

12-2016

# Gender and Collaborative Writing

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## Recommended Citation

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# Gender and Collaborative Writing

An Action Research Report

By Anna Hertzog

GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Gender and Collaborative Writing

Submitted on November 1, 2015

in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED Degree

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## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Catherine Kelly

November 1, 2015

## Abstract

This action research report investigated whether all-boy collaboration groups improve the writing skills and attitudes in primary aged boys. The study included an all-male writing group, a mixed gender writing group, and an all-female writing group in a small, rural Montessori Academy in a classroom with 21 students ranging in Grades 1 through 3. Students were instructed on how to collaborate and work appropriately with one another before beginning writing in their groups assigned by gender for six weeks. While students worked in their groups the researcher observed behaviors, scored entries, conferenced with students, and administered surveys regarding writing pre and post-intervention. Students, male and female, had an overall positive attitude towards writing before intervention and maintained their positive attitudes post-intervention. Results showed that the mixed gender group demonstrated the highest improvements in writing skills, but participated in the lowest amount of collaboration. The results of the study suggested that collaboration could have been an effective tool for males, but not a consistent method for other students. Based on the results of the study, it is suggested that all students participate in mixed gender groups.

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

“According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the year 2000 boys were three to five times more likely than girls to have a learning/reading disability placement in schools” (Young & Brozo, 2001, p. 318). Upon reading this staggering statistic, it is evident there is a need to address how boys are learning in school. In particular, research suggests a learning gap in early reading and writing skills between primary aged boys and girls. There are specific reasons as to why boys may not always achieve literacy success in schools. However, many strategies have proved to be effective in closing the learning gap between the genders. This report reviews what research has declared as issues and challenges that boys may face in learning literacy skills in school settings, and the successful strategies that have been implemented to improve those skills. In addition, the report also reviews the implementation of one of these strategies in a multi-aged classroom to determine its success in the field.

### **Review of Literature**

Children develop attitudes and approaches to learning reading and writing skills at a very young age. Boys’ attitudes towards literacy are unique, and may identify why learning these skills can be challenging for them. According to the research, some boys view reading as a “feminine” activity (Blackburn, 2003; Newkirk, 2000; Sokal, Katz, Adkins, Gladu, Jackson-Davis & Kussin, 2005; Sokal & Katz, 2008; Young & Brozo 2001). From an early age, there is an expectation placed on boys that they should be interested in “masculine” activities, such as sports. Often, reading and writing are not seen as “masculine” activities and boys are subject to ridicule for showing interest in these activities. Since many young boys are interested in more traditional “masculine” activities, reading and writing are activities they are simply not interested in or have trouble relating to. The “feminine” view of reading is also potentially due to

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

a lack of prominent males in literacy, in both fictional literary characters and the authors who write for young children (Lipsyte, 2011). In addition, the research also states that while boys are held to the expectation that they are “masculine”, girls experience more broadened expectations of themselves and it is more socially acceptable for them to enjoy both “masculine” and “feminine” activities (Waston & Kehler, 2012; Waston, Kehler & Martino, 2010; Young & Brozo, 2001). Additional theories assert that educators need to be more knowledgeable about how to teach and how children learn rather than placing blame on the “femininity” style of school (Watson & Kehler, 2012; Watson, Kehler & Martino, 2010). If a teacher is knowledgeable about how boys learn and develop, this would potentially remedy the issue of school being too “feminine” and become a more appropriate learning place for young boys.

While many boys develop negative attitudes towards literacy, there are books and other types of literature that young boys do enjoy. However, the types of print that boys do find interesting, such as comic books and magazines that are aligned with current and popular culture, are reportedly scarce in schools, thus supplying boys with fewer resources and less access to meaningful print (Askew, 1997; Newkirk, 2000; Ortiz et al., 2014; Sokal et al., 2005; Williams, 2004). More “traditional” literature, such as storybooks and short novels are more abundant in schools, but these types of print are apparently less appealing to boys. Boys like to read and write about the characters they see in movies or television, or nonfiction topics. School libraries have a much smaller inventory of these types of literature, perhaps giving boys the idea that their topics of interest are less valued.

While boys enjoy comic books, magazines and nonfiction topics in print, many educators do not see the value or quality in these types of literature (Askew, 1997; Blackburn, 2003;

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Newkirk, 2000; Sokal et al., 2005; Young & Brozo, 2001). Instead, boys are often encouraged to choose from genres of print that they are not naturally drawn to, which can develop a more negative attitude towards reading. Some educators are vocal about their distaste for particular types of literature, like comic books. This again makes boys perceive that their topics of interest are not of value.

Often in types of literature such as comic books and nonfiction books the central topics include heroism, which can also include violence. Violence in literary text is often prohibited in classrooms and makes many teachers uncomfortable and fearful. However, classic pieces of literature used in many classrooms across the United States, such as *Beowulf* and *The Great Gatsby*, contain strong elements of violence themselves (Blackburn, 2003; Newkirk, 2000; Ortiz, Ferrell, Anderson, Cain, Fluty, Sturzenbecker & Matlock, 2014; Williams, 2004). Once again, when boys are subject to this contradiction they may perceive their interests in literacy are not of value.

Boys can often be found reading about topics that include violence, and can often be found writing about topics of violence as well. The subject of violence makes many educators uncomfortable, and can even have the perception that reading and writing about violence will encourage children to carry out violence in their own lives. Since boys are more likely to read about topics that include violence, educators sometimes see boys as problematic learners because of the topics they choose to read and write about (Blackburn, 2003; Newkirk, 2000).

There are educational philosophies that take a different approach to teaching literacy to young children. These philosophies uphold alternative methods of learning compared to a more traditional curricula that many public schools utilize. An example of this is the Montessori

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

method. Soundy (2003) describes a Montessori school that gives children opportunities to explore literacy, as print and verbal communication, as early as 8 weeks of age. The school upholds the Montessori philosophy that children should be allowed to explore the world around them using tools provided to them in the classroom. The tools used could be music, books, manipulatives, and social interaction. The Montessori philosophy instills that children should find their own journey in literacy acquisition and success by being surrounded by a literacy rich environment. Children should also be provided with many materials to learn from, and having educators who are there to provide them with these experiences. This approach to learning may be a beneficial method for young boys acquiring literacy skills, as they would be encouraged to find experiences in learning that match their interests, strengths, and potentials.

Boys learn differently from girls because of the physical differences in brain development and how the brain is used. Jantz (2014) discusses that male brains use a completely different part of the brain than female brains, which makes males capable of focusing deeply on a task and less capable of multitasking. Not only do males use different parts of the brain, they also process chemicals in the brain differently. Due to different brain chemistry, males are less likely to sit for longer periods of time to complete tasks, and are more likely to show aggression and impulsions. Male brains use only one side of their brains for verbal centering, and for this reason many boys and men are seen as having an aversion to emotions or may jump too quickly to problem solving in a situation. There are physical and chemical reasons why boys are different from girls and how they learn and process, and this is key in understanding how to teach young boys successfully. Sommers (2013) discusses how schools have become a more successful place for learning for girls, in which behaviors like regulating impulses and sitting still are expected.



## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Schools are also changing important policies such as smaller amounts of recess time and less tolerance for disciplinary issues in children. These are policies that directly affect how boys thrive due to their physical and chemical make-up. Sommers (2013) highlights vocational schools with intense academic requirements of specific trades as a possible alternative, rather than implementing policies that are not conducive to how young boys develop.

While an achievement gap between boys and girls is apparent in many schools in reading and writing, it is also evident that not all boys struggle with or dislike reading and writing. Many boys enjoy these activities in their own unique ways. Despite this, boys are often lumped together into one problematic population by schools (Blackburn, 2003; Sokal et al., 2005). Some theorists record that boys should be looked at as individuals and unique learners who develop their own strengths and weaknesses in their academic growth in literacy. Just as many other populations do, boys vary widely within their gender. Their interests, likes, dislikes, passions, and learning styles are vast. Boys should not be categorized as all “masculine” driven learners, but instead unique learning individuals (Sokal & Katz, 2008; Watson & Kehler, 2012; Watson, Kehler & Martino, 2010).

While some of the research highlights the unique learning styles of boys, there is also research that digs deeper to find why learning gaps in literacy are occurring. Some researchers state that instead of analyzing the gender of a child, it is more important to examine the socioeconomic status of a child. The socioeconomic status of children plays a vital role in literacy achievement (Watson & Kehler, 2012; Watson, Kehler & Martino, 2010; Sokal et al., 2005). Research indicates that the lower the socioeconomic status a child has, the lower their

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

achievements are in reading and writing. This may be due to a lack of literacy-rich resources, such as books, inside their homes and communities.

The research on why boys may struggle with their success in reading and writing also discusses important strategies that schools and educators can use to make literacy a more fruitful subject for them. Within school, community, and classroom libraries, boys should be given more choices regarding their reading choices, such as magazines, newspapers, and nonfiction topics (Blackburn, 2003; Ortiz et al., 2014; Sokal et al., 2005, Young & Brozo, 2001). This not only gives boys more access to print that is meaningful to them, but also suggests that their interests are of value and of importance. However, another article of research suggests that merely supplying boys with more “boy-friendly” books is a simple answer to a much more complex issue. Therefore, giving boys more books may not always remedy the literacy gap between boys and girls (Sokal et al., 2005).

The research also suggests that boys are socially motivated to learn, which is often why a boy can be turned off to reading and writing if they are ridiculed by others for enjoying it. If educators encourage opportunities for young boys to read and write together in small groups, it can make them more successful in their literacy learning. This is because boys can relate to their topics of interest with one another, and can therefore support one another in their drive to read and write more (Ortiz et al., 2014).

Teachers who integrate technology within their reading instruction may also see improvements in primary aged boys’ literacy success (Blackburn, 2003; Sokal & Katz, 2008, Watson, Kehler & Martino, 2010). Many boys tend to gravitate towards technology and technology tools, and providing them with meaningful experiences with these tools in literacy

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

promotes excitement towards the topic as well. Research also states that having access to technology does not always increase reading skills, however (Sokal & Katz, 2008). The use of technology can sometimes be an isolating learning experience, and since many boys are socially motivated to learn, they could potentially be resistant to technology use if it means they must work individually.

Changing educators' attitudes towards literacy, in general, is also a solution to the literacy gap for young boys. Teachers and other educators should widen their perspective on what they consider quality literacy, including comic books, magazines, and newspapers. Educators should also readily stock their classrooms with these types of print, and integrate this literature into their own personal reading lists. This enables more boys and girls access to more reading experiences in their school career (Askew, 1997; Ortiz et al., 2014). Also, educators should begin to acknowledge when children, both boys and girls, write about popular culture topics and violence. Writing about subjects such as heroism, struggle, and overcoming obstacles carries value and power for students. When teachers accept these items as meaningful, it encourages children to write more (Newkirk, 2000; Ortiz et al., 2014; Williams, 2004). As teachers begin to look more critically at what is considered "acceptable" reading and writing in their classrooms, they can also begin to analyze the current curricula they utilize in their instruction. Teachers should carefully review the materials they use in their teaching practices to determine underlying biases of masculinity and femininity in their resources. Instruction and resources utilized within classrooms should be encouraging to both boys and girls, and not reinforce stereotypical gender roles within our society (Blackburn, 2003; Sokal & Katz, 2008; Watson, Kehler & Martino, 2010; Young & Brozo, 2001).

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

School districts and administration should consider that having more males in the teaching field, particularly those who model positive reading and writing skills, provide literacy-rich experiences for boys and make them more successful learners (Blackburn, 2003; Sokal & Katz, 2008). Males in the teaching field are scarce, particularly in the primary grades. Finding quality male teachers who can encourage young boys in their reading and writing and relate to their experiences and development is potentially empowering. However, boys having the same-gender teacher as themselves will not always increase their desire to read and write, or change their attitudes towards reading. Studies have shown that because boys have developed a sense of their gender role and their negative attitude towards literacy at very young ages, it is difficult to break down those barriers by merely providing a male teacher in the classroom (Blackburn, 2003; Sokal & Katz, 2008; Watson, Kehler & Martino, 2010).

The research on boys and successful literacy acquisition overlaps in many ways. Many researchers agree on why boys can develop negative attitudes towards literacy, and why educators sometimes view boy learners as problematic. The research also discusses why the issue of gender is not always the issue, but rather other factors also need to be considered. There are some conflicting arguments about why boys lag behind their girl counterparts in literacy, and how to successfully reach them. I hypothesize that this may be because the issue of gender proves to be much more complicated than simply lumping students into their genders for educational and data collecting purposes.

### **Research Methodology**

The action research takes place at a Montessori Academy in a small, rural Midwestern town. There are lower elementary classrooms and upper elementary classrooms, and this

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

research takes place in a lower elementary classroom. The classroom is a multi-aged classroom, containing students in grades 1 through 3. Within the classroom, there 11 female and 10 male students. The Montessori Academy has proven to be an alternative choice for public schooling for students and their families, when traditional classrooms were a more challenging environment for learning. Sixty percent of the Montessori Academy's student population is using free and reduced price lunch programs, and about 36% of students utilize an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for special needs.

Based upon the findings of the research on boys and literacy success and the student population that I serve at the Montessori Academy, the purpose of this study was to determine if gender specific collaborative writing groups improve the attitudes and skills in writing for primary aged children. Specifically, the study was designed to address the following research question: What effects will an all-boy writing collaboration group have on improving writing skills and attitudes in primary aged boys? While all students, male and female, will participate in the study, attention will be paid to the data collected on the male students in the classroom.

In order to collect effective data in this research, several tools were developed and utilized. First, a four question attitude survey was created to ask students what their perceptions, likes and challenges were about writing. Second, a log to enter field notes as the students were working in their writing groups was developed to document my observations. Third, a writing rubric was developed that was to be followed while I was looking through their entries each day. Finally, a conference form was created so that I could meet with students once per week to reflect and make goals towards their writing progress.

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Before implementing gendered and collaborative writing groups, pre-assessment data was collected to determine how students perceived the task of writing. An Attitude Survey was completed by conducting a video interview using the software VoiceThread. Each student was asked four questions regarding their ideas, perceptions and experiences with writing (Appendix A). After all students were interviewed, they were randomly placed in a writing group. In order to randomize, I first categorized my class list into First graders, Second graders, and Third graders. I began with First Grade children and, based upon the student's gender, I placed their name on one of three lists labeled: Male, Mixed, or Female. This was done until all students were placed in an assigned group. Three distinct groups were formed to determine the validity of gender and writing as data was collected and analyzed.

Before students began working in their groups, a lesson was given on expectations and procedures that should be followed while participating in the groups. First, the word "collaboration" was defined and discussed. Students learned that the purpose of the group was to work as a team on their writing entries, but that they should be entering their own individual entries. As a class, students determined that "collaboration" meant giving each other ideas on topics to write about, editing each other's work including assisting with spelling or grammar and reading entries for feedback, and giving feedback and support on writing topics. Students were also taught that while the groups were collaborative, classroom rules and expectations were to still be upheld including being kind and respectful to one another and to also respect classroom materials. Students were told that there were only two requirements to their journal entries: each entry should contain a date even if they made several entries in one day, and their entries should also include an illustration. I highlighted that they could write about any topic they chose, and

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

that part of their duty as a collaborator within the group was to assist others in coming up with ideas or topics to write about. Students were instructed that the purpose of these groups was so that they become better writers, and help one another become better writers as well. As a class, we reviewed these expectations for two days before working in the writing groups. We also discussed the expectation was to write and/or collaborate the entire segment of time, which is approximately 30 minutes. Students were given a composition notebook to keep their entries in, and instructed that only entries from their writing group work should be entered in the notebook. Should they complete writing at any other part of the day, they were to document that in their separate writing notebook and/or loose leaf paper. Students were allowed to go back and continue writing on a piece they did not finish or would like to add more to from the previous days. Students sometimes did not have enough time to finish the illustration that should accompany their entries. When this occurred, students were instructed to write the date in the margins where they continued working so that when scoring, I was able to determine what they completed during their writing time each day.

As students began working in their designated groups, I took Field Notes on my observations of how the groups were working together (Appendix B). During the designated writing time, I took anecdotal notes on my observations of each group for 5 minutes, 2 times each day. In these notes, I documented only what I observed, including: conversations, writing topics, illustrations, on or off task behaviors, and interactions between students and the adults in the classroom.

At the end of each school day, each student's composition notebook was collected to be scored using a Scoring Rubric (Appendix C). As grammar and handwriting lessons continued,

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

the rubric allowed me to document whether students were utilizing skills learned from instruction as well as entering the two required pieces to their entries (date and illustration). When an entry was scored, a check mark was placed by the date or on the top of the page as a visual reminder to me and the student that it was scored. A different color pen or marker was used each week to check off in the journal so that each scoring week could be identified quickly. This was an important tool as the student conferenced with me on their writing each week. The rubrics also allowed me to analyze and notice any trends in students scoring and compare them to the designated writing group to which they belonged.

Once per week, students were individually pulled during the school day to conference with me and discuss their writing. I asked each student questions and prompts that were based on the Conferencing Notes (Appendix D). These conferences were scheduled during any time of the school day. The student and I found a quiet area within the classroom to meet with their composition notebook. The student was allowed to quickly flip through the entries from the last week and choose one specific entry to conference about (scored or unscored). Students would then reflect specifically on this piece during the conference time.

After six weeks of working in the collaborative groups, students were then video interviewed once again using VoiceThread. Students were asked the same four questions (Appendix A) to determine differences in attitudes and perceptions on writing post interventions.

### **Data Analysis**

When students completed the Attitude Survey via VoiceThread, I listened, viewed and then transcribed their responses onto a Word Document. The survey was completed pre-intervention and post-intervention. I then analyzed their responses to find themes and





## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

<b>What topics do you like to write about?</b>								
Fiction	4	2	2		3	4	1	
Non-Fiction	3	6	4		4	4	5	
<b>What's hard for you about writing?</b>								
Spelling/Grammar	4	4	4		5	3	5	
Inability to Read/Write	2	2	1		0	1	0	
Choosing Topics	1	2	1		2	1	1	
<b>How does writing make you feel?</b>								
Positive	6	5	6		5	5	6	
Neutral	1	1	0		2	0	0	
Negative	0	2	0		0	1	0	

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Students primarily answered that their reasons for enjoying writing are because they enjoy the task of writing itself. This was typical between all three writing groups. About the same amount of students answered that they like writing because it is a part of learning and because they enjoy writing about topics of their choice, both pre and post-intervention. Only one student responded that they did not enjoy writing at all prior to working in writing groups, but no students answered that they did not enjoy writing post-intervention. Overall, more students preferred to write about nonfiction topics versus fiction topics both pre and post-intervention. Most students also responded that their challenges in writing fall within spelling, grammar or sentence structure issues pre-intervention. Post-intervention, more students responded that their challenges in writing were with spelling and grammar issues, but less responded that it was due to the inability to read or write. About the same amount of students responded that their challenge is their inability to read or complete the task of writing, or choosing topics to write about. Finally, most students responded with a positive feeling towards writing, while two students felt neutral and two students felt negative about writing pre-intervention. Only 1 student responded with a negative feeling towards writing post-intervention. Pre-intervention, this data reflected that most students will likely enjoy working within their writing groups because they enjoy writing and have positive feelings regarding the task. It also told me that I was likely to be reading nonfiction topics within their writing entries, and that students may struggle with spelling and grammar during their writing process. Post-intervention, the data reflected that students' primarily positive attitudes towards writing did not change. While more students felt that spelling and grammar were more of an issue after working in their writing groups, less responded that writing was a challenge due to their inability to read or write. Also, one less

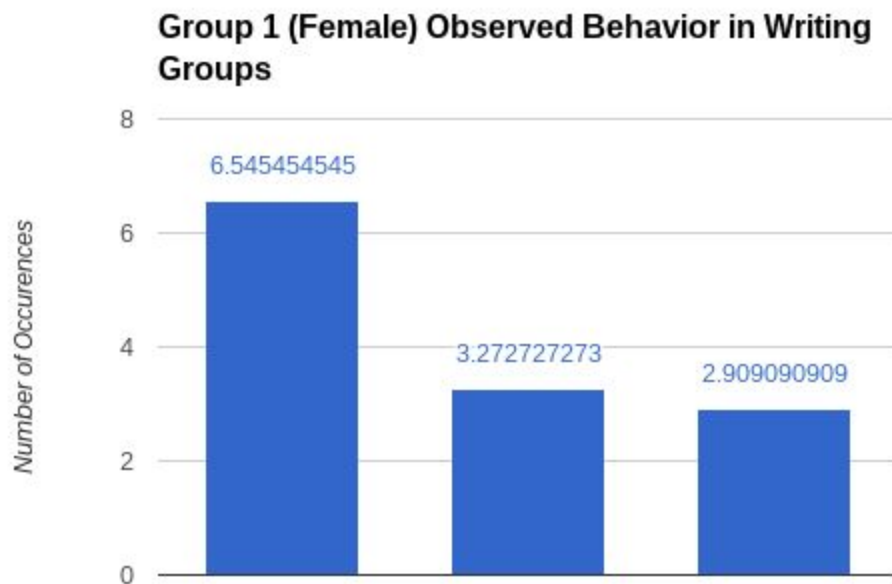
## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

student responded with a negative attitude towards writing post-intervention. The data also reflected that their primary topics to write about did not change. Students' reasons to enjoy writing had primarily not changed, either.

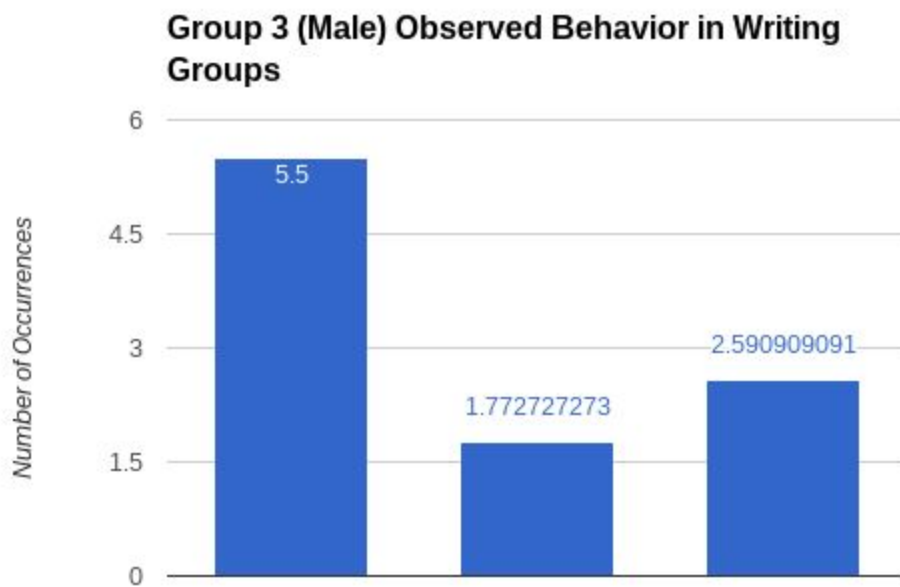
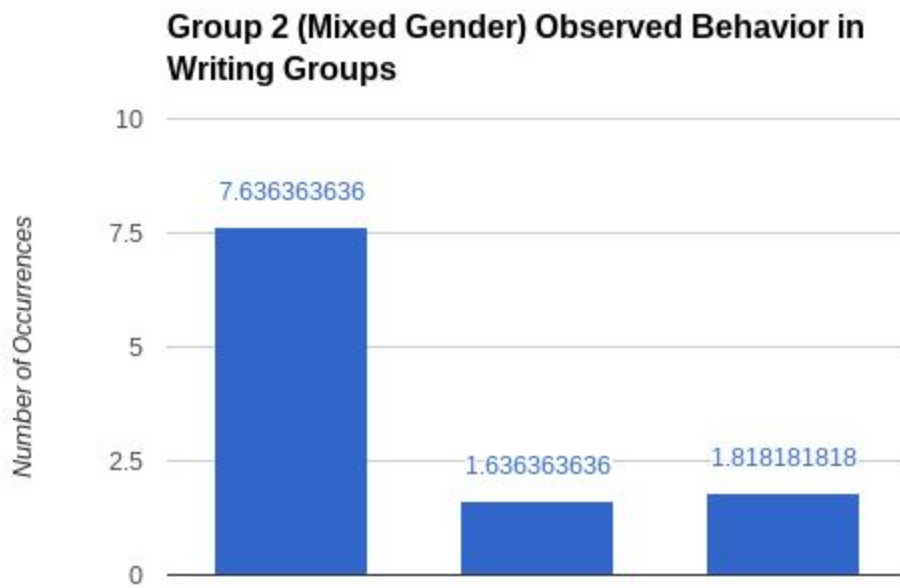
As students worked in their writing groups, I quietly rotated between the three groups and collected anecdotal notes on their work. These notes were analyzed and then categorized each day. Out of the behaviors observed while groups were writing, three categories were formed: on task behaviors, off task behaviors and collaborative behaviors. On task behaviors included students writing and/or illustrating quietly in their own writing journals. Off task behaviors included students doing anything not considered writing or illustrating including: moving around the classroom, misusing writing or drawing materials, sitting in their area but not working, or having a conversation that did not include their writing topics. Finally, collaborative behaviors included students participating in any behaviors that demonstrated the term "collaboration" as defined by the students themselves, including: giving each other ideas on topics to write about, editing each other's work including assisting with spelling or grammar and reading entries for feedback, and giving feedback and support on writing topics. Observed behaviors were tallied and placed into one of the three categories each day and logged into a spreadsheet. Student names were organized by the writing group they participated in. After each day's behaviors was observed, categorized and logged, I created a bar graph to demonstrate each writing group's typical behavior while working in their groups. The first bar in each graph represents the writing group's average occurrence of on task behavior. The second bar graph represents the writing group's average occurrence of off task behavior. The third bar graph represents the writing group's average occurrence of collaborative behavior. The bar graphs represent the average

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

amount of each behavior observed during each daily writing period, which was approximately 30 minutes.



## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING



## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Out of the three writing groups, Group 2, the mixed gender group demonstrated the highest on task behavior consistently. While the group's collaboration was generally low, most students remained on task by quietly writing and/or illustrating in their own journals. Group 1, the all-female group, had the most off task behavior. Their off task behavior was nearly double what the other groups' off task behaviors were. These behaviors were usually in the form of conversations being held that had nothing to do with their writing topics. Finally Groups 1 and 3, the female and male groups respectively, demonstrated the highest amounts of collaboration within their groups. The males and females in these groups were consistently observed helping one another out with spelling, providing feedback on illustrations, and feedback on sentence structure. This data suggested that same gendered groups had the highest amounts of collaboration, and also corroborated the theory that boys are socially motivated to learn. This is because boys can relate to their topics of interest with one another, and can therefore support one another in their drive to read and write more (Ortiz et al., 2014). The all-female writing group did demonstrate the highest amount of collaboration, which may suggest that girls may also be more motivated to learn from one another.

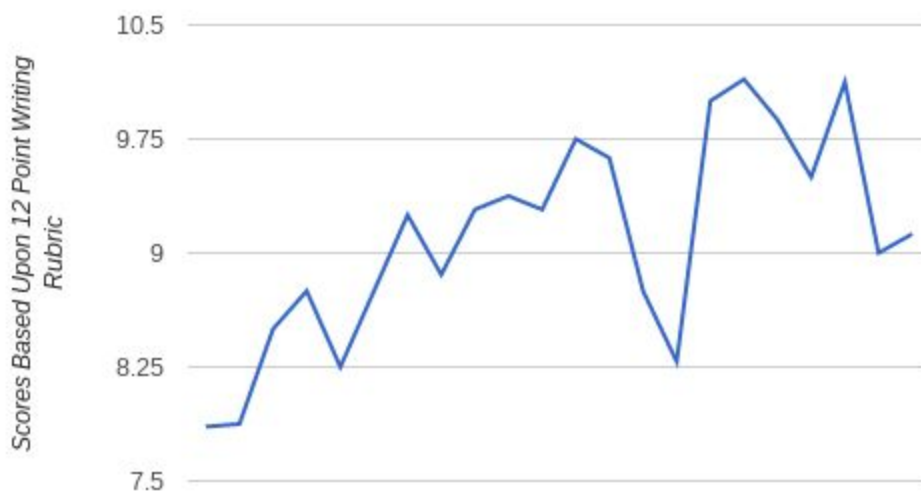
Student journals were collected and analyzed daily against the Scoring Rubric (Appendix B). The rubric allowed a possible 12 points per entry, per student. One point was awarded for students demonstrating "Emerging" skills, two points for "Proficient" skills, and three points for "Exemplary" skills. After rubrics were scored, the score was entered onto a spreadsheet. Student names were organized according to the writing group they participated in. When all rubrics were scored and entered, the average score per writing group was calculated and organized into a line graph.

GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

**Group 1 (Female) Writing Group's Average Daily Performance**

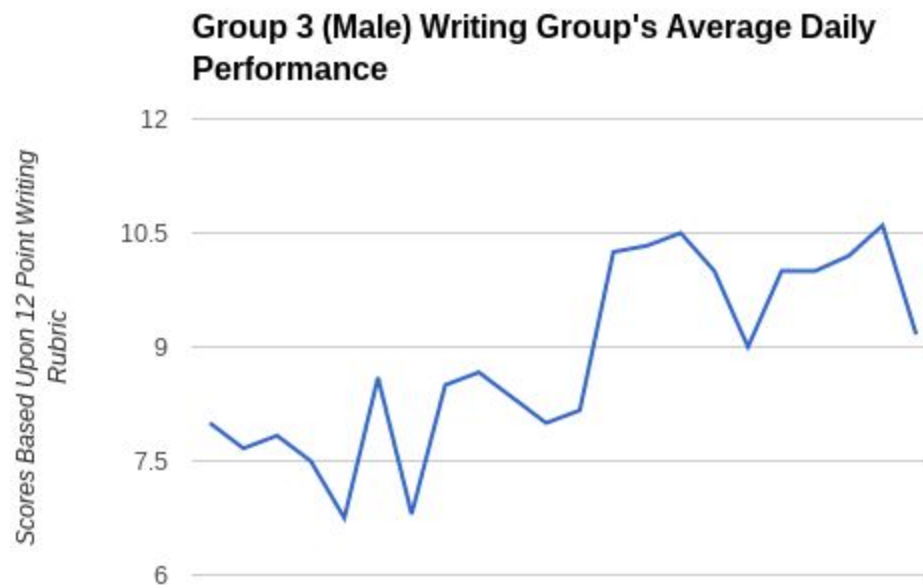


**Group 2 (Mixed Gender) Writing Group's Average Daily Performance**





## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING



Groups 2 and 3, the mixed gender and all-male writing groups respectively, demonstrated an overall incline in their writing and writing skills. While there were some days within the intervention period that students may have scored lower, they generally showed improvement in their writing skills and abilities. Group 1, the all-female writing group's data displayed more inconsistent scoring and improvement in their writing skills. The writing group showed a drastic improvement about halfway through the intervention, but then showed a slight decline after their improvements. Group 1 also demonstrated the highest amount of off task behavior. Since this group tended to carry out many conversations with one another that did not contribute to their writing, this may be the reason that their entries were inconsistent and showed a decline towards the end of the intervention. Group 2 demonstrated the highest on task behavior, which is a possible contribution to their consistent improvement in their writing skills. Group 3, the all-male group, demonstrated the high collaboration skills which could have contributed to their

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

improvement in their writing skills. However, Group 1, the all-female writing group, demonstrated the highest amount of collaboration but showed generally inconsistent improvements.

Lastly, once per week students met with me to conference and reflect on their writing using the Conferencing Notes (Appendix D). Each week, their notes were transcribed and analyzed, and categories and themes that emerged from their responses. When I analyzed student responses during their conferencing with me, I organized their choice of writing topics into fiction or nonfiction topics. Overall, most students chose to write about nonfiction topics. This was consistent between all three writing groups, and consistent with each conference that I held with students. This was also consistent with the data collected during the Attitude Survey (Appendix A) with what students enjoyed writing about, which was primarily nonfiction topics. Three categories emerged when students reflected what they enjoyed about writing throughout the week. They included: enjoying the social/collaboration piece of the writing groups, enjoying the task of writing/illustrating, and enjoying the topic they chose to write about. Overall, students in Groups 1 and 2, the all-female and mixed gender groups respectively, answered that they enjoyed the topic that they chose to write about. This suggested that students enjoyed the freedom that they had to write about whatever they chose. In Group 3, the all-male group, they primarily answered that they enjoyed the task of writing. This also supported the data collected during the Attitude Survey (Appendix A), in which most students from Group 3 enjoyed the task of writing. When reflecting on their writing strengths, areas to improve upon, and their goals for future writing passages, four categories emerged from students' responses. They included: handwriting/spelling/illustrations, topics chosen to write about, staying on task, or no strengths

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

or improvements to reflect upon. Throughout all three writing groups, students overwhelmingly answered that handwriting, spelling and their illustrations were their strengths in their passages. This was the overall strength that they found in their passages at each conferencing time throughout the intervention. When reflecting on their areas to improve upon, students from all three writing groups overwhelmingly responded that their handwriting, spelling and illustrations could improve. Finally, students across all three writing groups overwhelmingly responded that their future writing goals would be in the area of handwriting, spelling, and illustrations. This data suggested that while students found handwriting, spelling and illustrations to be successful for them, they also found it to be areas they could continue to improve upon, and even an area to set weekly goals for themselves. Some students kept the same goal for many weeks, but others, once they read and reflected on their goal from the previous week created a new one to work on. Largely, students had completed or nearly completed their goals from the previous week before creating a new one. This told me that students reflected appropriately upon their work and considered their strengths and weaknesses carefully. The data collected from the conferences with students corroborated what students' attitudes and skills were pre and post-intervention.

The overall data suggests that working within collaborative writing groups was successful in assisting students become better writers, as all three writing groups demonstrated improvements in their writing skills. Students responded with a largely positive attitude about writing before the intervention, and their positivity remained post-intervention. Throughout the class, only 1 student responded with a negative feeling towards writing post-intervention as compared to 2 students pre-intervention. The group with the largest gains in writing improvement was Group 2, the mixed gender group, as demonstrated by their scoring on the

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Writing Rubric (Appendix C). While collaboration remained fairly low in this group, they also reported the most on task behavior. Seemingly, even though collaboration was lower in Group 2, students still demonstrated improvements by merely sitting with one another and having the freedom of writing about any topic they choose. Collaboration was high in Group 3, the all-male group and they also showed consistent improvement in their writing group. However, Group 1 had the highest amount of collaboration and showed a large gain in their writing improvement. Their scores on the Writing Rubric (Appendix C) were somewhat inconsistent, but could be attributed to the higher amount of off task behavior observed within this group. Despite collaboration being lower in the mixed gender group, they made the largest improvements in writing. I believe that the high amount of collaboration between the same gendered writing groups could potentially continue if students participated within mixed gendered writing groups, which data showed they made the most improvements. Based on the outcomes of this study, it is suggested that mixed gender groups be used throughout the class.

### **Action Plan**

The data from this research reflected that after students worked in their writing collaboration groups, the mixed gender group had the most improvement in their skills as writers. The mixed gender group had the most on task behavior, but did not engage in the most collaboration. The all-female group did the most collaborating within their group, and made improvements in their writing, but their scores were at times inconsistent due to a larger amount of off task behavior. Finally, the all-male group showed high collaboration and demonstrated improvements in writing. Based on the data, I believe that mixed gender writing groups would prove to be the most successful throughout the class. In addition to what the research yielded, I

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

made other observations about writing in my classroom, particularly during the Daily 5 Block. Daily 5 is a balanced literacy program in which students are given choices of when they complete literacy rich tasks including: Read to Self, Read to Someone, Listen to Reading, Work on Writing and Word Work. During our Daily 5 Block, I observed students choosing to do “Work on Writing” much more frequently, and often as their first choice during the Block. Students also frequently asked for time to work in their writing groups throughout the school day. These requests were a new change to students and their approaches to writing in the classroom. Both of these observations occurred in both genders, and students chose to work with same gendered peers and different gendered peers equally. Not only did students choose to write more frequently outside of their writing group time, they also requested to write with one or more students in a collaborative manner. This included partnering with other students to create a story, students dividing roles and responsibilities in the writing process, and reviewing and editing their own work. While the increase in interest in writing may not be directly linked to the implementation of the writing groups, it shows promise that student attitudes and skills towards writing will continue to increase and remain high throughout the remainder of the school year because they enjoyed working with one another. Due to the increase in interest and engagement in writing, I, along with my other classroom team members that work in my classroom have decided to continue to have students work in collaborative writing groups on a daily basis. The data from the intervention demonstrated that the mixed gender group was the most successful in improving writing skills, so we will create all mixed gender writing groups for students to work in. The format of the writing groups, including freedom of choice in writing topics and peer support and editing, will remain the same. Students will also continue to conference with me

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

periodically to discuss their writing and make informal goals to work on. As the intervention continued, students seemed to become more cognisant of their goals, and mentioned them periodically to myself or to their peers as they worked in their groups. I plan to continue these writing groups as long as interest is high and skills of the students increase. I also plan to embed more Daily 5 components, terminology and skills including more formal editing training for students, into the writing groups. These skills will be implemented slowly and be monitored closely through observation and teachers monitoring the writing in students' journals.

The research showed that mixed gender groups proved to be the most successful in improving writing skills for students. Based on these findings, my grade-level team and I continued the writing groups and made them all mixed gender. Due to this being successful in writing, potential further investigation could include creating collaborative groups in other content areas such as math or science. Would mixed gender collaborative groups prove to increase skills and attitudes in math and science? Would students be more likely to work on math and science outside of the allotted time throughout the day, if they were allowed to complete content-related tasks of their choice and collaborate with one another? Secondly, would goal setting in math and science work the same way as it did when students set goals for their writing in this research? Would they be mindful of these goals and work towards them in those collaboration groups? These questions could potentially be further avenues for action research.

This action research was formulated based upon the question: What effects will an all-boy writing collaboration group have on improving writing skills and attitudes in primary aged boys? It was formulated based upon the concerns about how primary aged boys acquire literacy skills. In addition, it was also formulated based on the research that boys are socially

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

motivated to learn from one another. The data in this study demonstrated that boys did collaborate with one another and did demonstrate improvements in writing skills. However, collaboration was higher in the all-female group, and the most writing improvements were in the mixed gender group. While collaboration may not have been the primary tool in improving writing in all groups, students enjoyed working with one another, improved their skills, and their positivity for writing remained high. This demonstrated that the collaborative writing groups were overall successful, and could potentially be more successful if all students participated in mixed gender groups. I believe collaboration could play a larger role in mixed gender groups, and all groups could demonstrate the improvements that the mixed gender group achieved.

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

## Appendix A

**Questions for Audio Attitude Scale**

Students will be asked these questions by myself and then their responses will be recorded. This attitude scale will be performed pre interventions and post interventions.

1. What do you like about writing?
2. What topics do you like to write about?
3. What do you think is hard about writing?
4. How does writing make you feel?



GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Appendix B

**Field Notes**

Observations taken for 5 minutes 2 times per day

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Which groups are on task/off task? Individual students on task/off task?

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

## Appendix C

**Scoring Rubric for Student Journals**

To be scored per entry by the classroom teacher

	<b>Emerging</b>	<b>Proficient</b>	<b>Exemplary</b>
<b>Sentence Structure</b>	Writer has used no sentence structure rules, such as using an uppercase letter to begin a sentence, punctuation marks, using an uppercase letter for names, etc.	Writer has used and applied most sentence structure rules, such as using an uppercase letter to begin a sentence, punctuation marks, using an uppercase letter for names, etc.	Writer has used and applied all sentence structure rules, such as using an uppercase letter to begin a sentence, punctuation marks, using an uppercase letter for names, etc.
<b>Spelling</b>	Writer has applied no inventive spelling techniques and applied known sight words and high-frequency words within writing piece	Writer has applied some inventive spelling techniques and applied known sight words and high-frequency words within writing piece	Writer has applied all inventive spelling techniques and applied known sight words and high-frequency words within writing piece
<b>Format</b>	Writer has written less than the three required sentences about the topic of their choosing	Writer has written the required three sentences about the topic of their choosing	Writer has written more than the three required sentences about the topic of their choosing
<b>Illustrations</b>	Writer has not provided an illustration or an illustration that is not relevant to their writing	Writer has provided an illustration that is relevant to their writing, including color	Writer has provided a detailed and thoughtful illustration that is relevant to their writing, including color

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

## Appendix D

**Student Journal Writing Conferencing Notes**

To be kept in a folder for student and teacher records.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Tell me about your writing topics this week. Why did you decide to write about this topic?**

**What have you enjoyed about writing this week? (Topic, learning new words, working with someone, etc.)**

**What have you done well in your writing this week?**

**What do you think you could improve on in your writing for the next time we meet?**

**Goals for writing for next conference:**

## GENDER AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

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