John: (squirming) No...(Mr McPhail laughing) well, he's gonna...but he's not going to have anyone to work with!

GM: Interesting...

John: (switching strategies) I'll be on your side and then we can gang up on Hunter.

(after a long pause)

John: And if anyone asks if I want to gang up on Mr McPhail, i'll say "no thanks"

In the Writer's Workshop session immediately following this interview, John wrote the following letter to Hunter:

Dear HUNTER

MY favrit animal is A FoX

Wat is yor favrit thing tO DO?

I defunatle wunt to gang up on Mr McPhail in Superdog. It will be so fun!!! He is going don! Let's talk stratuje at snak.

Luv,

John

(Dear Hunter,

My favorite animal is a fox.

What is your favorite thing to do?

I definitely want to gang up on Mr. McPhail in Super Dodge. It will be so fun!!! He is going down! Let's talk strategy at snack.

Love,

John)

I regarded this level of mischievousness as harmless and even entertaining. Writing letters allowed this mischievous side of John's personality to enter the classroom and connect to the writing curriculum. John wanted to gang up on me with Hunter, denied it and even attempted to form an alliance with me during the interview, but then turned around and wrote a letter to Hunter confirming his intention. By writing letters to each other, Hunter and John were able to express their fun-loving sides, devise a plan to gang up against me, and write about topics that were directly related to their interests. As a result, they also strengthened their friendship and sense of camaraderie.

While Hunter wrote letters to broaden his social world, John mainly wrote letters with a specific purpose (to "talk strategy" or to clarify Halloween details) in order to

strengthen existing relationships and to communicate his immediate needs. Similar to Nolan and Hunter, John stated that he preferred to write letters over personal narratives. His reason was that he found it boring to write about himself “in a story kind of way” but when he wrote letters he could write about things that were important to him at that moment. Personal narratives required writing about moments from the past, but writing about the present was much more interesting and more relevant to John’s life. Writing letters had a more immediate and practical connection to his life than writing personal narratives.

The following excerpt from an interview with John reveals that although he preferred writing letters to personal narratives, the writing curriculum had not yet addressed his true literacy interests:

GM: Have you liked writing letters?

John: It’s been OK, I guess...

GM: (sensing a little hesitancy) What haven’t you liked about writing letters?

John: What haven’t I liked?

GM: Yeah.

John: That you can’t write nonfiction things...

GM: You can’t write nonfiction things? What do you mean?

John: You can’t write things that aren’t true.

GM: Oh, you mean you can’t write fiction things. Fiction means its not true.

John: Yeah, that’s what I meant.

GM: Do you like writing fiction?

John: Yeah. I like it a lot. I love it. A lot.

GM: When we come back after winter break, we’re going to do two kinds of...

John: Comics?

GM: We’re going to do comics...

John (cheering) I can’t wait! I’m going to create my own version of Calvin and Hobbes!

While John was more interested in the interactive nature of writing letters than the self-reflective nature of writing personal narratives, he was most eager to write comic books

and fictitious stories that tapped into his interest in popular culture. So far, although the letter writing unit and personal narrative unit differed in form and function, they both involved writing about the personal in some way. John was excited to learn about writing genres that didn't involve his personal life at all.

According to *The Six Traits for Beginning Writers* rubric scores, John was in the middle tier for personal narrative, but moved to the top tier when writing letters, the genre he preferred. During the personal narrative unit, John's personality and voice were not nearly as present as they were in his letters. For example, John's personal narrative *When I Went to Water Country* was merely a linear retelling of his family trip, complete with the car ride to the water park at the beginning and the park closing at the end. This story did not focus on his excitement about spending the day at Water Country. He wasn't comfortable expressing emotions in his personal narratives, even when the emotions were positive ones such as excitement. When writing letters, however, John was much less vulnerable and in turn expressed much more of his true self when he was writing to one specific person. While writing personal narratives, John needed distance and space to write about his own feelings. While writing the letter to his mom, he sat right next to me and allowed me to read as he was writing. There was also an important purpose to his letter and as a result, he was more careful and deliberate with his word choice. John revealed more of himself in his letters because his writing had a purpose and he already had a relationship with the recipient of his letters, so he felt more comfortable expressing feelings and his true thoughts. In contrast, the content of his

personal narratives were much flatter than his letters. They lacked the depth that his letters contained.

David

David was somewhat of a live wire who enjoyed manipulating situations and testing boundaries in class. David was strong as a writer but he didn't like the unit on personal narratives. He wrote one story entitled *Sadness* about his mother living in Denver, and he started another story but didn't finish it. He used mostly uppercase letters in his writing and he put spaces between his words so the reader could decipher his message. He also thoroughly and accurately sounded out all the sounds in the words he chose to write. He took risks with word choice, and his voice was strong. David was hard to motivate during the personal narrative unit. He almost always required a teacher to sit next to him in order to get work done, and there was endless banter and negotiation about his writing. He needed help to "focus his microscope," which was his term for paying attention. The following excerpt from my teacher journal reveals the contrast in David during the letter writing unit:

Friday, November 11

Well, I can honestly say there has been no need for us to tell David to focus his microscope during our letter writing unit thus far. Before I even gave my first mini-lesson to the whole class on letter writing, David took the initiative and wrote the following letter to Peter during Morning Choice Time:

DERE PETER-
SPY SUPLIS IS SO GRET!
I THINC THAT YOU ARE SO GRET!
WE WILL MEET AT THE BLOK AREA TOOMORO OK?
DOBLO-O AGENTS 005
SINSIRULY
DAVID

(Dear Peter
Spy Supplies is so great!
I think that you are so great!
We will meet at the Block Area tomorrow, OK?
Double O Agents 005
Sincerely,
David)

When he was finished, David came right over to me and asked for an envelope and a stamp. He then put his letter into the class mailbox and was very excited about the impending delivery.

Part of the reason David liked writing letters was that his writing was connected to his immediate thoughts. Writing letters had a direct and immediate impact on his social life. David was eager to write when he viewed it as meaningful, social activity. Similar to John, David preferred to write letters because this form of writing was in the present, unlike writing about personal stories from his past. For David, writing letters was not reflective, it was action-oriented. For example, he was excited about making "Spy Supplies" with Peter and wrote a letter to him to meet in the Block Area to further their play.

David also enjoyed writing letters because he could express his inner thoughts in writing to Peter alone. He liked that there was a very specific audience for the letters. The line "I THINK YOU ARE SO GRET!" really stood out to me. As a social member of our class, David had a very hard time giving compliments to other students. In fact, he often hurt other people's feelings in class and took up more than his share of airtime in the classroom. He enjoyed his reputation as resident "Bad Boy." He was very sarcastic, rolled his eyes often and spoke in a manner that offended others. We consistently worked with him to display more positive and appropriate behavior. One of the first times I saw

David take the initiative to compliment someone was in the form of a private letter.

There was an audience of one in letter writing, and David didn't have to worry about how he appeared to the rest of the class, while he was complimenting his friend. One of the main reasons why David wrote this letter to Peter was to tell him that he liked him as a friend and he wanted to keep playing with him. Letter writing provided a safe, private forum for him to be able to do that.

David was incredibly social and loved the interactive nature of writing letters. Like Hunter, David seized the opportunity to write letters to many he knew outside of class. David was very excited about the prospect of being able to write letters to anyone in our school community and he often speculated about who he would write to next, including the Director of the School, his prior teachers, Louis, a good friend in the other first grade class, and his 8th grade Partner. An example of a new relationship that was formed as a result of this project was David's relationship with Ms Somers, the Assistant Head of Admissions. Ms Somers had emailed me, explaining that she loved the idea of our post office project, wanted to become involved, and asked if she could write to a student in my class. Capitalizing on David's curious nature, I emailed her back, telling her to write to David. David loved getting her letter but he had no idea who she was. So, during one delivery, he set out to find her office. He was gone quite a long time. When he finally returned, 30 minutes later, he said that he had a nice long chat with Ms Somers and that he learned a lot about what she does at the school. ("Did you even know, Mr McPhail, that people have to apply to come here? And that Ms Somers is one of the people who help to figure out if Taylor Academy is going to be a good school for kids to come to?")

David was so taken with Ms Somers and learning more about her job that he proceeded to write three more letters to her, including giving her a holiday card and a piece of artwork. The letter writing unit provided an opportunity for David to learn more about his school community and how the Admissions Office functions.

David stated that he much preferred to write letters rather than personal narratives, mainly because he liked being in control of the audience for his letters. He also liked being social and letting others get to know more about himself through his private correspondences. It was very important to David that his peers consider him to be smart and popular. The following excerpt from an interview with David demonstrates how writing letters helped him promote the two factors of his image and reputation:

GM: Um, what does it feel like when you walk in the morning or after the mail has been delivered and you realize that you have mail in your mail slot?

David: Well, I kind of feel like "Oh my gosh, I can't wait to open it" and I just come running over and I come whooshing over and open up the letter.

GM: It makes you feel good...

David: Yeah. It makes me feel good. And is also sometimes makes me feel "Oh my gosh, embarrassed, because I'm like...who is writing to me? And scared because I'm like what did they say?"

GM: (laughing) Does it make you feel curious to learn about what they said?

David: Yes

GM: Excellent. Um, what have you liked about writing letters so far?

David: Um, well...I liked...um, well, you know...um...a lot of things like...I liked it because...well, I liked it when I received letters back...and I liked writing them and I kind of like to like, well...you know...show off, kind of.

GM: Uh huh. And how does letter writing help you be able to show off?

David: Because I can show off how well I can know how to write words...

GM: Uh huh.

David: And how, even if I want to, that I don't give up.

GM: Cool. And what, um, who do you show off to?

David: Well, sometimes the person that I'm writing to...

GM: Did you show off to your 8th grade Partner?

David: No.

GM: No.

David: Well, maybe a little. And sometimes, well, to other people at my table...

GM: So you can show off to the people that are also writing at your table?
David: Yeah, the people at my table. Or the person that I'm writing to. Or both.
Usually, it's both.
GM: Do you like to show off?
David (long pause) Yeah. (another pause) I know it's not like the best thing in the world...but still, I kind of like it.
GM: Why do you think you like it?
David: It's kind of like I want people to think "Wow, he's good. You know?"

David came in every morning and went directly to his mail slot to see if anyone had written to him. When he received a letter, he proudly let everyone know about it, especially if the letter came from someone outside of the classroom. It was important to David that everyone knew that he had a lot of friends in the greater Taylor Academy community. He also tried to keep tabs on how many letters other people were receiving, in the hopes that he was receiving the most.

As a writer, David remained strong during the letter writing unit. Shifting genres did not displace David. He remained in the top tier for both units. Although he continued to use mostly capital letters in his writing, his word choice and voice received high marks in both genres. According to his *Six Traits for Beginning Writers* rubric scores, the level of David's writing was very similar during letter writing and personal narrative. The two main differences were that David produced more writing during the letter writing unit and he was much more motivated and excited to write letters. Stuart, the only other boy who was in the top tier for both genres, had a different experience from David's during the letter writing unit. Although he remained in the top tier with David, Stuart was nervous about the social interaction that was involved with writing letters. For this reason, he preferred personal narratives to letter writing.

Stuart

During the personal narrative unit, Stuart loved writing about his personal experiences because he was able to revisit his memories like catching a big fish or having a run-in with the neighbor's cat. He was a shy but passionate boy who was comfortable expressing his emotions in writing. During the letter writing unit, he continued to be a strong writer. He was comfortable writing about his passions and freely expressed his emotions in his letters, as evidenced by the following sample of his letters:

Dear Lisa, wut is your favorite spourt
Wut is your Favite anomol
MY Nabrse had tow bunees
DOO You now haw to kaWnT to 100
Love, Stuart

(Dear Lisa,
What is your favorite sport?
What is your favorite animal?
My neighbors had two bunnies.
Do you know how to count to 100?
Love, Stuart)

dear Joe
You aor kyoot
hav a nUYs daY
love, your biG brutr
Stuart

(Dear Joe,
You are cute.
Have a nice day.
Love, your big brother,
Stuart

dear James MY ould cat cut ded mise
Wut is your lucee number
Love Stuart

(Dear James,
My old cat caught dead mice.
What is your lucky number?
Love, Stuart.)

dear MOM wen will you bring in the crafish
ILoVeYou
Love, Stuart

(Dear Mom,
When will you bring in the crayfish?
I love you.
Love, Stuart.)

Dear Karla I LOVE being your Partner
I hav a cat it brings In smoll anomlse luyc muys
Love, Stuart.

(Dear Karla,
I love being your Partner.
I have a cat. It brings in small animals like mice.
Love, Stuart.)

These letters reflected that Stuart was still able to write about his own interests, particularly animals and nature, even though he was no longer writing personal narratives. In almost every letter, Stuart included specific knowledge he had about animals (such as “I have a cat. It brings in small animals like mice” and “When will you bring in the crayfish?”) The only difference was that in letter writing, Stuart directed his thoughts towards and shared his passions with a specific, private audience instead of the more broad audience of the personal narratives. While Stuart’s writing interests tended to be more aligned with females literacy interests, it was important to note that he wrote a large number of letters during the letter writing unit. In sum, he produced 8 letters, the second largest amount for any boy in the class. This was second only to John, who

viewed writing as a race. Shifting the genre from personal narrative to letter writing did not impact Stuart's rubric scores. He did well and landed in the top tier for both genres. When considering his writing proficiency, it did not seem to matter that the content shifted.

Similar to David, Stuart freely expressed positive emotions in his letters, as was evidenced by his letters to his mother ("I love you") to his younger brother ("You are cute") and to his 8th grade Partner ("I love being your Partner.") Stuart also suggested that the whole class write birthday cards to Ms Martin, the gym teacher. In contrast to David however, Stuart was also comfortable verbalizing sentiments he was putting in writing. While David complimented Peter only in writing and not out loud, Stuart often told his brother that he was cute and expressed his love to his mother freely and openly in front of others.

Stuart was the only one of the 6 boys I focused on who preferred to write personal narratives over writing letters. And although he was in the top tier for both genres, his scores were slightly higher when writing personal narratives, according to *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*. As previously described, Stuart was shy. Although he was passionate and intense, he did not often express these sides of himself to the whole class. In fact, it was a great risk for him to suggest that the class make birthday cards for Ms Martin. Stuart was somewhat of an introvert and he thought deeply about the fact that his letters were written to someone specific. He also thought deeply about what message he wanted to send. Although his messages usually contained sweet sentiments, Stuart's writing was more personal during the personal narrative unit. He felt

pressure during the letter writing unit and sometimes struggled initially about choosing an audience for his letters during this unit. During an interview, he revealed that it sometimes made him nervous because he knew his audience would be writing back to him. Letter writing exposed Stuart socially to another individual in the school community. Even though this person was self-chosen, Stuart felt vulnerable when he wrote letters and he mainly wrote to people in our school community that he knew very well: his mother (who was also a teacher at Taylor Academy) his younger brother, his 8th grade Partner, etc. Unlike most boys, Stuart did not seize the opportunity to branch out socially and connect with others through writing letters.

Stuart's voice was stronger when he was writing personal narratives and was not interacting with anyone through writing. Social interaction often overwhelmed Stuart. He had a quiet, creative presence in the classroom. He was an intensely passionate child but he was also quite shy. He could readily process his emotions but was somewhat intimidated by the social complexities involved with sharing his feelings with his peers. In direct contrast to David's experience, Stuart did not like that there was a socially-interactive component to the letter writing unit or that writing letters was in the present tense and could have an impact on his social life. Although he remained in the top tier, Stuart preferred to write about his own memories rather than interacting with another person through writing. His voice was more authentic during personal narratives where the flow of information was unilateral.

Mark

Similar to Hunter, Mark produced very little during the personal narrative unit. He wrote one story, which he actually invented rather than retelling a personal memory, even though he denied it. He also produced very little during the letter writing unit. When the curriculum shifted genres, Mark slipped from the middle tier to the bottom tier. He wrote the first required letter to a student, but it lacked creativity and was almost an exact replica of the letter I had modeled for the class during the first mini-lesson. After this letter, he wrote a letter to his dad, who was also a teacher at Taylor Academy. Despite constant reminders to get more work done, Mark accomplished very little. He wrote two letters during the two-month letter writing unit. The following excerpt from an interview with Mark shows that he was not interested in writing letters:

GM: OK. So, who have you written to, so far?

Mark: Um, in letters? Um, let me think...Linda. Who else? My dad. Who else? (long pause...then quietly) Nobody else.

GM: OK. That's it? OK. And why did you choose to write to Linda?

Mark: Actually, I picked her name out of the hat at the beginning of the unit so...so I had to write to her. You made us write to that person, even though I didn't want to.

GM: OK. And why did you choose to write to your dad?

Mark: Um, because I just felt that I couldn't think of anyone else to write to...so I just did.

GM: So you chose your dad...is he someone that you know really well at this school?

Mark: Yeah.

GM: So you chose him. What did you say in your letter to your dad?

Mark: Um...“I like being your son. Do you like being my dad?” Um, what else did I say? “I like pizza. Do you? From Mark”

GM: Nice. Did he write back?

Mark: Yes.

GM: What did he say?

Mark: He said “Yes, Mark, I do like being your dad. I do like pizza too. From dad.

GM: Nice. And what did you write in your letter to Linda?

Mark: Um...I forget.
GM: You forget? OK.
Mark: Oohhh.
GM: OK. What have you liked about letter writing?
Mark: Um...I've sort of liked getting it done because I just felt like "Finally, I got one done...and I can start another one...and hopefully soon, I'll be done with that..." That's really just why.
GM: So you liked it when you were able to just get it done. The writing
Mark: Yeah.
GM: That's a good answer. What haven't you liked about letter writing?
Mark: I sort of haven't liked that like, it's really hard and you have to think of someone to write to. That I have to say things to people when I don't feel like it.
GM: What part about it, for you, has been hard?
Mark: Sounding out the words. That was one of the things I'm working on...and I think I'm doing pretty good at it though.
GM: I agree. I think you have been doing really well at that.
GM: Which one do you prefer, letter writing or personal narrative?
Mark: Um...out of the two of them...I like letter writing the best.
GM: More than story writing?
Mark: Yes.
GM: Why do you say that?
Mark: Well. it's sort of hard for me to write stories about my life since I've done so many things...and it's sort of hard to think back and think about what happened in your life and to decide what stories you want to share about your life. That's hard.
GM: Uh huh. And...what have you learned about letter writing?
Mark: That...it's sort of fun...I guess...but it's also hard.
GM: What's fun about it?
Mark: Just getting it done!

As a writer, Mark's pace was extremely slow and he was not interested in the writing units we had covered so far, but his skills were age appropriate. He could sound out words and form letters correctly. He just did not seem to like expressing himself using writing. In his letters, he used the same few words over again, and his sentence structure was very basic. For example, in the letter to his dad, his sentences began "I like..." and "Do you like..."

Mark struggled with deciding what and to whom he wrote. He was guarded socially and did not use letter writing to broaden his social realm or to share details of his life with others. He was most excited when his letters were done because he did not have to share any more of his life with others. For these reasons, Mark's letters received a score of "2" for every single trait: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency and conventions. Also, mainly because Mark produced so little during the letter writing unit, he slipped from the middle tier to the bottom tier.

During the personal narrative unit and the letter writing unit, Mark participated in Writer's Workshop because he had to, but he spent most of his time talking with friends at his work table. Mark was not being rebellious or disobedient, although he did have a stubborn side. He simply was not interested in the subject matter of our Writer's Workshop curriculum so far.

At the end of the letter writing unit, Mark still remained a mystery to me. Part of me thought that he was just waiting for the writing curriculum to focus on units of interest, particularly fiction and comics. But part of me thought that his stubborn side would always get in the way, that his need to be in control would prevail and that he wouldn't get much done during these units either because I was the teacher, telling him that he needed to write in a certain genre. By observing Mark since the beginning of the year, I learned that presenting learning opportunities as choices was very important to him. He often produced very little during academic times that featured lessons with direct instruction in which the teacher was telling the students exactly what to do. He did not like these lessons because he felt that he was being bossed around and he did not like to

have to follow someone else's directions. His way of rebelling against authority was to passively do the minimum, or nothing at all. Interestingly, I learned much more about Mark as a learner when I presented a variety of choices within any given learning opportunity.

Mark had expressed a continued interest in writing fiction and regularly chose to do so during Choice Writing Time. One afternoon a week, during a work time called Checklist Choices, children could choose Choice Writing Time to work on writing projects that were not connected to the writing curriculum. During Checklist Choices, the students also chose from a variety of academic areas such as reading or math. I found it interesting that although it was incredibly difficult to motivate Mark to write personal narratives or letters, he regularly chose Choice Writing Time during Checklist Choices because he was in control of the subject matter of his writing.

When I interviewed Mark about what he chose to write about during Choice Writing Time, he came alive, describing a story about aliens attacking, a story he wanted to turn into a movie—and star in and direct—when he was older. During the first part of this interview, we discussed letter writing. He was bored and gave short non-descript answers. But when the topic of conversation shifted to what he was doing during Choice Writing Time, Mark's eyes lit up. He talked for more than 15 minutes about his story, his ideas, and how much he enjoyed using his imagination to create this fictitious story about aliens. The following is a lengthy excerpt from this interview with Mark. It shows how excited he was to write about fiction compared to writing in a genre that involved sharing something personal about his life or interacting socially with others:

GM: Excellent. And you know how during Checklist Choices, you usually choose Choice Writing Time?

Mark: Yeah!

GM: What do you choose to write about during Choice Writing Time?

Mark: Um, I think...stories. And I've got it in here. Some of it...now. Um, here it is...I can't find the other page! Here's the other page.

GM: Have you written the same story during Choice Writing Time? Are you working on the same story?

Mark: Yeah.

GM: Tell me about that story.

Mark: Um, it's about this planet called Gaul. And the Gaulumists live on it...and the Gaulumists somehow have gotten attacked by the Earth once. So now there's a Civil War going on between the Gaulumists and Earth.

GM: Cool. Do you want to read it to me?

Mark: OK! (This is the most excited I have seen Mark about writing) "This is the planet Gaul. Only Gaulumists live on it. This is the planet Earth. The Gaulumists are attacking it.

GM: I like how detailed your illustrations are.

Mark: This is the good planet.

GM: And tell me about this picture.

Mark: Well, this is the good planet Gaul. And only good Gaulumists live on it. But there was one tiny bad Gaulumists, some bad Gaulumists were living in here...and I was falling...this white is lava...so I was falling off that...and that's rock...and I was falling off this rock here. And one of the bad Gaulumists came out of the water and he saw me...and the Gaulumsists have these litter blade things...and he was about to throw it at me...and then I said "I'm innocent...I'm about to fall in the lava...I'm a human and I can't survive in the lava...so he saved me...and that's how the Gaulumists turned good.

[Mark then proceeded to talk for over 15 minutes about this alien story idea that he wanted to make into a movie. The transcript for this segment of the interview was over 3 pages long. He became increasingly more excited as he told me about this intergalactic tale that he was developing in his head. In the course of this interview, he stated that he much preferred Choice Writing Time to personal narratives and letter writing.]

Mark: And the good Gaulumist's planet is called the Good planet. Because it's all good basically.

GM: I have never seen you so excited about writing a story before.

Mark: I know.

GM: Have you ever been so excited about writing before?

Mark: I have at my house.

GM: You have at your house...but not at school.

Mark: Well, I was thinking of this story at my house, and I made the characters up at my house....but most of the time I can't work on it at school because we have to write about letters or personal narratives mostly. But besides Choice Writing Time, I work on this story at my house.

GM: Are you happy that you are able to have Choice Writing Time where you can work on it?

Mark: Yes.

GM: Alright...well, do you have anything more you want to talk about?

Mark: No.

GM: Thank you very much, Mark. This has been an awesome interview.

I tried many times to end this interview, but Mark kept talking about his story idea about the Gaulumists. This was the most animated I had ever seen him and I had certainly never seen him be so interested in writing. I was particularly intrigued by the segment where he said that he worked on this story idea at home. He was working on a whole writing project, and growing as a writer independently at home. However, during Writer's Workshop so far, Mark sat idle in class.

Many researchers on boys and writing (Pollack, 1998; Dyson, 1997; Newkirk, 2002) theorize that the manner in which literacy is taught, especially writing in the primary grades, is too narrow and is not captivating and appealing to boys. They state that many genres and styles that boys gravitate towards (comic books, adventure stories, silly fictitious stories, sports pages, etc) are considered to be of low-status and are not welcome in many classrooms during writing time because they are either "inappropriate" for school or deemed not worthy of instructional time. Mark was an example of one of these boys who had not yet engaged in the writing curriculum but I would have been wrong to think that he was not interested in writing. He simply was not interested in the genres in the writing curriculum thus far and was not yet able to connect writing in school

to his own interests. Mark's literacy interests remained unconnected to the curriculum and he practiced writing mainly at home, outside of the curriculum and the classroom. For this reason, Dyson (1997) argues for a permeable writing curriculum so these students can bring their own interests into the classroom and grow as writers because they are motivated by the subject matter, partly because it is of their own choosing.

Graham (2001) noted that boys encountered the greatest success in writing when they were able to write about things that mattered to them and write as experts. Similarly, by interviewing and observing two boys during a Writing Workshop classroom, Abbott (2000) showed that when boys were able to control important aspects of writing, such as ownership, genre, style and length, they produced more high quality writing pieces. Harris (1998) also explained that offering boys greater choice over what they learn may help address their underachievement. Mark was one of these boys who sought control of many aspects of the writing process such as audience and topic. He liked Choice Writing Time because he could control the subject matter and write about his own interests. I am thankful, and I know that Mark was as well, that he could choose Choice Writing Time during Checklist Choices because then he could be in complete control of his writing and he did not have to take directions from anyone. Without this time built into our schedule, Mark would not have been interested in any writing that took place within the classroom thus far.

In addition to controlling the audience, Mark taught me that it was important for him to have control of the subject matter, and not always having to follow the teacher's directions. He struggled with the personal aspect of both writing letters and personal

narratives. Mark, in particular, abided by the boy code and was not comfortable sharing aspects of himself with others, whether through personal narratives or letters. The size of the audience did not matter to him. He did not like the subject matter being so personal. However, he wrote freely during Checklist Choices because he was able to control the subject matter and write fiction. For Mark's sake, I was thankful that fiction writing was an upcoming genre in the writing curriculum.

Lessons Learned from the Letter Writing Unit

In this concluding section, I discuss four main lessons I learned by observing the children in my class as they wrote letters for two months: Many boys were "socially different" when writing letters in that they chose to show different sides to themselves in their letters than they did in their personal narratives or in class. Also, these boys found it more socially meaningful to write in the present tense. The boys' letters could be viewed as windows into the self because they were genuinely more expressive and open in their private letters than they were in their personal narratives. Finally, shifting genres shifted who was motivated and which boys were in the top and bottom tiers during Writer's Workshops.

The first lesson learned during the letter writing unit was that many boys were socially different in their letters than they were in real life. Millard (1997) suggests that boys and girls are "differently literate" because she found strong relationships between pupils' literacy activities, their leisure activities, and their gender. Similarly, I suggest that during the letter writing unit, many of the boys in my class were not only "differently literate" but also "differently social" from the way they had been previously in their

writing and in class because they more readily revealed their genuine selves in their letters. Many boys were not as socially and emotionally guarded as they were when writing personal narratives or during normal classroom social activity. Writing letters provided another form of social interaction for these boys to express themselves and they were more open and honest with this form of communication. They revealed sincere, complex feelings in their letters that they would never have revealed through verbal conversation, even with their close friends. The specificity, privacy, and small size of the audience of their letters helped these boys take risks and develop socially. They were much more comfortable revealing more tender aspects of their personal lives, and not abiding by the boy code when they were in control of the audience of their letters. In effect, because these boys were able to control the audience and did not have to divulge social information about themselves to the world at large, their letters were much more authentic and more accurately personal than their personal narratives were. They did not have to worry about their image or reputation in their letters and so they expressed themselves more fully and freely.

I found it interesting that the boys felt less vulnerable, and were actually more open and personal in their writing when they were in control of their audience. They liked that in the letter writing unit there was a private audience of one. With a chosen, singular audience, many boys didn't have to worry about their social standing with the class as they wrote private letters. This seemed to be of the utmost importance for many boys. For example, David, who was not always nice to others and enjoyed his social status as resident Bad Boy, freely complimented his new friend Peter in his letter about Spy

Supplies when he wrote "I think you are so great!" This was a social breakthrough for David and I am not sure he would have expressed the same sentiment verbally, even in private. He took a risk and complimented a friend but he did not have to worry about how others would perceive this because it was not a public action. Privacy and image were very important to him and letter writing gave David the chance to privately strengthen a friendship while maintaining his rebellious classroom reputation. Similarly, John, who also somewhat enjoyed his Bad Boy reputation, dropped the act and showed me that he was a very sweet boy when he was communicating his thoughts in his letters. These boys liked writing letters because they could privately communicate their true emotions to a specific and self-chosen audience using the written word without risking a change in their overall classroom reputation.

Similar to David and John, Nolan also revealed a socially different side to himself through his letters. He showed me that he was indeed a very sincere, thoughtful young boy. Nolan branched out beyond his own perspective to connect in a thought-provoking manner with his Kindergarten teacher when he asked "Is it fun to have different children?" I found it very interesting that Nolan was much more personal and mature in his letters than he was during his social interactions in real life. He found real comfort in the fact that he could take social risks and learn about others in his letters without having to actually be physically present. Nolan liked knowing that in letter writing there was not going to be an immediate response that he had to absorb and process like there was in social conversation. He could unilaterally convey his feelings and worry how to respond at a later date. Despite his intellect and his curious nature, Nolan was somewhat

intimidated by face-to-face complex social interaction. As a social member of our class, Nolan often seemed overwhelmed by the prospect of trying to understand another person's point of view during conversation. In his letters, however, he was able to diffuse the socially awkward feelings he felt when engaged in social interaction and he could freely compliment others or ask probing questions. Nolan was able to express personal sentiments in his writing that he never would have expressed face-to-face. Letter writing provided him with a safe forum to take social risks and he encountered significant social growth as a result.

It is important to note, however, this phenomenon of boys being socially different when writing private letters did not apply to all boys in my class. For example two of the focal boys were not socially different in their letters than they were in real life. Stuart, who was the only focal boy who felt comfortable expressing affectionate sentiments to others in real-life and in his personal narratives, did not struggle with the personal nature of letter writing. He openly said "I love you" to his mother and told his younger brother that he was cute. Stuart was not socially different in his letters. For Stuart, writing letters was merely another way to express the same sentiments he already felt comfortable vocalizing. He was a very expressive writer and was in the top tier during the letter writing unit. Mark had the exact opposite experience to Stuart, even though he was not socially different in his letters either. As a social member of our class, Mark was emotionally guarded. He was the same way in both his personal narratives and his letters. He was not interested in connecting with others socially through letter writing

and struggled during this unit as a result. Mark fell to the bottom tier in the letter writing unit.

Interestingly, there was a connection between how socially outgoing children were and their writing proficiency in this unit. Overall, the more extroverted students preferred the letter writing unit to writing personal narratives. This was consistent with the experience of the focus children. The more extroverted boys preferred letter writing to personal narratives and were more motivated during the letter writing unit as well. This was an important finding because of the connection between genre and social disposition. Certain students benefited from a curricular focus on a genre that highlighted social interaction. In any given classroom population, there are students that tend to be more extroverted and students that tend to be more introverted. Shifting genres from personal narrative to letter writing shifted who enjoyed writing during Writer's Workshop. It also shifted the tier structure during this unit. It was important to note that this shift in success was not just based on the students' literary interests. It was also based on their social disposition.

The second lesson learned was that most boys found it more socially meaningful and relevant to write in the present tense. They liked writing letters in the present tense because their writing could have an immediate, social impact and a relevant, practical connection to their current everyday lives. Personal narratives required that students look back upon their own lives and retell specific personal memories to the class. In this way, writing during the personal narrative unit was reflective and public. Personal narratives also required students to write in the past. Letter writing, on the other hand, was in the

present tense and could be action-oriented. For this reason, the boys were very interested in writing during this unit. They were more motivated to write letters than they were personal narratives. They preferred to write in the present tense, instead of retelling stories from their past, because the content of their letters could be immediately connected to their current lives. For example, David wrote a letter to Peter to make plans to meet his friend in the Block Area to play together. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) highlight the importance of choice and meaningful social activity for boys' learning in schools. Similar to the reasons why many of the boys liked the active nature of our study of the post office, many boys liked letter writing because it was "real." It was current, and socially meaningful to them. To many boys, the past was the past and they were not interested in revisiting it. What mattered to them was the present...and the future. Writing letters had a different purpose than writing personal narratives and many boys liked that they could use writing in a way that was immediately connected to their own lives. John summed it up nicely during an interview when he said that he thought personal narratives were boring because he had to write about himself "in a story kind of way" but he liked writing letters more because "writing letters mattered because they could be about what was happening in your life right now...or what you wanted to happen in the future."

For the focal boys in this study, there was a practical use to writing letters: to communicate their current thoughts in order to have a specific impact on their present lives. This occurred in a variety of different forms: Hunter and John used letter writing to plan to gang up on me in a game. David asked the Assistant Director of Admissions

questions so he could learn about how the school made decisions to accept a student. Stuart wrote a letter to ask his mother to bring in his crayfish. John wrote a letter to remind his mother to express condolences on behalf of his family. Graham (2000) claims that boys encounter the greatest success in writing when they are able to write about things that mattered to them. The experiences that the majority of the focal boys had during the letter writing unit support this claim. Most boys much preferred writing when it was within a genre that was practical and involved current and meaningful social activity.

The third lesson learned from the letter writing unit was that I genuinely got to know these boys better as social beings by reading their letters than I did by reading their personal narratives. Many boys were very personal and took social risks in their interactions with their peers through their letters. I did not expect that the content of the boys' letters would be more personal during the letter writing unit than it was during the personal narrative unit. This point was important because it countered the common perception that teachers get to know their students personally by having them write personal narratives about their own lives for the whole year. I learned much more about the social lives of many of my male students when they were writing letters because the writing process was active and in the present. While writing letters, they still wrote about themselves, but they did not have to reflect upon their own experiences. This led me to consider the point that all forms of writing can be viewed as autobiographical, regardless of the genre. Furthermore, similar to how I learned to view my students' personal narratives as windows into the self, I quickly realized that I could also view the letters my

students wrote as windows into the self, especially since most of the boys were more personal and expressive in their letters than they were in their personal narratives. Especially given that the boys knew that their letters were private, I learned a great deal about the inner thoughts of these boys as I read their letters. Their letters were depositories of their private thoughts and feelings of the moment. By paying attention to their content, I learned a great deal about these budding writers as social beings. I learned what they valued and what they thought was important. For example, I learned through his letters that John had a much softer side to his personality than he revealed in the classroom. John, who had a reputation as a bad boy, wrote a very sweet and heartfelt letter to his mother. In class, he never mentioned that his babysitter's boyfriend's mother had died but he was quick to ask his mother to express his condolences in the form of a private letter to her. I saw many sides to John in class (funny, mischievous, intelligent, etc) but I never saw this tender side that he expressed in his letters. Letter writing provided access for me to learn more wholly about who John is as a social being.

As a teacher of young children, this finding was important. It was part of our school's mission to raise ethical citizens and nurture each child's social development. For these reasons, we reported on students' social and emotional development several times throughout the year. In order to do this, it helped to know the students in our classes and understand the complexities of their personalities and their social lives. The letter writing unit provided me with great insight into the social lives of many of the students in my class. This finding is further explored in Chapter Nine.

Finally, I was surprised by the differences in rubric scores between the letter writing and personal narrative units. I predicted that most boys would prefer letter writing to personal narratives but I did not expect that including a letter writing unit in the writing curriculum would result in there being more boys than girls in the top tier. Unexpectedly, I learned that the social disposition of the children seemed to have more of a direct connection to their rubric scores than their gender. This led me to consider the complexities of learning to write and how our curriculum helps or hinders our students as they become more adept as writers. The process of learning to write involves not only the intersections of genre and gender but also perhaps social disposition and identity. This theory is further explored in Chapter Nine but it is important to note that I first began to realize that there were more social components involved than just gender when considering how we teach writing to our young children.

The children's experiences with letter writing not only taught me the above mentioned lessons, they also taught me that it was important to shift genres throughout the year. Shifting genres allowed different contingents of the student population (whether it was the girls, the socially-outgoing, etc) to encounter success. Changing genres from personal narrative to letter writing changed who the top writers were in my class. This led me to believe that it was important to shift the curricular focus in order to give the many different writers in my class a chance to succeed.

CHAPTER SEVEN COMIC BOOK/FICTION WRITING

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed description of the comic book and fiction writing units and to chronicle and analyze what happened when I implemented these units with my first graders. In doing so, I explain the academic and social issues that were unique to these genres. By design, I purposely combined these two genres into one chapter. Although some issues were unique to each genre, there were also some similarities between these two genres. By analyzing the two genres in one chapter, I highlight these similarities and discuss their impact on my first grade students.

The chapter is structured in the following way: First, I describe how I introduced the comic book unit, which was implemented in January and February. Second, I describe how I introduced the fiction unit, which was implemented in March and April. Following these descriptions, I discuss how the whole class fared with both these genres and the issues that emerged for the whole class as a result of writing in both these genres. From the whole class perspective, I scored all the comic books and fiction stories they wrote using *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*. I analyzed their writing and their scores to observe how their writing varied by gender. For the discussion on the perspectives of the six focal children, I captured their attitudes towards writing comic books and fiction stories and the issues that arose as they did so. Finally, in the Lessons Learned section, I bring together the three perspectives of the whole class, the six focal children and the teacher researcher, to theorize about the importance of including comic book and fiction units into a primary grade writing curriculum.

Introducing the Comic Book Unit

The following entry from my teacher research journal describes how I launched the comic book unit.

Sunday, January 8

This week I introduced comic strip writing. This was met with mixed emotions from the class. Many (mostly the boys) were excited. Hunter and Mark stated that they have been waiting all year for this. Others (Linda and Nancy) asked if this kind of writing was a choice or if it was a "Have To". I found it fascinating that this was the first time a girl had expressed worry or dissatisfaction about the content of Writer's Workshop.

Regarding my goals for this unit, I wanted to give the students an opportunity to think about and develop their own characters. They are exposed to so much fiction in the books they read, but none of my students had any direct instruction in school thus far on how to write fiction. I asked the pre-K and Kindergarten teachers about the content of their writing curriculum. They revealed that the writing my students had done so far was personal narrative, factual investigative writing, and poetry. They also mentioned that personal narrative comprised the vast majority of their writing curriculum.

So, the comic book unit was the first opportunity that my students were able to make up their own characters, plot, settings, etc. And, it was clear from day one that some were eager and others were anxious. The rules of writing were about to change and the students knew it...

I began my first mini-lesson explaining that the first step was to think about and create a main character for their comic strip. They would use a character page to develop their main character. The character page is a regular Writer's Workshop sheet with seven lines on the bottom and a space at the top for an illustration. Modeling what I wanted them to do, I created the character of Captain Tire on a character page. I drew a picture of him on the top of the page, and then used the 7 lines to come up with 7 different things I knew about this character. I told them that this was important because, before they began writing their story, they needed to know a lot about the character. This knowledge would help them come up with some interesting plot points for the comic strip.

The seven statements I created about Captain Tire are:

1. No one knows that he can fly.
2. He lives in a junk yard on an old car.
3. He lives with his mother, father and sister.
4. He goes on adventures.
5. His secret identity is Tommy Tire
6. His weakness is being punctured.

7. His other special talent is that he can roll really fast.

The students helped me come up with this list of statements about my character. They loved the character and being able to share what they knew about super heroes, especially the parts about having special talents, weaknesses, and a secret identity. I was fascinated by how interested some of the boys (Mark, Hunter, Peter and James) were in thinking about character when it was based in the context of comic strip characters.

After the students finished their character page, the next step was to complete a story web (the same web that they used with their personal narratives.) I reminded them that they needed to complete a story web because it helps to plan out and organize their comic book, so that they begin to think about story sequence, plot, setting etc. It was noticeable that there was not the usual groaning when I mentioned the story web. The children, at least the usual complainers, were fine with being in the planning stage of writing when writing comic books.

The first two full Writer's Workshop sessions of the comic book unit were filled with talking about planning, thinking and creating characters. So, the children sat as a whole class for two sessions before they even had the opportunity to write. I wanted to make sure the students fully understood the whole process of creating comic books before they embarked upon the task of creating one of their own. Compared to the personal narrative unit, the boys' energy level was high. Interestingly, I was unsure of how the girls were feeling. They seemed to be much more quiet and hesitant. They did not ask a lot of questions during the first two sessions. The following entry from my teacher research journal shows that Linda was very anxious about comic book writing and came to view herself as "bad" at writing because she wasn't as interested in the genre. During this unit, she disconnected from the curriculum and questioned if this meant that she was going to struggle in other academic areas. As a result, for the first time, she woke up in the morning and did not want to come to school.

Sunday, January 8

Jill, Linda's mother, came into the classroom during Drop-Off Time. She said that for the first time, Linda didn't want to come to school. She was a little intrigued by this and was wondering if this was normal. I said that it was. Especially in the week right after a two week vacation, many children get used to being at home and it takes time to adjust back to their school's schedules, routines, etc. Pushing a little deeper, I asked if Linda was dragging her feet about anything in particular. Jill said that each conversation started with general worry but they always wound up discussing Writer's Workshop, especially comic book writing. (My heart dropped.) Linda expressed to her mother that she spent one whole Writer's Workshop session just staring at a blank character page. She was worried because she didn't accomplish one thing for the whole period. Linda quickly jumped to the conclusion that this meant that she was now a bad student and she began to worry about what would happen to her during math, reading, science and other academic areas.

I found this fascinating. Thus far, Linda had been a very good writer and had always looked forward to Writer's Workshop. She wrote about a range of emotions during our personal narrative unit, and she loved writing letters to her fellow female friends in class during our letter writing unit. The beginning of the comic book unit, however, had created anxiety and self-doubt about her writing abilities. And, interestingly, this anxiety and self-doubt quickly translated into worry about her performance in other academic areas. With the introduction of this unit, Linda had begun to disconnect from the curriculum and as a result, and for the first time ever, she did not want to come to school. I could not help think that this is what some boys (who either disconnect or, what's worse, never initially connect to the curriculum) experience when they are not interested in personal narratives, which is the genre that reigns supreme in the primary grades. They are not interested, so they disconnect and begin to worry about their abilities as a writer, and as a student in general. Like Hunter during the personal narrative unit, Linda was now thinking of herself as "bad" at writing because she was struggling with the content of the genre.

I explained to Jill that, by design, the writing curriculum covered a lot of ground and exposed the children to multiple genres and purposes for writing. I also told her I would talk to Linda, and the class at large about how they are feeling about this new genre of writing.

When I approached Linda that morning, she told me that she was nervous about creating her character. She found it very difficult to make up her own super hero. I realized that because I had created a comic strip character that had super powers, she thought that she

had to do the same. I asked if this were true and she answered in the affirmative. She said that she struggled because she was not allowed to create a character that was similar to real-life. During Writer's Workshop that same day, I asked the class if anyone felt worried about comic book characters or if anyone found this kind of writing to be difficult. Not one boy raised their hand. For the first time, the following people found writing to be difficult: Linda, Sarah, Barbara, Nancy, Karen and Alice. All girls! More than half of the girls in the class reported that they found it difficult to write comic books. Interestingly, with the exception of Barbara, who was in the bottom tier during personal narratives, all of these girls were in the top tier during personal narratives. When the genre shifted to comic books, these girls found writing to be difficult for the first time all year.

Not wanting any of my students to feel anxious about writing, we talked about their concerns. The girls were not very eager to talk about what they had found challenging so the conversation took a very abstract, hypothetical form. I did a lot of the talking and they nodded and contributed very little in dialogue. I explained that even though I made up Captain Tire, a character that did not exist in reality, students were free to create a character that was more similar to a real-life character. For example, Garfield is a comic book cat that lived with his owner and a dog. Except for the fact that Garfield expressed his thoughts in English, he was very life-like and similar to a cat that real people might have at home. Also, Peanuts was a comic about a boy named Charlie Brown who has friends, a sister named Sally and a dog named Snoopy. Many of the things that Charlie Brown and his pals experienced were similar to real-life experiences. So, although my

students certainly did not have to, I told them that they were free to create comic strip characters that were similar to people or animals in real life. I checked in with all of the girls mentioned above and they all felt a little better about creating characters after our group talk. I also emphasized that creating characters was difficult and that it was alright that they found it hard. Writing is not always easy and they needed to be patient with the writing process. I encouraged them to keep their minds and imaginations open and I promised them that ideas will come. Notably, this was the first times that I had given this message to the girls. Many of the girls in the top tier during the personal narrative unit struggled with writing for the first time during the comic book unit. I was curious to see if this would be consistent with their experience during the fiction unit.

Introducing the Fiction Unit

As a whole, the class was much more excited about the fiction unit than the comic book unit. The boys remained excited about incorporating fictitious elements into their writing. Interestingly, the girls seemed more interested in writing fiction stories than they were in writing comic books. I had not predicted that the tone and energy level of the class would differ so much from comic book writing to fiction writing. The following entry from my teacher research journal explains the criteria for this new genre and how the class responded to the shift from comic book writing to fiction writing.

Saturday, March 11

This week we began our new unit on writing fiction. On Tuesday, we had a whole class discussion on this new genre. The children were very excited. Some were excited that our comic book unit was over, others were excited that they could use similar themes that were utilized in their comic books, such as outer space adventures. I also explained that we would be returning to the storybook format that we used for personal narrative (planning out your story using a story

web, using the same pages and covers, etc). This unit was combining what children knew about writing a story book from the personal narrative unit and being able to make up sections or entire plots of their book from the comic book unit.

We began talking about what the word fiction meant. Everyone already knew that fiction meant that the stories were not true, that they have not happened in real life. Then, I delved a bit further and asked "Is it that fiction stories can't happen in reality or that they have not yet happened?" The class thought about this for a while, mulling over examples of fictitious stories that we knew. We arrived at the conclusion that it could be either. Some fiction stories were possible, while others were not. For example, Harry Potter is fiction, and that story could not happen because (as far as we know) there is no such thing as a wizard and Hogwarts does not really exist. The same could be said for stories like *Horace and Morris but Mostly Delores* because the main characters were animals and animals do not speak and form gendered exclusive social clubs. The children also recognized that it would be very possible for other stories such as *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* to happen and the only reason why this is a work of fiction is because the characters are made-up. After we discussed this, the children were quick to ask which kind of fiction stories we would be creating.

I told them that they were in complete control over which kind of fiction they wrote. They could make up absolutely everything in their stories be made-up including the plot, setting and characters. They could borrow from a work of fiction that they know like *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter*. They could also make up a life-like story (I used the example of when Nancy broke her bracelet) and just alter the story a little to include sections that were fictitious. It was completely up to them.

The only requirement was that they must include themselves as one of the characters. They did not have to be the main character of their fiction stories, but they needed to be included. I had this be a requirement because I thought it would ground some of the students, especially those that encountered success in the personal narrative unit and those that struggled with comic books.

I was curious to see what my students do with this. I predicted that some would create life-like stories based on their own personal lives, like Nancy's bracelet story, and just change a few details, while others would create outlandish adventures and have themselves be included in them in some minor way. The important thing was that the curriculum was broad enough to include both styles and emphasized that all these stories were valued in the classroom.

As soon as I told them they had to be a character in their fiction stories, the usual onslaught of questions followed suit:

- Do I have to have my real name? (Yes)
- Do I have to be a human or can I be an animal or a made-up creature? (You have to be in the form of a human.)
- Do I have to be the actual age that I am or can I be a younger or older version of myself? (You can be any age you want.)
- Do I have to be my actual size or can I be a miniature version of myself, like in *Honey I Shrunk the Kids*? (You can be a miniature version of yourself.)
- Can I be a gigantic version of myself? (Yes)
- You said that I don't have to be a main character. Can I be hiding somewhere in the pictures, like in *Where's Waldo?* books, and not be really involved in the plot? (You do not have to be really involved in the plot. You can just be hiding somewhere in the pictures.)
- Do there have to be words about me or can I just be in the pictures? (There do not have to be words about you. But, the minimum # of pages is the same as personal narrative. Your story needs to be at least 4 pages long and you must fill up all the lines on the pages.)
- Can it be longer than 4 pages? (Yes.)

To be honest, I was not prepared for this list of questions, and I made up the answers to their questions as I went along. I was impressed with their level of interest in how creative they could be with involving themselves in their story. It showed how much they knew about story and plot, and the relationship that illustrations and text have with one another. Their questions showed an interest in being an author and the creative freedom that authors have. I decided that the students should take human form in their stories, and use their real names, because I wanted them to have a personal connection to their stories. I felt that having them be in human form, instead of an alien or silent blob or talking palm tree, would provide more of a strong connection. But after that, I wanted the students to have creative freedom, so they could make themselves a miniature version of themselves or hidden somewhere in the pictures. I was curious to observe what role the

students would play in their fiction stories. They were excited about writing fiction and I was excited to see what they came up with. I was curious to see if there was a connection between what I knew about my students socially and how they chose to cast themselves in their fiction stories.

Whole Class Perspective

At the end of the comic book and fiction units, I used the *Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers* rubric to assess the writing that each one of my students produced from the beginning of January to the end of April. The purpose of this section is to discuss how the whole class fared during the comic book and fiction units. In particular, I look at how the girls fared compared to the boys. In this section, I also discuss certain issues that were unique to these particular genres, such as incorporating violence into writing, the fact that many girls struggled with writing when the subject matter was not personal, and my realization that it took more time for my students to write comic books and fiction, as compared to the personal narrative unit.

The following charts reveal how the students fared during the comic book and fiction units. They also provide a comparison between the rubric scores for these genres and the personal narrative and letter writing scores for each child for each of the six traits. In each box, the numbers represent the scores for the genres as they occurred chronologically. The first number in each box is the score for personal narrative. The second number is the score for letter writing. The third is the score for comic book writing. The fourth number is the score for the fiction unit. The results are as follows:

Boys
Personal Narratives/Letter Writing/Comic Books/Fiction

- 1 = Experimenting
- 2 = Emerging
- 3 = Developing
- 4 = Capable
- 5 = Experienced

Name	Ideas	Organization	Voice	Word Choice	Sentence Fluency	Conventions	Total Scores Comics/Fiction
Peter	2/3/3/3	2/3/2/4	3/4/3/4	2/3/2/3	2/3/2/3	1/2/2/3	14/20
Oscar	2/3/2/2	2/2/2/2	3/4/3/3	2/3/2/2	2/2/2/2	2/3/2/2	13/13
Hunter	2/3/3/4	1/3/2/4	2/3/3/3	1/2/3/3	1/2/2/3	1/2/2/3	15/20
Stuart	3/4/3/3	3/3/3/3	4/3/3/3	3/3/3/3	3/2/2/3	2/2/2/3	16/18
Mark	2/2/2/3	2/2/3/4	1/2/2/4	2/2/3/4	2/2/2/3	2/2/2/3	14/21
Tim	2/2/3/3	2/2/2/2	1/3/2/2	1/2/2/3	1/2/2/3	1/2/2/2	13/15
James	3/2/2/3	2/2/2/3	3/3/2/2	3/3/2/3	2/2/2/2	2/2/2/2	12/15
Luke	2/3/3/4	3/3/3/4	2/3/3/3	2/3/3/3	2/2/3/3	2/2/2/4	17/21
Robert	2/3/3/4	2/2/2/4	2/3/2/3	2/2/3/3	1/2/2/3	2/2/2/5	14/22
David	2/4/3/4	3/3/3/4	3/4/4/5	3/4/3/4	3/3/3/4	2/3/3/4	19/25
Nolan	2/3/4/5	2/3/3/5	2/3/4/4	1/3/3/4	1/2/3/4	1/2/2/4	19/26
John	3/4/4/4	3/3/3/4	2/4/4/4	2/4/3/3	2/3/3/3	2/3/2/4	19/22

Girls

Personal Narratives/Letter Writing/Comic Books/Fiction

Name	Ideas	Organization	Voice	Word Choice	Sentence Fluency	Conventions	Total Scores Comics/Fiction
Nancy	3/2/2/4	3/2/3/4	3/3/2/4	2/3/2/4	2/2/2/4	2/2/2/3	13/23
Liz	2/2/4/3	2/2/3/3	3/3/4/4	2/3/3/3	2/2/3/3	2/2/2/3	19/19
Ayanna	3/3/2/3	3/3/2/4	3/4/3/3	2/4/2/3	2/3/2/3	2/2/2/3	13/19
Erica	2/2/2/2	1/2/2/3	1/2/2/2	1/2/2/2	1/2/2/2	1/2/2/2	12/13
Barbara	2/3/3/3	2/2/3/3	2/3/4/3	1/3/3/4	1/3/2/3	1/2/2/2	17/18
Karen	4/2/3/4	3/2/3/4	3/2/3/3	3/2/2/3	2/2/3/3	2/3/3/3	17/20
Julie	2/3/2/4	2/3/2/4	2/3/2/3	2/3/2/3	2/2/2/3	2/2/2/2	12/19
Sarah	3/4/3/4	3/3/3/4	2/4/3/3	2/3/3/3	2/3/3/3	2/3/2/4	17/21
Lisa	3/3/2/2	2/2/2/3	2/4/2/3	2/2/2/3	1/3/2/2	1/2/2/2	12/15
Linda	3/3/3/4	3/3/3/4	4/4/2/4	3/3/3/4	2/3/3/4	2/2/3/3	17/23
Alice	4/4/4/4	3/3/4/3	4/4/4/3	3/4/2/3	2/3/3/3	2/3/2/3	19/19

Analysis of how the boys and girls did according to each of the six traits

Upon analysis of the rubric scores for the first trait, ideas, the girls tended to have higher scores than the boys during the personal narrative unit. Interestingly, the opposite was true for the comic book unit. The boys tended to have higher scores than the girls for ideas when writing comic books. The boys' and girls' scores for ideas were more similar during the fiction unit. According to the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, the association that developed the *Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*, this trait provides the overall heart for the writing and it captures what the writer has to say. In order to score high on the ideas trait, students need to express their ideas clearly so that every reader can understand and it should provide the reader with interesting insights. Interestingly, when the curriculum shifted genres, there was a shift in the students that achieved high scores with regards to this trait.

The girls scored higher for organization than the boys did during both the personal narrative unit and the comic book unit. This did not surprise me because many of the boys in my class wrote about fast-paced plots at the expense of everything else. Even in the comic book unit, a genre the girls tended to not prefer, their writing was more organized than the boys' writing. Surprisingly, however, the boys tended to have higher scores than the girls for organization during the fiction unit.

The boys' rubric scores for voice were higher than the girls were during both the comic book unit and the fiction unit. This trait allowed the personality of the writer to shine through on the page. Voice gives the writing a sense of flavor and unique style, and gives the reader the sense that the writer is talking directly to him/her. A strong sense of voice indicated that the writer had made a commitment to the writing. In this way, I was

not surprised that the boys' voice scores tended to be higher for both comic books and fiction stories. They were extremely committed to these genres.

When analyzing the gendered breakdown for word choice and sentence fluency, I noticed similarities between the boys' and girls' scores. The boys scored slightly higher than the girls for word choice during comic book unit but their scores were more similar for this trait during fiction unit. They also achieved similar scores for sentence fluency for both genres.

The boys and girls also had similar scores for convention during the comic book unit but the boys tended to have higher scores than the girls with regards to this trait during the fiction unit. This surprised me because this trait is concerned with the rules of the language. It is the most mechanical of the six traits and required writers to learn editing and proofreading skills. I would have predicted that the girls' scores would be higher than the boys' in this trait because in general, the girls were more interested in creating a polished piece of work. The fact that the boys had higher scores than the girls in both organization and conventions during the fiction unit showed me that many boys cared deeply about writing fiction and that they were more vested in writing during this genre.

The breakdown for boys during the comic book unit was as follows:

Low Tier (Total score under 14) James, Tim, Oscar

Medium Tier (Total score 14-17) Luke, Stuart, Peter, Mark, Robert, Hunter

High Tier (Total score 18 or higher) Nolan, John, David

The breakdown for girls during the comic book unit was as follows:

Low Tier (Total score under 14) Nancy, Ayanna, Julie, Erica, Lisa

Medium Tier (Total score 14-17) Sarah, Karen, Linda, Barbara

High Tier (Total score 18 or higher) Alice, Liz

The overall breakdown for the comic book unit was as follows:

Low Tier: 8 students (3 boys, 5 girls)
Medium Tier: 9 students (6 boys, 4 girls)
High Tier: 6 students (3 boys, 2 girls)

The breakdown for boys during the fiction unit was as follows:

Low Tier (Total score under 18) Oscar, James, Tim
Medium Tier (Total score 18-21) Hunter, Mark, Stuart, Peter,
High Tier (Total score over 21) Nolan, David, Robert, Luke, John

The breakdown for the fiction unit was as follows:

Low Tier (Total score under 18) Erica, Lisa
Medium Tier (Total score 18-21) Liz, Ayanna, Barbara, Julie, Alice
High Tier (Total score over 21) Nancy, Karen, Sarah, Linda

The overall breakdown for the fiction unit was as follows:

Low Tier: 5 students (3 boys, 2 girls)
Medium Tier: 9 students (4 boys, 5 girls)
High Tier: students (5 boys, 4 girls)

How did the class fare?

The results of dividing the class into tiers for these two genres surprised me. Almost half of the girls, 5 out of 11, were in the bottom tier for the comic book unit. Only one quarter of the boys, 3 out of 12, landed in the bottom tier for the same unit. Three quarters of the boys were in the top two tiers for comic book writing. While just over half, 6 out of 11, of the girls were in the top two tiers for the same unit. When looking at the class at a whole, less than half, 3 out of 8, of the students in the bottom tier for comic book writing were boys. I predicted that the boys would enjoy writing more in these genres than they did during the personal narrative unit but I did not expect that the results would be this dramatic.

Interestingly, the same boys were in the bottom tier for both fiction and comic books: Tim, James and Oscar. Regardless of genre, Tim was always in the bottom tier throughout the year, but James was in the top tier for personal narrative. Similarly, Oscar

was in the middle tier for personal narrative and the top tier for letter writing but was in the bottom tier for both comic book writing and fiction. I found it interesting that the bottom tier was exactly the same for the boys for these two units. These three boys were the only boys in the class that stated that comic books and fiction were the hardest units for them to date. They clearly struggled when the writer had more creative control and had to incorporate non-realistic components such as plot, character and setting into their writing.

Similarly, Erica and Lisa were in the bottom tier for both fiction and comics. Erica, like Tim, was always in the bottom tier so the genre shifts did not seem to influence their writing proficiency. However, Lisa's experience was similar to James and Oscar's experiences. She was in the middle tier for personal narrative and letter writing units. Oscar, James and Lisa, were stronger when writing personal narratives than writing comics or fiction. Shifting the subject matter from being personal and realistic to imaginative and non-realistic had a big impact on their rubric scores.

Nolan, John and David were in the top tier for both the comic book and fiction units. Robert and Luke, who had keen interests in science fiction, moved to the top tier during the fiction unit. This was the first time these two boys landed in the top tier all year.

There was a connection between their genre preference and their writing proficiency, when considering their rubric scores. Many boys loved the comic book and fiction units. 10 out of the 12 boys, compared to only four girls, said that they really enjoyed writing comic books. These boys were excited about writing and they wrote at a higher level

during these genres. Overall, the make-up of low tier became mainly female when fictitious elements entered the writing curriculum.

Interestingly, when studying a genre of interest, the boys produced more than the girls did during the comic book unit. Collectively, the boys created 12 comic books while the girls only created eight comic books. Five boys wrote more than one comic, and most of these boys wrote three or four comics. Only three girls wrote more than one comic. When the content shifted to a genre in which the boys were more interested, they produced more writing than they did during the personal narrative unit. They were produced more than the girls.

It is important to note that some girls liked the units that contained fictitious elements, but overall the girls encountered more difficulties (eg, Linda not wanting to come to school because she no longer thought she was good at writing) during the comic book and fiction units. This led me to conclude that when the subject matter was aligned with students' writing preference, it not only had an impact on students' rubric scores, it also had an impact on the quantity of writing that students produced

Fiction and Comic Books took more time than Personal Narratives.

An important finding from the comic book and fiction units is that it took the students much more time to complete a story when the elements of their stories were fictitious, as compared to writing personal narratives. Nine of the 23 students, five boys and four girls, in my class did not complete one comic book during the first six weeks of the unit. The "thinking stage" was particularly difficult for some of the girls, because they could

not rely upon their personal experiences to tell the story. The following excerpts from a whole class interview on comic book writing illustrate this point:

Alice: I think that once I got my idea, it wasn't as hard because I knew what my story was going to be about. But sometimes I got stuck or forgot what I wanted to say so I had to think again.

Lisa: Well, when I started my comic book, I had to look at my web for just a second and thought "OK, here's my web because I don't know what she [my main character] does in the beginning and I thought I only had a few pages to go...OK." And it's sometimes hard for me to think about what other ideas to put in my story.

Ayanna: You have to think of a title, think of the setting, think of the characters, the main idea and the beginning, middle and end. And you still don't know, really what is going to happen exactly in the story...

James: Um, it's sort of hard at the beginning to think of the stuff that's actually in it, but then once you get going, it's not as hard...

Many of the girls had a difficult time staying organized and remembering their story ideas during the comic book and fiction units. It was hard for them to fill out a story web because their stories were not recounted memories. These story webs proved to be a valuable step in the writing process because it helped them with the various literacy components: setting, main idea, characters, etc. Overall, the children felt the story web was more useful and more important during the comic book and fiction units than the personal narrative unit. The boys, in particular, were more eager and interested in planning out their story using the story web when the story elements were fictitious. Although many students, five boys and four girls, did not complete one comic book during the first six weeks of this unit, the boys enjoyed the thinking and planning stage of the writing process and discussed at length with their peers about possible fantasy story

ideas. The girls, on the other hand, were frustrated and struggled with creating their story ideas. This was in stark contrast to their experiences during the personal narrative unit at the beginning of the year. Most boys dragged their feet and struggled with the personal side of writing about themselves while the girls were excited and eager to do so.

Content varied between boys and girls.

During the comic book and fiction units, there were differences between the pace and content of the boys' stories and the girls' stories. Many of the boys wrote Star Wars-esque adventure stories that took place in outer space and featured intergalactic battles between good and evil. In contrast, many of the girls wrote happy stories that took place in fantasy lands such as Candy Land. The girls' stories tended to focus more on character while the boy's stories focused more on action. The girls also tended to write about little animals or cute characters while the boys' stories contained more fast-paced adventurous plots. For the boys, writing became an action-packed escape while many girls relied strongly on their personal lives to write their stories. Many girls wrote about their own personal experiences but they changed minor details to fictionalize their stories. For example, Ayanna wrote a comic book entitled *The Adventures of Anna Lisa and her Brother* in which the two main characters play dress-up, put on a show and pretend to be movie stars. This was a very typical activity for Ayanna to engage in during her real-life play-dates with her friends. Similarly, Barbara wrote a comic book entitled *Simon, the Brave Cat* about when her cat was lost. This story mirrored Barbara's lived experience when she lost her cat but in this comic the cat was the main character and the story was told from the cat's perspective. Peter, on the other hand, wrote a series of comic books

entitled *The Adventures of Eyeball Boy* in which the title character was a miniature creature that resembled a tarantula who fought monsters in the depths of the jungle. I was interested to learn that for the most part, the boys' comics and fiction stories were more far-fetched while the girls' stories tended to be more within the realm of possibility.

Even fictionalizing a few minor details was difficult for some of the girls. I was interested to learn that some girls struggled with writing when the subject matter was fictitious. Overall, the girls took fewer risks in their writing and were less creative than the boys. For example, more than half the girls (Sarah, Barbara, Karen, Linda, Lisa and Alice) created new imaginary settings and characters for their stories but these characters lived lives very similar to their own. The setting was a home, the characters had dinner, did homework, played with friends. In this way, most of the girls wrote according to what they knew, even though the characters were animals or Brownies. The extent of the girls' adventures, for every girl except Liz, was that the characters were lost. This happened in Barbara's, Karen's and Sarah's story. And, in predictable fashion, the stories ended with the characters finding their way home and living happily ever after. The boys preferred to write completely made-up, outlandish stories with plots that were not even close to being grounded in reality.

Based on his findings in an action research case study involving 22 primary grade classrooms, Graham (2001) concluded that boys encounter the greatest success when writing in the company of other boys. In this way, writing becomes a shared common experience in which they support each other, help build each other's confidence, and even play out social themes together in their writing. Consistent with this finding, in my

own classroom, Robert, Luke and Tim loved working together and helping each other generate ideas for their individual stories. They all created stories that were based on one of their favorite movies, *Star Wars*. Their writing involved overlapping storylines and favorite characters that showed up in all of their stories.

Similarly, Hunter used my comic book character Captain Tire in his story. His comic involved two borrowed characters: Captain Tire and Yodoo, a character he borrowed from his friend Robert's comic. Yodoo is based on the *Star Wars* character Yoda. Using borrowed characters in this comic helped Hunter relate to others while writing. It also gave him confidence to know that he created a comic book that others would find interesting. Afterwards, Hunter branched out and took some risks and created a story that was entirely his own, the story about the mummies and the tomb described later in this chapter.

During the fiction and comic book units, the students were in control of more aspects of the writing process. Some of them greatly appreciated having this heightened level of control. Many students, both boys and girls, stated that during the fiction unit they felt more free as writers and they felt the rules had loosened up. Mark, who struggled during the personal narrative and letter writing unit, enjoyed writing during the comic book and fiction units. "I like writing about fake stuff because you can do anything that you want." In fact, 19 out of 23 students stated that fiction writing was the genre that was the most fun.

Violence in Students' Writing.

Violence was a common topic that most of my students explored in their comic books and fiction stories. Fourteen out of 23 students incorporated violence into their comic books. Many of the boys, in particular, looked forward to the comic book and fiction units because they wanted to include violence into their action-packed adventures. Anticipating this, one of my first mini-lessons of the comic book unit focused on how to incorporate violence into their writing in a manner that was appropriate for school. The following entry from my teacher research journal describes how I introduced the topic of incorporating violence into their writing:

Saturday, January 21

On Thursday, we talked about how to incorporate and illustrate violence in our comic books. Not surprisingly, many of the comic strip characters, particularly the super heroes, get into situations where the children want to utilize violence in their descriptions and illustrations. They had a lot of questions, right from the beginning of the unit, about violence, and were eager to talk about it. Many of the students had left illustration squares blank because they were unsure of how to do it in a way that was appropriate for school. I was surprised and impressed that most of them felt strongly that some kinds of illustrations were simply not appropriate. But more than anything, I noticed that many of the boys were looking forward to learning about the guidelines and boundaries for using violence in their writing.

I used David's comic book as an example. David's character was a super hero. David had been thrilled about comic book writing, and right from the beginning had been excited about this genre, mainly because he liked the idea of incorporating violence into his stories.

In my opinion, David was obsessed with violence. He talked about it every chance he got and he slipped it into his play out at Recess. David had also slipped violence into his comic strip, even though my directions had been to wait until we talk about it as a class. Little guns slipped into the pictures, and some of the bad guy characters were drawn with cut marks on their bodies. Nothing extremely grotesque, but they were there. David liked to rebel against authority and this was a typical example. This rebellious streak (which his teachers and parents were aware of and worked together to channel in a positive manner) is why I chose David's comic book as an example to discuss in front of the class.

David shared that Noah (a prior student of mine, who was in 3rd grade and occasionally visited our classroom to help during Writer's Workshop) had taught him how to show violence in comic books. "Noah told me that if you want to be clever about it" explained David (being known as clever was very important to David) "you should make it so that the readers have to do some of the work and picture what happens in their imagination. The way you do this is you construct this colored cloud that covers up the "bad" stuff and in big letters you write funny comic book words like *BANG!* or *POW!*

It was great to have David explain to the class what Noah had taught him. He felt knowledgeable and the class responded very well to Noah's advice. They then proceeded to spontaneously generate a list of comic book words that could be used to cover the colored clouds of smoke: *ZOWIE!*, *CRASH!*, *KAPOW!*, etc.

Linda raised her hand with a question: "How do you know when to use the cloud for violence and when to just draw the picture of what is happening?"

"Good question," I reply, "What does everyone think?"

"Well," Linda says, "Can I come up to the easel and draw what I have a question about?"

"Sure," I said, handing her a marker.

Linda then approached the easel and explained that she was creating a comic book featuring Brownie Boy and Ice Cream Sundae Man. She explained that one of her characters was falling into a trap. She didn't know if it was OK to draw the character in the trap, caught and bleeding.

"What does everyone think?" I asked the class.

To my surprise, the class agreed that Linda should not draw the character all bloody and caught in the trap. Even some of the boys (such as David and John who were very interested in depicting violent situations in their comics) agreed. John then suggested that if she didn't think the cloud idea would fit into the flow of the comic, then she could draw the character *falling* into the trap instead of being caught in the trap. Everyone thought this was a great idea. For the next several minutes, the conversation then focused on how far down should Linda draw the character. Should she draw the picture with the trap at the bottom of the picture and the character falling at the top? Should she draw the character just barely on top of the trap? Practically touching the trap, just about to be hurt? Should she just draw the picture of the character falling and not include the trap?

"Where should we draw the line?" I asked the class. There was much discussion on whether or not individual students would include the trap. Many of the boys felt strongly that they should be able to draw the trap, but agreed that they should not draw the bloody character caught in the trap. Some of the girls said that the trap was not necessary, that the reader would know what was going on without including the trap. Nancy said that the trap was kind of like drawing a weapon and she wouldn't include it in her drawing. Being the one to have the final say, I said that I agreed with their decision to not have the character be caught and bloody in the trap, but that I thought it could be up to the individual author to

determine what felt right for them regarding how close to draw the character to the trap or if to include the trap at all.

The next comic book we talked about were the Star Wars-esque comics that Robert and Tim were creating. Both of them were very interested in the Star Wars movies and enjoyed creating comics that feature Jedi Knights. Robert had left some pictures blank in his comic book because he was waiting to hear what was acceptable to draw regarding battle scenes involving light sabers. Once again, I asked the class "What do we think?" Once again, their answers varied. Nancy (remaining consistent on her stance of no-weapons) felt that they should not draw pictures with people using their light sabers. "They are weapons and we should not be drawing any weapons." John, Tim and Hunter completely disagreed. "That's the whole point," Hunter said "They are fighting for freedom and justice in the universe and the way they do it is with their light sabers. You have to show that."

"OK," I said, "But, for example, in one of the Star Wars movies, Darth Vader cuts off Luke's hand with a light saber." Should we be able to show that in our drawings?

"No" the class agreed. That was too gross.

John raised his hand with a suggestion. "What if we are able to show Jedi Knights *using* their light sabers and we show the light sabers clashing against each other like in a sword fight but we don't show the light sabers cutting into anyone's body because that would be showing someone actually getting hurt and I don't think we should be showing that."

"What do we think of that?" I asked the class. "John is suggesting that we can show the Jedi Knights using the light sabers but we can't show anyone actually getting hurt."

The class thought this was a great idea.

This raised an issue within me about my own personal comfort level that I did not vocalize during the class conversation. What about guns? I am OK with showing light sabers, and a trap, but I am not OK with guns. And I'm not really OK with knives, for that matter. I don't think they belong in children's work. Swords and light sabers are different in my mind. Sword fights and light saber duels display a certain amount of grace and finesse that raise them above a gun fight or a knife fight. But I also recognize that this is only my opinion. Should David be able to draw characters with guns in his comic, if they are not being used? This would be consistent with the rule the class created but I wouldn't like it. I am the teacher and I ultimately get to draw the line. But I would feel the need to talk about it with the class, especially since I have opened up the conversation and involved them in some decision-making.

I am relieved that this issue about parameters for guns and knives did not come up in conversation but it might come up soon so I better figure out my stance...

This whole conversation about violence fascinated me. My students had very strong opinions. Interestingly, they all felt that there should be boundaries to what is OK for their comic books. They all loved being a part of the conversation in determining what the boundaries should be. Without exception, they all accepted that I should be the one to have the final say, but they all loved being able to be involved in making the rules for including violence in their comic books. They appreciated being invited into the decision-making about appropriate parameters and they took this responsibility seriously.

Honestly, I was surprised to realize how dramatic the gendered breakdown was when considering the students who included violence into their stories. Out of the 14 students that incorporated violence into their writing, 12 of them were boys. Every single boy in my class included violence in their stories while only two of the girls did. I predicted that more boys would incorporate violence into their writing but I did not expect the gendered breakdown to be so dramatic. The following is an entry that discusses the use of violence in the girl's writing:

March 11

Liz and Karen were the only girls who used violence in their stories. Liz wrote about a battle in a made-up underwater world where mer-people had a battle with animals. She mentioned that the animals had weapons but was quick to mention that they were not dangerous. And in her "chapter" called *The Batul* ("The Battle") a battle is implied but there was no mention of actual fighting. Liz mentioned that the battle had started, that there was a new king and the bad king was in jail. In one of Karen's story, the violence was more prominent. There is a battle (in a land with a kingdom and dragons) between the good guys and the bad guys. Every page mentioned that the good guys were mad at the bad guys. Towards the end, the good guys fell into a trap door and then the bad guys shoot them. The End.

Interestingly, this was the only story written by a girl that showed and mentioned graphic violence. It was illustrated by a cloud with BANG and stars around it. Knowing who Karen is socially, however, this did not surprise me. Karen was very much like one of the boys in class. She had an active older brother who she

looked up to. Out on the playground, Karen was somewhat mischievous and controlling. She was good friends with boys and often engaged in their play out at Recess. Similar to how Stuart's interests were much more aligned with the girls interests, Karen's interests were much more aligned with the boys' interests in class.

Compared to the girls, the boys pushed boundaries with violence, and included more graphic violence, while the girls did not. I was quite surprised to realize that every boy took the opportunity to include topics that would normally be considered "inappropriate" or risky into their stories, topics such as slang, weapons or violence. This was compared to only two of the girls incorporated violence into their stories.

Many of the boys liked that they were given permission to write about violence and freely incorporated violence into their stories. Newkirk (2002) states that many boys prefer fiction because writing becomes a free utopian state where they can act out, claim power or skill that they do not have in real life. In my opinion, the manner in which most of the boys incorporated violence in their writing was not brutal or aggressive. They played out fictitious storylines in their writing and their characters claimed powers or skills that these boys did not have in real life. They used violence in their stories to accentuate the drama and to make their stories more exciting. For example, in Hunter's comic entitled *Mummies Attack*, the main character was exploring a tomb. In this comic, Hunter cleverly built up the suspense for two pages, showing that mummies were lurking in the tomb, watching the nameless main male character. Towards the end, the man is attacked by mummies and he fought them off bravely behind a comic cloud that said "Bang!" Hunter loved the *Indiana Jones* movies and this comic paralleled a plotline he knew from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Hunter played out this adventurous plotline in his

comic book and he incorporated violence into this story to punctuate the drama at the end when the man battled the mummies.

I knew these boys well, and with the exception of David, I did not think any of these boys were obsessed with violence. Furthermore, I did not feel that this would lead to the boys being more violent in their real lives. Instead, I realized that including violence in their plots was a way to make their storylines more exciting, scary or dramatic. Thomas (1997) states that boys' stories often have pace and event at the expense of everything else. The boys in my class included violence in their stories to punctuate the fast-pace of their fictitious storylines. According to his study of over 900 Writer's Workshop books in first grade classrooms, Hunt (1985) found that boys wrote more often about sports, war, fighting and catastrophe while girls wrote more about themselves, their feelings, their families and their friendships. This is consistent with the stories that the boys and girls in my class created. The violence that the boys used in their stories helped increase the action in their adventures.

I was surprised by the fact that only two girls chose to include violence in their stories, even though they had participated in creating the ground rules for doing so. This is consistent, however, with what the literature says about girls and the content of their writing. For example, Peterson (2001) found that the characters in girls' writing more pro-social behavior (sharing, helping, empathizing) while characters in the boys' writing exhibited more aggressive behavior and engaged in more high-intensity, dangerous actions. Also, Thomas (1997) found that girls' writing was generally more aware of social and moral contexts. This was consistent with the girls writing in my class during

the comic book and fiction units. Overall, their stories were far less violent, featured more realistic storylines, in which most of them included a happy ending.

Frankly, I was struck by the gender breakdown regarding who included violence in their writing and who did not. All 12 boys did and only two girls did. Even more striking to me than this gendered imbalance, however, was my realization that the boys were completely engaged during the discussion about appropriate parameters. The boys, in particular, were extremely excited and surprised when I structured the mini-lesson as a conversation and not as one where the teacher was telling the students the way it was going to be. They couldn't believe that they were being invited into the conversation on such a taboo school topic. They recognized that I had the final say but they loved being able to share the responsibility of determining the ground rules. Many of the boys looked for control over the subject matter of their stories. For example, they did not want to write about themselves and when they were able to write about fiction, they felt more free and that the rules had loosened up. Impressively, when they had some control over deciding appropriate parameters for incorporating violence, they all obeyed the parameters created by the class.

The Focus Children

In the following section, I describe both the writing development and the social experiences of the focal children during the comic book and fiction units. Although I mention each of the six children in this section, I do not focus on their experiences equally, in terms of length. I deliberately focus on certain boys more than others in order to discuss the following findings about boys and comic books and fiction stories: Most of

the boys preferred to write fiction because the emphasis was not on the personal. They liked writing in these units because they could let their imaginations run wild and create outlandish stories. They connected their interests in favorite movies, such as *Star Wars*, or favorite comic books, such as *Calvin and Hobbes* or *Captain Underpants*, to the writing curriculum. Although the curricular emphasis was not on the personal, I learned a great deal about these boys socially, and what they valued, by watching them write comics and fictitious stories. In fact, I learned much more about them personally in these units than I did during the personal narrative unit. Furthermore, most boys wrote their longest pieces and achieved their highest rubric scores during these units because they were motivated and interested in the content.

David

As an overall writer, David was strong. He did not like the unit on personal narratives but he loved our letter writing unit, particularly because he could write secretive, private letters to his friends. By the end of April, we had covered four of the five units in the curriculum: personal narratives, letter writing, comic book writing and fiction writing. During an interview where he reflected upon his experiences with writing during these four genres, David stated that he much preferred comic book writing:

I really loved comic book writing...it sort of was actually fun because you could just like pick up your pencil and decide, I want to write about this...and it's so cool...I mean, some people may think "He's just kidding about that, and he's just being nice, but I really mean it...it was fun and I actually wish that we could have done it for the whole first grade.

Well, it sort of felt a little easy for me because when you're writing a comic book, it's not like it has to be...I mean, once you think of something, you have to make sure it's appropriate but... it's not like true stories about your life because then you have to make sure it's true...but in comic book writing because you could just go wild and go anywhere your imagination wanted you to go!

Before we were learning about comics, I wasn't that into writing. At the beginning of the year, I thought writing was all about reality...it was...you could call it...dull. And then once I started learning more about how you could make up stuff, writing became more exciting. I started liking writing better. And it just so happened that once I started learning that, we were doing comic book writing.

David felt that he was in more control of the content of his writing during the comic book unit. He felt his topic options were more varied and he enjoyed not being limited to writing about his own personal experiences. Control and excitement were very important to David and he liked the creative freedom he had a writer during the comic book unit.

For similar reasons, he also loved the fiction unit. He explained "I also did enjoy that during fiction you were able to...let your imagination fly and you could just do whatever you want. It's free, almost." David had a very different response to writing comic books and fiction stories than he did when writing personal narratives. During the personal narrative unit, David was painfully aware that he was sharing something personal with the class and he procrastinated greatly during this unit. He wrote a very powerful story entitled *Sadness* about his mother spending the year away from him but he struggled with the personal nature of writing this story. During the comic book and fiction units, he was excited about writing and looked forward to Writer's Workshop. He found it very freeing and fun to let his imagination fly.

Below is the text of David's comic book entitled *Fat Man*. It is clearly action packed and filled with creativity. It is also filled with violent pictures and plot twists. In the brackets, I explain what is happening in the pictures of the comic book. Also, while writing this comic book, David made the transition from using mainly uppercase letters

throughout his writing to using mainly lowercase letters. This explains why the first half of David's comic book is filled with all uppercase letters.

THIS IS FAT MAN. HE IS FaT. HE IS ALWAYS EXPLODING, HE HAS A STIRUFOME GUN. HE DOSENT SHOOT PEPOUL. HE ONLY SHOOTS AIR.

WHEN HES SCARED BE ShRINKS. BECUS HE SHRINKS HE GETS MEDICEL PROBLEMS.

[The picture shows Fat Man carrying many guns on his holster.]

FAT MAN IS SUDINLY ATTAKT! POW! OW! POW! HE SEES THE SMOKE CLER, THAT BULLY JOHNNY X WAS RUNNING AWAY!

[This picture shows a comic cloud of smoke with the word "POW!"]

FAT MAN IS HURT. HE SAS OOOOOOOOO! HIS WHOLE BODY HURTS. THE AMBULENCE CAME. IT CARID FAT MAN AWAY. OCH! OOOO! STOP! IDIOT! HELP! PERSON! STOP! I'LL KILL YOU! BULLY! FAT MAN WAS GETTING SURGERY.

WEN THEY OPURATED, HE WAS TO BIG! SHES SAID THE DOCTER.

[This picture shows Fat Man on the operating table. The doctor is on top of him cutting Fat Man open. Blood is dripping all over. One doctor is falling off of Fat Man to the floor.]

BANG! A TEST ROCKET EXPLODED! I HAD ENOF FAT MAN YELLS.

[This picture shows another cloud of comic smoke with the word "BANG!"]

BOOM! FAT MAN EXPLODES. A defing boom covers the city.

[Another cloud saying "BOOM!" with guns flying on the side of the cloud.]

Fat Man starts to form tiny. Every body part shrnks.

Down falls fat man. Step by step towards what very well could be his tomb.

[This picture shows Fat Man falling, shooting his gun as he falls.]

Fat Man walks towards his rocket. He steps inside.

Fat man punchis a fu butens and taks OFF!

Fat mans rocet barly missis a satalit!

[This picture shows a near collision between his rocket and a satellite.]

Fat Man sends a SOS! His radeo says meteor!

Fat Man is sopost to stop at plaent X. the meteor went out of control!

[This picture shows a rogue meteor hitting Fat Man's rocket, causing him to spiral out of control.]

Fat Man drives at 100000000mph. HMMMMM, said Fat Man. The air tanks.

Fat Man bumps into the steering whell! He dives for the air tanks. Shmack.

[This picture shows Fat Man knocking into the air tanks, unleashing poisonous gases.]

Fat Man sters his rocket towrds the portal just barly missing the poisonus gasis.

Fat Man lands his roket. He steps onto an uncharted planet!

Fat Man sees fuigurs on the horozion. Are they frendley or hostile?

[This picture shows the aliens with weapons.]

Definitely hostile!

[This picture shows Fat Man and the aliens engaged in a battle.]

(This is Fat Man. He is fat. He is always exploding. He has a Styrofoam gun. He doesn't shoot people. He only shoots air. When he's scared, he shrinks. Because he shrinks, he gets medical problems.

Fat Man is suddenly attacked. Pow! Ow! Pow! He sees the smoke clear. That Bully, Johnny X was running away!

Fat Man is hurt. He says "Oooooooo!" His whole body hurts.

The ambulance came. It carried Fat Man away. Ouch! Oooo! Stop! Idiot!

Help! Person, stop! I'll kill you! Bully! Fat Man was getting surgery!

When they operated, he was too big! "Sheesh" said the doctor.

Bang! A test rocket exploded! "I had enough!" Fat Man yells.

Boom! Fat Man explodes! A deafening boom covers the city.

Fat Man starts to form tiny. Every body part shrinks.

Down falls Fat Man, step by step, towards what could very well be his tomb.

Fat Man walks towards his rocket. He steps inside.

Fat Man punches a few buttons and takes off.

Fat Man barely misses a satellite!

Fat Man sends a SOS! His radio says meteor!

Fat Man is supposed to stop at planet X. The meteor went out of control!

Fat Man drives at 100,000,000 mph. "Hmmm," said Fat Man. "The air tanks."

Fat Man bumps into the steering wheel! He dives for the air tanks. Smack.

Fat Man steers his rocket towards the portal just barely missing the poisonous gases.

Fat Man lands his rocket. He steps onto an uncharted planet!

Fat Man sees figures on the horizon. Are they friendly or hostile?

Definitely hostile!)

During the comic book and fiction unit, David loved being able to incorporate violence in his writing. He did so more frequently than any other child in class. Furthermore, the violence he depicted in his writing was noticeably more dramatic and extreme than the violence depicted by any other student in the class. His use of violence stood out to me because of its high frequency and dramatic content. David was very deliberate about including violence into every comic book and fiction story he wrote. In the following

excerpt from an interview, David explained that he consistently included violence in his writing to make his stories more dramatic and exciting.

David: I just thought that...at first, I thought I would just put one or two violent parts in, but then, every once in a while I noticed that my comic book got a little dull so I decided to put a violent, dramatic part in because I didn't want people to read and think "Oh, this is the most boring comic book I have ever read." I want them to think "This is so boring and dull and then...Oh, that's so exciting! Ha ha ha! This is the livliest comic book I've ever read!

GM: So, you're thinking a lot about what the people who are reading your comic book will think? What the reader is going to feel like while reading your comic book?

David: Yeah. Because I don't want them to like, start telling everyone "David's comic book is really boring. David's comic book isn't exciting at all. Don't read David's comic book..."

There was a strong connection between David's writing and his classroom reputation. He desperately did not want either to be considered dull by his peers. He liked having the freedom to include violent illustrations and plot lines into his stories. For the most part, he used the decided-upon strategy of depicting violent scenes by using a cloud that says "Zowie" or "Kapow." The following excerpt from an interview with David reveals, however, that he would have preferred to be more graphic.

David: Well, it's all about action and excitement...and it's just that when I draw a picture or write a book, I like the people to know every single detail about what's going on and by drawing the real violence, that's one of the ways I let them know everything that's happening, whereas when I do it with a cloud, then they know that there's something violent happening...and that someone's getting hurt or something... but I just *prefer* to see how they're getting hurt.

GM: Why?

David: I just think its more fun to draw the violence

GM: OK

David: And I also just don't know why...but I like to draw the people getting hurt and show everything. I don't know why I like to...but for some reason I just do.

GM: Huh. Every single story you wrote during comic books and fiction had some violent parts. Why did you think you wanted to write about violence?

David: Wait...I included violence in all my stories. I didn't write *about* violence...

In this interview, David was very clear that violence was not the actual subject matter of his stories. His stories were not *about* violence. They were about superheroes or zany characters. He incorporated violence into these stories as a creative strategy to make them more interesting. Similarly, David included humor into his stories when he feared others would think his writing had become dull. He wanted his writing to be funny, clever and exciting-- just like his social reputation. When I realized that David was including violence in his stories to make them less dull, it did not surprise me that he was the student who incorporated violence in his writing the most frequently and dramatically. After all, he was the most animated student in class and he enjoyed pushing boundaries and being a bad boy to get attention. As he said himself, he would prefer to be dead than considered dull. David did not want either his writing or his social reputation to be dull so he incorporated violence into both to get attention and to present himself as dramatic, exciting and cool. To David, this was about as far away from being considered dull as you could get. He did not care that he had a bad boy reputation because at least bad boys got attention, albeit in negative ways.

As a social member of our class, David was somewhat of a live wire who enjoyed testing limits and manipulating situations. He enjoyed his status as resident "bad boy" and had a powerful presence in the classroom. Gallas (1998) writes about the presence of "bad boys" in her primary classroom and how they crave attention in negative ways and strive to develop a rebellious identity that is counter to classroom culture:

“Bad boys” is a term I first developed to describe particular boys and the effect they had on the classroom. I use it as a caricature for how these boys view themselves and are viewed both by other children and their teachers. In using the term, my intention is to highlight their behavior while also underscoring their intentions. Bad boys are “bad” in the sense of the street lingo that they so admire and try to use: they are bad meaning they push boundaries of all behavioral norms, and they are also bad, meaning attractive, risky, desirable, cool. The construction of their personae, however, is a performance that conceals many layers of social awareness, creative activity and ambivalence towards powerful others” (Gallas, p 33).

As his teacher, it was truly a challenge to figure out how to channel David’s energy in appropriate directions. He was often mean and disrespectful of classmates, particularly to those he did not consider friends. Compared to his peers, David’s behavior was extreme. He was occasionally physically aggressive towards his peers and he incorporated violence into his play more than any other student in class. The following entry from my teacher research journal explains that I was beginning to worry about David’s behavior at school.

March 20

David is going through a stage (or at least we hope it’s a stage) where he is being very disrespectful to others in class, particularly other students who he does not consider friends, and our Apprentice, Valerie. In my opinion, David has a keen understanding of power and he enjoys exerting it over anyone who will let him. He was awful with Valerie (who is still gaining confidence when it comes to her classroom management) during her Solo Week and he often prays upon the more quiet or introverted children in our class. Many children have started to complain about David’s behavior lately and he doesn’t seem to care. David is also obsessed with violence. Now, being a teacher for 9 years, and being a male myself, I realize that violence is a concept that many boys are interested in, but David takes it to an extreme. He is often depicting violence in his play out at Recess. And he frequently mentions violence in his sharings during Meetings. He frequently lies and uses violence to exaggerate these lies in class. He admitted that he purposely exaggerated in class and enjoyed being inappropriate. Last year, he told his peers that his father has a gun and he said that he heard his father say that he was going to come into class and use it. This obviously got David a

considerable amount of attention, which was the desired effect. We do a lot of talking with David about violence and what is appropriate for school.

I began to wonder if there was a connection between his incorporating violence in his writing and his increased level of violence in his play. In an attempt to understand if such a connection existed, I asked David to talk about his own interest in violence. He acknowledged it was a strong interest but was very clear that he did not think of himself as a violent person. During this interview, he explained,

I think writing violence or drawing violence or playing violence feels better to me and is not the same as actually being violent. Because I know when I draw it or imagine it out at Recess, it's not really happening. It's make-believe. It doesn't mean that all of me is violent. Not at all. And even in my writing, I don't like it when the whole book is violent. I just like it when it turns violent once in a while. I do it to get attention and to make things more exciting.

I was relieved to learn that David did not consider himself a violent person but it bothered me that he clearly enjoyed being overly dramatic and violent in his writing in order to get attention from the class. Even though he stated otherwise, I questioned if giving David permission to write about violence in school led him to be more violent as a social member of our class. I started to worry about a potential tension between allowing my students to have more freedom/creativity/control in the classroom and allowing an intense interest in violence to permeate the discussion and culture of the classroom. If David was becoming more violent because I was allowing this interest to develop during Writer's Workshop, I needed to be more responsible as an educator. If this was truly happening, I needed to consider David's overall well-being and the physical safety of all my students. I liked that David was more motivated and felt more free as a writer during the fiction and comic book units. I also liked that he was connecting an interest, albeit an

interest in violence, to the curriculum. I began to wonder, however if being able to further explore this interest during Writer's Workshop had a negative impact on his social reputation and personal development.

During the course of the comic book and fiction units, I closely monitored David's behavior and use of violence in his writing. I learned a great deal about David's personal development by observing him and paying close attention to what he wrote about during these units. David was obsessed with violence and he was glad that this was not a taboo topic for Writer's Workshop during these genres. He wrote freely and willingly during each writing session. He depicted violent scenes in every comic book and fictional story he wrote. Even though violence was not an interest of mine, and one I hoped he would soon abandon, David connected this interest to the writing curriculum. He was fascinated by the guidelines (such as using the cloud and words like "Zowie" to disguise the gore) for incorporating violence into comic books, and even abided by them for the most part because the strategies made him feel intelligent and creative as a writer.

Importantly, because violence was a personal interest of his and not considered a taboo topic for writing, he began to encounter some personal growth by incorporating this interest into his writing and sharing his thoughts with his peers. Earlier in the year, David used violence to rebel, to shock, and to get attention. Once the topic of violence was included in the curriculum, I learned more about David socially by watching him while he wrote about topics of interest to him. By listening to what he had to say and observing his behavior when there was violence in his writing, I learned that David incorporated violence in his drawings and his play when there was something emotionally upsetting in

his life such as his mother living in Denver, his best friend Ian moving to Brazil, his feelings of exclusion by some of his friends, and his father working too much. There was usually a strong connection between David's depictions of violence in writing and his social life. David used violence to communicate his emotions and he hoped someone would pay attention. I realized I could use his depictions of violence as a social barometer and monitor how he was feeling emotionally without David having to state it outright. Similar to how I realized that my students' personal narratives could be considered windows into self, by viewing David's use of violence in his writing as a window into self, I gained tremendous insight into his personal life. This topic is further explored and brought to fruition during the poetry chapter of this dissertation. It is important to note, however, that my realization that I could view David's use of violence as a social barometer began during the comic book and fiction units; units that allowed David to connect his interest in violence to the curriculum.

John

During the personal narrative unit, John was in a race to complete the highest number of stories in the class. He loved writing but was more concerned with quantity than quality and as a result produced many flat stories that lacked focus. His personal narratives did not focus on his emotions and they were not particularly personal. Socially, John was somewhat silly, even mischievous at times, but he did not reveal many aspects of his personality during his personal narratives. I got to know a softer, more personal side to John through his letters, particularly the one that he wrote to his mother at Halloween. Similarly, I learned a great deal about John, personally, during the comic

book and fiction units. He revealed much more about his personal self when he could include fictitious elements into his writing.

John valued friendship tremendously and this was reflected in the comic books and fiction stories he wrote. John wrote a series of comics entitled *Animals in the Jungle* which focused primarily on friendship. There were four different books in the series. These comics featured a gang of animals who were all friends and went on adventures together. It didn't take me long to realize that these characters were actual animated versions of John and his classmates and they reflected what John valued in his friendships. In books one through three of this series, the two main characters were Batty and Foxy. In class, John was known to his close friends as "Foxy" which was a nickname he first acquired in Kindergarten. In John's comics, the character of Batty was Nolan, John's best friend. In the first three books, Foxy and Batty went on adventures, encountered pirates and fought robots. These stories all ended with Batty and Foxy forming a team and winning a battle of some sort.

In the fourth story, John introduced a new character, Penguiny. Penguiny was a prankster. At the time that John was writing this fourth installment, he and Nolan were starting to form a new friendship with David, our resident bad boy. David's favorite animal was a penguin. There were obvious similarities between David and Penguiny, including a similar wink and smirk. It was clear that John was playing out issues of his friendship in his comic series. It was particularly clear in *Animals in the Jungle #4* that John was excited about this new friendship with David:

Animals in the Jungle #4.

Foxy, Batty, Penguiny all meet each other and now they are friends...Penguiny likes playing pranks. Ooooooh.

But Batty and Foxy do too. And Batty's prank is pulling down a tree.

Penguiny goes to a hockey game. He is going to meet Batty and Foxy. And when they get to the stadium, they get popcorn...

Before the game, Penguiny put a thing in the ice to melt all the ice...so no one got to play!

Splot! Foxy threw a snowball in his own face.

The End

John liked David's animated personality. In class, John and David were very silly and they enjoyed getting into mischief together. This was reflected in the comic book as well. Similar to his comics, John's fiction stories all focused on his social issues and friendships. John wrote five stories during the fiction unit:

Doughnut Head and Spaghetti Head
Strawberry and the Empire State Building
Blueberry Man and Raspberry Man and Pineapple Man
Gold Eagle and Bronze Eagle.
The Attack of the Glush

These stories all featured silly, imaginative characters, involved issues of friendships and had plotlines containing adventures and silly pranks. The book John chose to publish, *The Attack of the Glush*, however, was the most emotionally powerful for John and clearly reflected his strong friendship with Nolan and his deep feelings for his father. In *The Attack of the Glush*, John fought a heroic battle with his dad, Nolan and Nolan's dog Samson. They worked together to save the world against the Glush people. The Glush people were weird made-up people who were trying to take over the world. The following text shows that John put tremendous value into his relationships with his dad and with Nolan, his best friend:

The Atak of the glush

Once upon a time a weird group of people are taking over the world! Both Nolan and John obviously want protection. The glush is getting stronger and stronger. Meanwhile the glush people are attacking people and trapping them in cages with metal bars. If people keep on getting caught the world will be destroyed and there will be no people left.

The people are getting trapped every second. And the people really need to think of a plan. But the glush people are getting stronger and stronger every second too. I'm going to call Nolan. Ding a ling a ling! Hi, Nolan. Can you bring Samson over to fight? Sure, John. All bring Samson over. Thanks Nolan. Be quick, OK? John, all be quick.

Mom said Nolan to his mom. John needs help! Can you drive me over mom? Yes! I will drive you over with Samson. Ya, that's better said Nolan. Mom, drive fast but do not speed.

Hey Nolan, are you ready to fight the glush? Yep said Nolan. My dad is also here to help us fight. Good John, he's going to help us a lot. Ya, he is really strong Nolan. That's good.

Dad lets drive to the cave of the glush people. Ya, said John's dad. Let's go to the cave of the glush people. Ya, so we can destroy the glush people. Wait dad, don't forget Samson. Oh ya, said dad. Nolan go run in and get Samson! I got Samson, said John. Nolan, OK now get in the car. OK. Hurry, Nolan. Hurry. We need to go to the cave of the glush people to fight! Ya, said Nolan. We need to go!

Well then guys said John's dad. Now we have to fight them. Nolan, get Samson out of the car so he can also fight the glush people. Come, Samson come! Arf arf said Samson. I wonder what he's trying to say?

Attack! Attack the glush people. We're attacking you said Nolan.

O, you think your going to beat us in a fight? Ya, we will beat you said Nolan. The glush people are mad.

John's dad destroyed the glush people!

THE END

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“Hey Nolan, are you ready to fight the glush?” “Yep” said Nolan. “My dad is also here to help us fight.” “Good John, he’s going to help us a lot.” “Yeah, he is really strong Nolan.” “That’s good.”

“Dad lets drive to the cave of the glush people”. “Yeah,” said John’s dad. “Let’s go to the cave of the glush people.” “Yeah, so we can destroy the glush people. Wait dad, don’t forget Samson.” “Oh yeah,” said dad. “Nolan, go run in and get Samson!” “I got Samson,” said John. “Nolan, OK now get in the car.” “OK.”

“Hurry, Nolan. Hurry.” “We need to go to the cave of the glush people to fight!” “Yeah,” said Nolan. “We need to go!”

“We’re there guys” said John’s dad. Now we have to fight them. “Nolan, get Samson out of the car so he can also fight the glush people. Come, Samson come!” “Arf arf” said Samson. “I wonder what he’s trying to say?”

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“Oh, you think you’re going to beat us in a fight?” “Yeah, we Jamesl beat you” said Nolan. The glush peopel are mad.

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The End)

In this story, John and Nolan were both excited and anxious about battling the Glush people. They wanted to be brave heroes and they want to save the world. These imaginative plotlines were the exact ones involved in their Recess play. They also clearly exemplified how much John valued his friendship with Nolan. Nolan was featured in every comic and in most fiction stories that John wrote.

It was particularly noticeable to me that John’s dad was the character who saved the world at the end of *Attack of the Glush*. John craved the attention of his father, who worked a tremendous amount. John was sad because he felt that his father was not very involved in his life. This bothered John but he didn’t feel comfortable talking about it at home. Instead, John cleverly chose to relate to his father through his imagination and his father became a heroic character in one of his fictitious stories. Similar to how he cast his friends as characters in his comics, John cast his father in *Attack of the Glush* to connect

with him emotionally. John didn't write explicitly about missing his father in this story but his father was clearly the heroic figure in the story. He saved the entire world at the end of the comic book. It doesn't get much more powerful than that. John wanted his father to be his hero so he played out this creative storyline in his writing. John would not have had this opportunity in a classroom that emphasized personal narrative for the year.

It was interesting to me that John was very deliberate about choosing this book to publish. He explained that he was excited to invite his father to the Publishing Party at the end of the year. His book was about friendship, bravery and his heroic father and he wanted to read it out loud to an audience. Sadly, John's father had to work and was unable to attend the Publishing Party. Despite this sad personal reality, John loved writing fiction. It was his favorite genre we covered all year. He used it as a form of social escapism. He made up plotlines with his friends and let his imagination run wild. Below is an excerpt from an interview where John explained why he had such a strong preference for made-up stories:

It's kind of cool that you could go anywhere you wanted with your idea. You could go anywhere you wanted. I like writing fiction...because you can exaggerate, and have it be in your stories and not be in real life. And you can make your stories as weird or as wacky as you want...and it's a story, its not really true.

And stories about your life are not really that funny.

John's pieces during the fiction unit were the longest ones he created all year. He was also in the top tier for both of these units. There was a clear connection between his high rubric scores and his strong interest in writing that involved fictitious elements.

Nolan

Nolan's experiences during the comic book and fiction units were dramatically different from his experience during the letter writing and personal narrative units. During the personal narrative unit, Nolan was in the low tier and he was in the middle tier during the letter writing unit. His personal narratives reflected his immaturity and his apparent inability to consider other perspectives than his own. His letters displayed a reluctance to engage in social interaction with other people. During the comic book and fiction units, Nolan came alive as a writer and was very eager and motivated to write every day. He landed in the top tier for both the comic book and the fiction units.

Similar to David, Nolan found it much easier to write comic books and fiction than he did when the content of the writing focused on his real life in some way. Interestingly, Nolan's reasons for this were very different from David's. David made calculated and deliberate decisions to not have his writing be personal. He was well aware of the decisions he made and how he presented himself in his personal narratives. Nolan, on the other hand, was socially immature and had not yet developed the overall reflective abilities necessary to fully express his true feelings in writing during the personal narrative unit. David was hiding. Nolan was young.

Nolan was very interested in writing comic books and fiction. Nolan was a talented artist with a vivid imagination. He much preferred that he could "just go wherever he wanted" and that his stories during these two units didn't have to be true. He said that he "got stuck" a lot less and found it much easier to write fictitiously, compared to personal narratives.

Outside of school, Nolan took a comic book writing class in the afternoons. He was very excited when we began the comic book unit during Writer's Workshop and was eager to connect his strong interest in comic book writing to the curriculum. During the comic book unit, Nolan wrote two comics about Super Frog that were in a series. In *Super Frog #1*, aliens attacked the world and Super Frog had to defend Earth. The comic ended happily, and Super Frog's mother was very proud of him. In *Super Frog #2; When He Gets Lost and Found*, Super Frog went for a drive in the woods and got lost. This comic also ended happily and Super Frog's mother came to the rescue and found him in the woods. The last caption featured Super Frog and his mother hugging and Super Frog said "thank you" to his mother. Similar to his letters and personal narratives, Nolan's comics reveal that he was very young. A maternal character figured prominently in both these comics and they both end very happily. Nolan stated that it was important to him that Super Frog was happy at the end of his comic book because he did not want to end his comic book with his main character in trouble. That did not feel right to him. There was a strong connection between the social content of Nolan's comic books and his maturity. Nolan self-identified with the Super Frog character and he wanted everything to end happily for this silly super hero. It was clear to me that Nolan played out some social themes in his writing. The plotlines to these comics were very simple and somewhat young. They featured a curious character who got overwhelmed by conflict and was then rescued by his mother. This was who Nolan was as a social being in our class. He was a silly, curious boy who was often overwhelmed by the complexities of social interaction so he let others make decisions for him.

Nolan loved reading comic books and often read them during Morning Choice Time in class. His favorites were *Calvin and Hobbes* and *Captain Underpants*. He liked the silly jokes and the funny superheroes featured in these comics. He also liked that they were sometimes inappropriate. During Morning Choice Time, Nolan worked on a comic book that he wrote for his after-school class. This comic was modeled after the Captain Underpants character. Nolan's comic was about Baby Boy who fought the evil Captain Doo-doo. This was a very silly story that contained inappropriate subject matter. For example, in one scene Baby Boy reached into his diaper and threw poo at Captain Doo-doo. Nolan thought this was hilarious. He loved being silly and inappropriate in his comic book. The following excerpt from an interview showed how Nolan loved creating a comic book modeled after one of his favorite real comic book characters:

GM: Yeah. Now, I notice during Choice Writing and at home...you have started to make a new comic book?

Nolan: Mmm hmmm.

GM: Tell me about that one.

Nolan: Well, I made it funny. I made it a little funny...because you know how sometimes comics are a little funny? And I wanted mine to be a little funny. And since I wanted to have it be a little inappropriate, I just did it during Choice Time instead of during Writer's Workshop.

GM: And tell me about what goes on in that comic strip.

Nolan: Well...Baby Boy...he fights the evil Captain Doodoo...

GM: Captain Doodoo?

Nolan: Yeah, and he fights Captain Doodoo...and he falls off...and there's this sign, and it breaks and its really funny...because it says something really funny...it says...um, well, should I say it?

GM: Yep.

Nolan: OK. Well it says "My butt smells awful!"

GM: (laughing) That's what the sign says?

Nolan: Well, when he breaks it...before it says "My buttermilk smells awful" but then part of the word "buttermilk" breaks off...so it says "My butt smells awful."

GM: Now, do you like writing about that you think might be...a little bit inappropriate?

(Nolan nods)

GM: Why do you think you do? Because I've noticed that you do that.

Nolan: I don't know...

GM: OK. For example... in this part, you include spit in your story. Do you think it's appropriate?

Nolan: I don't know...do you?

GM: I don't know either...I don't think there's anything wrong with including spit in a story. But I think that some people might...that they think its just gross. Like I think some people might think what Baby Boy does in the story is sometimes...like doesn't he reach into his diaper...and throw doodoo at some point at one of your characters...who is that?

Nolan: Captain Doodoo!

GM: And I'm not sure that...I mean I think that...I think that you're interested in making funny, gross comics like that...and so I think it's fine to have you do that in your comic but I know that some people wouldn't think that's fine. But do you think it's fine?

Nolan: Yeah, I guess.

GM: Why do you think it's fine?

Nolan: Because, well, you know how um, Captain Underpants does it?

GM: Yeah.

Nolan: Well, I...it's really funny...so I know that it must be fun.

GM: So you learned a little about how to write comics in a funny way from Captain Underpants...and you wanted to kind of try it out on your own?

Nolan: Yeah.

Interestingly, Nolan never worked on this comic during Writer's Workshop. He was very deliberate about this decision. He wrote about Captain Frog during Writer's Workshop. These comics ended happily and would never be considered inappropriate. They were about a young frog who wanted to be brave and the main theme was about Super Frog's love for his mother. I asked Nolan about his decision to not write about Captain Doo-doo during Writer's Workshop. He said that he felt that he would get in trouble if he wrote his Captain Doo-doo comic during Writer's Workshop because it was inappropriate. This made me wonder. Nolan was excited about writing a silly, gross comic book story in an after-school class. He also worked on it during Morning Choice Time. I found it interesting that Nolan thought he could work on it during this time of the day, because the

students were in charge of the choices they made during this time of the day. But Nolan did not think he could work on it during Writer's Workshop because of the inappropriate subject matter. Clearly, Nolan thought that certain content was valued over others in school. Even though we wrote comic books during Writer's Workshop, Nolan's real interests were still outside the curriculum. In the following teacher research journal entry, I explored my thoughts on whether or not this comic should be allowed in during Writer's Workshop.

Saturday, March 18

The Captain Doo-doo character is exactly what Newkirk was talking about when he states that some boys would bring inappropriate subject matter into the classroom if teachers broadened the circle of acceptability and children were given the freedom to write about whatever they wanted to. According to some, this form of writing (both format but especially content) would be of low quality writing and is not worthy of classroom space, time and instruction. And this content is certainly not in line with my own interests. I mean, I like cartoons and comic books and all, but I personally do not enjoy the content, and I even think it borders on the edge of what is considered inappropriate for school. However, Newkirk's point is that this content is what is motivating Nolan to write and to practice his skills and be excited about becoming more literate and most importantly, to think of himself as a writer.

I know that took out three Captain Underpants books from the school library last week. Nolan thinks these books are hilarious. Instead of running around and playing during Recess, Nolan sat on the bench with me and read his books to me, laughing constantly the whole time. This raised some questions for me:

- If the school library thinks that this content is appropriate enough for school that they allow these books to be in the school library for children to take out, what message does this send to children if teachers of writing forbid students from writing about it in their comic books during Writer's Workshop?
- Also, if Nolan takes great enjoyment from sitting and reading *Captain Underpants* (so much so that he is willing to spend his Recess time reading instead of running and actively playing) why can't he choose the Dav Pilkey, author of *Captain Underpants*, as a model for himself as a writer? Why can't he write similar comic books if our school library, and our culture at large (these books are sold widely across the nation in bookstores) have them as example of authors? We teach the children to model themselves after authors in order to consider themselves to be

budding young authors, but what we are really saying, when we discourage them from modeling themselves after certain authors, is that some books and some forms of literacy are more valid than others and that we are teaching them to value certain forms of literacy over others, instead of exposing them to a wide range of genres and allowing the students the opportunity to choose for themselves what kind of writers they will become.

The next week, I told Nolan that he could work on this comic during Writer's Workshop. Interestingly, he was hesitant to do so. He worked on it for one Writer's Workshop session but then decided not to and never worked on it again during Writer's Workshop. Although he enjoyed writing silly, inappropriate stories, he said that he did not want to be inappropriate during "school time." I decided not to press the issue with Nolan but I was fascinated by the distinction he was making about using "school time" for more appropriate writing and reserving Choice Time for his silly, inappropriate comics. In an indirect way, Nolan was telling me that although he enjoyed being silly and gross, he also wanted to be a "good boy" in school. I was being as inviting as I could be, but Nolan preferred to keep some literacy interests separate from the official writing curriculum.

Nolan truly blossomed as a writer during the fiction unit. He wrote a 13 page book called *The Rising of the Demons: The Adventures of Nolan and John*. This was the longest piece of writing that Nolan wrote all year. He was so invested in this story idea that he wrote a sequel to this book which was entitled *The Revenge of the Demons*. In these stories, John, Nolan and Nolan's dog Samson battle evil demons that were trying to take over the planet. In the following excerpt from an interview with Nolan, he described these books:

Nolan: *The Rising of the Demons*. And then it's *The Revenge of the Demons*.
GM: And what's the main idea in *The Rising of the Demons*?

Nolan: Well, what really happens is that the demons come out and try to invade the world because they have millions and millions of demons and they need two worlds...

GM: Where do they live?

Nolan: They live on one world but they two worlds because they need more space because its not enough. So they try to destroy all the people on Earth to take over our planet but then one of the demons died in one of the battles. So the next one is called *The Revenge of the Demons* and then the people scare the demons away.

GM: What did you like about that story?

Nolan: I liked that I put myself and my best friend as the main character. Look, John's one of the main characters. Like it says "The Adventures of Nolan and John" in the title.

GM: Yeah. Was that fun for you?

Nolan: Yeah, I feel good including John and Samson. And in John's story, he includes me and Samson.

Similar to John's fiction stories, Nolan also wrote stories that featured best friends fighting a war to save the entire planet. Also, similar to John, Nolan chose to publish this book at the end-of-the-year Publishing Party. Nolan gave the following reasons for choosing *The Rising of the Demons* to publish, "Well, I chose it because I definitely worked the hardest on it. It was the most complicated story idea, and I was the most proud of it. And, well, it's about me and John and Samson saving the planet. I love that idea."

Socially, as previously mentioned in earlier chapters, Nolan was not particularly interested in having a lot of friends in class. John was his best friend and that was enough for him. During the personal narrative unit, Nolan did not write expressively. His stories were flat and linear. During the fiction unit, however, he wrote much more freely and when I looked closely, I noticed that he was also being more personal in his fiction stories. *The Rising of the Demons* was not only about an intergalactic battle between good and evil; it was also about friendship. Not surprisingly, it ended happily.

The final picture showed two boys and a dog. All characters had big smiles and everyone was holding hands. This was just the way Nolan wanted his life to be.

Hunter

Similar to David, Hunter was more motivated as a writer once he could incorporate fictitious elements into his stories. Hunter did not like writing personal narratives. He was much more interested in the letter writing unit. He idolized his brother Michael and wrote letters to all of Michael's teachers and some of Michael's friends. He was more interested in letter writing than in personal narratives but even during the letter writing unit, Hunter only wrote words that he knew how to spell. He loved the comic book and fiction units and took more risks with his word choice during these units. He was interested in these genres and took greater risks as a writer, as a result. The following entry from my teacher research journal, written during the comic book unit, exemplified this point.

January 28

Hunter is coming alive during this unit. He loves writing comics and quickly gets to work. I am so glad to see this because he has not liked writing so far this year. He used to say that he hated reading and writing (because it was hard for him and Hunter doesn't like doing things that he is not immediately good at) and this escalated further to him saying that he doesn't like school and he doesn't think he is a good student. He used to ask me at least twice a day if I thought he was a good student. I always answered in the affirmative and Hunter quietly accepted this, but my response usually did not pacify or satisfy him for long. That's why I am so thrilled to see Hunter excited about Writer's Workshop during our comic book unit. He still has a long way to go regarding his literacy development, but it is not like pulling teeth to get him to started with the writing process. He is also taking risks and trying to spell words that he feels belong in his comic instead of relying on the short list of words that he knows how to spell. This is big for Hunter. He used to sit there and wait for a teacher to pass by to ask how to spell a word if he didn't know the correct spelling. Now, he is following expectations

and is attempting spelling the word on his own first before asking an adult. I am thrilled that Hunter is beginning to take some risks on his own...

Hunter landed in the middle tier for both the comic book and the fiction unit.

Comparatively, he was in the bottom tier for personal narratives. Hunter was much more motivated to write when he was able to incorporate fictitious elements into his stories.

Hunter also liked writing comics and fiction stories because he was able to connect his interests in Star Wars, Super Dodge and basketball to the curriculum. He told me that it was easier for him to make decisions about his stories when he was writing about topics that interested him. Hunter was not only more motivated to write during the fiction and comic book units, he also produced longer pieces during these units. The minimum length for a comic book was 2 pages, which included 6 captions in total. Hunter's comic book *Mummies Attack* was 3 pages long with a total of 9 captions of text. This was the first time Hunter wrote more than the minimum requirement. During an interview, I asked Hunter about this and he said that he was excited about this comic so he decided to keep writing. He did not think about the minimum length requirement or when he had to stop. He explained, "I had to add more writing because it wasn't the end of the story." Hunter was excited about writing during the comic book units and as a result wrote longer pieces.

Hunter wrote two comic books during the comic book unit. The first one was entitled *The Adventures of B.B. (Bouncing Ball)* and the second one was entitled *Mummies Attack*. Both of these comics involved a struggle between good versus evil and ended with the bad guys losing. Socially, Hunter thought deeply about whether he was a good

boy and often asked me if he was good in order to get validation. He often lacked self-confidence and questioned his own goodness. He trusted me and frequently relied on me to give him the confidence he needed. He was usually happy when I reassured him that he was both a good boy and a good student. I noticed that there were parallels between Hunter's sense of self and the content of his writing during the comic book and fiction units. This same theme of goodness prevailing over evil figured prominently in his writing. The following text is from Hunter's comic book *The Adventures of B.B.*

(Bouncing Ball):

BB is training Captain Tire's sister. The room is really dark. Turn on the light saber. I got my...light sabre...

A guy with a pistol is running away...Slam. He shut the door.

BB calls Yodoo. Yodoo says what's the problem. A guy with a pistol.

Bang, bang, bang. He is almost hit!

Bang, bang, bang. That is the bad guys pistols. The bad guys were SO scared... Then they ran away. The End.

Interestingly, this was a common theme that occurred in many of the boys' comic books and fiction stories. Unlike David's comics, however, where evil prevailed occasionally, Hunter's comics and fiction stories always ended with good conquering evil. This was important for Hunter and it showed that although he sometimes questioned his own behavior and inner sense of self, he always wanted to come out on the good side.

I was fascinated to learn that Hunter used writing to connect socially with others during the comic book unit. He also did this during the letter writing unit when he wrote to his brother, his friends and his teachers. To Hunter, writing was a form of meaningful social activity. During the comic book unit, he borrowed characters from my comic book and Robert's comic book in order to connect socially with us. I wrote a comic about a

character named Captain Tire and Captain Tire's sister was in Hunter's comic. Similarly, Robert created a character named Yodoo, based on the Star Wars character Yoda, and Hunter also used this character in his comic book. During the comic book unit, Hunter felt very close to me and often sought out my advice, attention and companionship. Similarly, he was also developing a friendship with Robert and usually wanted to play Star Wars out on the playground during Recess. Hunter was incorporating our characters into his comic books as a way of relating to us and strengthening our bonds of friendship.

Similar to how Hunter realized that his personal narratives revealed personal aspects of his life to his peers, he also realized that he could make a statement about his social reputation through his fiction stories. Hunter desperately wanted to be perceived as "cool" by his friends. In his fiction story, *NBA Dream Team*, he cast himself as the main character: the coach of an Olympic basketball team. To Hunter, it does not get much cooler than that. He loved basketball and often said that he wanted to be a famous basketball player so people would like him and think he was cool. The following is the text of *NBA Dream Team*. It illustrates the important point that Hunter was longing to be cool and well-liked and that he used writing to boost his social image:

NBA AllStars Gathr arod for a Basketball game. The Olympic Game! These pepol are init: Vins Cardr, Micel Jordn, Regy Miller, Kile Korver, Alan Iverson, Chris Weber, Lary Bird, Ricky Davis, Charles Barkley, Isaya Thomas, Shaquille O'Neil. Hunter is the coach.

Here comes Hunter Gates, the coche. Vins Cardr, Michael Jordan Regea Miller, Kile Korver and Al. This is our team. Chris Weber, Lary Bird, Ricy Daviz, Charles Barckle, Isaya Thomas, Shaquille O'Neill. This is the other team. The game starts at the stTime of the sixers. The game is about to hapin. The shoot arowd is starting.

Team West came out. Here comes Team East! The people cheered at the games. Ricee Daviz did a backwards dunk for Hunter's team. Hunter felt good becuz he

is winning 5-0. Sasha Ocavich skors a three for the othr team. Kyle Korver skors a three for Hunter's team.

It is haf time. The score is 30-29, Hunter's team. Haf time is over. Micel Jordin shoots a 3 and it is a swoosh. The crowd cheers! Shaquilles O'Neil blocks Larry Bird! AI fakes Chris Weber and shoots a 3 and he makes it! Chris Weber is abowt to shoot but AI steals it and dunks! It is 38-20.

Hunter's team wins! Hip hip hooray!!!

(NBA Dream Team

NBA All Stars gather around for a basketball game. The Olympic Game! These people are in it: Vince Carter, Michael Jordan, Reggie Miller, Kyle Korver, Allen Iverson, Chris Webber, Larry Bird, Ricky Davis, Charles Barkley, Isiah Thomas, Shaquille O'Neal. Hunter is the coach.

Here comes Hunter Gates, the coach. Vince Carter, Michael Jordan, Reggie Miller, Kyle Korver and AI. This is our team. Chris Webber, Larry Bird, Ricky Davis, Charles Barkley, Isiah Thomas, Shaquille O'Neal. This is the other team. The game starts at the stadium of the Sixers. The game is about to happen. The shoot around is starting.

Team West came out. Here comes Team East! The people cheered at the games. Ricky Davis did a backwards dunk for Hunter's team. Hunter felt good because he is winning 5-0. Sasha Vujacic scores a three for the other team. Kyle Korver scores a three for Hunter's team.

It is half time. The score is 30-29, Hunter's team. Half time is over. Michael Jordan shoots a 3 and it is a swoosh. The crowd cheers! Shaquille O'Neal blocks Larry Bird! AI fakes Chris Webber and shoots a 3 and he makes it! Chris Webber is about to shoot but AI steals it and dunks! It is 38-20.

Hunter's team wins! Hip hip hooray!!!)

Hunter is a hero in this story, which was exactly how he wanted to be regarded by his peers. He often struggled with his self-image internally, or in private conversations with me, but Hunter wanted everyone else to know him as a confident, heroic figure. This came across loud and clear in his fiction stories. Hunter did not have to tell the truth about himself during the fiction unit. Instead, he could portray a version of himself that he wanted others, and himself, to believe. Not surprisingly, it was much easier for Hunter to write and stay motivated during this unit than it was during the personal narrative unit. Out of all four genres thus far, fiction was Hunter's favorite. He preferred

writing fiction stories because he could think of who he wanted to be instead of reflecting on his own actual lived experiences.

Mark

Mark produced very little during the personal narrative unit. He wrote one story, which he fictionalized, even though he denied it. He also produced very little during the letter writing unit. During the personal narrative unit and the letter writing unit, Mark participated in Writer's Workshop because he had to, but he spent most of his time talking with friends at his work table. Mark was not being rebellious or disobedient, although he did have a stubborn side. He simply was not interested in the subject matter of our Writer's Workshop curriculum so far. He told me that he was looking forward to the comic book and fiction units because he had a very elaborate story idea in his head about aliens attacking, a story he wanted to turn into a movie—and star in and direct—when he was older. For this reason, I was curious to see how Mark performed during the comic book and fiction units. Prior to the comic book unit, Mark accomplished very little during Writer's Workshop. He was in the middle tier for personal narrative and he slipped to the bottom tier during the letter writing unit. I wondered if he would be more motivated during Writer's Workshop when he was allowed to incorporate fictitious elements into his stories or if he would continue to get very little work done. To be honest, I was unsure if Mark's stubborn personality would prevent him from being excited about writing, regardless of what genre we were studying. As an overall student, Mark was generally reluctant to show that he was excited about learning. I was curious

to watch Mark perform when the curriculum shifted to a genre in which he had already professed an interest.

To his credit, Mark was very excited about the content during the comic book unit. He wrote a comic book that was modeled after *Star Wars*, one of his favorite movies. Robert and Luke, Mark's two best friends in class, were also writing *Star Wars* comics so writing became a way for Mark to connect with his friends and share a common interest. Not surprisingly, however, Mark spent most of his time talking about *Star Wars* and accomplished very little during this unit. He only wrote one comic book during the two month unit. Despite his interest in outer space and intergalactic battles, he was not motivated or excited about the actual process of writing. In Mark's case, student interest did not appear to be connected to achievement. He was not motivated to write, and as a result got very little done, even when he was interested in the content of the genre. Regardless of the genre we studied, Mark did not produce much writing at all. To be fair, Mark was sick for a week during the comic book unit but I expected Mark to accomplish more during the comic book unit due to his strong interest in the subject matter.

The following is the text from Mark's comic book entitled *Master Slime*:

This Is Mastr SLIME. he has lots uv Jedi pwres.
Mastr Tite calld Slime Head and she retrned the call.
Then Mastr Slime waced back to the Jedi Consil
They arrivd at the Jedi Consil. And in the Jedi Consil they saw DAH DAH
DAH...
They saw Darth Saw. They attickd him. And he ran and ran and ran.
Then thay stopped running. They waced back to the Jedi Consil. Meanwhile...
The clonz landid on the snow planit. The evil Jedi were geting rede for the war.
To be continued...

(This is Master Slime. He has lots of Jedi powers.
Master Tite called Slime Head and she returned the call

Then Master Slime walked back to the Jedi Council.
They arrived at the Jedi Council. And in the Jedi Council, they saw..dah, dah,
dah...
They saw Darth Saw. They attacked him. And he ran and ran and ran.
Then they stopped running. They walked back to the Jedi Council. Meanwhile...
The clones landed on the snow planet. The evil Jedi were getting ready for the
war.
To be continued...)

This story was Mark's longest story to date, but I had expected more, especially since it took him two months to finish it. This comic did not reflect his level of creativity or vivid imagination. In and of itself, it was an age-appropriate piece of writing and Mark landed in the middle tier as a result. Honestly, I was disappointed because I felt that Mark was capable of more. His skills as a writer were fine. The mystery behind Mark as a writer was that he always seemed reluctant to put his ideas down on paper during the personal narrative and letter writing units. This same phenomenon occurred in the comic book unit, a genre that he expressed an interest in. I was surprised that Mark did not write about his movie idea about the planet Gaul but instead chose to write a Star Wars comic, similar to his friends' comics. I understood that he did so as a way to connect with his friends but I wondered if he was ever going to come alive as a writer. Would his confidence and motivation ever increase?

As it turned out, I should not have worried that much. During the fiction unit, Mark started to think that Writer's Workshop was fun for the first time all year. He wrote his strongest and longest piece during this unit. In an interview about fiction, Mark felt strongly that teachers should include a fiction unit into the curriculum because it was the only unit that he was interested in all year long. He was excited about Writer's Workshop during the fiction unit and was even excited about the process of writing his

story. He did not procrastinate or spend Writer's Workshop sessions talking with his friends. There was an increase in Mark's motivation during the fiction unit. In contrast, Mark struggled with the personal nature of writing personal narratives and he did not like Writer's Workshop as a result. It made him sad to know that in third grade at our school they teach personal narratives all year. The following excerpt from an interview illustrated this point:

Mark: Well, I think they should let their kids write fiction because it's really fun for me. Because it was really fun for me and I liked being able to just...well I usually did the words first because that helped me do it faster...but I liked it better when I could think of it when the story was just coming out of my mind

GM: Why do you think it's important that kids learn to write fiction during Writer's Workshop?

Mark: I think it's important that they learn how to because I think it's important that they know how to, like, write freely and not have to think that writing always has to be about your life.

GM: Did you enjoy writing more when it wasn't about your life?

Mark: Yes, definitely.

Mark wrote about his movie idea during the fiction unit and began to blossom as a writer during this unit. I was pleased when he finally took the risk and initiative to write about his movie idea about aliens attacking Earth. Below is the text of his fiction story entitled *War*.

War

This is the planet earth, the Gaulumists are attacking it.

This is the good planet.

Mark was looking at a map of the planets. He was planning an attack on Gaul. But what he didn't know was that the planet Gaul had allies. For instance the Black Sun was an ally.

The armies were training on the last piece of land and the people on Earth were glad they had it. But they were sort of afraid of it so they only let the army go on it.

Also they knew that the bad guys were going to attack.

The people on earth started an invaesin on the planit Gaul. The best kind of ship on the planit erth is the eagle ship. Ther are six eagle ships. The eagle ships hav six laser canins. The laser canins are the best kind of canin. The invaesin had beegun and so had the space batul and they wore not rety. Exept for too ships wech were not so good at fiting and the bad guy ships were dustrud. The good guy ships had one...for now.

(War

This is the planet Earth. The Gaulumists are attacking it.

This is the good planet.

Mark was looking at a map of the planets. He was planning an attack on Gaul.

But what he didn't know was that the planet Gaul had allies. For instance, the Black Sun was an ally.

The armies were training on the last piece of land and the people on Earth were glad they had it. But they were sort of afraid of it so they only let the army go on it. Also they knew that the bad guys were going to attack.

The people on Earth started an invasion on the planet Gaul. The best kind of ship on the planet Earth is the eagle ship. There are six eagle ships. The eagle ships have six laser canons. The laser canons are the best kind of canon.

The invasion had begun and so had the space battle and they wore not ready.

Except for two ships which were not so good at fighting and the bad guy ships were destroyed. The good guy ships had won...for now.)

Throughout the course of the fiction unit, Mark only wrote one piece but he was motivated to work on this story idea during Morning Choice Time, Choice Writing Time and Checklist Choices during the poetry unit. By the end of the year, Mark had written three episodes of this movic idea. Being in control was very important to Mark and it was interesting for me to realize that Mark accomplished much more during Choice Writing Time than he did during Writer's Workshop. He did not like academic times of the day when he perceived that the teacher was in control. Even during the comic book and fiction units, Mark appeared to sometimes be in a stand-off with me. He did not want to write because that was the expectation during Writer's Workshop. I found it remarkable that he produced a great deal more writing when it was presented as a choice.

Towards the end of the year, Mark even chose to write during Morning Choice Time when his friends were playing with Legos or in the Block Area. But, during Writer's Workshop, he was reluctant to write because he was not in control of the choices. At times, I found Mark's stubborn side to be somewhat difficult but it was important for me to realize there was real value for Mark in presenting writing as a choice. As a result, this was when he did his best work.

Mark chose to publish *War* for the Publishing Party. This was his most successful piece he wrote all year. He received a "4" for organization, voice and word choice. Prior to this story, Mark's highest rubric score was a "3," which he received during the comic book unit. He received "2's" for most of the six traits during both the personal narrative unit and the letter writing unit. Even though Mark was a slow writer, and did not accomplish much during the comic book and fiction units, it was noticeable that he was most excited about writing when he could incorporate fictitious elements into his stories and connect his interests to the curriculum. Although I would have liked Mark to accomplish more during Writer's Workshop time, it did not surprise me that he achieved his highest rubric scores during the fiction unit.

Stuart

During the personal narrative unit, Stuart loved writing about his personal experiences because he was able to revisit his memories like catching a big fish or having a run-in with the neighbor's cat. In class, Stuart was a shy but passionate boy who was well-versed on writing about his feelings. He was in the high tier for both the personal narrative unit and the letter writing unit. He loved writing about his own life and his own

experiences. He also did well during the letter writing unit, although he did not really like that there was a socially-interactive component to that unit. When the content shifted to incorporate fictitious elements, Stuart slipped out of the top tier for the first time all year. He was in the middle tier for both the comic book and fiction units. Interestingly, Stuart was the one boy in my class whose literacy interests were more aligned with the girls.

Stuart had a keen interest in animals and cast his favorite animals as the main characters in his comic book and fiction stories. In Stuart's personal narratives, he also wrote about animals but those stories were always grounded in his own experiences with animals. During the comic book and fiction units, Stuart liked letting his imagination run wild and wrote creatively about his favorite imaginative animal characters. During the comic book unit, Stuart was particularly interested in cobras and mongooses. The following text from his comic *Mongoose and the Cobra* illustrated this point:

Mongos and the Cobru

Wun day mongoosee was eeting a brd wen he hrd a kobru.
he nokt the cobru out ov his den. tha had a batl
the batl lasted for 3 yers. Then mongoose inventid a medl chest plat.
then he invendid a heimit and wepins. with thes he sed I can fiyt.
then it was valentins day. mongoose sent a valentin to the cobra and so it went on
and the wepins wre distroyd.
Then they marreid. The end.

(Mongoose and the Cobra

One day, mongoose was eating a bird when he heard a cobra.
He knocked the cobra out of his den. They had a battle.
The battle lasted for 3 years. Then mongoose invented a metal chest plate.
Then he invented a helmet and weapons. "With these," he said "I can fight."
Then it was Valentine's Day. Mongoose sent a valentine to cobra. And so it went
on and the weapons were destroyed.
Then they were married. The end.)

The following excerpt from an interview revealed that he loved being able to write about animals in the comic book and fiction units. He loved being able to connect his passion for animals to the writing curriculum.

GM: And what about *Mongoose and the Cobra*. Where'd you get your idea for that?

Stuart: Well, at that time, I was really interested in mongooses and cobras. They are main enemies. And it's funny how a little rodent is able to be a good match for this gigantic snake who is the second most poisonous snake in the world...

GM: Yeah.

Stuart: The most poisonous snake in the world is the tiger snake. Actually, it's a relative...it is a relative to the tiger snake. They just call it the tiger snake because it's basically the same thing...but...it gets a little bit more poison.

GM: OK. Do you like that you get to...I know that you are extremely interested in animals.

Stuart: Yes!

GM: Do you like the fact that you could write a comic book about two animals that you know a lot about?

Stuart: Yes!

GM: Why?

Stuart: Because, basically, I'm able to share what I know about animals.

GM: Mmmm hmmm. Using your comic books.

Stuart: Yeah.

GM: Awesome. So, what do you share...tell us what happens in this one...

Stuart: Well, the mongoose is in his den, in his nest. Inside the den. And it's funny in the middle and the ending part because...its Valentine's Day!

GM: Oh.

Stuart: And the mongoose...he made all this armor...and then its Valentine's Day and he loves his enemy suddenly...

GM: Yeah.

Stuart: And he says "I love my enemy..." (then Stuart starts making choking sound effects)

GM: And what's happening there, where he's choking? What's he choking on?

Stuart: He's choking because he's fighting with his soon-to-be-best-friend. And so then he sends his valentine to the cobra, which is right there. And the cobra wore it, is wearing it.

GM: Yeah.

Stuart: And the cobra made one for him and the mongoose wore it for the entire day.

GM: Uh huh.

Stuart: And then...they made friends and then got married!

Unlike the other five Focus Children, Stuart's comic book and fiction stories were not more personal than his personal narratives. Stuart was comfortable writing about love and other emotions in his personal narratives. He was equally as comfortable doing so in his fictitious stories. *Mongoose and Cobra* clearly displayed a theme of love, particularly when the two main characters celebrated Valentine's Day and then got married.

Compared to the other boys in class, Stuart was much more adept and more comfortable writing personally during the personal narratives unit. In this way, his writing was more similar to the girls writing. For this reason, I was curious to see how he would respond to the comic book and fiction units. Interestingly, he did not seem to have a problem when the content shifted. Stuart still wrote freely and expressed pro-social emotions such as love in his writing.

Stuart fell to the middle tier for these units, mainly because of the mechanics of his writing. He still relied mainly on inventive spelling and his writing contained many backwards letters. Also, his sentence fluency was not strong. Interestingly, Stuart achieved higher rubric scores in September during the personal narrative unit than he did in February during the comic book unit. In particular, Stuart's voice was stronger in his writing during the personal narrative unit than it was during the comic book unit. Several girls in class also had this experience.

It was important to note, however, that Stuart truly enjoyed writing comic books and fiction stories. The following excerpt from an interview with Stuart shows that he loved writing when he could let his imagination run wild:

GM: Um, what advice do you have for other teachers that might be interested in teaching their kids about comic book writing and fiction writing...because not a lot of teachers do that...yet.

Stuart: They should let their kids really explore in writing.

GM: Let their kids explore in writing?

Stuart: Yeah.

GM: Why is it important to let kids explore in writing?

Stuart: Because then they're able to use their imagination. It's really nice to be able to um, write about...use our imagination to explore. Stuff like that.

GM: Yeah. Why do you think it's important to have kids use their imagination in writing?

Stuart: Because if a kid learns how to do this stuff, and use their imagination in writing, they'll learn how to have fun when they write.

GM: Right. So, it's important to be able to have fun when you write?

Stuart: Yeah. So then you actually know that you're allowed to have fun in writing and it's not just like "Here's your writing: blah, blah, blah, blah."

GM: And do you feel like...you learn better when you have fun?

Stuart: Yeah. I like that you could write a long story and it never had to have anything that was true.

GM: You liked that you didn't have to write anything true at all. Why do you think that was fun for you?

Stuart: Because if you had to write something real in every single book, it would be so boring.

GM: So boring.

Stuart: It would just be writing about what you knew and would be writing about yourself.

This last sentiment was consistent with many of the other boys' responses. They liked that they did not have to write about something true during the fiction and comic book units. I was particularly interested to hear Stuart say this, however, because he achieved his highest level of success to date during the personal narrative unit. He was a very skilled and reflective writer but he also welcomed the opportunity to just have fun and make stuff up. This led me to believe that some students who preferred to write personal narratives would also enjoy a multi-genred writing curriculum that shifted genres throughout the year.

Lessons Learned

In this concluding section, I discuss four main lessons I learned while observing my students write comic books and fiction stories from January to April: Many boys sought control in the classroom in order to feel more ownership of their own learning and more connected to the classroom culture. The comic book and fiction units gave these boys more control and they were more excited about writing in these genres as a result. They not only wrote more freely during the units in which they perceived a heightened sense of control, they performed at a higher level, wrote longer pieces and achieved higher rubric scores. Surprisingly, I learned that even when I opened the door wider to allow room for the male literacy interests, some students chose to develop their literacy interests outside of the structure of Writer's Workshop. Some boys perceived a difference between the official and unofficial writing curriculum and preferred to write about their interests during Choice Time rather than Writer's Workshop. Finally, regarding their social/emotional development, I learned that most boys were more expressive in their writing when they could incorporate fictitious elements into their writing. Because the content was fictitious, many boys abandoned the boy code and made more pro-social statements about what they valued. As a result, I learned much more about the personal nature of these boys and what they deemed socially important during the comic book and fiction units than I did during the personal narrative unit.

The first lesson learned was that during the comic book and fiction units many boys perceived a heightened sense of control which led them to feel more ownership over their learning and more connected to the classroom culture. They felt that the rules had

loosened up tremendously during these genres and they felt more free as writers. Also, the boys, in particular, were extremely excited and surprised when I structured the mini-lesson about violence as a conversation and not as a lesson in which the teacher was telling the students the way it was going to be. They could not believe that they were being invited into the conversation on such a taboo school topic. They recognized that I had the final say but they loved being able to share the responsibility of determining the ground rules. They had plenty to say about this matter and they appreciated knowing that their voices would be heard. I did not expect that my students would feel such a difference in freedom when writing during the fiction and comic book units. They taught me that incorporating fictitious elements into their stories gave them incredible flexibility and this was a great motivator for many students, particularly the boys.

The second lesson learned was that the boys not only wrote more freely during the units where they had a heightened sense of control, but they also performed at a higher level. Most boys wrote their longest pieces and achieved their highest rubric scores during these units because they were motivated and interested in the content. Mark, in particular, came alive when he had more control over the content of his stories. He struggled when the content was personal during the letter writing and personal narrative units. He wrote his longest and strongest piece during the fiction unit. In an interview about fiction, Mark felt strongly that teachers should include a fiction unit into the writing curriculum because it was the only unit that he was interested in all year long. It made him sad to know that in third grade at our school they teach personal narratives all year.

Being in control was particularly important to Mark and it was interesting for me to realize that Mark accomplished much more during Choice Writing Time than he did during Writer's Workshop. He did not like academic times of the day when he perceived that the teacher was in control. Often during these times, Mark appeared to be in a stand-off with me. He did not want to write because that was the expectation during Writer's Workshop. I found it remarkable that he produced a great deal more writing when it was presented as a choice. In a similar way, Mark thought that writing during the comic book and fiction units were like choices because he had more control over subject matter. He wrote more readily and freely during these units because no one was telling him what he had to write about or how he needed to express himself.

In many primary classrooms across the country, the curricular emphasis is on personal narratives for the entire year. Similar to what I was taught as a teacher candidate, many teachers believe that the focus on personal narratives makes it easier for the students because the stories are self-contained. An unintended consequence of this is that many students feel the teacher has all the control. They know that the teacher decides what kind of writing will be allowed in the classroom. My students taught me that they wanted more control of the entire writing process, including topic selection and genre.

I was surprised to learn that the vast majority of the girls enjoyed that the writing curriculum contained many different genres; some realistic and some non-realistic. To quote Lisa during a whole-class interview on fiction, "I think fiction stories were fun because we got a break from all the other kinds of writing and the old things that we do. It's sort of cool that we got to explore a whole new idea, like a dream." Only two girls,

Nancy and Ayanna, stated that they would prefer a whole-year writing curriculum focused on personal narratives. I was even more surprised to learn that Fiona, my co-teacher, preferred a writing curriculum that focused on personal narratives for the entire year. Fiona stated that she preferred to write personal narratives herself and she felt that students would find it easier to write personal narratives because the stories had already happened and were therefore self-contained. I was quite surprised to learn that my fellow teacher, with whom I shared a classroom during this year-long study, would prefer to emphasize personal narratives for the entire year. Despite the fact that the majority of our students were saying one thing, my co-teacher believed the opposite. The student voices were not in synch with Fiona's beliefs (and many other teachers in my school) and this teacher research study helped expose this disparity. This important finding led me to believe that teacher research can be a valuable vehicle to educate teachers and have them hear their students' authentic voices and preferences. This will hopefully lead many teachers to be more reflective and critical about their own practices and the curricular choices they make in their classrooms. This theme is further explored in Chapter Nine but it is important to note that this finding came about during the fiction and comic book units.

The third lesson learned was that, despite my desire to make more room in the curriculum and invite the male interests into the classroom, some boys were still reluctant to fully connect their interests to the curriculum and write freely about their true interests during Writer's Workshop. Mark did this for control reasons. He wrote freely during Choice Writing Time, but not during Writer's Workshop because he felt that as the

teacher I was in control during Writer's Workshop. He accomplished the most writing throughout the year during Choice Writing Time when he was in complete control.

Similarly, Nolan did not think that his "Captain Doo-doo" comic was appropriate for school and chose not to write this comic during Writer's Workshop even after I gave him permission. He felt that he would get in trouble if he wrote this comic during Writer's Workshop because it was inappropriate. It was obvious to me that Nolan was using this comic to work out his own sense of inappropriateness but he did not think the content was worthy of Writer's Workshop time. I learned that there were still some obstacles to overcome, even after I purposely opened the door wider. Some students were being deliberate about not bringing their interests in.

Clearly, Nolan thought that certain content was valued over others in school. I found it interesting that Nolan thought he could work on this same comic during Choice Time because the students were in charge of the choices they made during this time of the day. There was an appeal for Nolan to write a comic that was considered inappropriate but he did not think he should work on this comic during Writer's Workshop because of this inappropriate subject matter. I was puzzled by the realization that some of my students were working on writing projects inside the classroom walls but outside of the writing curriculum. Nolan was even working on a comic book modeled after Dav Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* but he did not want to work on it during Writer's Workshop comic book unit because he believed the subject matter was too inappropriate for school. This led me to believe that it was important to provide opportunities for students to pursue their own interests during Choice Writing Time. These boys wanted to pursue

their own literacy interests and had the drive and motivation to do so, but they were clearly showing me that they wanted to do so apart—or even in direct opposition to—the established writing curriculum and the authority of the teacher. Once again, these boys wanted control. For this reason, I believe that schools should not only embrace a writing curriculum that exposes students to a wide range of genres but also one that incorporates regular sessions for Choice Writing Time into the weekly schedule. This will enable the students to choose what kind of writers they will become.

The fourth and final lesson learned was regarding the connection between the boys' writing during the comic book and the fiction units and their social development. Most boys were more expressive in their writing when they could incorporate fictitious elements into their writing. Because the content was fictitious, many boys abandoned the boy code and made more pro-social statements about what they value such as friendship, bravery and loyalty. They also readily played out relevant social themes in their writing because they did not have to be the characters connected to these themes. In their writing, they could distance themselves from a social issue but still make a statement such as needing your mother's love or naming your father a hero. It was safer for them to make these personal statements when the plot involved animals in the jungle or aliens attacking Earth. Ironically, as a result, I learned much more about what the boys valued and what they deemed socially important during the comic book and fiction units than I did during the personal narrative unit.

Many boys were stoic and guarded during the personal narrative unit, but were eager to write during the comic book and fiction units because they could let their imaginations

run wild. These boys played out relevant social themes more readily in their writing when they could fictionalize their stories and exaggerate the plotlines or characters as much as they wanted. Playing out these social themes through their characters in their fictitious stories was a safe way for them to make comments and share with others what they valued socially while also feeling some protection by hiding behind the fictitious elements. For example, John, who craved the attention of his father cleverly connected and related with him by casting his dad as the hero who saves the world in his fiction story *Attack of the Glush*. Because these boys were not the characters making the statements, they felt comfort because they were not stating outright what they felt. They could make personal expressions of friendship and social commentary without having to own it fully. As a result, they did not feel as personally vulnerable and wrote more freely because their stories were fictitious. They did not have to worry about looking stoic or cool in their fiction stories and comic books. Also, they could incorporate cool and exciting elements into their stories such as violence and humor to maintain their social reputation. It was important for me to realize however, that embedded in these intergalactic battles were sincere themes of loyalty and friendship which the boys felt comfortable expressing when writing fictitiously.

These boys taught me that they believed that writing had real social power. It not only reflected their image but also expressed how they wanted to be seen by their peers. David used violence and humor throughout his comic and fictitious stories to jazz them up and make them more interesting. He included these elements to make sure the people reading his stories would not find them dull. There was a direct connection between

David's writing and how he wanted to be portrayed socially: funny and dramatic. Incorporating violence into his play and his writing ensured that people did not think of him as dull. He knew that his writing reflected who he was socially and he also knew that he could manipulate his image by having his writing be more dramatic. Many boys remained stoic during the personal narrative unit and struggled over what to reveal about themselves because they knew that their writing reflected who they were as social beings. These same boys also knew that their comic books and fiction stories made a social statement about themselves. It was a very important lesson for me to learn that boys were more eager to make these social statements and expressions of friendship when the content of their writing was fictitious. These boys were not afraid to make pro-social comments about life and express to others what they value. They were just looking for the creative control to express themselves in a fictitious format.

CHAPTER EIGHT POETRY UNIT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed description of the poetry unit and to chronicle and analyze what happened when I implemented this unit with my first graders. In doing so, I explain the academic and social issues that were unique to this genre. First, I describe how I introduced the poetry unit, which was implemented in May and June. There was direct instruction on three different formats for poetry: acrostic poems, rhyming poems and poems with repeating lines. Second, I analyze the poems the students created and discuss issues that emerged for the whole class as a result of writing poetry. From the whole class perspective, I scored all the poems they wrote using *The Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers*. I analyzed their writing and their scores to observe how their writing varied by gender and to document how the boys and girls fared. Third, I discuss the perspective of the six focal children. In this section, I captured their attitudes towards writing poetry and the issues that arose as they did so. Finally, in the Lessons Learned section, I bring together all the points of the three perspectives, whole class, focal children, teacher researcher, and theorize about the importance of including a poetry unit into a primary grade writing curriculum.

Introducing the Poetry Unit

The following entry from my teacher research journal describes how I launched the poetry unit:

Monday, May 1

Today during Writer's Workshop, we introduced poetry. Many of the children were very excited about this, especially the girls, but I also heard a fair amount of groans during my mini-lesson. So, I quickly inserted my own personal story of how I didn't like writing poetry when I was younger because I didn't think I was

very good at it. And I thought it had to be elaborate and flowery and use big words, and that I thought that most poems had to rhyme. I then explained that I actually learned to like poetry once I understood it better. The type of poetry that we were going to begin with was really fun and pretty simple.

I then asked if anyone had ever heard of an acrostic poem. Oscar and David (the self-proclaimed resident “know-it-alls”) said they had heard of it but didn’t know what it was. Liz raised her hand and asked if the diversity poem that we performed for the Black History Assembly with our Partners was an acrostic poem. I said it was. Then, given that, I asked if anyone knew what an acrostic poem was. Liz raised her hand. “Well, it’s where the title of the poem runs down the side of a page and the poem slowly spells out the title.” I confirmed that this was true and explained that we had many books in our Book Nook that featured acrostic poems. We discussed a book of winter poems that featured different acrostic poems on each page, each poem had something to do with winter. I then modeled my own acrostic poem, spelling out the word “campus” down the left side of the page.

Regarding mechanics, the goals for my students during this unit were to solidify capitalization at the beginning of sentences and ending punctuation. I explained to the class that every letter in the title (running down the left side of the paper) needs to be a capital letter. This was because every new line in the acrostic poem was its own sentence. Then we discussed ending punctuation. They all knew that sentences must end in a period, question mark or exclamation mark. In my acrostic poem, I purposely utilized all three:

Can you find your way to our classroom?
Are all of the school buildings the same color?
Most of them are gray.
Paths take us to different places.
Usually I run into friends I know outside!
School is a very special place to me!

After I introduced acrostic poems, and modeled how to do them (including illustrating them) I let them get to work for the remaining 15 minutes of Writer’s Workshop. I was immediately impressed with the variety of topics that children chose to explore with their poetry. They all chose topics they were interested in. Lisa chose “Summertime” as the title for her poem. Oscar chose to make up a poem entitled “Beware” about Caesar being decapitated (he approached me to talk about how to discuss this historical act and still follow the established guidelines regarding violence.) David wrote about rockets and outer space. Nancy wrote about her younger brother Avery. Ayanna wrote about spring. Robert, who for the first time all year did not struggle over what to write about, wrote a poem about money.

Students quickly came up to me and asked me to read their poems out loud to the class. This technique has worked very well in the past to motivate students to do

creative work and today was no exception. We are off to an excellent start to this genre. The energy and student's level of motivation is high.

In addition to acrostic poems, during the poetry unit I also taught the children how to write rhyming poems, where the last words of every line or every other line rhymed. Connecting to the students' mathematical knowledge of patterns, I showed that they could apply the same understanding of patterns to their writing. For example, an "ABAB" poem featured rhyming words at the end of every other line. An "AABB" poem featured a set of rhyming words at the end of the first and second lines and another set of rhyming words at the end of the third and fourth lines.

Finally, I taught my students how to write poems that featured repeating lines. In this format, each poem contained a line that repeated at least three times. Liz's poem entitled *Rules* is a nice example of this type of poetry:

Rules

Understanding rules is hard
Restriking childrin from doing things
Lisin to me rules are ridkulus!
Understanding rules is hard.
So who cares abawt rules?
Igsakly wot children hat!
Understanding rules is hard

(Rules

Understanding rules is hard.
Restricting children from doing things.
Listen to me, rules are ridiculous!
Understanding rules is hard.
So, who cares about rules?
Exactly what children hate!
Understanding rules is hard.)

I chose to include this form of poetry in the unit to introduce the children to the concept of rhythm. I thought that a recurring line would give the sense of rhythm to a poem, without having the children wrestle with more complicated forms of rhythmic poetry such as haiku.

I was curious to see how the children would do with the poetry unit and what issues would emerge for my students during this unit, both socially and as writers. I predicted that many girls would enjoy this unit and that many boys would struggle, mainly because many of the boys had already associated poetry as a “girl” kind of writing. They thought that most poems were about “lovey-dovey” stuff and they did not want to write those kinds of poems. Many boys also thought that writing poetry would be hard because there were specific rules about rhyming or repeating lines.

Throughout the poetry unit, I emphasized that although there were certain formats to follow for each type of poem, the students were free to choose the subject matter for their poems. I also emphasized that their poems did not have to be about love or about abstract, global concepts such as freedom. Their poems could be about everyday inanimate objects such as a Game Boy or a sweater. They could also be about fictional characters in made-up lands.

Whole Class Perspective

At the end of the poetry unit, I used the *Six Traits Assessment for Beginning Writers* rubric to assess the poems that each of my students created during May and June. The purpose of this section is to discuss how the whole class fared during the poetry unit. In particular, I look at how the girls fared compared to the boys. In this section, I also

discuss certain issues that were unique to this particular genre, such as the differences in motivation between the boys and the girls, the preference that most of my boys had to produce writing that was not expressive or personal, and the fact that most boys performed at a higher level in genres that did not ask them to do so.

The following charts document how the students fared during the poetry unit. They also provide a comparison between the rubric scores for this genre and all prior genres in the curriculum. The first number in each box is the score for personal narrative. The second number is the score for the letter writing unit. The third number is the score for the comic book unit. The fourth number is for the fiction unit. The fifth number is for the poetry unit. The results are as follows:

Boys

- 1 = Experimenting
- 2 = Emerging
- 3 = Developing
- 4 = Capable
- 5 = Experienced

Boys Rubric Scores
Personal Narrative/Letter Writing/Comic Book/Fiction/Poetry

Name	Ideas	Organization	Voice	Word Choice	Sentence Fluency	Conventions
Peter	2/3/3/3/3	2/3/2/4/3	3/4/3/4/3	2/3/2/3/3	2/3/2/3/3	1/2/2/3/3
Oscar	2/3/2/2/3	2/2/2/2/2	3/4/3/3/3	2/3/2/2/3	2/2/2/2/2	2/3/2/2/2
Hunter	2/3/3/4/3	1/3/2/4/3	2/3/3/3/2	1/2/3/3/2	1/2/2/3/3	1/2/2/3/2
Stuart	3/4/3/3/4	3/3/3/3/4	4/3/3/3/4	3/3/3/3/3	3/2/2/3/4	2/2/2/3/3
Mark	2/2/2/3/3	2/2/3/4/2	1/2/2/4/2	2/2/3/4/2	2/2/2/3/3	2/2/2/3/3
Tim	2/2/3/3/3	2/2/2/2/3	1/3/2/2/3	1/2/2/3/3	1/2/2/3/2	1/2/2/2/2
James	3/2/2/3/3	2/2/2/3/2	3/3/2/2/2	3/3/2/3/2	2/2/2/2/2	2/2/2/2/3
Luke	2/3/3/4/4	3/3/3/4/5	2/3/3/3/4	2/3/3/3/4	2/2/3/3/4	2/2/2/4/5
Robert	2/3/3/4/3	2/2/2/4/3	2/3/2/3/3	2/2/3/3/3	1/2/2/3/3	2/2/2/5/4
David	2/4/3/4/4	3/3/3/4/4	3/4/4/5/5	3/4/3/4/4	3/3/3/4/4	2/3/3/4/4
Nolan	2/3/4/5/4	2/3/3/5/5	2/3/4/4/5	1/3/3/4/4	1/2/3/4/4	1/2/2/4/3
John	3/4/4/4/3	3/3/3/4/3	2/4/4/4/3	2/4/3/3/3	2/3/3/3/3	2/3/2/4/3

Girls

- 1 = Experimenting
- 2 = Emerging
- 3 = Developing
- 4 = Capable
- 5 = Experienced

Name	Ideas	Organization	Voice	Word Choice	Sentence Fluency	Conventions
Nancy	3/2/3/4/3	3/2/3/4/3	3/3/2/4/3	2/3/2/4/3	2/2/2/4/3	2/2/2/3/3
Liz	2/2/4/3/3	2/2/3/3/3	3/3/4/4/3	2/3/3/3/3	2/2/3/3/3	2/2/2/3/3
Ayanna	3/3/2/3/3	3/3/2/4/3	3/4/3/3/3	2/4/2/3/3	2/3/2/3/3	2/2/2/3/3
Erica	2/2/2/2/3	1/2/2/3/3	1/2/2/2/2	1/2/2/2/2	1/2/2/2/2	1/2/2/2/3
Barbara	2/3/3/3/4	2/2/3/3/4	2/3/4/3/3	1/3/3/4/3	1/3/2/3/3	1/2/2/2/3
Karen	4/2/3/4/4	3/2/3/4/3	3/2/3/3/3	3/2/2/3/3	2/2/3/3/3	2/3/3/3/3
Julie	2/3/2/4/4	2/3/2/4/3	2/3/2/3/4	2/3/2/3/3	2/2/2/3/3	2/2/2/2/3
Sarah	3/4/3/4/3	3/3/3/4/3	3/4/3/3/3	3/3/3/3/3	2/3/3/3/3	2/3/2/4/3
Lisa	3/3/2/2/3	2/2/2/3/3	2/4/2/3/3	2/2/2/3/3	1/3/2/2/3	1/2/2/2/3
Linda	3/3/3/4/3	3/3/3/4/3	4/4/2/4/3	3/3/3/4/3	3/3/3/4/3	2/2/3/3/3
Alice	4/4/4/4/3	3/3/4/3/3	4/4/4/3/3	3/4/2/3/3	2/3/3/3/3	2/3/2/3/3

The following chart shows the total rubric scores for the boys and the girls for the poetry unit. These total scores were calculated by adding their poetry rubric scores together for each of the six traits.

Boys Name	Total Scores for Poetry	Girls Name	Total Scores for Poetry
Peter	18	Nancy	18
Oscar	15	Liz	18
Hunter	17	Ayanna	18
Stuart	22	Erica	16
Mark	17	Barbara	21
Tim	16	Karen	20
James	14	Julie	20
Luke	26	Sarah	18
Robert	19	Lisa	18
David	25	Linda	18
Nolan	25	Alice	20
John	18		

It surprised me that the highest total scores during this genre were boys'. I also noted that the lowest total scores were boys' as well. There was a 12 point range in total scores for the boys during the poetry unit. The range was much smaller when considering the girls' total scores. There was only a 5 point range within the girls' total scores. As was the case for each genre, these total scores were used to determine which tier each student was in for the poetry unit.

The breakdown for boys during the poetry unit is as follows:

Low Tier (Total scores under 18) Oscar, Hunter, Mark, Tim, James

Medium Tier (Total scores 18-19) Peter, John, Robert

High Tier (Total scores over 20) Stuart, Luke, Nolan, David

The breakdown for girls during the poetry unit is as follows:

Low Tier (Total scores under 18) Erica

Medium Tier (Total scores 18-19) Nancy, Liz, Ayanna, Sarah, Lisa, Linda

High Tier (Total scores over 20) Barbara, Julie, Karen, Alice

The overall breakdown for the whole class is as follows:

Low Tier: 5 students (4 boys, 1 girl)

Middle Tier: 9 students (3 boys, 6 girls)

Top Tier: 8 students (4 boys, 4 girls)

How did the class fare?

The rubric scores showed that more boys than girls were in the bottom tier. Although the top tier was evenly distributed, 4 boys and 4 girls, when considering the top two tiers, there were 10 girls, every girl but 1, in these two tiers. There were only 7 boys in the top two tiers, which meant that 5 boys landed in the bottom tier. Another way of looking at this is 42% of the boys were in the bottom tier for poetry. Only 9% of the girls were in the bottom tier for this same unit. There were five boys and only one girl in the bottom tier which meant that 83% of the students in the bottom tier were male. Although I predicted that the girls would fare better than the boys in this genre, I did not predict that the results for the bottom tier would be this dramatic.

In addition to the girls scoring higher than the boys with regards to the make-up of the bottom tier, the girls also wrote more than the boys did. The boys wrote 55 poems in total. Each boy wrote an average of 4 poems. Comparatively, the girls produced many more poems than the boys. They wrote 79 poems in total. Each girl wrote 7 poems on average. Only two girls wrote less than 3 poems, which was the amount that most of the boys wrote.

Robert, Luke and Tim produced the largest amount of poems for the boys (6, 16 and 11, respectively) and so the average amount that each boy produced was increased due to the high quantity that these three boys produced. Most boys only wrote 2 or 3 poems.

Interestingly, these three boys in particular had never written much during any other genre. So, shifting genres influenced which boys wrote the most.

The subject matter also varied, with regards to what the boys and girls chose to write. The girls tended to write happy poems that tended to be more expressive overall than the boys poetry. For example, the following poems by Lisa and Julie were very typical of the poems that most girls produced.

SUMMERTIME by Lisa
SoMetiMes I Love Hot DaYs!
Usyoually it is fun!
Mabe I LOVE summer!
More Morshmelows!
Evrey DaY is Fun!
RiDing the WaVes!
Turtels on the Bech
Ice crem on the bech!
Mooveys evry night
Evening wAlkS akk the time!

*(Summertime by Lisa
Sometimes I love hot days!
Usually it is fun!
Maybe I love summer!
More marshmallows!
Every day is fun!
Riding the waves...splash!
Turtles on the beach
Ice cream on the beach
Movies every night
Evening walks all the time!)*

BEAUTIFUL by Julie
BEAUTIFUL fLoWrs
Evrey day fLowrs bLoom
A Gust of wid blos
Undrnth seds grow in to sprots
Teers of Joy
I love fLowrs
Flowrs in the wid

Unbrelu petals covr you
Like love

(Beautiful by Julie
Beautiful flowers
Every day flowers bloom
A gust of wind blows
Underneath seeds grow into sprouts
Tears of joy
I love flowers
Flowers in the wind
Umbrella petals cover you
Like love)

Comparatively, the boys poems either featured a wider range of emotions or merely recounted facts they knew about the subject of their poems. For example, the following poems by James and Robert were typical of the poems the boys produced in this unit:

HOLloEEn By James
Hary goblins gots are wiyt
Ooooo oooo oow a spiydr
Larj and hary
Larj and hary
Larj and hary
Oooo ooo aaahhhh
Eeting pepl DeaD
Eetin pepl DeD on the stret
Nevr haD Ben a more hontid holoeen

(Halloween by James
Hairy goblins, ghosts are white
Ooooo oooo ooow a spider!
Large and hairy
Large and hairy
Large and hairy!
Ooooo oooo ooow aaahhh!
Eating people dead
Eating people dead on the street
Never had been a more haunted Halloween)

MONEY by Robert
Most peopl have money!

Only ho chi men is on some dung bills
Never thro eny cind of money away
Every kind of money has a person on it
You can buy stuff with money!

Money by Robert
Most people have some money
Only Ho Chi Men is on some dung bills
Never throw any kind of money away
Every kind of money has a person on it
You can buy stuff with money!

It was striking to note the similarities between the experiences the boys and girls had with the poetry unit and the personal narrative unit. For both genres, the girls' writing was more pro-social and focused on topics that were happier and positive while the boys were noticeably less expressive and personal in their writing. This finding led me to conclude that most of my boys preferred to produce writing that was not directly expressive or personal. They also performed at a higher level in genres that did not ask them to do so.

Shifting genres also had an impact on motivation. Most boys were not motivated to write a lot during the poetry unit, while the girls were much more motivated to write poetry than they were comic books. Although I introduced three different kinds of poems during this unit, the majority of the boys did not take the initiative to write more than just one poem for each format. Many boys did not even finish one poem for each format.

Shifting genres from fiction to poetry also shifted who encountered success as writers with regards to their total scores. Although their successes varied by degree, nine students' total scores increased when the genres shifted from fiction to poetry: Stuart, Oscar, Luke, Tim, Erica, Alice, Julia, Barbara and Lisa. Interestingly, with the exception of Stuart and Alice, the students whose total scores increased during the poetry unit were

not the strongest writers in the class overall. Although most of these students did not spend the majority of the year in the top tier, including poetry in the curriculum gave these students a chance to shine. Importantly, most of these students did not shine in the other genres throughout the year. Seven of these nine students chose to publish a book of their poems for the end-of-the-year Publishing Party, in which all students selected their writing from all five genres that they were most proud of to publish.

Similar to how the more outgoing students performed well during the letter writing unit, I was curious to learn of any similarities among the students whose total scores increased during poetry. As I reflected upon who these students were as overall learners, I realized that they all performed well academically in structured activities where the formats and expectations were clear. Overall, this group was structure-oriented and liked learning rules such as grammar, capitalization and mathematical equations. Also, compared to structured lessons, these children tended to not prefer activities that were open-ended. This finding led me to believe a defining criterion for success in poetry was an approach to learning that involved an appreciation for structure, format and rules. This finding is further explored in the Lessons Learned chapter later in this chapter.

Most boys struggled with the fact that there was an imposed format thrust upon them with poetry. They did not feel as free as they did during the comic book or fiction unit. They started many poems but then got bored or frustrated and did not complete them. Instead of continuing with a poem they worked on from the prior day, for many boys each Writer's Workshop session was a blank slate. Oscar was the extreme version of this. He did not complete one poem during the 5 week duration of this unit. For

example, he started an acrostic poem called *Beware*, which was about the Ides of March, but never completed it. The first line began “Beware the Ides of March for the dangers to.” Unfortunately, this was all he wrote. The next day he started another poem called *America* that started “The states in America shining like its valiant flag.” Oscar clearly had great ideas. His writing folder was filled with many great beginnings to poems but he never followed through with any of them to complete a poem. He struggled with the imposed structure. Despite many reminders to continue with the poems he had already started, each day Oscar started a new poem but never completed any of them.

The girls, on the other hand, had a very different experience with writing poetry. Similar to the boys’ experience with comic books, the girls found it very freeing to write poetry. To quote Lisa during a whole class interview on poetry,

I thought what was really fun about poetry was it was like being free. It just had to fit into poem words. You could write about anything you wanted. You could do one about self portraits. It could be about anything. You could even do one called “Houses” or “Trees” “Leaves” “Sky!”
I like poems because...like when I go on vacation at Fishers Island I can do whatever I want. Writing poems is basically like Fishers Island. It’s like Fishers Island where I can do whatever I want, except with words.

In contrast, many boys found it more limiting to write poetry because they had to abide by specific rules and formats. To quote David during this same whole class interview on poetry,

Yes, poems was harder. Because what happens is like, what happens with me anyways...I easily thought about the object or the thing that we were going to base the poem on and all that stuff...but occasionally I would be able to think of an ending or beginning or middle but like when I wrote the poem about trains, I suddenly thought that the only good poem I could write about, the only thing that popped into my mind was something that started “Here comes the steam engine and the express” which is what I wrote, and then I couldn’t...I decided that ...but

then it got a little confusing and weird towards the end...because of the rhyming. And the structure of poetry, not just the rhyming part but also the structure, was kind of hard for me.

Interestingly, most of the boys agreed with Lisa and most of the boys agreed with David. The girls found it more freeing to write poetry and did not struggle with the structure of the various formats while most of the boys found it more freeing to write fiction stories and comic books, partly because these genres were in narrative form.

It surprised me that Luke, who had never been in the top tier before, produced the largest amount of poetry in the whole class. He wrote 16 poems. Sarah came in second with 15 poems. Interestingly, the amount of writing they produced did not directly correlate with their rubric scores and the tier in which they landed. For example, Tim was in the bottom tier, which is where he had been all year, even though he wrote the second largest number of poems for the boys. Tim was more motivated to write poetry and letters than he was to write in any other genre, mainly because these pieces could be shorter. Tim often struggled with the minimum length requirement of personal narratives, comic books and fictitious stories. He produced more in the poetry unit than he did in any other genre. Although this did not impact his rubric scores, Tim taught me that it is important to include genres such as poetry and letter writing in a primary grade writing curriculum because some students were overwhelmed by the prospect of writing lengthy pieces. Tim wrote more freely when he did not have to worry about writing a long piece.

The Focus Children

In the following section, I describe both the writing development and the social experiences of the focal children during the poetry unit. Although I mention each of the six children in this section, I do not focus on their experiences equally, in terms of length. I deliberately focus on certain boys more than others in order to discuss the following findings about poetry and boys: Half of the focus boys had lower rubric scores during poetry than fiction, even though poetry came after the fiction unit chronologically. These boys were not motivated to write during the poetry unit and they struggled to find their authentic voices when there was an imposed format for the poetry. Some struggled because of preconceived notions about what poetry should sound like or because they did not feel poetry was important. There were strong similarities between the personal narrative unit and the poetry unit in regards to both content and motivation. Only the boys that were in the top tier during the personal narrative wrote poetry that was explicitly expressive and personal. These boys used poetry to connect to their personal lives in very powerful and socially meaningful ways.

Hunter

Hunter began the year in the low tier. He did not like writing personal narratives. He was much more interested in the letter writing unit. He idolized his brother Michael and wrote letters to all of Michael's teachers and some of Michael's friends. He was more interested in letter writing than in personal narratives but even during the letter writing unit, Hunter only wrote words that he knew how to spell. He was in the middle tier during the letter writing unit. He loved the comic book and fiction units and took more

risks with his word choice during these units. Hunter was much more motivated to write when he was able to incorporate fictitious elements into his stories. Hunter also liked writing comics and fiction because he was able to connect his interests in Star Wars, Super Dodge and basketball to the curriculum. He was in the middle tier for both the comic book and fiction units.

Hunter fell back to the bottom tier during the poetry unit. He also found this genre to be the most challenging. The following is an excerpt from an interview with Hunter about poetry:

GM: What did you...what were you feeling during our whole unit on poetry?
What did you think about it?

Hunter: I...just for me, but probably not for anyone else in the class...I didn't really like poems.

GM: You didn't?

Hunter: No.

GM: You didn't really like poems.

Hunter: I don't really like to write them. Because for me, it's really kind of boring.

GM: It's kind of boring? Was it hard for you to write poems?

Hunter: Yeah.

GM: What was hard about it?

Hunter: Because I couldn't think of a title and I couldn't think about what I wanted to write about.

GM: That makes sense. Poems were really hard for me when I was a kid.

Hunter: But I like that someone taught me that poems can be like songs.

(Hunter sings a song that Michael taught him that is a spoof on the "I Like Big Butts" song)

GM: OK, what was easy about writing poems?

Hunter: Nothing.

For Hunter, there was a connection between motivation and achievement. He only completed one poem during the poetry unit. He was sick for two weeks during the poetry unit which accounted for part of the fact that he did not produce a lot of finished poetry

but his lack of motivation contributed to this as well. Below is the one poem that Hunter completed during our five week unit:

The Pillow.
I sleep on a pillow.
I love it.
I hug my pillow.
I love...love...pillow.
I hug pillow.

This poem is not indicative of Hunter's best work. He did not care about writing poetry and did not put a lot of effort into understanding this genre. The last two lines of *The Pillow* are not even in complete sentences. He also did not follow the directions for this format. This was supposed to be a poem with three lines that repeat. The second and fourth lines come close to repeating but there is not a third repeating line. His sentence structure was also very basic. Each line begins with "I" and was only a few words long. After knowing Hunter for an entire year, I knew he was a better writer than this poem indicated.

Hunter was not excited about writing poetry and he stated that he did not think it was important to know how to write poetry. Hunter was highly motivated to write letters because writing during this unit was a meaningful, social activity. He loved writing fiction because he could let his imagination run wild. During the poetry unit, Hunter felt stuck again and unmotivated to write, similar to how he felt during the personal narrative unit. Interestingly, these were the two tiers in which he landed in the bottom tier.

Mark

Mark produced very little during the personal narrative unit. He only wrote one story, which he fictionalized, even though he denied it. He was in the middle tier for the

personal narrative unit. He also produced very little during the letter writing unit, in which he landed in the bottom tier. During the personal narrative unit and the letter writing unit, Mark participated in Writer's Workshop because he had to, but he spent most of his time talking with friends at his work table. Mark was not being rebellious or disobedient, although he did have a stubborn side. During the comic book unit, Mark was very excited about the content. He wrote a comic book that was modeled after *Star Wars*, one of his favorite movies. During the fiction unit, Mark started to think that Writer's Workshop was fun for the first time all year. He wrote his strongest and longest piece during this unit. He was in the middle tier for both the comic book and the fiction units.

Similar to Hunter, Mark fell back down to the bottom tier during the poetry unit. Despite the fact that the poetry unit was at the end of the year, both Hunter's and Mark's rubric scores were higher during the fiction unit which came earlier in the spring. Also, similar to Hunter, Mark only completed one poem during this unit. The acrostic poem he started, but did not complete, is below:

Harry
Harry likes to play Quidditch
A
Ron is Harry's best friend
R
Y

The rhyming poem that Mark started, but did not complete, is below:

Rebecca
Rebecca is my sister
She likes to eat hair

While he started many poems that featured repeating lines, the only poem that he completed in this format is below:

The Saw

The saw is very usefull
In many ways
The saw is very usefull
To cut
The saw is very usefull

From my assessment of observing Mark during the poetry unit, he had returned to his position of not trying very hard during Writer's Workshop. Similar to his experience during personal narratives and letter writing, Mark was not interested in writing during the poetry unit and as a result he did not accomplish much. Regarding motivation, Mark peaked during the comic book and fiction units. During the poetry unit, Mark became the reluctant, if not stubborn, student that he was at the beginning of the year. In the following interview about poetry, Mark confirmed my assessment that he did not like writing poetry and therefore was not going to try to understand how to write poems following the various formats:

GM: OK, my friend, we're going to start off talking today about poetry.

Mark: OK.

GM: Did you like our unit on poetry?

Mark: Kind of...well, honestly...not really. Well, I guess I kind of liked that you got to decide what you could write about.

GM: You liked that part? What did you choose to write about?

Mark: I chose to write about...my first poem was about Harry [Potter] but I never finished that...

GM: You never finished that...

Mark: And then my...I forget what my second one was about and I forget what my third one was about.

GM: OK. Did you do an acrostic poem?

Mark: Ummm....yes. My acrostic poem was Harry.

GM: And what was hard about poetry?

Mark: For me...well, I only thought one of the poetrys was hard. And that was the rhyming poem.

GM: The rhyming poem? I agree. I think that can be hard. Why do you think that its hard?

Mark: Because I couldn't really think of rhymes that would go with the poem...Oh yes, my rhyming poem was about Saw

GM: It was about a saw. Oh yeah, I remember that one.

Mark: It was called Saw. And I couldn't think of things that had to do with a saw that could, well, really rhyme that well...so I made it into a repeating poem because that was easier.

GM: I think rhyming poems are hard too. So, your acrostic poem was about Harry, and your repeating poem became the one about The Saw. And then did you have a poem that rhymed?

Mark: Ummm...let me think...I forget.

GM: OK. What was easy about writing poems? What did you enjoy?

Mark: I enjoyed just really...well nothing, I guess. I think poetry was really boring. I didn't really feel like myself when I was writing poems so I didn't really want to do that kind of writing.

Throughout the year, Mark struggled with aspects of control over the writing process.

During the personal narrative unit, he abided by the boy code and controlled what others knew about him by not revealing much at all. He remained stoic and reserved during the letter writing unit, because he did not like the personal exchange of writing, even though he could control the audience. He felt much more free during the comic book and fiction units, primarily because he was in complete control of the subject matter. During the poetry unit, Mark became a reserved, reluctant writer once again, mainly because he struggled with the imposed formats for poetry that he perceived to be thrust upon him. I learned that with Mark as a writer, it was either all or nothing. He was either in complete control of everything or he was not going to put forth much effort. I learned that Mark was a rebel who was looking for control. As a writer, he showed me glimpses of greatness during the fiction unit, but during all other units he remained a closed book.

This made me really worry about Mark as a student in the years to come, particularly knowing that in third grade he would be writing personal narratives all year long. While I felt that he needed to be less defiant and more flexible as a learner overall, Mark taught me that some students do not find it overwhelming to have complete control over the writing process. For some students, it's the freedom they've been looking for. It made me sad to see Mark return to his reluctant stance as a writer during our poetry unit.

John

During the personal narrative unit, John was in a race to complete the highest number of stories in the class. He loved writing but was more concerned with quantity than quality and as a result produced many flat personal narratives that lacked focus and depth. As a writer, John was in the middle tier during the personal narrative unit. His personal narratives did not focus on his emotions and they were not particularly personal. Socially, John was somewhat silly, even mischievous at times but he did not reveal many aspects of his personality during his personal narratives. I got to know a softer, more personal side to John through his letters, particularly the one that he wrote to his mother at Halloween. He climbed to the top tier during the letter writing unit. Similarly, I learned a great deal about John, personally, during the comic book and fiction units. He wrote a series of comics about a group of animal friends that lived in the jungle. In these comics, he played out some social themes that he was wrestling with personally. John revealed much more about his personal self when he could include fictitious elements into his writing. Similar to how he performed in the letter writing unit, John was in the top tier for the comic book and fiction units.

During the poetry unit, John fell back down to the middle tier, which was where he started the year during the personal narrative unit. The only times throughout the year when John was not in the top tier was during the personal narrative and poetry units. Interestingly, these two genres are at the top of the hierarchy of genres in the writing curriculum across the country, according to Newkirk (2002). I could not help but wonder that John's potential as a top tier writer may not have been realized if he was in a class that focused primarily on personal narratives and poetry for the duration of the school year.

Similar to Hunter and Mark, John was not interested in learning how to write poetry. In the following excerpt of an interview about poetry, John was very candid about his feelings about writing poems as compared to the other genres:

GM: Do you think it's important to learn about different kinds of writing?

John: Yeah.

GM: What about poetry? Did you enjoy poetry?

John: No, not really.

GM: No, not really. So, either yes or no: did you enjoy personal narrative?

John: No.

GM: Letter writing?

John: Mmmmm....so, so.

GM: So so. Comic book writing?

John: It was OK.

GM: It was OK?

John: It was good, but not great.

GM: It was good but not great? What about fiction writing?

John: Great.

GM: Poetry?

John: Mediocre.

GM: Mediocre. Tell me why you say mediocre about poems?

John: Because...it was a little better than so so, but it wasn't really good.

GM: Why not?

John: I don't know. It's just...I don't know. I wasn't into it at all. It didn't get me excited about writing at all. It was more annoying than anything. It seemed

fake...it's not how I would write normally. I didn't like the following the rules for the different kinds of poems.

The line "It seemed fake...it's not how I would write normally" really struck me. John much preferred to write prose than poetry. During most genres, John seemed to be in a race to produce more writing than anyone else in the class. During the poetry unit, however, he was not nearly as motivated. He struggled with generating ideas for his poems. Once these ideas were generated, he was not excited about the process of writing. This was in stark contrast to John's experience with the other genres, especially comic book and fiction writing. Although he started a few poems that he did not finish, John only completed three poems. This was less than the average amount of poems that the boys produced.

The three poems that John completed during the poetry unit are below:

Isicels

I is for Isicels cold and wintry.

C is for cold cold as ice.

I is for iceing icicles redy to fall.

L is for leving the pipes so they freeze.

E is evreewon in winter

S is for sinking snow winter is over.

(Icicles

I is for Icicles, cold and wintry.

C is for cold, cold as ice.

I is for icing icicles, ready to fall.

L is for leaving the pipes to freeze.

E is for everyone in winter.

S is for sinking snow. Winter is over.)

My house

My house is very safe.

And its very worm

But wen its to hot the elektrik bil is to high.

My house is very safe and my house is very worm amd wen its to hot I get a cold drink

(My House

My house is very safe.

And it's very warm.

But when it's too hot, the electric bill is too high.

My house is very safe and my house is very warm and when it's too hot I get a cold drink.)

My Bed room

My bed room has lots of pitchers. Its very worm. My bedroom has a lot of pitchers and its also very very worm

But when we turn off the lihgt its exstremle boring.

(My Bedroom

My bedroom has lots of pictures. It's very warm.

My bedroom has lots of pictures. It's also very, very warm.

But when we turn off the light, it's extremely boring.)

To me, the actual poetry that John produced was completely age appropriate for first grade. He knew how to spell most of the high frequency words and he thoroughly sounded out the words he did not know how to spell conventionally such as "elektrik" and "exstremle." He began all his sentences with capital letters and used ending punctuation at the end of most of his sentences. This is what we expected first graders to do by the end of the year, according to our school's language arts guidelines. What struck me most of all was that John was not motivated to write during the poetry unit. The race to be the writer who wrote the most was over. For the first time all year, John was not excited about Writer's Workshop.

John did not like writing poetry because "it seemed fake." This particularly reminded me of Mark when he said "I didn't feel like myself when I was writing poems so I didn't want to do it." They both wrestled with the imposed structure of the poems. These boys

did not feel that they could write poetry using their authentic voices. There were specific formats regarding convention and word choice that they had to follow and they did not like it. Not surprisingly, both John and Mark's rubric scores for voice declined when we shifted from fiction to poetry.

Nolan

During the personal narrative unit, Nolan was in the low tier and he was in the middle tier during the letter writing unit. His personal narratives reflected his immaturity and his letters displayed his apparent inability to consider the viewpoints or experiences of other people. All of his stories and letters focused entirely on himself and his own perspective. During the comic book and fiction units, Nolan came alive as a writer and was very eager and motivated to write every day. He landed in the top tier for both the comic book and the fiction units. He found it much easier to write comics and fiction than he did when the content of the writing focused on himself in some way. He was very interested in writing comic books and fiction. During choice times during the comic and fiction units, Nolan experimented with writing silly and sometimes inappropriate stories, such as *Captain Doodoo*.

Nolan had the complete opposite experience as Hunter, Mark and John during the poetry unit. His writing development steadily improved from September to June. As the year progressed, Nolan climbed from the low tier to the middle tier to the top tier. Once he landed in the top tier during the comic book unit, he remained there for the duration of the school year. His rubric scores for voice, in particular, continued to increase as the

year progressed. Nolan wrote the following two poems, an acrostic poem entitled *Spring* and a repeating poem entitled *John*.

Spring
Samr is after Spring.
Peapel love Spring and somer.
Rane hapins a lot in the Spring.
Is Spring two months?
No Spring is three months
Great thing's hapin in the spring!

(*Spring*
Summer is after Spring.
People love Spring and Summer.
Rain happens a lot in the Spring.
Is Spring two months?
No, spring is three months
Great things happen in the spring!)

John
John is my beast friend
Racing down the house to play
John is my beast friend
I like beon lic and being loud with John
John is my beast friend
After lets screm and woch the shows
No won is ever gowing back to ther hows!
John is my beast friend

(*John*
John is my best friend.
Racing down the house to play
John is my best friend
I like being liked and being loud with John
John is my best friend
After, let's scream and watch the shows.
No one is ever going back to their house!
John is my best friend

These poems, particularly the one about his best friend John are expressive and capture Nolan's active nature and his sensitive personality. Nolan's piece de resistance, however, was the following poem about his dog, Samson:

Samson

"Samson is my dog. I love hem very moch.
he is very very codolee. and he codols in a bonch
he lovs are now hawse he things it is very nice
and i'm relee relee locy that he never chasis mise.
I cant bolev hes onle one I'v had hem for prety long
Samsons cind of dog is prete rar he can iven sing a song!

(*Samson*

Samson is my dog. I love him very much.
He is very cuddly and he cuddles in a bunch.
He loves our new house, he thinks it's very nice.
And I'm really, really lucky that he never chases mice.
I can't believe he's only one, I've had him for pretty long.
Samson's kind of dog is pretty rare, he can even sing a song!)

This poem captured Nolan's love for his dog and also exemplified his understanding of rhythm and rhyme. Nolan loved working on this poem and read it out loud many times for days on end to anyone that would listen. He was very proud of his accomplishment and wanted to share this sense of pride with others. Nolan liked the challenge of fitting his ideas into a specific rhythmic format. Similar to his best friend John, Nolan only completed three poems during the poetry unit. Unlike John however, Nolan worked diligently on his poems during every Writer's Workshop session. He took his time and he was very deliberate about his word choice and syllabication as is evidenced in his poem *Samson*.

Similar to his personal narratives, the content of Nolan's poetry revealed that he was a young boy primarily focused on his own self and his own ideas. His writing also

reflected what he valued socially. Nolan chose to write about what he knew and loved: his best friend and his dog. John's friendship and his dog's loyalty were very important to Nolan and there were recurring themes in his writing throughout the year. Nolan never branched out socially in first grade to have a lot of friends. He was often overwhelmed by the complexities involved with navigating several different classroom friendships. As a social member of our class, Nolan preferred to focus on his friendship with John throughout the year. It came through in Nolan's writing that he was more concerned with maintaining and strengthening one specific friendship than obtaining more friends. To Nolan, the quality of his friendships was more important than quantity. In this way, his writing throughout the year, including his poetry, reflected what Nolan felt was socially relevant.

Stuart

During the personal narrative unit, Stuart loved writing about his personal experiences because he enjoyed revisiting his memories like catching a big fish or having a run-in with the neighbor's cat. In class, Stuart was a shy but passionate boy who was well-versed on writing about his feelings. He loved writing about his own life and his own experiences. He also did well during the letter writing unit, although he did not really like that there was a socially-interactive component to that unit. He was in the high tier for both the personal narrative unit and the letter writing unit. When the content shifted to incorporate fictitious elements during the comic book and fiction units, Stuart slipped out of the top tier for the first time all year. He was in the middle tier for both the comic book and fiction units. Interestingly, Stuart was the one boy in my class whose literacy

interests were more aligned with the girls and he performed well when writing within genres that were aligned with the female literary interests. Stuart was a nice reminder for me not to think in absolutes when considering gender and writing. He showed me that some students will do well when writing genres that are aligned with the literacy interests of the opposite gender.

Stuart climbed back into the top tier during the poetry unit, which is where he started off the year. He loved writing poetry and once he understood the formats for the three different poems, he wrote many poems at home in his journal. During the poetry unit, the content of Stuart's poems was very similar to his personal narratives. In both genres, he eagerly wrote about his love of nature and animals. His first acrostic poem entitled

Wilderness is below:

Wilderness
Woods and prays I love you
Islands wetlands I love them too.
Loons and hawks herons too fish in the brook
Deer moss in the bushes valleys too
Eagles gliding high up in the sky
Rain is falling from the clouds
Name of the deer lingers in the air
Eagles hunting rabbits
Snakes in the woods
Secrets of the world all connect to Wilderness

(Wilderness
Woods and prairies, I love you.
Islands and wetlands, I love them too.
Loons and hawks, herons too, fish in the brook.
Deer moss and bushes, valleys too.
Eagles gliding high in the sky.
Rain is falling from the clouds.
Name of the deer lingers in the air.
Eagles hunting rabbits
Snakes in the woods

Secrets of the world all connect to Wilderness)

Similar to the nature content of this poem, Stuart went on to write another acrostic poem entitled *Mouse* and a repeating poem about lightening entitled *Streaks of Yellow*. Unlike most of the boys in class, Stuart readily and eagerly conveyed his thoughts and passions in his writing following the established formats.

In total, Stuart completed six poems during the poetry unit. About half way through our poetry unit, I noticed a shift in the feel of his poetry. Stuart started to experiment with infusing his poems with different emotions. For example, in a silly poem entitled *Meal Time*, Stuart lists all his favorite foods and then falls asleep with his face in his plate. *Streaks of Yellow* is about his home being struck by lightning, which Stuart thought was cool. In his poem entitled *Lunch Bell*, the cafeteria bell takes on an eerie personality and yells at the children. It struck me that Stuart was expressing more of his personality in his poetry than he was in his classroom behavior.

During the poetry unit, Stuart's social identity in the classroom began to take on a different shape. Despite his interest in games that the boys played out the playground such as kickball and Super Dodge, Stuart usually played with girls at Recess because he did not like social conflict. He seemed much more at ease playing with the girls in their imaginative play. He usually played with one girl at a time, roaming the playground pretending they were iguanas or some other natural creature.

During the spring, however, Stuart started to experiment with a few different classroom personas. He branched out socially and started to engage in the boys' play, especially when they were playing baseball or Super Dodge. It became important for

Stuart to be accepted by the boys in his class. He started having play-dates with boys on the weekends. In class, he started acting silly and even a bit rebellious. I found it fascinating that these same emotions were occurring in Stuart's writing during the poetry unit. Interestingly, for the first time all year, Stuart was excited about sharing his writing with his male friends. Stuart was looking for acceptance by the boys, and he was using his writing as a way of showing the other boys in class that he was cool. He started to incorporate silly and scary content into his poetry because these elements were associated with the male interests in our class. In the following spooky poem entitled *Bad Door!* Stuart wrote about what happened to him when his bedroom door came alive and took on an evil personality.

Bad Door!
I pld the Door off its hinjis! It fel on my hed
And that was the end of me.
Kus I was scoldid frim my tiny bruthe Tim to my grat Aunt Pumcin
I had no breakfast or dinr
Not tea time or lunch
And as for my fathr he beat me up!
You know you shoudint do that!
You are much to old!
But but but but...
Oh yes, now I remember! Thay forgot to scold the door!

(Bad Door
I pulled the door off its hinges. It fell on my head.
And that was the end of me.
Because I was scolded from my tiny brother to my great aunt Pumpkin
I had no breakfast or dinner.
No tea time or lunch
And as for my father, he beat me up!
You know you shouldn't do that!
You are much too old!
But, but, but, but...
Oh yes, now I remember! They forgot to scold the door!)

In the illustration that accompanied this poem, the door had a demonic expression. When he was done, he went straight to Oscar and David to show them the pictures and to read it out loud to them. They loved it, which pleased Stuart immensely. I must admit that although I found this poem to be very creative, it left me feeling a bit unsettled. I enjoyed watching Stuart experiment with the content of his poems in order to connect socially with his male friends, but the particular content of this poem caused me to worry about his overall well being. The following entry from my teacher research journal reflects my worry:

Monday, May 22

Researchers like Newkirk and Dyson have urged educators to widen the spectrum of acceptability when it comes to writing instruction. They also warn that teachers should be prepared for what comes into the classroom when children are given more freedom to explore their own interests. An interesting thing happened this week that caught me off guard. Stuart had constructed a poem and we were editing it together because he wanted to include it in his published book of poems. During my mini-lesson regarding repeating poems, I taught the children that to emphasize the rhythm of a piece, they could have one line or phrase repeat itself a few times throughout the poem. Stuart created a poem that reminded me of Edgar Allen Poe. It was called "Bad Door." It was very creative and well written and was about a boy who was being punished for some inappropriate behavior, and at the end it mentions that the door was not actually punished for its involvement. It was spooky and Stuart loved it. The one line that gave me pause was "And as for my father, he beat me up." As a teacher, I need to consider the safety and well-being of my students, as well as supporting their creative sides so I was torn about what this line meant. Yes, it was a work of fiction and yes, it fit in nicely with the tone and feel of the poem. And although I feel that Stuart is incorporating certain elements into his writing to gain further acceptance from his peers, this was completely out of character with everything that I know about Stuart and his family. From my perspective, he seems to come from a very supporting, nurturing and loving family. His mother is a teacher at my school and a colleague I work closely with.

I decided to not let on that this sentence didn't exactly sit well with me while I was editing the poem with Stuart. First, I asked him to reread the poem for me, to make sure that I was reading his words properly. (It is first grade afterall, and it has happened a few times that, because of invented spelling, I have thought that a budding author was saying one thing when really they were saying something

completely different.) Stuart reread his poem, with emphasis and clarity. It was clear that I had decoded his writing appropriately. When he finished, Stuart had a big smile on his face and was clearly proud of his work. I asked him why he liked this piece and he said "Well, it's not like anything that I've ever written before. And it's kind of creepy and cool." OK. I decided to leave it alone. When Stuart was rereading the poem, he did not overly emphasize the line about the father beating him. Instinctively, I felt strongly that Stuart was not being beaten by his father. But what could it mean? And what if I was wrong? These two questions weighed heavily on my mind all afternoon.

The next morning, I decided to pull Stuart's mom aside to show her the poem. I told her that I wasn't terribly worried about it but there was one line that gave me pause. She read the poem and looked shocked when she saw the line. She looked up at me and said "I am completely positive that this is not autobiographical." "Good," I said, "I feel the same way. I just wanted to show it to you. Stuart wants to publish this in his book of poems. He will read his published book out loud and then this book will become a part of our classroom library where all students will be able to read it during DEAR Time." Stuart's mother felt strongly about the fact that she did not want this poem, as is, to be included in her son's published book. Despite the fact that we were imposing our adult judgment on what this poem may be saying, I agreed with this call. When I published Stuart's poems, I wanted to leave this one out.

Over the next few days, I thought a great deal about the unilateral decision that Stuart's mother and I made as adults to leave *Bad Door!* out of his published book of poetry. The more I thought about the decision we made to not include Stuart's poem in his published book, the more it did not sit well with me anymore. I decided to talk with Stuart about his poem, especially the line about his father beating him. I wanted to learn from him where this idea came from and what he was trying to achieve by including this idea in his poetry. Stuart admitted that he wanted to write as scary and spooky a poem as possible, so Oscar and David would like it. I learned that he was writing this poem with them in mind as a specific audience. He incorporated subject matter into his writing that was typically male, but not typically Stuart, in order to be accepted by his friends. I told him that the line about his father was inappropriate for school so could not be included in his

published book of poetry. Stuart understood this reason but did not want to edit this line out of the poem. He also admitted that his father never beat him and never would. I found it interesting that Stuart was still incredibly proud of this poem. He understood that he could not include it in his published book of poetry but he did not want to edit it. He liked his poem just the way it was and he did not care if it would be published or not. His friends liked it and that is what was important to Stuart. A young rebellious writer was born.

During our poetry unit, Stuart made great strides both socially and as a writer. In both realms, he took risks and shared new aspects of his personality with his new friends. There were strong connections between the content of his writing and the issues he wrestled with socially. He did a wonderful job using writing to convey his new social image to the peer group in which he wished to be accepted. He played to their interests and was welcomed into this group with open arms as a result. At the end of the year, it was not surprising to me that Stuart stated that he much preferred writing poetry over any other genre.

David

As an overall writer, David was strong. He was in the top tier for every genre throughout the year. He did not like the unit on personal narratives but he loved our letter writing unit, particularly because he could write secretive, private letters to his friends. He loved the comic book and fiction units, particularly because he was in charge of the content during these units. He liked making up stories and characters and stated that writing felt freeing during these units. David incorporated violence into every comic

book and fictitious story that he wrote. As I watched David during these two units, I realized I could use his depictions of violence as a social barometer and monitor how he was feeling emotionally without David having to state it outright.

Towards the end of the year, David's behavior on the playground became increasingly more violent. Students complained that David was too aggressive and he was being physical with some of his close friends like Oscar. I began to worry and wonder. Was allowing David the opportunity to incorporate violence in his writing during Writer's Workshop having a negative impact on his social reputation and personal development? I was concerned because he alienated his close friends due to his obsession with violence.

By listening to what he had to say and observing his behavior when there was violence in his writing, I learned that David incorporated violence in his drawings and his play when there was something emotionally upsetting in his life such as his mother living in Denver, his best friend Oscar moving to Brazil, his feelings of exclusion by some of his friends, his father working too much. There was usually a strong connection between David's depictions of violence in writing and his social life. The following excerpt from my teacher research journal explains the social ramifications of this very important point:

June 27

Many of the students in my class have expressed that it scared them when David talked about violence, wrote about it, or pretended to act out something violent. Even his close friends were beginning to think that his obsession with violence was inappropriate for school.

Oscar is one of David's best friends. At the beginning of the year, Oscar found it fascinating that David knew so much about violence, war and catastrophe and sought out David's friendship. During the winter months, David became even more obsessed with violent movies and TV shows and he gained popularity with Oscar as a result. Talking about violence and including violence in his writing and play became a way for David to connect with Oscar. During the spring, things began to change, however. Oscar began to move away from David

because of his violent tendencies. During the early spring months, it was noticeable that David was being increasingly rude to many of his friends and was drawing and writing more violent pictures of war and bombings. David also became more physical during games out on the playground like "Cops and Robbers." Oscar began to pull away from David because he felt that David was spending too much time drawing, writing and talking about violence and disasters. It scared him. When he began pulling away, Oscar began to really feel David's wrath. David told Oscar that he hated him and that he wasn't his friend anymore.

After talking with David and observing his behavior for a while, I realized that David was actually upset because Oscar was moving away to Brazil for a year. And although Oscar was coming back in third grade, missing someone for a year is like an eternity when you're in first grade. David had grown close to Oscar and now he was moving away. David was acting out because he was upset and he was channeling his anger in the only way he knew how to: by using violence in his play, writing and drawing to get attention. At that point, I realized that David's use of violence had become a social barometer I could use to know how he was feeling.

I asked David if he wanted to have "a private meeting" with Oscar to discuss how he was feeling. In this meeting, David explained that he was feeling confused because he felt that earlier in the winter he had been drawing more violent pictures and talking about violence to strengthen his friendship with Oscar. But now, Oscar was pulling away because of the violence. It didn't make any sense to him. David expressed this to Oscar and in turn Oscar acknowledged that he was indeed purposely pulling away from David. "I don't like it anymore when David gets obsessed with violence and I don't want to go down a bad road myself and get in trouble. I don't want to be known as a bad boy like David" he explained. Oscar expressed that he used to be more interested in violence but he felt that he had outgrown it. "People grow at different rates" Oscar explained "and sometimes people are just late-bloomers about some stuff. And maybe David is just a late-bloomer about outgrowing violence." Instead of being upset about this, or even insulted, David nodded and accepted this rationale. David then told Oscar that he was going to miss him while he was away. This made Oscar smile and they spent the remainder of the recess devising a strategy to communicate with each other via their parents' emails using a secret code.

Similar to how I realized that my students' personal narratives could be considered windows into self, by using David's overall writing throughout the entire year as a window into self, I gained tremendous insight into his personal life. He used violence to communicate his emotions and he desperately hoped someone would pay attention. I

realized I could use his depictions of violence as a social barometer and monitor how he felt emotionally without David having to state it outright. His actions spoke louder than his words.

In this way, David revealed a great deal more about his personal self during the letter writing, comic book, fiction and poetry units than he did when the curricular focus was on personal narratives. The real impact of David's social and emotional growth as a result of being able to connect personal interests (in this case, violence) with the writing curriculum was truly felt during our poetry unit at the end of the year.

The following is a poem that David wrote the very next day after the conversation with Oscar mentioned above:

NO War by DAVID

War is crazy, war is dumb. If war dozeNt stop I'LL eat MY thumb. Gun's are dangerous and no fun, I'm out to make WaR say GOODBYE. if I fail I'LL Pobably CRY.

Hurray! I did it! Yippy ME! Earth is pecefulk cause of me!

(No War by David

War is crazy, war is dumb. If war doesn't stop, I'll eat my thumb. Guns are dangerous and no fun.

I'm out to make war say "Goodbye." If I fail, I'll probably cry.

Hurray! I did it! Yippy me! Earth is peaceful because of me!)

The picture that accompanied this poem depicted David and Oscar, smiling and holding hands, standing on top of the Earth with a big rainbow overhead. When he was done, David walked around the class and shared the poem with anyone who would listen. This was a social breakthrough for David. Gallas (1998) wrote that "bad boys, like most children, are not naturally mean spirited; they are experimental. They are small, social scientists studying the effect of their behavior on others" (p 44). David was one such

social scientist who experimented with violence throughout the year as a way to communicate his emotional state to others.

In *No War* David not only took an anti-war stance but he also publicly displayed affectionate feelings of friendship towards Oscar. This was in stark contrast to David's behavior at the beginning of the year when he was consistently mean to the majority of his peers. By writing this happy anti-war poem, David allowed himself to be vulnerable and showed his classmates that he was kind and that he wanted to change his reputation as resident bad boy. He broke out of his emotional straight jacket and abandoned the boy code. Similar to his experiences during the comic book and fiction units, David enjoyed the poetry unit because he was in charge of the subject matter. I decided upon the format for the poems but David was in control of the content. Once again, he could connect his interests to the curriculum.

It is important to note that if the writing curriculum had not been able to connect with David's interest in violence, he would not have been able to write about this interest freely, which contributed to his desire to change his social reputation. By being more inviting, the writing curriculum helped David rebel less against the classroom culture and become more interested in Writer's Workshop.

Lessons Learned

In this concluding section, I discuss six main lessons learned by observing the children write poetry during May and June. The first lesson learned was of great importance to the overall significance of this study. Overall, most students achieved higher total scores during the fiction unit than the poetry unit. This was relatively evenly divided by gender.

Nine students, four boys and five girls had total scores that increased as the genres shifted from fiction to poetry. 12 students, seven boys and five girls, achieved higher total score during the fiction unit, compared to the poetry unit. And two students, one boy and one girl, performed the same during these two genres. I was particularly fascinated by this since the fiction unit came earlier in the year than the poetry unit. As a teacher, I assume that my students' writing development will generally increase over the course of the year. This, however, did not happen. Also, of great importance to the overall significance of this study, most students, both boys and girls, achieved higher scores in the fiction unit than in the poetry unit. This is an important finding because fiction units tend to not be taught in schools while poetry units are more common. Most of my male students were more interested in writing fiction than they were in writing poetry and most of my students, boys and girls, achieved higher scores in their genre of interest.

Half of the focus boys achieved lower total rubric scores during poetry than fiction, even though poetry came after the fiction unit. It was interesting to me that these boys did similarly during the personal narrative and poetry units, even though one unit took place at the beginning of the year and one at the end. For example, during the poetry unit, John fell back down to the middle tier, which was where he started the year during the personal narrative unit. These two genres, personal narrative and poetry, are the genres of my curriculum that dominate the writing curriculum in the primary grades. I could not help but wonder that John's success and potential as a top tier writer may not have been realized if he was in a class that focused primarily on personal narratives and poetry for the duration of the school year. When I gave these boys a chance to write in

the genres that are usually not privileged in schools, these boys were more interested in writing and more motivated to write during Writer's Workshop.

The second lesson learned was that many of the boys and girls had very different reactions to the fact that there were specific formats for the poems. Many girls felt very creative during this unit and were more excited to learn the formats of the various poems while many boys felt frustrated by trying to express themselves in writing when they could not use prose. Many of these boys expressed that writing poems felt "fake" to them and they felt confined by the structures of the poems. Many of these girls, on the other hand, had a very different experience with writing poetry. Similar to the boys' experience with comic books, many girls found it very freeing to write poetry.

The third lesson learned was that the imposed formats for poetry seemed to influence my students' rubric scores for voice in particular. Voice scores for many students, both boys and girls, went down when we shifted from comic book and fiction to poetry. This made sense to me because these students felt somewhat restricted by the formats they had to follow for each of the poems. Therefore, their voices were not as free or genuine. Their voices during the poetry unit seemed more flat than their voices many students developed in the fiction unit. As John stated, "It's not how I would write normally."

Interestingly, this seemed to influence the boys' motivation to produce while it did not seem to influence the girls' motivation to produce. Some boys expressed that it was difficult for them to write poetry because the formats were not aligned with their genuine voices as writers. For the boys, especially for those boys who sought more control over

their learning, voice and motivation were connected. They did not want to write when they had to follow formats they were not interested in or did not understand.

With the exception of Nolan, only the boys who were in the top tier during the personal narrative wrote poetry that was personal and expressive. These boys used poetry to connect to their personal lives in very powerful and socially meaningful ways. It is important to note that Nolan had the complete opposite experience of Hunter, Mark, John and many other boys in class during the poetry unit. Nolan's writing development steadily improved from September to June. His scores did not decline during the poetry unit. As the year progressed, Nolan climbed from the low tier to the middle tier to the top tier. Once he landed in the top tier during the comic book unit, he remained there for the duration of the school year. His rubric scores for voice, in particular, continued to increase as the year progressed. This was an important finding because it taught me that although there were similarities in who encountered success in the personal narrative and poetry units, it was possible for some students to succeed in one without encountering success in the other. Not every child who struggled with personal narrative struggled with the poetry unit. These two genres that tend to dominate the writing curriculum in classrooms across the country allow different students the opportunity to shine.

The fourth lesson learned involved an analysis of the learning styles of the nine students whose total scores increased during the poetry unit. Nine students achieved higher total scores when the curriculum shifted from the fiction unit to the poetry. Seven of these nine students chose to publish a book of their poems for the end-of-the-year Publishing Party, in which all students selected their writing from all five genres that they

were most proud of to publish. This phenomenon of who encountered success did not seem to be a gender issue during the poetry unit since this group included four boys and five girls. Instead of gender, success seemed to be connected to the students' approach to learning. As overall learners, these nine students were rules-oriented and performed well in activities where structure and format were clear and emphasized.

At Taylor Academy, in an attempt to understand the different learning styles of the children we taught, our report card featured a section called "Approach to Learning." In this section, we reported on how well each child followed directions, stayed on task, approached tasks in an organized manner, worked independently, was self-directed and approached tasks with flexibility. We also commented on whether students responded well to open-ended activities or to lessons that had clear structures, guidelines and expectations. Some students, like Mark, did not respond well to lessons in which there were specific structures and formats to follow. A typical first grade example of a structured literacy lesson is one where children learned about an individual word family (such as the "at" word family) and then had to peruse the alphabet to find how many words are in that family. Students learn to start with the beginning of the alphabet and move towards the end, writing down as many words that fit into this family such as bat, cat and fat. It is a structured activity because the students learn a strategy and then follow it. While we acknowledge that there is not only one strategy that can be used to complete the lesson, students that are rules and structure-oriented tend to respond well to these types of lessons. These structure-oriented students found freedom in the rules and formats because they provided clarity in expectation for them. Responding well to

formats and following rules was an integral part of their approach to learning. They knew that if they followed the formats they were meeting expectations. These nine students that moved up a tier during the poetry unit responded well to the various formats of the poems. Interestingly, these nine students were all structure-oriented, according to their "Approach to Learning" sections on their Taylor Academy report cards for pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten and first grade. Comparatively, these students did not respond as well to more open-ended learning activities. Writing during each of the other five genres throughout the year was more open-ended than it was during the poetry unit.

This was similar to the way that the socially outgoing students did well during the letter writing unit. The structure-oriented students did well in the poetry unit. What this suggests is that learning to write involves many different aspects of the self including gender, social disposition and one's approach to learning. Shifting genres enabled me to see many different aspects of my students and allowed my students to encounter success as writers in different ways. This theory is further explored in Chapter Nine but it is important to note that this finding was realized during the poetry unit.

The fifth lesson has to do with my role as teacher, especially at times when students brought literacy interests into the classroom that were inappropriate or indicative that something was troubling in their personal lives. As noted in previous chapters, Writing Workshop theory has evolved out of the process approach to writing which encompasses the expressivist theory of composition. According to the expressivist perspective, writing is essentially an extension of individual expression which incorporates self-discovery and the creative process (Johns, 1990.) Students work to become fluent writers by having the

power and control over their own writing process, choosing and experimenting with writing topics pertaining to their own interests. A main goal for all writers, according to the process approach, is to use the written word to help see themselves as creators of self expression and to practice aspects of independent decision-making.

As a teacher, I love this aspect of Writer's Workshop but I worried a few times throughout the year about the content that my students explored in their writing. Even though they were expressing themselves, sometimes I felt the content of their writing was inappropriate or even alarming. For example, because the content of Stuart's scary poem entitled *Bad Door!* was so different from anything else he had written throughout the year, I wondered about why he was expressing these thoughts and about the current status of the relationship that Stuart had with his father. As it turned out, Stuart's relationship with his father continued to be loving and supporting, but as a responsible educator, I felt responsible for exploring the issue with him and his parents in order to ensure that he was simply writing a spooky poem to gain acceptance from his peers. Similarly, because David consistently incorporated violence into his writing, I also wondered about his emotional well being. Over time, I came to realize that I could use David's violent writing as a social barometer for him. This led me to believe that when teachers open the door wider to the literacy club, students don't just bring their interests in. Under a broader curriculum, the students bring more of themselves into Writer's Workshop and share more aspects of themselves socially in their writing. The children are not as limited by what they can write and how they can express and share themselves. This deepens the manner in which children can connect with the classroom culture and the curriculum but

it also can heighten the responsibility that teachers have to make sure their students are safe and healthy. This theory and the important social role a teacher can play when students are encouraged to bring their own interests into Writer's Workshop are further explored in Chapter Nine.

Finally, the poetry unit helped make it clear that in different ways each genre provided support and scaffolding for some students while it limited others. In schools, there is much talk about the theory that every child has a unique perspective and approach to learning. Each child has his/her own learning style and it is the teacher's responsibility to provide balance in the classroom so that the many different kinds of learners are able to encounter success in school. For example, students perform differently in different contexts. Some are more comfortable speaking in front of a group while others are more comfortable working independently. In whole group conversations, some students need prompting and teacher support in order to express themselves while others speak freely and openly on their own accord. Other students feel more limited when working in small groups and need scaffolding provided by the teacher such as strategies for negotiation. Thus, it is important to provide experiences where students work individually, with partners, in small groups and in whole groups.

With writing, however, students do not typically encounter a varied experience regarding the content of the curriculum. As the writing genres shifted throughout the year, I began to realize that the content of each genre provided scaffolding and support for some students while it seemed to limit others. For example, Lisa felt as free as if she were on vacation during the poetry unit and required very little support from me during

this unit. John, on the other hand, did not like writing poetry because “it seemed fake.” He wrestled with the imposed structure of the poems and did not like this unit because he could not figure out how to write using his authentic voice. There were specific formats regarding convention and word choice that he had to follow and he did not like it. John needed a lot of teacher support during this unit. He felt limited by the same genre that gave Lisa such freedom. John and Lisa had very different approaches to learning.

In this way, genre is similar to group dynamics (whole group, working in pairs, etc) in that they both influence learning. Mark felt stoic during the personal narrative but came alive during the fiction unit. Linda was very social and loved the letter writing unit but froze during the comic book unit and did not want to come to school because she did not think she was a good writer during this unit. Each of the 23 students in my class were unique in their perspective and their approach to learning. They needed different things during each genre in order to continue to grow and encounter success as learners. It was important for me to realize by observing my students write throughout the year, that each genre provided support for some while it limited others. In other words, each genre in the writing curriculum was not “generic” meaning that it was not characteristic of the whole group or class. Certain kinds of learners landed in the top tier for each genre. While it was important for me to reflect upon the common characteristics of the students who did encounter success within each genre, it was also important to shift genres throughout the year to give opportunities for a variety of learners to succeed.

It is important for teachers to provide many varied and diverse learning opportunities so that the largest possible number of students in their classrooms can experience success.

I am beginning to realize that it is better to have students experience success during a few of the genres in a writing curriculum—and encounter a relatively lower level of success and struggle but try their best during other genres—instead of providing a curriculum that focuses on one or two genres for the duration of the school year. An entire curricular focus on one or two genres leads to a smaller number of students—or a specific group of students—who think of themselves as good writers. Instead, I believe in providing the students with a curriculum that shifts genres so more students have the opportunity to shine. I especially believe this curricular balance is imperative in the primary grades when children are just beginning to consider themselves to be writers.

CHAPTER NINE WORKING THE DIALECTIC

I began this study by asking questions about what a classroom teacher could do about the current gender gap that exists in writing. According to the U.S. Department of Education report, *The Condition of Education 1997*, females of all ages have outscored males in writing proficiency for the last thirty years. This report states that girls are approximately one and a half years ahead of boys in reading and writing competency. This advantage exists at all levels (Gurian, 2001). Also, according to recent PIRLS scores released during the course of this study, girls score an average of 10 points higher than boys on reading literacy scales. Recent PIRLS scores indicate that this gender literacy gap is an international phenomenon with girls outperforming boys on literacy scales world-wide, not just in the United States. (Retrieved February 18, 2008, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008>).

In an attempt to learn what I could do to address the ongoing gender gap in writing, I broadened the writing curriculum in my first grade classroom to include genres that are appealing to the differing literacy interests of both genders. This study provides a rich and detailed look into practice and described the varied experiences my first graders had with this writing curriculum.

What does all this mean? Where do we go from here?

The previous four chapters have provided an in depth look at each of the genres covered in the writing curriculum I implemented in my first grade classroom: personal narrative, letter writing, comic book writing, fiction writing and poetry. In these chapters, I reported on the day- to-day occurrences during Writer's Workshop,

documented the writing development of my students and examined their beliefs, attitudes and opinions about writing. In these chapters, I stayed close to the data of practice and described the richness of the classroom culture and how it changed as my students experimented with new ways of writing. Together, these chapters provide an answer to the main research question of this study: What happens when a classroom teacher alters the writing curriculum to make room for more “male” interests and provides learning opportunities for these interests to develop?

In short, I learned that genre influences writing proficiency and student’s attitudes towards writing. The students in my class had different literacy interests and differed from one another in which genres they were motivated to write. When the curriculum shifted genres, there were shifts in which students were excited about writing, and shifts regarding which students were in the top tier. Also, during certain genres when the curricular emphasis was not personal, many students who were reluctant to write personal narratives opened up and made social statements about what they value. In chapters five through eight, I analyzed the experience of my 23 first graders with the writing curriculum and theorize about the importance of a multi-genred writing curriculum. I conclude that a multi-genred curriculum not only teaches students that there are multiple purposes, formats and audiences for writing, it allows students with differing literacy interests various opportunities to enjoy and encounter success in writing at school.

This final chapter represents a deliberate shift in focus. In this chapter, I step back from the data and theorize, on a more general level, about what I learned from my students and this study about first graders learning to write in different genres. Two main

points emerged as a result of studying my own practice. The first point is that learning to write is a complex social process that involves many aspects of student identity intersecting with specific requirements of each particular genre in the writing curriculum. The second point is that the classroom culture influences writing development because it is the social context in which students learn to write. These two main points contribute to the overall importance of offering a writing curriculum that offers different genres. Also, I discuss how teacher research can be used to facilitate change in schools.

Teacher researchers provide both the research community and fellow teachers with a unique lens into the classroom because they are simultaneously constructing practice and constructing knowledge and research. Teacher researchers provide a view from within the classroom—a genuinely emic perspective—by combining inquiry and analysis with action. By definition, teacher researchers “work the dialectic” between research and practice, which Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2004) describe as follows:

By dialectic, we refer to the reciprocal, recursive, and symbiotic relationships of research and practice, analysis and action, inquiry and experience, theorizing and doing and being researchers and practitioners as well as the dialectic of generating local knowledge of practice while making that knowledge accessible and usable in other contexts and thus helping to transform it into public knowledge. When we “work the dialectic” there are not distinct moments where we are only researchers or only practitioners. Rather, these activities and roles are intentionally blurred. By “working” we mean capitalizing on, learning from, and mining the dialectic as a particularly rich source for new knowledge. (p 635.)

Throughout this year-long study of Writer’s Workshop in my own first grade classroom, there were not distinct moments where I was only a teacher or only a researcher. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle explain, I intentionally blurred these two roles all year long. I wore both hats while I researched gendered literacy interests, created the curriculum,

planned and executed lessons, observed my students writing, analyzed and scored their writing, and interviewed them about their opinions and performance during each genre. I knew my students well while I also analyzed and critiqued the experiences they had as budding writers. I interacted with them socially and was their guide on both academic and personal fronts while I also theorized the importance of including a wide array of genres in a writing curriculum by analyzing what happened when I did so in my own classroom. In short, I researched a classroom community in which I was both an active agent and participant. As a member of the community, I co-constructed knowledge with the students and produced research that stemmed directly from my own practice and experience.

By playing both roles and “working the dialectic,” I not only changed the experiences my students had with Writer’s Workshop and within the classroom culture, I also changed how I thought about my own work as a teacher of writing. In this chapter I explain how this study broadened my understanding of the complex social processes involved when young children learn to write. I also analyze the classroom implications of knowing children socially through their writing. At the end of this chapter, I discuss the power teacher research has and the role it can play in schools.

Towards the end of the school year described in this study, I took stock of how the class was doing with regards to their own attitudes towards writing overall, and I reflected upon and generalized about the experiences my students had with this year-long writing curriculum. The following journal entry shows my understanding of the

importance of providing a broad and balanced writing curriculum to my students as I reflected upon their growth as writers throughout the course of the year:

Sunday, May 21

As we head towards the end of the year, I truly believe that my children are in a good spot with regards to writing. All of them view themselves as writers. Some of them came into the classroom already knowing how to express themselves using the written word, others avoided it like the plague until they realized that writing was something that was not going to go away. But now, all of them, even the ones that struggled at the beginning of the year (like Hunter and Tim) are invested in the writing process. I began this project trying to create a writing program that offers many genres so that my students could realize at an early age (and as they were just learning the skills of sounding out words and expressing their thoughts in sentences) that there are multiple purposes and many different formats for writing. And that just because you are not successful when experimenting with a particular genre (or as successful as you were with other genres) or because you aren't particularly interested in a genre, that does not mean that you are not good at writing. Writing can (and should) be a very broad field. If our goal as educators is to get our students literate and proficient in writing, it shouldn't matter which genre they practice in. Or at least it shouldn't matter as much as it currently does. We send a message to our students about what good writing "should be" when we place such a strong emphasis on certain genres. I believe that a student's interest level is strongly connected to how motivated he or she will be to experiment, take risks, and hopefully succeed in an academic area. My students have a wide range of literacy interests this year and at some point or another, every student enjoyed further developing these interests as they strengthened their voices as writers and acquired the age appropriate skills.

Hunter loved our unit on letter writing. Mark, even though he had solid writing skills, struggled with letter writing. He didn't want to write to anyone. He wanted to make stuff up and engage his active imagination. He tried to do this with his personal narrative story, and was excited to open the flood gates during the fiction unit. David loved letter writing, and developing new social relationships with people (children and adults alike) throughout the school. He also loved comic book writing and fiction writing. Stuart loved personal narratives, didn't love letter writing because of the socially-interactive component, but soared again during the poetry unit. James experienced the greatest amount of success with personal narrative. John, although strong in all genres, loved fiction and comic book writing. And Nolan took off with fiction writing. He hasn't stopped writing fiction. He has developed other stories and writes them at

home, during Morning Choice Time, and even brings his fiction stories outside to recess to keep writing.

I would still say that, overall, the skill set of the girls is stronger than the boys, and I don't know how much to attribute that to the notion that developmentally girls are ahead of boys at this age group. Alice and Linda wrote books that they have chosen to publish that are over 20 pages long. Nolan's fiction story is the only boy's story that comes anywhere close to being as lengthy. But, I would not say that the girl's level of interest exceeds the boys' interest level in my class. I think it's pretty well balanced. By the end of the year, there wasn't anyone in my class who hated writing. The high students and the low students alike enjoy the process of exploring their own interests while continuing to grow as writers.

I believe that much of this is due to the fact that my students experienced a broad curriculum that focused on many different genres. As a result we headed in a variety of directions this year during Writer's Workshop. We covered a lot of ground and I believe doing so enabled all of my students to become interested and motivated to take risks at certain times throughout the year. Even the comic book writing unit, which was a struggle for some to get through, showed my students that they could explore and take risks and learn something about how comic book writing has similarities and differences to other kinds of writing. I have learned that many of the children in my class are differently literate and I believe I helped the class at large develop as writers by diversifying the curricular emphasis. Furthermore, while I acknowledge that every batch of students is different, this year's group is much further in their skill set at the end of the year than many prior first grade classes I have taught. More noticeable than that, however, is their willingness to write, explore, and create. Everyone in the class is launched!

As I reflected upon the year, it was striking to me that the struggles and successes with the different genres of the writing curriculum were different for different students. I started this study assuming that gender played a major role in how students take advantage of opportunities to learn to write in schools. I assumed that boys and girls had different literacy interests and that curriculum plays a major role in motivating students to write. Now that this study is concluded, it is important to note that I still believe this to be true, but I have come to realize that gender is only one piece to the puzzle. In the

following section, I theorize about the complex social processes involved when young children learn to write.

What's Really Involved When Young Children Learn to Write?

As previously mentioned, Writer's Workshop theory evolved out of the process approach to writing, which is based on the expressivist theory of composition. According to this theory, writing is important because it helps students develop an author's voice and learn that they can express themselves using the written word. From the expressivist perspective, writing is essentially an extension of individual expression which incorporates self-discovery and the creative process (Johns, 1990). Students work to become fluent writers by having power and control over their own writing process, choosing and experimenting with writing topics pertaining to their own interests. Graves (1983) explains that giving children choice and ownership over the writing topic is a driving force behind Writer's Workshop theory. He asserts that children learn through making decisions. Students search their lives and interests, make a choice, and write. Writers who do not learn to choose topics wisely lose out on the strong link between voice and subject. They do not develop a strong voice in their writing because they are not writing about topics in which they are truly vested. Developing and establishing one's voice as a writer is a crucial part of the craft of writing, according to Graves' approach to writing instruction. Voice starts with choice of the topic. Writers who learn to choose topics well make the most significant growth in both information and skills at the point of best topic. With the best topics, children exercise strongest control, establish ownership, and with ownership, comes pride in the piece (Graves, 1983). Writer's

Workshop theory “sets the stage for writing as an ongoing lifetime skill with multiple audiences and multiple purposes” (Hughley & Slack, 2001, p 4).

As a teacher, I am an advocate for Writer’s Workshop theory and believe in the fundamentals of the expressivist theory of composition. Children should learn to write because it is an important social mode of communication and expression. As a teacher candidate, I learned to teach writing by placing a major curricular emphasis on personal narrative. As I gained experience as a teacher of writing, however, I began to question the role genre plays in developing young writers of both genders. I wondered whether the dominant curricular emphasis on personal narrative was limiting or inhibiting to some of my male students.

I agree with Hughley and Slack’s claim that writing is an “ongoing lifetime skill with multiple audiences and multiple purposes” (Hughley and Slack, 2001, p 4). and for this reason, I realized that a Writer’s Workshop focus on personal narratives for a whole year is limited, and that students learn that writing is only about reflecting on and writing about their own lives. I also realized that in schools, we don’t necessarily teach children to write. Instead, we teach them to write specific genres for particular purposes and audiences. If students experience a curriculum focused only on personal narratives, they come to believe that good writers write about their own lives. Clearly, as adults, we know that writing is a much broader field but we are not teaching this to our students in the primary grades. These realizations contributed to my desire to teach my students about other genres, in addition to personal narrative.

I decided to broaden the writing curriculum to expose my first graders to multiple genres of writing and work the dialectic between research and practice. As a result, while my research and my experience confirmed the philosophical underpinnings of Writer's Workshop, I came to reject its traditional model because a decade of experience in the classroom has taught me that some of my female students benefitted from the scaffolding and support that an emphasis on personal narratives provided while some of my male students felt restricted as writers when writing about themselves. Over time, I came to believe that the traditional Writer's Workshop model—all personal narratives all the time—was not fair for all students. As a teacher of both boys and girls, I felt I owed it to my students to teach them more about the multiple purposes and audiences for writing so that as they grew and matured socially, they could realize that writing could be connected to their own lives outside of school in many ways. I wanted to provide opportunities for all students to realize that writing is actually an extension of individual expression and I was curious to see how my students would express themselves under a broad writing curriculum.

As indicated in Chapter Two, some of the research on writing (e.g. Anderson, 2003; Newkirk, 2002; Graham, 2001; Peterson, 2001; Abbott, 2000; Peterson, 2000; Harris, 1998; Hunt 1985) suggests that boys and girls have differing literacy interests and prefer to write about very different topics. These researchers argue for a broad writing curriculum that allows for boys' and girls' varied literacy interests to be developed.

In particular, Thomas Newkirk's work (2002) on boys' writing preferences provides an alternative approach to the traditional Writer's Workshop model. He states that

gender is an important social component to consider when creating a writing curriculum because boys and girls have different literacy interests. In *Misreading Masculinity; Boys, Literacy and Popular Culture*, Newkirk argues that by placing such a large emphasis on personal narratives, the construction of literacy is feminized in schools. As a result, boys are disadvantaged and disengage from the writing curriculum. He explains that this problem will not be resolved until schools are self-critical about what counts and what does not count as valid literacy activity. Newkirk's work greatly influenced the decisions I made regarding redesign of the writing curriculum and the design of this study. In a sense, Newkirk's perspective can be thought of as one that acquired and built off of a feminist perspective because he theorized that boys and girls have different interests and take different journeys as they become literate. Interestingly, however, in taking this feminist perspective, Newkirk does not focus primarily on girls. Instead, he focuses on the experience of boys and claimed that they are disadvantaged by a writing curriculum that emphasizes personal narratives all year long.

In keeping with the results of recent NAEP and PIRLS scores, Newkirk argued that there is a gender gap in writing across the country. This suggested to me that my own curricular emphasis on personal narrative might be contributing to this gap because this genre was not aligned with the literacy interests of boys. Newkirk posits a hierarchy of genres in the writing curriculum with the genres that females are interested in at the top and the genres that males are interested in at the bottom. For this reason, according to Newkirk, boys come to think of writing as a feminized activity. Newkirk encourages teachers to resist narrowness when it comes to literacy activity during Writing Workshop

and accept genres in which young children are interested. This includes allowing cartooning as serious business, and recognizing that although boys may have differing interests from girls, and possibly the classroom teacher, their interests can still be developed into acceptable writing topics in school. Newkirk insists that schools need to widen the circle of acceptability of literacy activities in order to make room for male literacy interests. This change is intended to create a writing curriculum that more accurately reflects the lives and interests of all the students involved in the writing process. Newkirk urges teachers to be critical and reflective practitioners and to consider which students benefit (and which do not) from their curricular approach to writing.

My research supports Newkirk's argument that gender needs be considered when creating a writing curriculum in elementary schools. The boys and girls in my class experienced the writing curriculum differently in that they had different successes and challenges. They also had different literacy interests. Their specific interests (or lack thereof) in certain genres influenced how motivated they were to write within these genres. For example, inspired by Newkirk, I included a unit on comic book writing and I was quick to realize that many of the boys were intensely interested in this genre while many girls were not. Some girls felt intimidated by this genre while many boys were excited about creating brave superheroes or outlandish characters. On the other hand, many of the girls were very motivated to write during the personal narrative unit while many boys felt vulnerable or restricted by the personal nature of this genre's content. The same genres that provided motivation to write for some members of one gender provided obstacles for some members of the other gender.

Many times throughout the year, there also seemed to be a gendered difference in the role that control and choice played in my students learning to write. Many of the boys in my class sought control in the classroom in order to feel greater ownership of their own learning and a stronger connection to the classroom culture. They wanted to be decision makers and did not want to feel that others in positions of authority were always telling them what to do. These boys were excited about writing during the fiction and comic book writing because they felt they had more control over the writing process. Writing within these genres felt freeing because they had more choices to make about the literacy components of their stories such as character, setting and plot. While some of the girls were also excited about writing fiction, the heightened level of control did not seem to influence their writing in the same way. Having more control did not seem to influence the girls as much as it did the boys.

The issue of control and choice is connected to the social role that students play in the classroom. Many students in my class thought deeply about their social reputations and, as I have shown throughout this study, some boys chose to define themselves as “bad boys.” To some degree, these boys knew that writing was a form of individual expression. They wanted to rebel socially against the classroom culture and they did so by developing literacy interests outside of—or in direct opposition to—the writing curriculum. For example, some of the boys fictionalized or grossly exaggerated their personal narratives to make themselves seem more “cool.” Other boys wrote more freely during Choice Time than they did during Writer’s Workshop. During Choice Time, they did not feel the constraining authority of the teacher telling them they needed to write.

They chose to write during Choice Time because they were in control of the decision to write or not to write. These boys taught me that when teachers have all the curricular control and choice, it sends a strong message to students about what counts as “school learning.” These boys understood, perhaps at a level deeper than I did, that there was an official and an unofficial writing curriculum in our classroom and that even when I opened the door wider to incorporate their own interests, I was still in control of the official curriculum during Writer’s Workshop and they were not sure they wanted to fully enter.

When discussing gender in any social context, it is important to talk about stereotypes and the risks involved with making judgments about students that appear to be based solely on their gender. When considering the concept of different gendered literacy interests and reflecting upon the different experiences that boys and girls have as they learn to write in Writer’s Workshop classrooms, there is real danger in oversimplifying. In my own classroom, for example, it was important for me to realize that there were not always clear cut divisions regarding how the boys and girls experienced each genre. For example, not every boy hated and felt painfully restricted by the personal narrative unit. Not every girl hated the comic book or fiction units. In other words, there was variation within as well as between genders. This is the case because children, like adults, are not defined solely by their gender. Stuart, whose literacy interests often tended to be more aligned with the girls’, loved the personal narrative unit because he could reflect upon his own memories. Similarly, Karen, whose literacy interests often tended to be more aligned with the boys’, enjoyed writing comic books and creating quasi-Star Wars stories

as a way to connect with her male friends. Karen and Stuart, in particular, taught me of the potential dangers of stereotyping students by solely considering their gender.

Analysis of gender can teach us a great deal about the complex social processes involved when young children learn to write. But it is critical that we do not think in terms of truths or absolutes when thinking about how boys and girls are different. Newkirk (2002) explains that generalization about gender “can only describe tendencies and patterns—not deterministic limitations” (p 22). Similarly, when Gallas (1998) discusses the “bad boys” in her classroom, she acknowledges that she wrote from a stereotypic viewpoint in order to name the personae these boys introduced to the classroom culture. As Gallas acknowledges, these boys were not “bad” all the time, and their behavior was not applicable to all her male students. As responsible educators, when we discuss stereotypes and gendered differences, we should think in terms of tendencies or generalizations. These generalizations about gender should only be used to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought, to focus a problem of interpretation, or to describe observed patterns or tendencies. It is also important to realize that the construct of gender itself lies on a continuum. Not every child fits into every generalization about their gender all the time, and it is certainly possible for generalizations about boys to apply to a girl, and vice versa. In this way, gender is not divisively categorical. It is not a matter of black or white. When theorizing about gender, it is important to realize that there are many shades of gray.

Gender is a social component of one’s identity that is enacted as one learns to write. But it is important to understand that not all members of a gender experience the writing

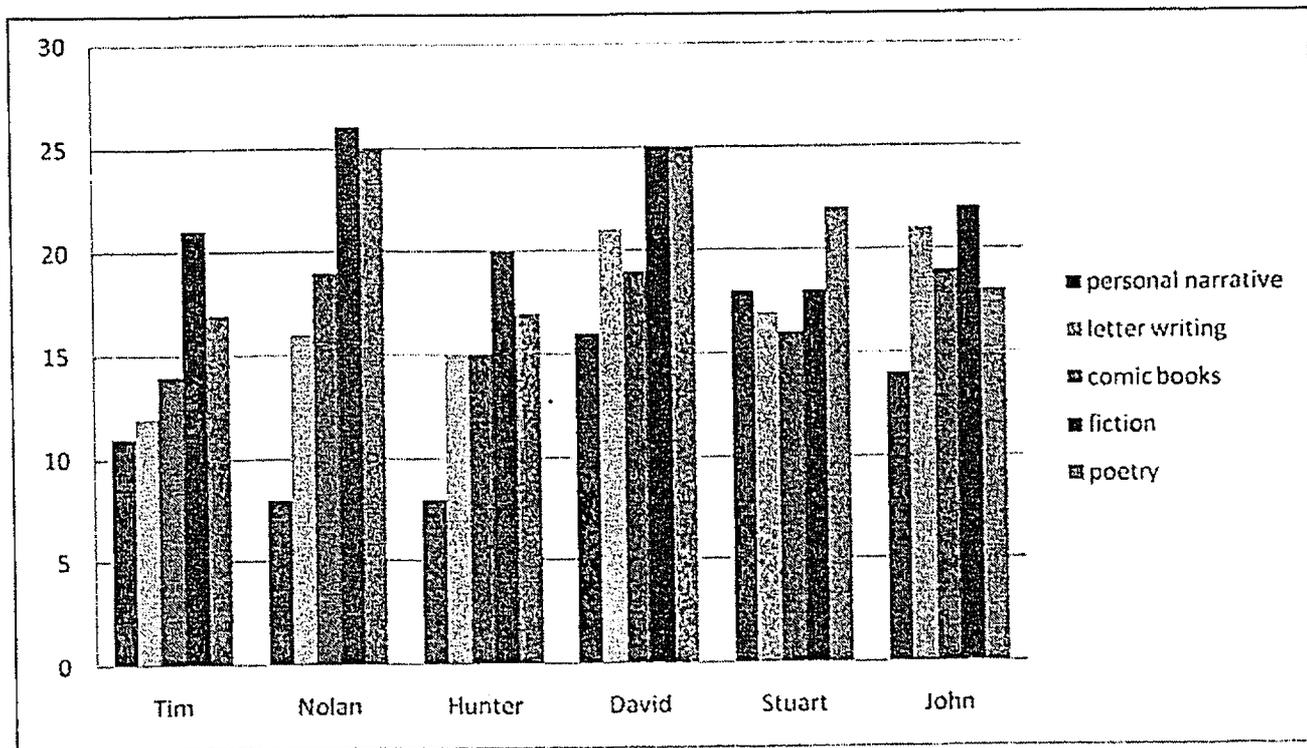
curriculum in the same way. For example, the six focal children selected for this study were all boys, but they had differing experiences within each genre. When considering their total scores for each genre, their experiences were quite different. The following table shows the total score for each genre for each of the six focal boys. This table indicates that each of the focal boys had different struggles and successes with each genre as the year progressed. For example, compared to the other five focal boys, John had one of the highest total scores for letter writing but one of the lowest total scores for poetry. Stuart had the highest total score for personal narrative but the lowest total score for fiction, compared to the other focal boys. This table shows that although each of the six focal children for this study were male, they had differing experiences with the multi-genred curriculum.

Focal Boys' Total Rubric Scores By Genre

	Personal Narrative	Letter Writing	Comic Books	Fiction	Poetry
Hunter	8	15	15	20	17
Nolan	8	16	19	26	25
John	14	21	19	22	18
Mark	11	12	14	21	17
David	16	21	19	25	25
Stuart	18	17	16	18	22

As I observed these boys closely and as I got to know them all personally as social beings developing as writers, I realized that not only were they differently literate, but they were differently social as well. David was the bad boy who constantly displayed bravado but was also desperate to be well liked by everyone. Hunter also craved a cool reputation from his peers. Both these boys were socially outgoing and thrived during the

letter writing unit. It was not as important to Mark and Stuart to have the attention of the whole class. They were more introverted than David and Hunter. Mark and Stuart were not as excited about writing during the letter writing unit. Mark had a vivid imagination and came alive during the fiction unit. Both Stuart and Nolan, who liked rules and structure, were strong writers during the poetry unit. The six focal boys all had different struggles and successes throughout the year. The following chart, which shows the total rubric score for each of the six focal boys, graphically depicts this very important point:



As this chart indicates, the six focal boys had different experiences with the writing curriculum. There were clear differences in which genres they succeeded and in which genres they struggled. For example, out of the six boys, Stuart had the highest total score

during the personal narrative unit. He was in the top tier for this first genre but was not in the top tier again until poetry, the last genre of the year. Nolan, who was in the bottom tier for personal narrative, achieved his highest total score during the fiction unit, which was the highest total fiction score of all six focal boys. Compared to the other focal children, John and David held the top total scores for letter writing. Each boy differed in his experience with the writing curriculum. It is important to note that there were also similarities among some of the focal boys' total scores. For example, five out of the six focal boys achieved their highest total scores during the fiction unit, and many of their total scores declined during the poetry unit. While these gendered similarities existed, it is also important to note that each boy had a uniquely different experience with the writing curriculum.

Gender influences literacy interests and writing development, but the varying experiences of the six focal boys in this study reveals that other aspects of the self were also involved as young children learn to write. Writing is a mode of social and individual expression and children express many facets of themselves as they practice this craft. In addition to gender, there are numerous aspects of social identity that were enacted when children wrote within the different genres. During the letter writing unit, for example, students' social dispositions had a more direct connection to writing proficiency than their gender. Similarly, during the poetry unit, rather than gender, the students' approach to learning seemed to be the defining criterion connected to success within this genre.

This study confirms Newkirk's (2002) claim that gender is an aspect of the self that is enacted when children learn to write, but my research also shows that other aspects of the

self, such as social disposition and approach to learning are involved. When I did what Newkirk (2002) calls opening the door wider to the literacy club and made room for more male interests to develop, the students brought more of themselves into Writer's Workshop than just their gender. As my students experimented with each genre, many aspects of their identities were enacted as they wrote. Importantly, specific social aspects were pivotal in that they contributed to encountering success or enjoyment within each genre. For example, the extroverted and socially confident students enjoyed letter writing because writing was socially interactive in this unit.

I began this study wanting to investigate how gender and genre intersect. As a result of this study, however, my understanding has been deepened and I realize that the process of learning to write is a more complex intersection. Learning to write is about the merging of writing with many aspects of social identity including social development, outgoingness and gender. My study focused on children's cultural understandings of gender and other aspects of identity such as social disposition and approach to learning influence writing development. While not realized during this study, I acknowledge that other social aspects are involved as young children learn to write. For example, Dyson (2003) discusses how children's racial identities contribute to the differing cultural knowledge that they bring into the classroom. These cultural differences influence how the students' literacy development in schools, as I elaborate below.

As young children write in primary classrooms, they are merging or mixing various cultural and social aspects of themselves with the specific formats and requirements of each genre in the writing curriculum. Each child is unique in how they think, express

themselves and interact socially with their peers. Many aspects of the self contribute to this uniqueness. Each child is differently social which leads them to have different social experiences with the classroom culture and different learning experiences with the writing curriculum. If writing is about individual expression, students should have different struggles and successes partially based on the unique make-up of their own social identity. Each of these aspects of self, to varying degrees for each student, intersects with one another when the child experiments with writing within each genre. Furthermore, within each genre certain aspects may contribute to enjoyment or success. Therefore, throughout the year, as each child shifted and learned about each new genre of writing, the social aspects of their own identity were “remixed” with the skill set, writing formats and requirements of each genre. This remixing either helps or hinders their success with each particular genre, depending on the unique social composition of each child.

Dyson (2003) uses the term “writing development remix” to show that children bring rich and diverse cultural understandings to school, particularly when they learn to write. In *The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write: Popular Literacies in Childhood and School Cultures*, Dyson describes how various forms of cultural literacy (hip hop songs, church experiences, jump rope rhymes, etc) are remixed with the process of learning to write for five African American students in a first grade class. She highlights the importance of these remixes as her students grow as writers and encounter success. She also highlights the importance of having a deep understanding of the knowledge base that children bring to the classroom. Dyson’s perspective begins with the world of the child and moves

towards the demands of the school and the writing curriculum. She suggests that children bring their social understanding to every academic lesson and how when children learn to write they are, in part, enacting their own identities. It is appropriate to apply Dyson's term "remix" to this analysis of how the children in the first grade classroom in this study learned to write. The children in my class had different successes and different struggles based on how each particular genre interacted with various components of their own unique social make-up. As students learned to write throughout the year, different aspects of their own social identities were being remixed and enacted with the varying genres. This remix could have a positive or negative influence on writing proficiency, depending on the student and the writing rules for the genre.

During a whole class conversation about poetry, Lisa said she liked the formats and structures for poems. She felt she was free during this unit and she likened the process of writing poetry to being on vacation where she could do whatever she wanted. During this same conversation, David stated that he felt stifled by the very same formats and structures that enabled Lisa to feel free. Interestingly, earlier in the year, David had used this same word "free" to describe his experiences with writing fiction, a genre that did not have an imposed structure or format to follow. David felt free during this genre because, in his own words, "you can just let your imagination run wild and do whatever you want." Lisa found freedom in structure while David found freedom in choice.

As I reflected upon what each of the 23 children in my class needed in order to succeed as writers, I returned to this contrast again and again, and to the fact that although these two students were different with regards to their approach to learning,

their social disposition and their gender, they both used the same vocabulary and concept to describe their experiences with writing within their preferred genres: freedom. In a sense, the concept of freedom can be applied to the writing experiences of all my students. To experience success or enjoyment as writers, some students found freedom in the structure and formats that were provided during the poetry unit. Some found it freeing to realize that writing could be socially interactive as it was during the letter writing unit. Some found freedom in the creative control they experienced during the comic book and fiction units. Some found freedom in the reflective process of retelling their own personal memories.

It is important to note that not all 23 students would have found their freedom as writers if they had been in a classroom that adopted the traditional Writer's Workshop model that focused on personal narratives for the whole year. Due to the remixing of genre and social aspects of the self, only certain students would have enjoyed a year-long curricular emphasis on personal narratives. Schools provide a very limiting experience to budding writers if they focus primarily on one genre for the whole year, as is the case with the traditional model to Writer's Workshop. It is limiting because, according to the specific requirements of the genre (for example, being able to comfortably reflect upon your own life and share these true memories with others) certain aspects of the self are needed to be enacted (being reflective, open, and process-oriented) in order to encounter success or enjoyment. In order for all, or most, students to find freedom as writers, we should offer a curriculum that shifts genres frequently so the remix happens more frequently. Children have untapped aspects of the self that are waiting to be aligned with

certain requirements of specific genres. We owe it to our students to allow this to happen by offering a multi-genred writing curriculum.

As I described in the teacher research journal entry earlier in this chapter, every student in my class was launched as a writer by the end of the year. Every student felt comfortable and excited about writing, at least with some genres. But the students took different roads and encountered different challenges and successes. Based on the unique make-up of their social identities, they had different experiences and found freedom in different ways. As a collective group, however, they taught me that it is important for each young budding writer to find his or her own road to freedom as a writer. My job as a teacher is to introduce them to, and guide them along, as many different roads as possible. This would not have been possible without a multi-genred curriculum.

In the next section, I discuss that in addition to understanding the remixing that exists when young children write, it is also important for teachers to understand the classroom culture and the social role each student plays within this culture. I explain that this classroom culture provides the context within which young children learn to write and express themselves socially.

Classroom Culture as Context for Student Writing

In the conclusion of *Sometimes I Can Be Anything: Power, Gender and Identity in a Primary Classroom*, Gallas (1998) discusses the importance of understanding the classroom culture as the context in which children learn and grow. She states:

Who I am, or who an individual child I teach is and will become, is always a continuing piece of work, constructed in relation to the other, in conversation with the other, and, in best of all possible worlds, in communion with the other (p 140).

In other words, students in school do not learn or grow in isolation. The relational nature of the classroom and the social activity of the classroom culture influence how they learn and grow. Throughout this year-long study of my own first grade classroom, I inhabited the same school spaces as my students from September to June. As we shared the playground, the gym, library and music room, we also shared the classroom. Each one of us played a part in creating and fostering a classroom culture. This culture played an important role in teaching and learning. My 23 first graders and I formed a social community in which we formed relationships that influenced both academic and social/emotional learning. In this section, I discuss the importance of understanding this classroom culture, as well as the importance of knowing the children in my classroom and giving them varied opportunities to communicate and express themselves in their writing.

Gallas (1998) suggests that the classroom is a laboratory for life where good teaching involves more than providing students with the content of the academic subjects in the curriculum. Gallas explains that, as a teacher, she needed to know about the social lives of her students in order to understand them as learners; there is a large social component to both teaching and learning. In other words, the curriculum is not taught in a vacuum. The social context of the classroom culture influences learning.

Children bring in varying experiences to the classroom and need the support of healthy social connections in order for them to feel trust and safety in the classroom. When children feel supported and known, they take risks with their learning. This is in line with what many early childhood theorists say about best practices in the primary

grades. Mooney (2000) suggests that it is important for teachers to spend time observing their students in order to understand what social role they play in the classroom culture. This observation, and the resulting knowledge of the individual child, is crucial to successful scaffolding. In this way, the social lives of children and the classroom culture are as important as the planned and documented curriculum. Dewey (1897) stated that education is a process of living and he describes the importance of knowing children socially. He believed that teachers do not just teach subject matter, but how to live in society. In addition, he thought that teachers do not just teach individual children but also shape society. According to Dewey, "true education comes from the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself" (p 4). In a sense, the classroom becomes a microcosm of society in which students learn democratic principles and practice being positive contributors to society.

The mission statement of the school where I conducted this research and have taught for five years states that the goal of the school is to raise ethical citizens who learn to participate positively in the school community and in the world beyond. The school community encourages students to be independent thinkers and doers. To accomplish these ends, the school strives to know students well and honor the individual character and spirit of each child. In order to raise ethical citizens, my school focuses deeply on different global communities, both for academic and social purposes. The social realm of the classroom community and the social/emotional development of each student are equally as important as each student's academic development.

The classroom community that students and teachers construct collectively represents a melding of many cultural viewpoints, incorporating the unofficial worlds of children's lives into the flow of the official world of school (Dyson, 1993). In my own classroom, many viewpoints were collectively constructed, and this culture incorporated the unofficial social worlds of the children into the flow of the official curriculum of Writer's Workshop. Their interests, to a degree, were able to permeate the curriculum and they brought their interests and social lives into the classroom as they simultaneously grew as writers.

My students and I formed our own classroom culture that depended upon the individual personalities of each of its members. During Writer's Workshop, each student practiced different ways to express and communicate with other community members. Writing became a way in which the children made social statements and contributed to the classroom culture. The culture of the classroom was important because it was the context in which the children communicated with each other, expressed themselves, and related to each other. Their writing was an expression of themselves and represented what they wanted to tell others. Similar to their play on the playground and their talk in the classroom, my students' writing was another mode of communication and expression for them to use within our classroom culture. Dyson (1988) explains that "any written text can lead to a sharing of experiences in the ongoing social world" (p 18). As my students became more literate in the classroom, they used writing as way to respond to and interact with the social world.

Throughout this dissertation, I have shown that students' writing can be regarded as a window into the self. I first came to this realization as a teacher candidate when I learned to teach writing by focusing primarily on personal narratives. I learned that these windows provided teachers with knowledge of the personal lives of children and were valuable because they helped teachers form healthy social connections with their students. During this study, as I broadened the curriculum to include other genres, I realized that all my students' writing, regardless of genre, could be viewed as windows into their lives. Any sample of my students writing could potentially lead to my deeper understanding of their social world because writing is both expressive and autobiographical. For example, during the personal narrative unit, David told us he missed his mother while she was living away from him for the year. Through letter writing, Hunter told us he idolized his older brother. With the fiction unit, John revealed that he craved the love and attention from his father, while during the poetry unit, Stuart wrote a misleading poem with a father character because he wanted to be accepted by a new group of friends. When these children wrote, in one way or another, they made statements about who they were and what they needed. These statements contributed to the social classroom culture. Dyson (1993) explains that "social processes involve crossing boundaries and intermingling texts in ways that bring together official and unofficial worlds. The social processes and the texts yield an intertext, a reverberation of connections" (p 108). Through their writing, the children in my class created intertexts, symbolic worlds that magnified how they wanted to be perceived by others and what was important to them. By analyzing their writing, I learned more about who they were

within the culture we created, what they wanted to say, what reputations they craved and what interests they wanted to develop. If the students in this study had experienced a writing curriculum that focused solely on personal narrative for the entire year, it would not only have limited what I could know about them as social beings but it also would limit the opportunities they would have to connect with the culture of their own classroom.

As the teacher in this classroom culture, I realized that the multi-genred curriculum gave the students varied opportunities to practice different modes of communication and expression. By focusing primarily on personal narratives all year, not only do we send a message about “what counts” as good writing, but we are also saying that there is a preferred way of communicating and expressing one’s self using writing. This is in stark contrast to the belief that we want to raise independent and creative thinkers and doers. My students differed from one another socially and in how they expressed themselves in writing throughout the year. A writing curriculum that limits genres also limits the ways students can use writing as a form of expression and as a way of contributing to classroom culture.

Given that the teachers’ role is to foster social/emotional development as well as academic development, it was as important for me to provide varied opportunities for students to express themselves as it was to give them the tools and skills to express themselves in writing. Especially given the high stakes, standards-based movement in this age of accountability, and the pressures schools face to raise literacy test scores, I argue it is even more important for teachers to know children well in order to know how

to support them and provide appropriate scaffolding as they grow as writers. An important first step to this scaffolding is to provide students with varied opportunities to express themselves using writing in the classroom so that teachers can get to know their students as learners. A writing curriculum that focuses on many different genres helps to accomplish this goal.

Since writing is an individual form of expression that requires student motivation and interest, a teacher of writing cannot just provide the students with a pre-determined skill set and expect them to develop into life-long writers. Merely teaching skills does not provide a relevant context or motivation for students to learn how to write. If we want to motivate our students, or boys in particular, to write more, we need to show them why this is a relevant craft and we need to provide the motivation for them to learn more about this craft. In essence, we need to teach writing so that it is interesting to all our students. In this way, the culture of the classroom and the social lives of children need to be understood and welcomed in the classroom so our students can be motivated to express themselves in writing and connect this skill set to their own lives. By observing our own classroom culture evolve, and by participating in it, I realized that the multi-genred curriculum provided the students with varied modes of communication and expression.

Teacher Research and Professional Development

In this final section, I discuss the value that teacher research has in the life of a school and the role teacher researchers can play in implementing change and participating in professional development opportunities. In addition to deepening my understanding of the complex social processes involved with writing development and the personal lives of

my students, doing research on my own practice revealed the great potential for teacher researchers to make curricular changes in their school from the inside out.

As an insider, I know that sustainable change in schools like mine is more likely if it stems from a conviction of a colleague who understands our school culture. Similar to how I explained that understanding of classroom culture was important in the writing development of my students, an understanding of school culture is important when a school is interested in developing curricular reform. Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (1994) explain that “educational practices are context bound, and that what might be effective or appropriate in one context might be ineffective or inappropriate in another” (p 43). In this way, the knowledge that comes from teacher research is helpful because it was generated locally and stems from the culture in which it seeks to implement change. Teacher researchers have a deep understanding of their school contexts because they live and work in the schools they research and potentially change. They acquire the empowering emic perspective and are able to implement change from the inside. In this section, I explain that there are true benefits to being able to straddle both the worlds of research and practice. As Cochran Smith and Lytle (2004) explain when teacher researchers work the dialectic between research and practice, they capitalize on, learn from, and mine the dialectic as a particularly rich source for new knowledge.

The administrators at my school were extremely supportive of this study from its inception. At my school, teacher autonomy is valued and the administration gave me the freedom I needed to broaden the writing curriculum. They also gave me permission to conduct this study in my own classroom. In turn, as this study unfolded, they paid close

attention to the rich, new knowledge that was constructed on our own campus. Not surprisingly, the administrators were very interested in the research that emerged from one of its own classrooms and was eager for me to share what I had learned with the faculty.

Towards the end of writing this dissertation, I presented my research during a faculty meeting and made a power point presentation, and outlined my findings. The main point was that when I shifted writing genres, it shifted which students were excited about writing and which students did well. I talked about how many aspects of the self, including gender, social disposition and approach to learning, were remixed when children learn to write within each genre. My concluding point was that if there were indeed gendered literacy interests in primary grades across the country, it might serve us well as educators to investigate our own approaches to literacy instruction. I suggested that might need to offer a curriculum that was appealing to the interests of both genders, especially if this shift was going to motivate boys to write more.

The presentation started a conversation among the faculty, especially about the fact that personal narrative is the dominant genre in the lower school writing curriculum. Teachers at my school are highly involved in curricular decision-making but it was through this conversation we learned that many teachers placed emphasis on the same genre. For example, in Kindergarten, writing has to be “True...and about You.” In second grade, the teachers are firm believers in Lucy Calkins’ approach that emphasizes “Small Moments” and involves students writing about personal memories. In third and fourth grade, students spend most of the year writing, editing and revising personal

narratives. In a sense, my presentation served as a starting point for our school to analyze our own approach to writing instruction, school-wide.

There was variation regarding the responses of the faculty to my research. Everyone was supportive and positive. They seemed excited about the research I conducted and the knowledge I generated. Some teachers were initially resistant to be reflective on their own approach to writing. With others, my research confirmed their suspicions that certain students may respond well to a varied writing curriculum and they were eager to think about including other genres into their writing curriculum.

The following journal entry describes a conversation I had with Katherine, a Kindergarten teacher shortly after my presentation. This entry highlights that although we had differing opinions on what a writing curriculum should offer, Katherine was interested in my research due to the emic perspective and the local knowledge it generated.

December 8, 2007

Katherine is a Kindergarten teacher at my school. She was not present during the faculty meeting when I shared my research with the Lower School. She had expressed disappointment in not being able to attend this meeting and so I said I would be happy to sit down and talk with her about it at some point. In Kindergarten, they teach that writing has to be "True...and About You." So, they emphasize personal narrative all year long. Katherine said that she really likes this emphasis because she believes that it is easier for kids to write about personal memories that have already happened because these experiences are self-contained and the students already know components such as characters, setting, and story sequencing. She believes that it's easier for them because the students don't have to reinvent the wheel. She also likes this emphasis because she gets to know her students as individuals by reading their stories. This is what she was taught during her teacher training...and it is exactly what I was taught as well. To her credit, Katherine said that she would love to learn about what I found in my dissertation because she is always interested in considering what new research says about the teaching profession. She also confessed, similar to Fiona, that she had a strong preference herself for personal narratives because it's what she likes

to write...and she was considered to be a good writer when she was a student in school.

I asked her how the boys in her class fared in writing. She said that overall they were not as capable and not as interested in writing but she thought that could be just because writing was more of a girl thing, especially since at the Kindergarten age, girls are a little more developed than boys are. I pushed back saying "Well, even if that is the case, think about what could happen if you included some genres in your writing curriculum that was catered to the boys' interests."

This gave her pause...and then she said that she would be interested in sitting down with me in-depth to reflect upon the Kindergarten writing curriculum. She wasn't making any promises...but she did want to learn more about my work.

Teachers throughout my school had conversations similar to the one described above about the prospect of analyzing their own approach to writing. These conversations raised many issues about teaching and learning. The first involved the possibility that gendered literacy preferences may exist amongst the faculty at our school. Many male teachers, myself included, seemed to have literacy interests that were aligned with the boys in our classrooms. Many of these male teachers were initially excited about broadening the writing curriculum to incorporate genres not focused on the personal.

Similarly, many female teachers at the school were initially resistant to the wide-open approach to fiction and comic books where children can bring in a wide array of subject matter into the classroom. These female teachers stated that they much preferred units on personal narratives to those on fiction or comic book writing. Their own literacy interests were generally aligned with those of their female students. Not unlike most elementary schools, the faculty at my school is predominantly female. The faculty of the lower school is 81% female. Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, the writing curriculum throughout the lower school is generally aligned with the female interests, both child and adult.

Like the dangers in stereotyping students based solely on their gender, it is also important to note that there is risk involved with making judgments about teachers and the curricular decisions they make solely based on their gender. Just as I realized that not every girl would prefer to write personal narratives, I realized that not every female teacher was an advocate for a writing curriculum that focused primarily on personal narratives. For example, Molly a, a pre-Kindergarten teacher, was immediately very interested in the prospect of broadening her own approach to literacy instruction. There were many female teachers like Molly who were interested in the possibility of revising their curriculum if it would better serve our student body. Interestingly, however, every male member of the Lower School faculty approached me after my presentation and stated that my work confirmed their own instincts and beliefs about gender and genre.

Although I am speaking in generalizations, as a result of listening to the reactions my colleagues had to my work, I began to wonder if, similar to the students in my class, there were gendered literacy interests among the faculty and if these gendered interests influenced the curricular decisions teachers made. As previously stated, teachers at my school are given considerable autonomy and freedom to set up their classrooms, design curriculum and implement lessons their own way. I value the autonomy we have and acknowledge that without it I would not have been able to conduct this study. However, given the freedom we have as educators, I wonder about the connection that may exist between teachers' gendered interests and the curricular decisions they make.

In addition to the potential differences in literacy interests that may exist amongst the male and female teachers at my school, I also wonder about other differences that may

exist between the way that male and female teachers view the curriculum and the classroom. There are currently many more female teachers than male teachers in elementary schools across the country, particularly in the primary grades. Similar to my own school, the faculty in most elementary schools is predominantly female. This contributes to the idea that currently elementary schools, especially the primary grades, are female territory, where female teachers are the adult presence in the classroom (Sommers, 2000, Pollack, 1998, Paley, 1984). Consciously or unconsciously, these female teachers make decisions regarding how to set up the classroom, how to deliver the curriculum to the students, and they send a message to our students as to what counts as learning.

There is a strong desire across the country for there to be more male teachers in elementary schools. Coinciding with our nation's desire to diversify the teaching field, schools may need to examine how gender influences the decisions teachers make regarding classroom and curricula. Just like our own students, I wonder about the differing gendered interests that male and female teachers bring to the classroom. Bringing more men to the teaching task force may do more than just provide positive male role models for our students. Male teachers may have a different gendered way of relating to students and knowing the classroom than their female counterparts and that their presence in schools may change the paradigm of the classroom and the curriculum.

Regardless of the gendered preferences that may exist among our faculty, it is important to note that all of the teachers were interested in learning about the knowledge that was constructed in this study because it happened at our school and represented local

knowledge. Although my presentation sparked conversation that highlighted potential gendered differences in our faculty, my colleagues took a vested interest in my work because it stemmed from our own school culture. Many of my colleagues would be much less likely to listen—and some would even be dismissive—if an outsider were to present research about the importance of comic books in a writing curriculum. Our school, as an overall institution, does not respond well to embracing programmatic store-bought “one size fits all” curricula because our classrooms are all different. The fact that my research started in the classroom spoke to the faculty. Herr and Anderson (2005) use the term “positionality” to refer to the particular perspective that researchers bring to their work. As a teacher in the school, I held an insider perspective that I shared with my colleagues. I held their attention because of my emic perspective and because I understand the lived experiences of teachers in our school culture. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) explain that teacher research has value because it is involved with “the questions that arise from the lived experiences of teachers and the everyday life of teaching expressed in language that emanates from practice” (p 59). Teachers respond to teacher research because it emanates from practice. It has power and relevancy because of its connection to the lives of teachers. Therefore, teacher research is well positioned to produce precisely the kind of knowledge teachers are interested in.

In listening to the reactions of the faculty to my research, the administration realized the potential our school has to learn from each other and to continue to construct knowledge from the inside out. During the summer following this study, my school has decided to provide me with grant money to conduct a workshop in which I will work with

interested teachers and share with them what the research says about gender, identity and writing. This group of teachers represents a vertical cross-section of the whole school and consists of one teacher from each grade level, pre-Kindergarten through eighth grade. It is important to note that many of the teachers were willing to participate in this workshop because of my own emic perspective. My research resonates from my perspective as a teacher and has arisen from our own school context. I know the school culture well and understand the particular challenges that teachers at my school face. Furthermore, they are interested because I am not telling others what to do or how to change. Instead, I am sharing research with colleagues and discussing my own experiences. By being a part of this group, willing teachers have the opportunity to be change agents in their own classrooms. For these reasons, many teachers were willing to be a part of this team that will reflect upon our own approach to writing instruction, school-wide.

This group of interested teachers is an internal collaboration, interested in reflecting upon the school's approach to writing instruction, school wide. Herr and Anderson (2005) explain that insider collaborations

engage in inquiry in ways that help the group move forward from working as isolated individuals toward a collaborative community; they seek to engage their members in learning and change; they work toward influencing organizational change; and they offer opportunities for personal, professional and institutional transformation (p 37).

As a group, our charge is to analyze the content of our current writing curriculum, discuss who benefits and who doesn't, and explore changes that can be made in different grade levels. In addition, we will also discuss how our own gender influences our teaching, the

curricular decisions we make and the classroom expectations we create. I will facilitate the workshop and chair this group as we work on analyzing our own practice. It is the expectation that during the upcoming fall semester, each teacher will create and implement a new unit in their classroom that exposes the students to new purposes or audiences for writing. Then, midyear, the group will reconvene to share with each other what they tried and what they learned. The Director of Curriculum at our school pictures this pilot group as a beginning. I will work with this pilot group of teachers throughout the year and then at the end of the year we will share with the whole faculty what we learned as a result of this work. Then, hopefully, this will inspire some other teachers to reflect upon their practice and work with us to further broaden the curriculum.

This is how effective changes are made at our school: slow at first and involving the teacher as change agent. I have to admit that, as teacher, I respect that. I also respect the fact that our school understands that change can sometimes come from the teachers themselves and it does not always come unilaterally from above. The local knowledge that stems from this pilot group has the potential to be powerful because teachers themselves will be determining how to “make the changes their own” in their classrooms, as opposed to embracing a “soup to nuts” curricular change that does not involve the teachers as decision makers.

In a sense, this professional development group will become an internal community of learners, reflecting on its own practice. It has the potential to become a community of teacher researchers that can share, support, challenge and inform each other as they work to have research effectively inform their own practice. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993)

discuss the power teacher research communities can have in schools. They state that “when groups of teachers develop curriculum through inquiry, they use data from their own classrooms to pose problems, sort out commonalities and differences in perspectives and values, and build instructional frameworks” (p 54).

I believe it will serve us well as teachers to work together to understand our own gendered preferences, as well as the gendered preferences of our students, and the potential impact these preferences have on decisions we make as teachers. This work will help us in our quest to create learning opportunities in our curricula that are appealing to both boys and girls. I welcome an open and honest conversation amongst my colleagues about how our own gender influences the decisions we make as teachers in the classroom. There is great potential here for us to learn from each other and appreciate the gendered differences that may exist, amongst both children and adults. After all, this understanding and appreciation of difference is what we expect our students to embrace. By no means am I trying to imply that my own approach is correct for everyone and I want to be clear that I have much to learn from the female teacher perspective as well as share with others my own male teaching perspective. It is the conversation that I look forward to and I realize I have much to learn.

During the summer, each member of this pilot group, at their own grade level, will research issues involving writing development, identity and gender as it pertains to their particular age group. Then, as a result of their research, they will design and implement curricular changes and reflect upon their classroom cultures as a result of these changes. Thus, the work of this group potentially has great implications for our school because we

will be constructing more local knowledge about gender, genre and identity by working the dialectic between research and practice school-wide.

This study, and the collaborative work that emanates from it, also has implications for the broader school and research communities. It represents a rich look into practice and speaks from the classroom perspective. As indicated above, this study has prompted other teachers at my school to investigate their own practices and start conversations about gender and writing in schools. Hopefully, by sharing our research with others, and making our local knowledge public, the research that comes from this group will contribute to practice that addresses the gender literacy gap that exists in our schools across the country.

Conclusion

This study has shown that teacher research has great power to make curricular changes in individual classrooms because knowledge is constructed from the inside as teachers work the dialectic between theory and practice. Due to this insider perspective, there is also great power when teachers unite to form internal collaborations and share and learn from one another. This study marks the beginning of a change initiative started at my school as a result of my own inquiry into my own practice. I have shown that teacher research can bring potential change to whole school, not just individual classrooms. Importantly, teacher researchers live in the culture of the schools they research. They are in the unique position to see and feel the impact of their changes, and understand on a deep level happens in their school as a result of their research because their perspective is based on practice.

In this study, I theorized that learning to write is a social and complex process that involves the interaction of genre with identity, gender, individual learning styles and social disposition. Due to this complexity, each student in my first grade class was different in how he/she experienced the demands of each genre and the social processes of the classroom. Each genre provided scaffolding and support for some while it limited or inhibited others. As their teacher, I realized that the students were all trying to find their own road to freedom as writers. A multi-genred writing curriculum helped them accomplish this goal. I look forward to the collective work of the pilot group as we explore further possibilities so that a greater number of students can find their own roads to freedom as writers.

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APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT FORMS



BOSTON COLLEGE

THE CAROLYN A. AND PETER S. LYNCH SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Introduction:

We are sending you this letter to ask your permission for your child or ward to take part in a research study describing what happens when a first grade class experiences a more gender-balanced writing curriculum, which has been broadened to include some genres and units that appeal to boys' literary strengths and interests. The study is called "Broadening the Literacy Spectrum: Making Room for Male Literacy Interests in a First Grade Writer's Workshop Curriculum."

Your child or ward is being invited to participate in this research study because he/she is enrolled in the first grade. If he/she takes part in this study, he/she will be one of about 24 children to do so. The study has been approved by your child's or ward's school administration.

Your child's or ward's participation is completely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow him/her to participate will have no effect on his/her grades, academic standing, or any services he/she might receive at school.

The person doing this study is Gary McPhail, who is your child or ward's classroom teacher and also a doctoral student in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. He is being guided in this research by Prof. Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Director of the Doctoral Program in Curriculum and Instruction in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. If you have questions about this study or this letter, please contact either Mr McPhail (617-520-5260) or Prof. Cochran-Smith (617-552-4180, cochrans@bc.edu).

No funding has been received for this study.

Purpose:

Despite decades of statistics indicating that boys are not as proficient in writing as girls, programs designed to aid boys in writing have taken very low priority. The purpose of this study is to focus on first grade boys and girls during Writer's Workshop in a classroom where I, Gary McPhail, function as both teacher and researcher. This teacher-researcher study will provide a qualitative lens into what a classroom looks like when a teacher attempts to create a gender-balanced writing curriculum by broadening the literacy circle to include some genres and units that appeal to the literary strengths and interests of male students.

The overarching research questions I, Gary McPhail, seek to learn the answers to are as follows: What happens when a classroom teacher attempts to create and implement a gender-balanced writing curriculum which makes room for "male" interests and provides

opportunities for these interests to develop? Sub questions are: What are the male literacy interests in my classroom? How do the children, boys and girls, respond to this broadened approach to writing, both in attitude and writing progress? How effective is a classroom writing program that attempts to do this? As a teacher, what changes to the classroom atmosphere and culture, do I observe when I do this?

Procedures:

The research will be done during the regular school day at your child/ward's school. If you give permission and your child agrees, he/she will not be required to complete any special assignments or do anything outside of the regular curriculum. The study will not require additional time or assignments outside the regular school day. Students, as part of the regular school day, are required to participate in a Writer's Workshop curriculum, in which they engage in the practice of writing every day and develop age-appropriate writing skills. The writing they produce will be assessed using the *The Six Trait Assessment for Beginning Writing*, an established rubric for writing in the primary grades. As part of the writing program, students will engage in whole class discussions and individual writing conferences with their teacher about each genre or unit covered, their attitudes towards writing, and their individual writing goals. These discussions will be audio-taped.

Risks:

No unusual risks to parents or their children are involved

Benefits:

Besides being exposed to a more broad approach to literacy instruction, your child will probably not get any direct benefit from taking part in this study. Some children have experienced relief and/or reassurance when they have the opportunity to express their experiences and feelings about writing and how it can connect to their daily lives. However, we cannot and do not guarantee that your child/ward will receive any benefits from this study. We hope that the information we gather in this study will help other children and teachers in the future when they engage in the craft of writing and writing instruction.

Costs:

There is no cost for your child/ward to participate in this study.

Compensation:

As a thank you, we will be sponsoring an ice cream party for all the first grade students at the class. Your child will be invited to this party whether or not he/she participates in the study.

Withdrawal from the study:

You may choose to withdraw your permission at any time during the academic school year. If you request it, we will remove your child/ward's data from the collection. After the academic school year, the data will have been entered into the pool of data to be analyzed, and we will not be able to remove it from the computer database. Your decision to withdraw your participation will have no effect on your child/ward's grades, academic standing, or any services he/she might receive at school.

Confidentiality:

All results from the surveys will have pseudonyms on them and so names will not be on any of the data. This informed consent document, your child/ward's assent document, and the code linking his/her name with their pseudonym used on the surveys will be kept in a locked cabinet in Gary McPhail's office at home, to which only he will have access. The informed consent document, assent document, and the code list will be destroyed by shredding seven years after the study is completed. Although we will treat the information we receive as confidential, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your child/ward's information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show this information to a court. Or we may need to report to authorities if we believe that child abuse has occurred, or that your child/ward is a danger to him/herself or to someone else. If we believe that your child/ward is a danger to him/herself or to someone else, we will also tell you. This is the only situation in which we will share any of your child's responses with you. Although it happens only rarely, we may be required to show information which identifies your child/ward to people who need to be sure we have done the research correctly; these would be people from such groups as the Boston College Institutional Review Board that oversees research like this. If we decide to use quotations from what your child/ward told us, we will omit any identifying information and use pseudonyms so that others will not be able to identify him/her.

Questions:

You are encouraged to ask questions. If you have questions about this study, please contact

either Mr. Gary McPhail (617-520-5260
(617-552-4180, cochrans@bc.edu).

or Prof. Cochran-Smith

If you have any questions about your child's rights as a participant in a research study, please

contact the Boston College Office for Human Research Participant Protection, (617) 552-4778.

Certification:

I have read and I believe I understand this Informed Consent document. I believe I understand the purpose of the research project and what my child/ward will be asked to do. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and they have been answered satisfactorily. I understand that I may withdraw my permission for my child/ward's participation in this research during the course of the data gathering period, which is the full academic school year, and that my child/ward can refuse to participate in this study. I understand that the researchers will work to keep the information they receive confidential. My child/ward's name will not be on the data collected. Instead a pseudonym will be used on the data, and this pseudonym will be used if quotations are published.

I understand that I should keep one copy of this Informed Consent document for my personal reference.

I hereby give my informed and free consent for my child/ward to be a participant in this study.

Signatures:

Date Consent Signature of Parent/Guardian

Printed Name of Parent/Guardian and Relationship

Printed Name of Child Participant

Please return this signed permission to your child/ward's teacher, or mail it directly to
Mr. Gary McPhail

APPENDIX B

SIX TRAITS ASSESSMENT
FOR BEGINNING WRITERS

SIX-Trait Assessment for Beginning Writers

1 EXPERIMENTING 2 EMERGING 3 DEVELOPING 4 CAPABLE 5 EXPERIENCED

IDEAS	IDEAS	IDEAS	IDEAS
Uses scribbles for writing	Some recognizable words present	Attempts a story or to make a point	Writing tells a story or makes a point
Dictates labels or a story	Labels pictures	Illustration supports the writing	Illustration (if present) enhances the writing
Shapes that look like letters	Uses drawings that show detail	Meaning of the general idea	Idea is generally on topic
Line forms that imitate text	Pictures are supported by some words	Some ideas clear but some are still fuzzy	Details are present but not developed (lists)
Write letters randomly			
			Develops one clear, main idea
			Uses interesting, important details for support
			Writer understands topic well
			Presents a fresh/original idea
			Topic is narrowed and focused

ORGANIZATION	ORGANIZATION	ORGANIZATION	ORGANIZATION
Attempts to write left to right	Consistently writes left to right	A title is present	An appropriate title is present
Attempts to write top/down	Consistently uses top/down	Limited transitions present	Transitions connect main ideas
No sense of beginning and end yet	Experiments with beginnings	Beginning but no ending except "The End"	The opening attracts
Experiments with spacing	Begins to group like words/pictures	Attempts at sequencing	An effective ending is tried
			Easy to follow
			Important ideas stand out

VOICE	VOICE	VOICE	VOICE
Communicates feelings with color, shape, line in drawing	Hints of voice present in words and phrases	Expresses some predictable feelings	Writing is individual and expressive
Work is similar to everyone else's	Looks different from most others	Moments of individual sparkle, but then hides	Individual perspective becomes evident
Ambiguous response to task	Energy/mood is present	Repetition of familiar ideas reduces energy	Personal treatment of a standard topic
Awareness of audience not present	Treatment of topic predictable	Awareness that the writing will be read by someone else	Writes to convey a story or idea to the reader
	Audience is fuzzy—could be anybody, anywhere	Reader has limited connection to writer	Attempts non-standard point of view
			Cares deeply about the topic
			Point of view is evident
			Writes with a clear sense of audience
			Uses text to elicit a variety of emotions
			Takes some risks to say more than what is expected

EXPERIENCED

CAPABLE

DEVELOPING

EMERGING

EXPERIMENTING

WORD CHOICE
 ___ Everyday words used well
 ___ Precise, accurate, fresh, original words
 ___ Creates vivid images in a natural way
 ___ Avoids repetition, clichés (vague language)
 ___ Attempts at figurative language

WORD CHOICE
 ___ Uses favorite words correctly
 ___ Experiments with new and different words with some success
 ___ Tries to choose words for specificity
 ___ Attempts to use descriptive words to create images

WORD CHOICE
 ___ General or ordinary words
 ___ Attempts new words but they don't always fit
 ___ Settles for the word or phrase that "will do"
 ___ Big words used only to impress readers
 ___ Relies on slang, clichés, or repetition

WORD CHOICE
 ___ Recognizable words
 ___ Experimental words used correctly
 ___ Attempts at phrases
 ___ Functional language

WORD CHOICE
 ___ Writes letters in strings
 ___ Writes word patterns
 ___ Attempts to use words and phrases
 ___ Copies environmental print

SENTENCE FLUENCY
 ___ Consistently uses sentence variety
 ___ Sentence structure is correct and creative
 ___ Variety of sentence beginnings
 ___ Natural rhythm, cadence and flow
 ___ Sentences have texture with clarity the important idea

SENTENCE FLUENCY
 ___ Simple and compound sentences present and effective
 ___ Attempts complex sentences
 ___ Not all sentences begin the same
 ___ Sections of writing have rhythm and flow

SENTENCE FLUENCY
 ___ Uses simple sentences
 ___ Sentences tend to begin the same
 ___ Experiments with other sentence patterns
 ___ Reader may have to reread to follow the meaning
 ___ Dialogue present but needs interpretation

SENTENCE FLUENCY
 ___ Strings words together into phrases
 ___ Attempts simple sentences
 ___ Short, repetitive sentence patterns
 ___ Dialogue present but not understandable

SENTENCE FLUENCY
 ___ Mimics letters and words across the page
 ___ Words stand alone
 ___ Patterns for sentences not in evidence
 ___ Sentence sense not yet present

CONVENTIONS
 ___ High frequency words are spelled correctly and very close on other words
 ___ Capitals used for obvious proper nouns as well as sentence beginnings
 ___ Basic punctuation is used correctly and/or creatively
 ___ Indents consistently to show paragraphs
 ___ Shows control over standard grammar

CONVENTIONS
 ___ Transitional spelling on less frequent words (MONSTR, HUMUN, CLOSSED, etc.)
 ___ Spelling of high frequency words usually correct
 ___ Capitals at the beginning of sentences and variable use on proper nouns
 ___ End punctuation is correct (,!) and other punctuation is attempted (such as commas)
 ___ Paragraphing variable but present
 ___ Noun/pronoun agreement, verb tenses, subject/verb agreement

CONVENTIONS
 ___ Uses phonetic spelling (MSTR, HUMN, KLOSD, etc.) on personal words
 ___ Spelling of high frequency words still spotty
 ___ Uses capitals at the beginning of sentences
 ___ Usually uses and punctuation correctly (!?)
 ___ Experiments with other punctuation
 ___ Long paper may be written as one paragraph
 ___ Attempts standard grammar

CONVENTIONS
 ___ Attempts semi-phonetic spelling (MTR, UTA, KD, etc.)
 ___ Uses mixed upper and lower case letters
 ___ Uses spaces between letters and words
 ___ Random punctuation
 ___ Nonstandard grammar is common

CONVENTIONS
 ___ Writes letter strings (phonetic, dixtyct)
 ___ Attempts to create standard letters
 ___ Writes word strings
 ___ Attempts spacing of words, letters, symbols or pictures
 ___ Student interpretation needed to understand text/pictures