Gender Identities and Self-Expression in Classroom Narrative Writing

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In this article, Peterson examines the ways in which the boys and girls in three fourth-grade classrooms used writing to perform gender roles.

When I began teaching writing in elementary classrooms, I believed that my students' narrative writing displayed a signature of the individuality of each writer. I viewed my students' narrative writing as a way of seeing the world through their eyes, as we walked together, reader and writer, through the storylines they had created. I thought that I could identify Ginelle as the writer of certain stories and Jacob as the writer of other stories, for example, because of the individual signatures they imprinted on their writing through their language styles, their preferred topics, and their perspectives on the world.

My views on individual self-expression through classroom narrative writing were shaken, however, when I supervised teachers who marked provincial writing exams of students in Grades 3, 6, and 9. Many conversations among teachers began with, “Read what this girl wrote,” or “You won’t believe how this boy ended his story.” The teachers seemed so certain of the writer’s gender, yet they did not know the names of the writers of the narrative papers they were reading.

To learn more about the existence of gender characteristics in students' writing, I surveyed approximately 100 of the teachers in Grades 3, 6, and 9 who had marked the provincial achievement tests (Peterson, 1998). The teachers in this study tended to identify gender differences that paralleled the findings in research on gender patterns in elementary children’s writing in various regions of the United States (Gray-Schlegel & Gray-Schlegel, 1995–1996; McAuliffe, 1994; Romatowski & Trepanier-Street, 1987; Tuck, Bayliss, & Belf, 1983). Teachers and researchers observed that the characters in girls’ narrative writing demonstrated more emotion and more prosocial behaviors (helping, sharing, empathizing), whereas characters in boys’ narrative writing exhibited more aggressive behavior and engaged in more high-intensity, dangerous actions. In addition, teachers and researchers noted that the topics of girls’ writing involved relationships within their immediate experience, and boys’ writing topics involved activities beyond their lived experience.

Having found direct evidence of gender differences in student writing, I then asked these teachers about the factors that they attributed to the gender differences. The teachers explained that the differences were developmental. They felt that elementary children, particularly boys, were not capable of viewing the world from multiple perspectives. In these
teachers' views, elementary students were developmentally unable to create new gender roles and relationships in their writing, and therefore, they continued to reproduce the stereotypical ones that were familiar to them. Furthermore, teachers felt that developmental differences accounted for the gender disparities favoring girls in the scores on large-scale writing examinations in Canada, Great Britain, and the United States, as shown in documents and articles authored by Alberta Education (1995), Applebee, Langer, and Mullis (1986), and Stobart, Elwood, and Quinlan (1992).

These findings raised more questions. If writing is a cognitive process that reflects individual development, as proposed by the teachers in my study, then how could those individual developmental patterns be so consistently and widely distributed in children's writing from Grades 1 through 9 and across international borders? On the other hand, if writing is strongly influenced by social expectations, as shown in studies of gender differences in student writing, would children in classrooms recognize social expectations, and would they express a desire to resist expectations that they found limiting? What gender characteristics would children recognize as being acceptable in their and their peers' narrative writing, and how would they view alternatives to stereotypical gender meanings that might be communicated through their narrative writing?

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**Children in classrooms need to demonstrate taken-for-granted knowledge about gender roles.**

In this paper, I make an initial attempt to address the questions raised in my previous study. Through learning more about the assumptions underlying students' writing choices, I hope to move toward a new understanding of writing instruction that encourages students to use narrative writing to discover new ways of looking at the world and at the potential gender roles and relationships within it. I begin by examining the findings of related research.

**Gender and Writing: Learning from Previous Research**

Observational research in writing classrooms provides evidence of the social influences exerted on boys' and girls' writing. In one Grade 1 classroom, Henkin (1995) observed that a socially dominant group of boys refused to conference with girls because they considered the girls to be inadequate partners. Fleming (1995) found that the girls in one second-grade classroom did not bring their stories to publication because their stories did not conform to the conflict-resolution model that served in their classroom as the model for publishable narratives. Furthermore, the Grade 7 girls that participated in Finders' (1997) research study wrote about "safe" topics that would not endanger their status in the classroom's social network. These findings support the work of Bakhtin (1981) and Gilbert (1993) who explain that writers leave sociocultural signatures on their narrative writing. The very language that writers use to write their narratives is laced with cultural meanings, as it reflects the social contexts within which those writers have participated and their ways of seeing the world learned through that participation.

The more deeply I explored previous research on the relationship between gender expectations and children's narrative writing, the more I questioned my initial views of narrative writing as a reflection of children's individuality. I wanted to believe that my students could come to know themselves as individuals through their narrative writing. I wanted to believe that they could discover more about who they were and who they could become through playing with ideas, roles, whims, and wishes in their writing. Yet, I was faced with growing evidence that there was a pattern of gender conformity in children's narrative writing. If children were discovering who they were and who they could become through their writing, it appeared that many of them were creating gender identities that were reproductions of stereotypes.

I recognized that there was an element of necessity in learning gender roles and expectations. Gender is a quality that is learned and then reaffirmed through the public performance of those behaviors and speech patterns that are accepted as masculine or feminine (Cameron, 1999). Children in classrooms need to demonstrate taken-for-granted knowledge about gender roles and relationships in order to be considered socially competent females or males, a need that Davies (1993) defines as "category maintenance." Through interactions with peers, children learn about ways of being a girl and of being a boy. They try out these ways of being in various situations, always with the goal of appearing appropriately feminine or masculine. Category maintenance, however, perpetuates an understanding of gender as a relational term; being of one gender often means not being of the other gender. Gender stereotypes arise when children see girls and boys as being polar opposites with few or no possibilities of overlapping or crossing over to the other side.

At the same time as children are learning how to demonstrate their competence at being a girl or being a boy, they also need to question the hierarchical and dualistic nature of the taken-for-granted gender roles and relationships they are adopting. Davies (1993) suggests that children's social learning should include examining, questioning, and offering alternatives to assumed gender roles and relationships. Through these processes, children would have greater choice in trying on gender roles that reflected who they wanted to be as individual females and males in their social worlds. For
example, they would not be limited to an understanding
that being a boy means not demonstrating girl-like roles and
relationships.

I saw in Davies' (1993) work a way to reconcile my belief
in the power of writing for individual self-discovery and self-
expression with my realization that children weave stereotyp-
ical views of gender roles and relationships into the fabric of
their narrative writing. In this article, I explore the ways in
which the fourth-grade students in the research study took up
stereotypical gender roles and the ways in which they at-
tempted to stretch the parameters of those stereotypical gen-
der roles and relationships in their writing.

THE CHILDREN AND THEIR CLASSROOMS

For six weeks, I visited three fourth-grade classrooms in two
northwest Ohio school districts twice weekly during their
writers' workshop instruction (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994).
The 16 boys and 14 girls in Diana's class and the 16 girls and
10 boys in Leanne's class lived in an urban center. Penny's class
of 11 girls and 11 boys was in a suburban school district. In
all three classrooms, the teachers arranged the desks in blocks
so that students could talk about their writing with peers and,
as a result, could be aware of the topics and styles of their
peers' narrative writing.

During the first three weeks, I talked informally with the
children while they wrote personal narratives. My goal was to
develop a relationship with the students so that they would
feel comfortable in taking part in small-group discussions later
in the study. During the final three weeks of the study, I con-
ducted small-group discussions with students from each class-
room in a quiet space somewhere else in their school building
while the rest of the class continued with their writing. I asked
students to discuss the similarities and differences that they
saw in girls' and boys' classroom writing and topic choices and
to discuss how they felt about crossing gender lines in their
own writing (questions are in Appendix). Each teacher deter-
mined the composition of the groups within her classroom. Of
the five groups in Penny's classroom, each had two girls and
two boys, as did four of the five groups in Leanne's classroom.
The fifth group in Leanne's class was composed of five girls.
In Diana's classroom, there were six groups; four groups were
made up of two girls and two boys, while the remaining two
groups had three girls and two boys. The discussions, lasting
25–35 minutes, were tape recorded and later transcribed, gener-
ating 268 double-spaced pages of transcripts.

As they talked about their own writing and about the writ-
ing of the boys and girls in their classrooms, the fourth-grade
students made it clear that they expected to find gender dif-
fences in student narrative writing topics and that they privi-
ileged boys' narrative writing topics over girls' narrative
writing topics.

GENDER DIFFERENCES ARE NATURAL
AND CROSSING GENDER LINES
IS UNNATURAL

With a united voice, the fourth-grade children identified the
topics that were acceptable for female and male writers in their
classrooms. They agreed that girls' writing centered on inter-
personal relationships within their immediate experience and
that boys' writing centered on individual conquests in sports
or on overcoming dangers in aggressive and violent ways. The
students explained that girls usually wrote about friends, fam-
ily, pets, and personal experiences such as going to the mall,
taking dance lessons, and breaking a leg by falling out of a
tree, whereas boys usually wrote about sports, space, mythical
creatures, adventure, and animals.

When asked to consider the possibility of using non-stereotyp-
tical gender roles and relationships in their writing, the fourth-grade children revealed the social pressures that they
experienced when making decisions about topics and styles
for their narrative writing. They expected their peers to write
about stereotypical gender roles and relationships that were fa-
familial to everyone in their classrooms. In a conversation among
five girls in Leanne's classroom, Melanie and Becky pointed to
the naturalness of gender differences in narrative writing:

MELANIE: [When asked why boys wouldn't write about
princesses.] Boys just don't know about
princesses. Princesses are girls, so why would
a boy write about a girl? [Laughter from other
girls in the group.]

BECKY: [When asked if girls would write about boys.]
Girls don't really know, like, boys, you know.

The two girls appeared to see writing as being a reflection
of the writer's lived experience and neither could fathom the
possibility of writing beyond that lived experience. They
laughed at the thought of a boy writing a story about a female
protagonist. This notion stretched beyond the bounds of what
the girls felt was socially acceptable and they viewed the idea
as preposterous.

In a similar manner, a heterogeneous group in Penny's class
laid out the rigid gender expectations directing grade-four
boys' narrative writing decisions in response to my suggestion
that a boy might write a story about a puppy:

STACY: The only person who could do that is if they
were, like, gayish.

BENJAMIN: Yeah. Girls can write like boys, but boys can't
write like girls.

SHANNON: No.

Benjamin defined a social rule that clearly established class-
room expectations for boys' narrative writing topics. Cameron
(1999) proposed that, in this kind of context, the term "gay"
is used to mean “failing to measure up to the standards of masculinity or femininity” (p. 447). In Penny’s fourth-grade classroom, it is likely that the students were not referring to the hypothetical male writer’s sexuality when they labeled him “gayish,” but rather to his performance of feminine writing behavior. It appears that the students expected boys to write in ways that were polar opposites of the ways in which girls were expected to write. Boys and girls alike did not question this expectation, nor did they offer alternative possibilities for boys’ topic choices. They accepted the gender parameters as a natural part of their classroom’s social world.

Jared let Ryan know that he was pushing the gender boundaries too far . . .

When students initiated the topic of boys’ crossing of gender lines in their writing, it was only within a teasing context. The following exchange between Ryan and Jared, two boys in Leanne’s class, demonstrates the difficulties that boys face in attempting to cross gender lines in their narrative writing:

RYAN: Jared will probably write about girls playing with worms and boys playing with baby dolls.

JARED: I’m not weird, are you?

RYAN: I don’t think so. That’s too gross.

By suggesting that his peer might take up gender roles in his writing that interrupted the accepted roles, Ryan was able to gauge his peer’s response to the alternatives without placing himself in a vulnerable position. Jared was unwilling to play along with Ryan’s exploration of new roles, however, and showed his discomfort in dealing with suggestions that felt strange because they violated gender norms. In the spirit of category maintenance, Jared let Ryan know that he was pushing the gender boundaries too far and needed to get back into line. Ryan was quick to comply. Jared’s response made it clear that there was no room to play around with sacrosanct gender expectations. The laughter and derision that accompanied suggestions about boys crossing gender lines in their narrative writing topic choices provided clear evidence of the social difficulties that boys would experience if they chose to cross those lines.

Were boys the only ones who were limited in their topic choices? I wondered how the assumption of natural gender differences in narrative topics affected the gender roles and relationships available to girls as they wrote narratives in the three classrooms. Krista and Scott, students in Penny’s class, discuss the possibility of a girl crossing gender lines:

KRISTA: You mean only boys write about UFOs and stuff?

SCOTT: Yeah.

KRISTA: Still, a girl could’ve written it and a boy could’ve given her the idea.

RESEARCHER: Girls can’t write a story about UFOs?

KRISTA: They can, but they don’t like to.

SCOTT: They don’t think of those things.

Krista questioned a previous assertion that the topic of UFOs was limited to boys’ writing. The notion of imposing limits on girls’ writing choices may have been unfamiliar to her. In contrast to the previous conversation in which alternative gender roles were proposed for boys, the three children did not laugh at the suggestion that girls could write about UFOs. Rather than questioning the social acceptability of girls crossing gender lines, they questioned girls’ experience and ability to give the masculine topics their due. Scott, like boys in many of the groups, felt that girls were rubbering up against the natural gender order when they chose to write on topics identified as male topics. Because, in Scott’s opinion, boys took to those topics more naturally, they would give a better treatment of the “male” topics than girls would be able to do. Unlike the boys, the girls resisted the restrictions placed on their narrative writing choices. Krista, in the example above, explained that the question was one of preference, rather than ability to cross gender lines. However, she also conceded that a boy would have provided the initial idea for writing about UFOs, furthering the notion that writing on such topics was more natural to boys than to girls.

Although the fourth-graders showed a greater willingness to consider alternative gender roles for girls than for boys, they anchored their discussions in an assumption that gender differences were natural and that crossing gender lines was unnatural. Boys and girls accepted these gender limitations, recognizing the social consequences of exploring new gender roles and relationships in their writing.

The assumption of natural gender differences appears to have constrained boys’ narrative writing choices to a greater degree than it did the girls’ writing choices. Why would boys accept these limitations on their narrative writing choices? One possible explanation may be found in the second theme that emerged from the data: that boys’ narrative writing topics held greater importance and more appeal than did the girls’ topics.

BOYS’ NARRATIVE WRITING TOPICS ARE PRIVILEGED

Relative to their identification of girls’ use of violence in narrative writing, the students identified violence as a feature of boys’ narrative writing with greater than 20 times the frequency. In some groups, boys such as Kenny and Mark in Leanne’s classroom explained in detail the violent topics that boys used in their writing:
KENNY: We write about tanks, 'cause if you hit, like, a pothole... POP! Just crush everything. I like the tank guns. They've got a missile. Just shoot it. When it hits the ground, it's a big boom.

MARK: Yeah. Grenades, smart bombs.

The boys confidently and unabashedly situated violence within the realm of male writing topics. It appears that they revealed in the power of the weapons that they wrote about in classroom narratives. The ease with which they communicated the details of the violence suggests that the power-and-dominance storylines typically aligned with males were very familiar to and well accepted by Kenny and Mark.

For the most part, these girls and boys rejected the possibility that girls might use violence in their writing. One girl in Learne's class stated, "I wouldn't blow up no castle." A girl in another group in Learne's class said, "I wouldn't write about tanks because they have guns and everything." A boy in this group agreed, "Girls think it's disgusting—blood and guts." Boys and girls accepted the use of violence to assert power and domination as an exclusive feature of boys' writing. Girls did not cross gender lines in the adoption of violence as a feature of their writing, nor did they propose any alternatives to violence that might reflect feminine authority and control.

Girls did ridicule boys' topics to the same extent that boys ridiculed girls' topics in the heterogeneous groups, however. It was in boys' and girls' responses to this ridicule that I observed gender differences. Boys defended their topic choices and resisted girls' assignment of lower status to their topics. When Candace, a girl in Penny's classroom, labeled boys' writing "destructive" and suggested that boys used protagonists, such as Godzilla, who were "silly" and "stupid," Josh tried to salvage the image of Godzilla as a protagonist. In his explanation that "Godzilla saves little people's lives," Josh offered another perspective on the significance of Godzilla-like characters in stories written by boys.

In contrast, the girls responded to the ridicule of female writing topics either by accepting the assessment of female topics as trivial and silly or by insisting that they did not write on the topics identified by boys as female topics. Melanie, in a heterogeneous group in Learne's class, assigned lower status to feminine topics in the following exchange:

RYAN: Girls like writing about beauty stuff.
MELANIE: [laughs.]
RESEARCHER: Is that what girls like?
MELANIE: Yeah. [giggles.]

Melanie's acceptance of Ryan's lumping of feminine topics into the general category of "beauty stuff" betrayed an attitude that trivialized girls' topics. By giggling in response to Ryan's suggestion, Melanie further trivialized feminine topic preferences. Unlike Josh, Melanie accepted the negative assessment of her gender's writing topics and offered no defense of the significance of those topics.

In the next exchange between Scott and Kaitlen, two students in Penny's class, Kaitlen refuses to accept the female topic choices that Scott proposed were available to her.

SCOTT: Girls write about pretty stuff.
KAITLEN: I don't write about pretty stuff.
SCOTT: They'll start talking about them and their friends go over to their house and start talking about boys and things.
KAITLEN: I don't agree with you. I don't write about ballerinas and stuff like that. NO!

Though Kaitlen did not identify alternatives to stereotypical views of female writing topics, she clearly did not restrict her narrative writing choices to those proposed by Scott. In one respect, Kaitlen had freed herself from the constraints of stereotypical gender roles in her disassociation with feminine topics. However, Kaitlen's passionate refusal to accept the stereotypical gender roles and her silence in proposing alternate ways to assess feminine topics also demonstrated her acceptance of the lower status of topics designated as female topics.

Whereas Josh resisted Candace's assessment of boys' topics as being inferior to girls' topics, Kaitlen and Melanie accepted boys' dismissal of girls' topics. Through their actions, Josh, Kaitlen, and Melanie maintained the gender order that students considered natural in their classroom—that of a male/female dualism in which male qualities were admired and considered to be superior to female qualities. This gender order was communicated again and again in their narrative writing topic choices and in the students' responses to each other's writing.

**RETHINKING MY CLASSROOM TEACHING**

I wondered if self-expression and self-discovery were possible at all as children transmitted widely recognized gender meanings through their narrative writing. How much of a choice did students actually have when selecting topics for their writing? What chance was there that girls might "come to know" the way boys know and vice versa, so that the female/male duality would not present itself repeatedly in students' narrative writing? I wanted to believe that free choice of writing topics liberated students to take risks and try out topics that were significant to them. Yet, in terms of gender meanings, the children in this study were unanimous in presenting a limited range of topic choices available to both girls and boys in their classrooms. They also gave many indications of their awareness of possible social implications for trying out alternative...
gender meanings in their writing. Assumptions about the naturalness of the gender order with its privileging of masculine topics appeared to have been deeply ingrained within the culture of the three classrooms.

The more information I gathered about gender differences in classroom narrative writing, the more I appreciated the complexity of teaching writing in elementary classrooms. I came to see that my initial view of classroom narrative writing as a tool for children's individual self-expression and self-discovery overlooked the social meanings that were expressed and learned through the writing. In the face of overwhelming evidence, I had to accept that there were inevitable social pressures for gender conformity in students' narrative writing. I also had to accept that the emphasis I had placed on individual cognitive development in my writing instruction addressed only one aspect of my students' growth as writers. I was overlooking the social influences on students' writing and their need to grow as literacy learners within social contexts. My students could not develop their unique voices if they did not feel accepted as socially competent girls and boys by their peers.

I still believe that my writing instruction can help students to use writing to make sense of their world and to discover more about themselves, however, if I approach classroom writing as a tool for social change. It would require creating a classroom where recognition of social competence revolves around trying out new gender roles, rather than accepting stereotypical gender roles. Recognizing that my students and I are always in the process of creating our gender identities, the first step is to examine my own views on gender roles and relationships. Rather than accepting the stereotypical gender meanings embedded within my students' writing, I must become a critical reader of student writing and demonstrate my own attempts to grapple with new perspectives and contradictory meanings in my responses to students' writing during student/teacher conferences and authors' groups. Perhaps if I began voicing questions and contentions with gender expectations in my responses to student writing, my students would find the courage to overcome their silence on the issue.

There were inevitable social pressures for gender conformity in students' narrative writing.

My students and I need to acknowledge the difficulties that we face as we attempt to express our uniqueness and at the same time take up gender roles and relationships that are recognizable to and satisfy our classroom audience as we share our stories and invite feedback from others. My mini-lessons could involve skills for social change, such as supporting students who explore non-stereotypical gender meanings in their writing. I could also weave into my assessment ways to provide feedback on students' exploration of gender identities that do not conform to norms. Students' self-assessment could involve an examination of the social meanings embedded within their writing. They might identify, for example, the unique twists on familiar social meanings that they express in their writing, the parts of their writing that they feel express their personality, those that give students the greatest pleasure to create, those that reflect a new discovery about themselves or their world, and those that reflect their experimentation with new ideas.

Finally, I need to show my students how they can use writing as a tool for social change. The very act of molding thoughts, feelings, experiences, and values into words, phrases, sentences, and story structures creates possibilities for new meanings. I want to show students how writing can be a powerful tool for creating, from everyday life, something extraordinary that transforms those daily experiences.

At this point, I cannot provide any evidence that my suggestions will be successful in creating a writing classroom that is respectful of children's needs to conform and be accepted within their social worlds and, at the same time, nurturing of their individuality. Now that I am coming to understand the strength of children's gender assumptions on their writing choices, there are a multitude of questions about effective writing instruction that I want to explore as I work with student writers. Indeed, the only certainty I have is that if I continue to teach as I always have, I will continue to observe girls and boys restricting their topic choices and reproducing stereotypical gender roles and relationships in their writing. I know that changes are needed. I see my move toward a new understanding of effective writing instruction is an important first step. Now my own exploration of new roles as a writing teacher begins.

Notes
1. Province-wide achievement tests of reading and writing are written by students in Grades 3, 6, and 9 in the province of Alberta, Canada. Students write a narrative that addresses a given prompt within a time frame that varies by grade. Grade 3, 6 and 9 teachers within the province are contracted by the Student Evaluation Branch of Alberta Learning to mark the narratives over a week-long period in July following the writing of the exams.
2. This research was supported by an Ohio State University Seed Grant and a Lima Campus Research Grant. I am grateful to the teachers and students who participated in this study for welcoming me into their classrooms.

References
APPENDIX

QUESTIONS GUIDING SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSIONS

1. What do girls write about in your class?
2. What do boys write about in your class?
3. How are girls’ and boys’ stories the same?
4. How are girls’ and boys’ stories different?
5. What do you like writing about?
6. Would you ever write about topics that (opposite gender) like to write about? Why or why not?
7. Does anyone in your class write about topics that (opposite gender) like to write about?

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