

5-2012

# Boys and Writing: A Look into Attitudes and Perceptions

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**Document Type**

Thesis

**Degree Name**

MS in Literacy Education

**Department**

Education

**Subject Categories**

Education

Boys and Writing:  
A Look into Attitudes and Perceptions

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
M.S. Literacy Education

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May 2012

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors that influence boys' negative perception of writing then analyze how that perception affects the quality of their work. The study consisted of nine male participants who were identified by their classroom teachers. Data was collected over three meetings with teachers and students as anecdotal notes, observations, writing samples, and surveys were conducted. The results indicate that male students perceive writing to be a negative thing due to the stagnant nature of the process, lack of interest in school based topics, and negative perception of self as a writer. All of these factors combined negatively impacted student performance. Results of this study will be used to inform teachers' lesson planning in regards to better meeting the needs of male students.

## **Boys and Writing – A Look into Attitudes and Motivations**

### **Introduction**

Tears, talking back, staring off into the beyond, daydreaming, doodling, distracting others, frequent bathroom breaks, and many more-- the problem of boys and their avoidance of the writing process is not new (Jones, 2007). Far too many male students in American schools find writing to be a negative experience and a daunting task that would be better left undone. The negative attitude of boys toward writing is a common theme among schools all over not only the United States but also across the world (Unal, 2010). Is it simply that they do not want to write, or is there a deeper meaning hidden under all of the avoidance they display in day to day classroom activities? If theorists and educators alike truly want to find an answer to this question then they must start by examining the factors that lead to these negative perceptions. As an educator, I find it deeply disturbing that many times there is such an imbalance between what a male student may know and what they are able to produce in written form on paper. It is scary to think about how much untapped potential is stifled by the way teachers are asking students to express their knowledge. Many teachers ask students to write down what they know or what they feel about a particular topic but when reading or editing take no regard into how personal and complex this task is. Writing is a requirement at any grade level but should not be seen as an intimidating to the point of detracting from the importance of it as a gateway to learning. By not exploring this topic, a great disservice would be done not only to the male students we struggle to understand but also to the art of writing. Writing should be seen as a form of expression that looks differently for each individual rather than one uniform concept through which all students must express knowledge. It is hoped that through exploring this topic knowledge will be gained about how to better reach male learners and turn the negative perception that far too many

possess into something positive that will in turn positively affect the quality of what they produce. If we can get to the bottom of what male students struggle with about writing, whether it lies in the process itself or the way in which it is presented, then it becomes possible to start initiating a change toward more positive results. Through consulting with my colleagues and reading numerous articles, the topic of why many boys struggle with writing more so than girls has become of avid interest to me. It has also led me to the following conclusion. If we as educators can work to reframe our teachings in ways that embrace identity as a key part of the writing process then we can more effectively and actively support our students in ways that make writing a positive means of expression.

In order to address analyzing the issues of male students and their negative perception of writing I took a variety of approaches toward collecting data that would give me insight into where this attitude stems from. First, I gathered some information about each participant in the study by conducting grade level interviews with questions about in and out of school literacies and then administered the Garfield Writing Attitude Survey to determine the percentile ranking of student attitude at current grade level as compared to the norm. Second I conducted interviews and administered surveys to teachers about their student's attitude and abilities. Third, I collected two writing samples the first of which asked students to write about a content based topic and the second asked students to write a creative story. Both samples were then analyzed using the 6+1 Writing Traits Rubric. The need to collect quantitative and qualitative data for the purpose of this study was essential to allowing me to gain a clearer picture of the reasons why some boys do not enjoy writing and how this attitude affects the quality of writing they produce.

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study consisted of nine male participants who were identified by their classroom teachers. Data was collected over three meetings with teachers and students as anecdotal notes, observations, writing samples, and surveys were conducted. Based on my analysis of current literature on the topic of boys and writing along with the data collected over the course of my research, I was able to gain insight into reasons why the boys involved in this study have a negative attitude toward writing. The writing process is a lot more complex and detail oriented than it may appear at first glance and it is difficult for young boys, particularly those who are used to being so active, to sit and attend for long periods of time. Boys in general were also found to not only have a negative attitude of the writing process but a negative attitude of themselves as writers which in turn had a severe impact on the quality of their work. Teachers in return found it difficult to address this need for attention to identity as they struggle to help learners achieve new heights while working combat the behaviors that surface as a result of this negative perception. The male student's negative attitude towards writing ultimately stems from a lack of endurance and frustration with the process of writing, as well as the view that boys have of their abilities to successfully write about content based topics.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In order to determine what underlying factors skew the male perception of writing into a negative experience, it is important to first start by examining the theoretical framework through which literacy is acquired and defined. What is literacy? Many different researchers and theorists have attempted to define literacy in multiple ways over time according to their own sets of beliefs. Though definitions may vary, theorists such as Gee (2002), Lankshear (1994) and Heath (1992) seem to agree on one thing: literacy is a social act. There are two main motivating forces that drive children in any society to learn language which are the desire to communicate and the

need to socially interact and emotionally bond with others (Kucer, 2009). Writing is one method which serves as a catalyst for achieving this form of social interaction. For a child, the process of becoming literate is an ongoing and never ending process in which they are consistently making use of linguistic and cognitive resources to build a linguistic and conceptual understanding of the language encountered. Even before a child enters school, he or she is building a framework of oral and written language based on the people around him/her and the culture of that particular society. Children acquire literacy as they are immersed in literate societies. Individuals in these societies become actively involved in building an understanding for how written language operates linguistically, cognitively, and socioculturally. Both male and female students spend a great deal of time at a young age experimenting with writing as a means of communication as they learn from adult and peer interactions. However, there comes a point in some students' development in which they view writing as a somewhat tedious task and act out in ways that display their attitude toward the process; ultimately stunting their growth in the continuum of literacy development.

Theorists such as Gee (2000), Freebody and Luke (1990) and Otto (2008) have attempted to define literacy in an effort to better identify, understand, and serve the needs of students. Freebody and Luke (1990) define literacy as a “multifaceted set of social practices with a material technology, entailing code breaking, participation with the knowledge of the text, social uses of text and analysis/critique of text” (p.132). This definition is again heavily rooted in the sociocultural theory and belief that all acts of literacy are social in nature. They identify four main roles to support their argument that effective literacy performances are determined by society: code breaker, text participant, text user, and text analyst. These roles seek to demonstrate how oral and written languages are acquired as well as how one serves to support the other.



Freebody and Luke's claims are consistent with that of Kucer (2009) and his dimensions of literacy. Kucer sees learners as a scientists and construction workers who negotiate meanings they encounter through adult interactions. Adults are the facilitators, demonstrators, mediators, and guides to a child's successful acquisition of literacy and without their support the child would struggle. If these experiences provided by the adult are not positive ones then the learning breaks down and perceptions have the potential to become negative. Many times after experiencing consistently negative experiences we start to see male students begin to struggle; when the work they complete is too often deemed not good enough or not satisfactory compared to peers of similar ability levels. Rather than viewing students as constructors of knowledge they become robots who need to be fixed or changed when the desired output has not been achieved. Male students negotiate their perceptions of the writing process through the interactions they have with adults (especially early on) and it would only make sense that if these experiences are not positive then the attitude of that male student would become skewed.

As an avid linguist, Gee also offers some key insights into the acquisition of literacy as well as areas in which this process may be hindered. Gee (2002) defines literacy as "control of secondary language" (p. #) or uses in secondary discourses where discourses are a socially accepted way of using language to show social identity. From his definition we can see that discourses, both primary and secondary, are "inherently ideological" and reflect a set of values and beliefs held by the individual and their society. According to Gee, primary discourses are acquired within the home through social interactions and conversations with family members in which acquisition and learning demonstrate the uses of both a child's primary and secondary discourses. While many literacies are acquired using primary discourse within the home, it is in school and through good instruction that children learn to critique various discourses throughout

their lives. It is also through this mode that children acquire perceptions of the importance and use of literacy in their lives. Gee favors acquisition as a vehicle for literacy learning because it portrays itself as a more natural and meaningful way of teaching that allows for exploration beyond one's primary discourse. It is also through this exploration that children acquire and refine their receptive and expressive language skills. This frame for literacy acquisition is interesting because it seems to be in direct contrast with the way in which most children today are taught. Writing in particular, is not taught in a natural way that encourages discovery and rewards creativity as a meaningful teaching experience but rather as a mathematical equation with a "one size fits all" answer for all learners.

The theoretical framework used to create and inform Freebody and Luke (1990) and Gee's (2002) definitions of literacy are sociocultural. In each instance, they emphasize the interdependence of social and individual processes as co-construction of knowledge. Both social and cultural factors highly influence a child's literacy development in the learning continuum and have profound implications for teaching, schooling, and education. The sociocultural theory states that learning is most beneficial when it is embedded in social acts and as the child interacts with people in their environment. (Gee, 2002). Based on this assumption teachers of male or female students should be striving to create lessons that are meaningful to the individual rather than rigor based. Through activities that require cognitive and communicative functions, children become literate members of their societies as they encounter literacy in a natural and meaningful way. Teachers must work to provide students with these experiences if they hope to help students achieve new levels of development. Programs that focus too much on a skill and not enough on the individual as a constructor of knowledge are doomed to fail from the start. The process of learning to write is framed heavily around the sociocultural theory however many more

components come into play when analyzing how children acquire this skill into their repertoire of knowledge as they become literate individuals.

Many different factors come into play when examining the skills, experiences, and motivations that lead children to different level in their literacy development. Ultimately, it is the environment from which a student comes from and the experiences with which they are provided that mold and shape their attitudes not only towards writing but toward literacy as a whole. Boys see writing as a stifling activity that is a waste of time because it is seemingly so much easier to just tell someone what you know rather than be confined to the constraints that are often put on the writing process by teachers. Research (Almazroui, 2010) shows that there is no major difference in the skill level of boys and girls, but there is a significant difference in their attitudes toward writing. Over time, boys develop a negative attitude towards this activity and in turn close their minds to writing as a positive means of communication (Almazroui, 2010). Therefore, teachers need to work to improve our understanding of all students as writers while paying particular attention to actively supporting individual identity. Boys are struggling with writing for a reason, and until we start paying attention to them as individuals and recognizing the distinct differences that vary in gender then we cannot hope to find the solution to this problem.

### **Research Question**

Based on the theory of literacy as a social practice, my research and personal experiences have led me to ask the following questions: What factors influence boys' negative perception of writing, and how does that perception affect the quality of their writing? I believe that we can find the answer to this question through a critical analysis of the experiences we are providing our writers with and how we are structuring those experiences.

### **Literature Review**

Research suggests that the issue of boys and their aversion of in school literacy is not a new one but rather one that can be seen as a problem consistently across decades as well as across the world (Williams, 2004; Blair and Sanford, 2004; Newkirk, 2006). By examining what current literature and studies claim are the reasons why male students have such negative perceptions of literacy, and more specifically writing, four main themes have emerged as critical points of discussion and inquiry. These themes include definitions of masculinity, regarding boys as individuals, the achievement gap, and the social, communicative and gender differences between boys and girls. By identifying these trends and patterns of study it is hoped that teachers can work to make writing a more positive experience for male students and in turn this will increase their achievement (Watson, Kehler, Martino, 2010).

### **Dealing With Definitions of Masculinity**

What does it mean to be masculine? Though definitions may vary depending on the gender or age of the person you are inquiring about it to, one thing is for sure. It doesn't have anything to do with Barbie dolls, sitting down to read a book, or writing out your feelings on paper. Masculinity as learned by boys through society ultimately plays a large role in their negative attitude toward literacy because it collides with what society and culture have shaped into their Discourse of masculinity (Young & Brozo, 2001). Boys see being masculine as tough, rebellious, and daring actions which are the exact opposite of how they perceive reading and writing. Current literature suggests that "feminization of schooling" is partly to blame for the underachievement of boys because of the stagnant nature of its activities and domination as a female profession (Watson, Kehler, & Martino, 2010). Hansen (2001), on the other hand, showed in a study of 215 New Zealand students that even though a great deal of the literature claims that boys struggle with writing comes from their discourse of masculinity, the real reason

why boys have a negative attitude can be seen in their perception of its usefulness. Many times it is hard for boys to see the real life application of writing and ways in which they can use it that will be helpful and interesting to them. When a child cannot see the usefulness of a particular skill or activity, the intended learning outcome becomes lost. However, as the gender gap of achievement in literacy continues to widen, research shows that lower grades cannot be correlated to future career success (Young and Brozo, 2001). Boys who struggle with writing in school will not necessarily struggle with it in the career world. In-school literacies are an essential catalyst for skills that will be applied outside of the classroom; however, teachers must actively respond to the struggles that their male students are facing and not view it as the end of the road for their success. Rather than viewing their natural attributes as weaknesses (impulsivity, single-task focus, etc), teachers need to use these to push male students to look further into masculinity, what it is, and how it affects their live. (Watson, Kehler & Martino, 2010). Through this construct of masculinity that society has built, boys and girls' opinions of what is socially acceptable for the opposite sex are created and built upon through how they experience media. Again, bringing to light that there are multiple Discourses of masculinity or ways of "being, thinking, acting, talking, dressing, and so on so that one can be identified as a male of a certain sort" (Gee, 1996; Young & Brozo, 2001). Male students know the way in which they wish to be viewed not only in the classroom but in society as well and will read, write, and think like others who lay claim to the same Discourse of masculinity. Anderson's (2003) study is consistent with the beliefs of Young and Bronzo (2001.) In Anderson's survey of boys and girls attitudes toward writing, it was demonstrated how critical it is that we help boys examine these constructs of masculinity rather than simply allowing these perceptions to be perpetuated. Teachers need to offer opportunities in the classroom where students can explore

the precariously developed definitions of gender so that they may feel freer to engage in and explore literacy without fear of repercussions.

Masculinity is a complex web of cultural and social influences which are many times intricately intertwined to be at odds with in-school literacies and more specifically the process of writing (Ruttle, 2004; Dutro, 2006; Beattie, 2007). When boys do write, they try to find concepts that do not deter too much from their own Discourse of masculinity, and as a result, many times this involves them writing about violence. Hansen (2001) showed in a study of 215 male students that rather than focusing so much on what students are writing, it is more important to focus on the fact that they are writing and broaden the opportunities available to them through this. It is essential to allow children (especially boys) to write about things that are important to them because this allows them to share their passions and stories- thus creating a more meaningful experience, heightening the engagement, and allowing for a deeper understanding to be absorbed (Dutro, 2006). Anderson (2001) proved that many teachers are reluctant to allow male writers to write about things that may be of interest to them such as violence because it perpetuates the stereotype of masculinity and is either not appropriate or does not align with curricular standards. Anderson (2001) worked with four boys in particular through informal observation, surveys, and questionnaires about their attitudes toward writing. When the boys in this study told what to write they “wrote the minimum amount required, and sometimes less,” their “writing was flat with little or no voice or description” (p. #). However, when given the choice of what to write, the boys may have chosen violent topics, but upon closer analysis, those stories blossomed with motivation, voice, and excitement. Violence may be a scary thing to read in a child’s writing, but it is important to remember that gender is a unique construction which must be given consideration when designing lessons for an inevitably diverse group of students (Beattie, 2007;

Dutro, 2006; Watson, Kehler, & Martino, 2010). Boys identify masculinity with their gender, and although teachers may try to combat it with critical inquiry into how it is socially created, the idea of what it means to be masculine needs to also be taken into consideration when planning lessons or critiquing a child's work. All writing is legitimate and powerful (Anderson, 2003). One of the reasons boys do not like writing is because they feel they are stifled by the process and cannot write about things they care about; teachers take away their voice and motivation. Masculinity is a topic upon which to tread lightly and give careful consideration of when examining why boys have negative attitudes toward the process of writing.

In a female dominated profession, it is quite easy to blame the decline of achievement for male students on not being able to relate to their gender and thus failing to reach or understand how to effectively instruct them (Hansen, 2001; Dutro, 2006). In their study, Watson, Kehler, and Martino (2010) strategically placed three male teachers in elementary school classrooms to observe the habits and see if having a teacher of the opposite gender in control of the classroom would otherwise influence their attitudes toward in school literacies. Through their study, it was found that qualities of masculinity and femininity are thought to be innate, and it is by acknowledging and accommodating them that we can achieve success in school for all students. This study showed that it did not matter whether this the teacher in this classroom was male or female; student attitudes toward the activities of reading and writing only differed when male students were given the opportunity to write about topics related to their Discourse because otherwise writing continued to be viewed as unappealing and unrewarding (Gee, 1996; Hansen, 2001). The thread of masculinity is sewn deep into male students and comes out in varying degrees as it aligns or fails to align with the experiences which school is providing for them. A critical eye is needed to first appreciate what masculinity means for male students and then work

to challenge it in a constructive, rather than destructive, manner (Peyton & Brozo, 2001; King & Gurian, 2006).

### **Boys Are Individuals Too – Finding Topics That Matter**

Writing is not a meaningless practice, but rather far from it. Once a child learns to write their first letters they will continue to expand and refine their skills in this practice over time as writing becomes one of the primary forms of communication (Gee, 1996). However, too many male students in today's classrooms writing is a chore better left undone because to them this form of literacy does not have a meaning or purpose relevant to their lives. Some theorists feel that such a response is because teachers have become unresponsive to the fact that male students acquire and interpret literacy based skills differently (Graham, 2001; Williams, 2004; Merisuo-Storm, 2006). Attitudes toward literacy develop early and are highly influenced not only by the school based activities they are provided with but also the environment they are coming from at home. Many children come to school with a "relatively rich vocabulary and a sense of story structure" but they also come with a zest for learning (Graham, 2001, p.8). Research shows that over time this excitement for school and learning sharply declines for various reasons but does so at a faster rate for boys rather than girls (Hansen, 2001). Olinghouse and Graham (2009) studied writing performance and perceptions over time by collecting writing samples and surveying 32 boys and girls in grade 2 and 32 boys and girls in grade 4. Their findings supported the claim that student knowledge about the process of writing and how it applies to their lives allows students to become better writers over time and inevitably improves their attitudes toward the task. Students, both male and female, need to know the reasoning behind what they are doing, why it is important, and how it applies to their lives. Williams (2004), like Olinghouse and Graham (2009) found that student knowledge about the process of writing combined with teacher



knowledge about how culture influences how boys engage in literacy practices improved the quality of work that male students produced. Boys have an innate need to know why they are doing what they are doing and why it should matter to them, otherwise their attitude toward the activity becomes negative as it loses meaning (Graham, 2001). As a result of these findings, it is suggested that teachers begin to think of students as males and females when planning lessons and put into consideration how their natural attributes can be best utilized to increase engagement in instruction. Boys need to be thought of as individuals and the instruction that teachers prepare for them should reflect this train of thought by connecting curriculum to their lives or interests. This in turn makes male students more likely to closely guard “the gendered boundaries” and avoid the task all together (Merisuo-Storm, 2006, p.38).

Boys have been found to be just as capable of writing as girls and no data has been found to support significant differences in their composing processes or linguistic characteristics. However, the learning processes of boys and girls must be looked at as uniquely different. Examinations of aspects of performance such as motivation, testing mechanisms, teacher assessment and expectations can only tell so much because the heart of the answer lies in identity – looking at boys and girls as individuals (King & Gurian, 2006). If we hope to change boys’ attitudes toward writing, then as teachers, our first step must be to start paying more attention to their identities. Dutro’s (2006) found a student’s lack of success with the writing process was directly correlated to his issues of identity and discomfort with expressing thoughts and emotions in print. The male participant’s identities in this study, combined with his teacher’s methods of instruction led to a breakdown of the child’s abilities and more importantly his confidence. This study leads to two important ideas about identity in the classroom. One, it is important to think about the classroom as places where identities are constructed and reconstructed by meaningful

discourse. Two, it shows just how important it is to analyze student work and hold one to one conversations and conferences. Martinez (2010), like Dutro, found that conversations and conferences can make a big difference in relating to male students as individuals. Boys need to know that teachers understand and respect them as individuals. By giving students short surveys or holding weekly conferences, teachers get to know students as individuals and can learn more about their reading and writing lives. Getting to know students on a more personal level is a great asset when planning instruction. Making connections with boys in the classroom helps teachers break down the shield of masculinity many boys put up to literacy, thus opening them up to exploring enjoyment in reading and writing. If teachers can come to support male students by adjusting the curriculum based on what is learned about their interests, then those students will come to have a higher amount of respect and regard for the knowledge that is brought to the table (Watson, Kehler & Martino, 2010; Martino, 2010). Attention to identity is a key element of the writing process as teachers can use this understanding to plan more meaningful instruction that is better suited to the needs of male and female students alike.

Boys write about topics that are of interest to them based on the constructs of masculinity they have engaged in with society, and teachers need to realize the creativity of these works rather than stifling them by branding them inappropriate or not important (Peyton & Brozo, 2001; Williams, 2004). Writing without a purpose does not interest boys, so therefore it would seem appropriate that teachers who find a “communicative function for writing” have a higher success rate than those who utilize writing instruction for individual activities (Merisuo-Storm, 2006, p.64). In Graham’s (2001) study of four primary school classrooms, four main themes were found among male writers: 1.) Boys made the most progress in writing when in the company of other boys, 2.) Boys like to write about what matters to them, 3.) Boys like to feel

like the experts and practice their newly acquired skills, and 4.) Boys enjoy reading their work aloud to an interested audience. These findings were consistent with those of Anderson (2003) and Hansen (2001) in that male writers seek to use the process of writing in more of a communicative function than many times school allows them to. Boys frequently seek to make the writing process more of a social one which can present itself in the classroom to look like rebellion which causes the teacher to take action and ultimately makes writing a negative experience (Graham, Berninger & Abbott, 2012). Williams (2004) states that “morphing the writing experience” can be viewed as a commonly seen coping strategy when male writers are confronted with a topic or assignment that is not of interest to them. All writing that boys produce should be seen as something of worth (Blair & Sanford, 2004). Boys enjoy writing about the story and suspense they engage in in their out of school literacy practices and teachers seeing this as a positive thing can help boys to see the importance of writing.

### **The Achievement Gap**

In schools all across America, teachers find a significant problem of writing apprehension which is in part contributing to the gap of achievement between male and female students (Jones, 2007; Olinghouse & Graham, 2009). Writing apprehension is a “general avoidance of writing and of situations perceived by the individual to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation of that writing” (Tunks, 2010, p. 1). Writing is a basic skill expected out of not only every student but also every member of society to varying degrees. Studies completed on writing apprehension have even revealed the following: there is a significant correlation between writing apprehension and scholastic achievement, attitudes toward writing influence academic and career decisions later in life, there is a direct link between avoidance of writing and avoidance of teaching writing, and writing apprehension effects self-

image (Blair & Sanford, 2004). Naturally, as students are forced to write about topics which they either are uncomfortable with or not interested in many develop negative attitudes towards the process as a whole. Students with more positive attitudes are likely to write more often and put in greater effort when writing than students with negative attitudes, leading to individual differences in writing achievement (Graham, Berninger, & Fan, 2007).

Research indicates that there is an important link between writing attitude and writing performance that develops early on in a child's academic career (Graham, Berninger, Fan, 2007; Cunningham, 2008, Tunks, 2010). Graham, Berninger, & Fan (2007) reported three paths between writing attitude and achievement in their study of 128 first grade and 113 third grade students. Out of the three models explored in this study the statistical data collected only supported the first model which supported the belief that writing attitude can influence a child's level of writing achievement. The results of this study are consistent with that of Cunningham's analysis of 201 students from magnet schools in an urban district. Cunningham (2008), like Graham, Berninger, & Fan (2007) concluded that attitude affects the level of ability that is ultimately attained by a student because of its influence on engagement and patience. These attitudes towards reading and writing can be increased through quality instruction. Students who come from literacy rich environments have more positive attitudes towards reading and writing; whereas students who come from classrooms that do not support language and literacy have negative attitudes (Cunningham, 2008; Graham, Berninger, Abbott, 2012). Most children generally begin school with a positive attitude toward learning but by the end of primary grades we begin to see a decline. Though we cannot change a child's attitude over night, it is important to note that we can change it through a learning environment where teachers are knowledgeable and enthusiastic and able to meaningful dialogue and discussion in support of writing. Beattie's

(2007) claim that dialogue is a key helps us to better understand how to stimulate and extend student thinking. Many times boys know the facts that they want to say but they struggle to translate that knowledge cohesively into writing. Writing “demands a high level of abstraction” which can be difficult for some learners (Olinghouse & Graham, 2009, p. 6). It should not be assumed that students possess knowledge about specific areas of writing; explicit instruction of small elements of the writing process can go a long way towards boosting the confidence and in turn the attitude of writers. However, over reliance on structured and scaffolded models can be confining to children which is why dialogue about the writing process allows for more freedom and expression of identity. Students need to know that they are writing for a purpose. They need a real and responsive audience to help drive their writing. Boys like creating a text through an interactive process of production that ends with publication. It is crucial that teachers provide forms of writing that allow for expression in three worlds of communication: “external and objective world with tasks and targets; the social world with expectations, conflicts, and conventions; and the internal subjective world of emotions, feelings and imaginations” (Habermas, 2004, p. 79). The perception male students have towards language skills along with a lack of motivation and engagement with the literacy curriculum has a profound effect on their academic success. Attitude again arises as a key component in the success of the individual.

The ever widening gap in the level of achievement between boys and girls has become a growing source of concern. As scholars and teachers alike attempt to solve this problem, it becomes more and more evident how deeply embedded the constructs of gender are in perceptions about school based literacy. Girls outperform boys in a wide range of areas but the biggest gender gap that exists today is that of writing (Newkirk, 2006). Some researchers argue that this is because school-based writing is more “natural” for girls and that boys, who crave the

social interactions that school has to offer, view writing as a solitary and lonely activity that isolates them from their peers (Graham, 2001; Blair & Sanford, 2004). Boys often refuse to write or show acts of rebellion to try and achieve an “underlife” or way to distance themselves from the “behaviors and language that they see as threatening and feminine” (Newkirk, 2006, p. 373). However, this refusal to participate in school based literacies does not happen overnight but rather develops over time when students begin to lose the opportunity to make choices about reading and writing as curricular demands grow. As students lose interest, they develop negative attitudes toward in school literacies and their skill levels begin to falter which causes the achievement gap between boys and girls to grow; this link between attitude and performance that has yet to be fully explored (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Cunningham, 2008; Graham, Berninger, & Abbott, 2012).

### **Social, Communicative, and Gender Differences**

Boys and girls have distinctly different gender roles in today’s society which are influenced greatly by socioeconomic and sociocultural background. These roles develop from an early age and are usually marked by distinctive differences in communicative and social styles (Sanford, 2006). Boys learn to play in ways that are hierarchal and structured and their games have clearly defined winners and losers while girls play things like “house” or “school” where there are no winners and losers. Also, boys use language to compete or show rank in their group while girls use language as a means of “collaborating to show intimacy” (Almazroui, 2010, p. 103). These differences transfer through to the classroom setting and seep into the ways in which boys and girls approach the writing process. In Ruttle’s (2004) case study of mixed ability 8-9 year old boys curriculum based writing was assessed on “whether promoting a metacognitive approach to teaching writing would have a positive impact on children’s attainment.” (p. 48) It is

important for teachers to not only facilitate important curriculum writing, but to also teach students what writing is for and why we use it. Through Ruttle's work with four fourth grade boys, several important points were uncovered toward being responsive to differences in communicative and social styles. Children process things differently, and though they may be able to talk about details and descriptions, they may not know what it means so we must take their personal schemata about writing into account. It is important not to equate a child's writing abilities with their ability to talk about a certain skill because the actual ability could be higher or lower than they are demonstrating (Jones & Myhill, 2007).

Ruttle's (2004) study is consistent with that of Heath's (1982) study about three communities in the Carolinas, where children from different societies learned different methods and degrees of taking from books which led to the conclusion that teachers will need to develop methods for instruction in early primary grades to fill in the gaps that perhaps exist. Ruttle finds that depending on where each student is coming from, what their background is, and the role that gender plays in their life directly correlates to the success they are able to find in writing. By changing the way that teachers instruct children to write, those same teachers are can enhance their own understanding of them as writers. Children from all different backgrounds come to our classrooms and we cannot expect one cookie cutter mold to bring them all to the same level of success and understanding. It is therefore the teachers to help students negotiate the meanings and values of writing through authentic experiences that help them write with a greater sense of purpose and appeal to their distinctive differences (Peterson, 2001; Sanford, 2006).

The difference in boys and girls social and communicative styles can also be seen through analysis of different types of writing: creative and narrative. In Almazroui's (2010) study, she worked with "a total of eighty students from an upper class neighborhood in Dubai

city, United Arab Emirates. These students submitted one formal piece and one creative piece for analysis. Surprisingly, this study showed few differences in both genders formal writing but demonstrated many in their creative piece. Boys scored significantly lower than girls in the categories of maintaining format, expressing emotions, punctuation, page tidiness, and neatness of handwriting. The biggest difference between the creative letter written by girls and that of boys however, was the way in which girls used their writing as place to record personal experiences and feelings. The fact that this is the area which showed the largest is not surprising when compared to the roles which gender plays in society. “Girls let their personal experiences and feelings intrude (while); boys, however, show domination and aggrandizement of self” (Almazroui, 2010, p. 16). Almazroui’s (2010) study is consistent with that of Peterson (2001) in her survey of teachers and students writing attitude across grade levels 3, 6 and 9. Peterson claims that boys do not have as much freedom of choice when writing because their field of topics is narrowed by what is deemed socially acceptable for their gender. Especially at an early age this stereotype is not challenged but rather accepted and perpetuated in student writing. Gender roles have more of a direct impact in the classroom than would initially be observed, it is important not only to recognize that these differences exist but to also offer opportunities that are responsive to them.

Many differences mark the ways in which boys and girls acquire the necessary skills to become literate members of society. Good literacy instruction is not a one size fits all mold. It is important to be aware of the differences that make up each gender and incorporate these into instruction to make use of the natural abilities that children bring with them to school. (King & Gurian, 2006). Research shows that many times administrators and teachers get stuck in the perception that educational success is determined solely upon test scores rather than looking at



in-school literacies and out of school literacies as equally important. When examining each gender from this standpoint, boys begin to appear far more competent in their abilities (Almazroui, 2010). Boys today are becoming literate more through their out of school literacies rather than in school literacies. The skills they use outside of the school building are not to be discredited, as research has shown that development of these skills in a different setting does not make boys any less successful than girls when they enter the career world (Sanford, 2006). King and Guarian's (2006) found that male writers demonstrated the importance of creating kinesthetic and experiential learning opportunities in school so that boys can write about what is interesting to and matters to them. Through statistical analysis of data taken from conferencing with male writers over time, it was found that many of the writing topics supplied to young writers represent a single-gender learning environment with favor leaning toward females. Good literacy instruction is not a one size fits all mold (Unal, 2010). It is important to be aware of the differences that make up each gender and incorporate these into instruction to make use of the natural abilities that children bring with them to school. Teachers need to look at the "natural assets" that boys bring to learning and use these to accommodate their instruction to it rather than seeing these things as problems (i.e. impulsivity, single-task focus, physical aggression, etc.) (King & Gurian, 2006). By further examining the social and communicative differences of each gender educators can move that much closer to developing an effective way to meet the needs of all learners.

In schools all across America, teachers are finding a significant problem of writing and more specifically writing apprehension. Writing apprehension is a "general avoidance of writing and of situations perceived by the individual to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation of that writing" (Tunks, 2010, p. 1). Writing is a

basic skill expected out of not only every student but also every member of society to varying degrees. There is a significant correlation between writing apprehension and scholastic achievement was found in the attitudes toward writing influence academic and career decisions students make later in life. Student avoidance of writing has also been found to contribute to writing apprehension and its effect on the individual's self-image of their capabilities in the writing process. Teachers must be able to think about the writing needs of each gender as relating to two different realms of thinking. Boys and girls grow up greatly influenced by the roles they see gender play in their every day interactions with adults and peers. We simply cannot expect an active boy's attitude toward writing (a passive activity) to be a positive one without giving thought to the activity in relation to identity. Research repeatedly shows us that there are no major differences in the skill levels between boys and girls but that the differences lie in their attitudes (Jones & Myhill, 2007; Graham, Berninger, & Abbott, 2012). If the "central goal of literacy instruction is to promote involvement in reading and writing" then we must first work to provide meaningful opportunities that will assist in curbing negative attitudes. (Abbott, 2001, p. 31).

## **Methods**

### **Context**

Research for this study occurred at Harris Hill Elementary School in Anderson, NY. Anderson is a town in the city of Rochester which operates four elementary schools, one middle school, and two high schools. There are currently 4,569 students currently enrolled in the Anderson Central School District. Harris Hill Elementary houses grade levels K-5 in an open classroom setting. There are four sections of each grade level. The school's population is 90%

Caucasian, 5% Asian, 3% Hispanic, and 2% Black. Harris Hill was recognized in 2008 by the U.S. Department of Education as a Blue Ribbon School for academic excellence. Their vision for students is to be critical thinkers, readers, and writers who are prepared to contribute as responsible leaders in middle school and beyond. Ten male students from Harris Hill, and 6 teachers participated in this study.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were recommended by their classroom teacher based on teacher observations of their negative attitude toward the process of writing. Two students participated in the study from each grade level one through five for a total of ten male student participants. Two students were identified from one classroom teacher at each grade level with the exception of second grade which had one student participating per teacher. Throughout the study at least one teacher per grade level was interviewed about his or her methods for teaching writing in the classroom and how they work to meet the needs of struggling writers.

**First Grade** - Mrs. Jacobs (All names have been changed for the purpose of this study) is a first grade teacher at Harris Hill Elementary who has two students participating in the study. She has been teaching for 24 years (12 of which were spent looping between first and second grade) and is certified in Elementary Education. Brandon is a six year old Caucasian male student in Mrs. Jacobs's class. He is currently performing at grade level expectations although Mrs. Jacobs reports that he seems to have a negative attitude toward school in general which may start to affect his performance. Connor, another student from Mrs. Jacobs's class, is a six year old Caucasian male who has difficulties staying on task and following classroom behavioral expectations. Mrs. Jacobs sees Connor as a very capable individual who is resistant to classroom

literacies. Connor loves to be social with his peers but finds it difficult to separate social time and work time.

**Second Grade** - Mrs. Howard is a second grade teacher at Harris Hill Elementary who has been teaching at Harris Hill for 16 years (3 of which were spent as a teaching assistant). She is certified in Elementary Education and Special Education. Alex from Mrs. Howard's classroom will be participating in the study. Alex is a seven year old white Caucasian male who does not currently receive any additional academic support services but does often require support for off task behaviors. Alex has a negative attitude toward school related tasks in general but Mrs. Howard has observed his particular dislike toward writing. Alex is currently performing on grade level expectations. Mr. Smith is another second grade teacher at Harris Hill who has been teaching for 15 years (10 years at Harris Hill and 5 years in another school district). Mr. Smith is certified in Childhood Education, Special Education, and Literacy Education. Danny from Mr. Smith's room will also be participating in the study. Danny is a seven year old Asian male who has a one to one teacher's aide to help him stay focused and maintain appropriate behaviors due to his Tourettes syndrome. Danny receives services from the school psychologist, special education teacher, and has modifications in place to help with task completion. Danny is currently performing above grade level expectations.

**Third Grade** – Mrs. French is a third grade teacher who has been teaching for 27 years. This is her first year teaching third grade but prior to that she taught fourth and fifth grade. Mrs. French is certified in Elementary Education. Max is an eight year old Caucasian male who does not currently receive any academic support services. Mrs. French reports that Max is currently performing at grade level expectations but frequently requires prompting to show all that he knows. Another participant from Mrs. French's class will be Jacob. Jacob is an eight year old

Asian male who is energetic about the social aspects of school but often needs reminders to settle down and focus on tasks. Jacob is working on achieving grade level expectations and receives reading support from the building literacy specialist.

**Fourth Grade** – Mrs. Ivory is a fourth grade teacher who has been teaching for 6 years at the same grade level in Harris Hill Elementary. Mrs. Ivory is certified in Elementary Education and Instructional Technology. Drew from Mrs. Ivory’s class is a nine year old Caucasian male who is currently performing below grade level expectations. He has an apathetic attitude toward school and does not enjoy reading or writing. Drew receives academic support in the form of math and ELA intervention. Nathan is a nine year old Caucasian male from Mrs. Ivory’s class who is currently performing at grade level expectations. Nathan does not currently receive any additional academic support although his teacher reports that he could easily excel further if he were motivated to do so.

**Fifth Grade** – Miss Jones is a fifth grade teacher in her ninth year of experience. She taught third grade at Harris Hill for six years and is currently in her third year of teaching fifth grade. Miss Jones is certified in Elementary Education, Special Education, and Literacy. Eric from Miss Jones class is a ten year old Caucasian male who is a highly energetic and enthusiastic learner. Eric is currently performing above grade level expectations. He loves to read and learn new things but can be reluctant to translate that learning into writing. Eric has modifications put in place for his ADHD. Tim, another student from Miss Jones classroom, is a ten year old Caucasian male who has a negative attitude toward any school based tasks. Tim struggles to meet grade level expectations and is currently receiving services for mathematics support and reading. Many times Tim requires multiple prompts and extra time in order to complete tasks.

**Researcher Stance**

As a researcher, I worked in a small group setting with the male students from each grade level in order to assess the attitudes and perceptions they have toward writing and the implications of this on their performance I conducted this study as a privileged active observer as I spend a lot of time substitute teaching at this elementary school. Mills (2007) defines an active observer's responsibility as observing their children during a time when they are not directly responsible for teaching the lesson. I am working on obtaining my Master's Degree in Literacy and currently hold a bachelor's degree in Childhood Education and Special Education. While working toward my certification in Literacy, I am currently certified in Childhood Education 1-6 and Students with Disabilities 1-6.

**Method**

During this study, I utilized a variety of methods as a means of collecting data to analyze the attitudes and perceptions of male students toward writing. This study focused on finding out what motivates male students, what methods teachers are currently using to engage them, and if this attitude changes over grade levels. Writing is a complex process that is daunting to some students, especially those who struggle in other areas. During the first meeting with students, I conducted an interview with them about school based literacy prompting students to talk specifically about their likes and dislikes about school. The initial meeting helped me get to know students better as individuals and learners. Students then completed the Garfield Elementary Writing Attitude Survey (Kear, 2000) to help me gain insight into how these attitudes compare to others of their age and grade level.

In my second meeting with students, I took a writing sample of a topic they are currently studying in class. Each writing sample varied depending on grade level but was assessed using

the Elementary 6 + 1 Writing Traits Rubric. While students completed the writing sample, I will observe their actions and behaviors in response to and during the task and taking notes. When students completed their writing samples, they were collected and analyzed using the described rubric.

In my third meeting with students, I took a second writing sample of a topic that had been identified as an area of interest for them. This writing sample was also analyzed with the Elementary 6 + 1 Writing Traits Rubric. While students were completing this writing sample, I again observed their actions and behaviors while looking for patterns and differences from the first observation. When students completed their writing samples, they were collected, analyzed, and compared for quality to the first writing sample.

During this study, teachers also participated and contributed their knowledge of what writing looks like in their classroom and behaviors noticed from their male students as writers. One teacher per grade level was interviewed about what writing looks like in their classroom and their beliefs about student perceptions of the process of writing. Teachers were also asked to fill out a short survey of questions about each student's attitudes and perceptions of writing that was analyzed and compared for patterns and similarities.

### **Quality and Credibility of Research**

During the course of this study it was essential to ensure the quality and credibility of the research being completed. Mills (2007) defines credibility as the researcher's ability to take into account the problems that may present themselves in a study and to deal with the development of patterns that cannot be easily explained. In order to ensure credibility in this study, I applied certain strategies. The study site is one where I have spent a great deal of time and students recognize me which helps overcome possible distortions about the presence of an unknown

researcher. Also, I completed numerous peer debriefings with a colleague to help me reflect on the progress of this study. These reflections helped me to look critically at the findings and data I had collected and practice triangulation (Mills, 2007). I also collected multiple forms of data during the course of this study including documents, audio recordings, surveys, and questionnaires. These artifacts demonstrated student abilities and attitudes in a controlled setting and helped to establish referential adequacy. Mills (2007) defines referential adequacy as test analyses measured against documents and recordings that were collected over the course of the study.

I also ensured transferability during my research. Transferability can be defined as the researcher's belief that everything they study is context bound and not meant to develop statements that can be generalized to a larger group of people (Mills, 2007). In order to ensure transferability, I collected very detailed data during observations with students that allowed for comparisons to be made between the different contexts created. I kept very detailed notes and descriptions of observations and interviews conducted in order for judgments and views to be made with other contexts.

Another factor in the validity of this study was ensuring dependability. Mills (2007) defines dependability as the stability of the data. In this study participants will be used to collect data in a variety of ways. Teachers were asked to participate in a short interview and fill out a questionnaire about student abilities. These methods overlap in terms of the questions they were asked about writing instruction and student attitudes towards it to help contribute to my understanding. Students participated in a short interview, questionnaire, and performed a writing sample. These tasks also overlapped to help identify patterns in student behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions as well as the possible impact it may have on their level of performance. All of the



data collected established an audit trail for analysis and interpretation.

Lastly, I ensured confirmability during this study, or the neutrality or objectivity of the data collected (Mills, 2007). Again I practiced triangulation through utilizing a variety of data sources and methods that can be compared with one another. This was done by comparing interviews, observation notes, surveys, questionnaires, and student work samples to help me cross check the data. I also practiced reflexivity (referring back to my research questions) by continually reflecting back on questions that had already been raised while identifying new ones that may arise. These reflections were kept in a journal that was recorded in regularly.

### **Informed Consent and Protecting the Right of the Participants**

Before beginning my research process, it was ethically essential to collect informed consent to protect the rights of the participants. The study of boys' attitudes and perceptions toward writing is a qualitative study where data was collected through experiencing, enquiring, and examination (Mills, 2007). As all student participants in this study were minors, it was essential to collect a parental permission form along with a signed child assent form in order for them to be able to participate. Teachers were asked to sign an informed consent form as well to acknowledge their participation in the study. For the purpose of this study, all names have been removed and pseudonyms given to protect confidentiality, as well as names and identifying marks being removed from data collected.

### **Data Collection**

As exemplified in the earlier explained methods for this study, there were multiple forms of data which were collected. I performed a privileged observation of all students participating in the study as they responded to the writing sample questions. From this observation I gained insight into their attitudes, perceptions, and body language towards writing and its implications

toward their process. I took field notes to record my findings during both sessions with each grade level and marked down any noted changes in behaviors. Informal interviews with students and teachers helped give me a better idea of each participant's thought process on the subject of writing and how this may affect how it is taught and received. Teachers were also asked to fill out a questionnaire that enquired about their knowledge of their student's attitudes and perceptions of writing during the current school year. This helped me see if teacher perceptions about student achievement may be impacting their outlook or performance level. Finally, students were also asked to complete a writing attitude survey to compare their attitudes to those of the percentile norm for that age and grade level. The completion of these surveys helped me to determine what type of percentile ranking these students' attitudes fall into which was then compared to their level of achievement.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the data that was collected I took time to read over the interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and behaviors observed several times. Upon the first reading of the data I looked at the information to see what I noticed about it and if there were any pieces of data that blatantly stood out from the rest. During the second reading through the data I began some initial coding by writing in key words and phrases as certain themes began to emerge. Certain words such as engagement, stamina, creativity, persistence, and negativity were frequently seen across the data as information was coded. During the third reading through the data I highlighted and color coded the data that aligned with particular themes and looked for disconfirming evidence or information that may lead to additional questions. After noticing recurring patterns in the data collected it was easy to identify four major themes emerging from my work with the boys in this study which were: struggles to successfully implement aspects of the writing process, limited

amount of attention paid to the male identity, school based tasks limiting creativity in writing, and negative perception of self as a writer.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Several major themes emerged from the research conducted over the course of this study. Through analyzing the interviews, discussions, writing samples, and surveys it became evident that all male students involved in the study have a distinct negative attitude toward writing. The evidence collected in this study supports the current research on the male perception of the writing process and the reasoning for it in a number of ways. The four main themes that emerged from analyzing the data collected were the following: 1.) Male students struggling to achieve and successfully implement all elements of the writing process, 2.) A limited amount of attention paid to the male identity by teachers, 3.) The negative perception that boys have of themselves as writers, and 4.) School based tasks stifling boys' creativity in writing. These themes surfaced multiple times in interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and through analysis of writing samples. The nature of my two research questions leads me to break up these themes into two sections in order to most effectively address the findings for each question. First I will identify the first three themes in answer to my first research question, and analyze the factors that influence boys' negative perception of writing. Second I will use the final theme that emerged from my research supported by the data to answer my second question which asked how this perception affects the quality of a male student's writing. The negative attitude of boys towards writing can be viewed through this research as a significant problem that teachers in today's classrooms are facing and it will not be until we come to address the underlying issues that we can help our students find success.

### **Struggling to Achieve and Successfully Implement All Elements of the Writing Process**

At the elementary level, the writing process can many times be overwhelming. Students at this age are working to master many concepts at one time such as handwriting formation, spelling, spacing, capitalization, punctuation, and many more (Ruttle, 2004). In an interview with first grade teacher, Mrs. Jacobs, she describes writing as a “juggling act” in which there are “so many balls to keep up in the air at a time because its very detail oriented” (1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher Interview, March 6, 2012). This “juggling act” can many times be too much for male students to handle as they try to think about and incorporate all of the components demanded from this process at their grade level. In the first writing sample collected from male students in this study, there were many resistant behaviors observed indicating frustration. Boys at all grade levels consistently stated that they did not enjoy writing because it involved a lot of thinking. When asked to complete a writing sample, first and second grade boys in particular reverted to behaviors of avoidance such as playing with one another, throwing pencils, bathroom breaks, and inability to sit in their chair (Observation, March 8th, 2012). These behaviors are consistent with the data collected from the “Questionnaire of Student Attitude Survey” completed by grade one and two teachers. Question number twelve from the survey asked teachers to rate their students on a scale from one to five, one being strongly disagree and five being strongly agree, on if their student displays defiant behaviors when asked to write. Both first grade students Brandon and Connor received scores of a 4 on the scale from their teacher Mrs. Jacobs as did Alex from Mrs. Howard’s classroom, while second grade student Danny from Mr. Smith’s room received a five. Through analyzing this data we can see that these primary grade level students are resistant to the writing process and act out in response to this apprehension. Responses from students when completing the “Garfield Elementary Writing Survey” also support the observance of defiant

behaviors when students were asked to complete a content based writing sample. Question number fifteen on the survey asked students “How would you feel writing about something you did in social studies?” Students were given four possible pictures of Garfield to answer the question with that best reflected their feelings about the task. These pictures showed a very happy Garfield, happy Garfield, somewhat upset Garfield, and finally a very upset Garfield. All first and second grade students circled the Garfield that depicted being most upset about the task. One of the second grade boys, Alex, from Mrs. Howard’s classroom, repeatedly stated that he did not know how to write and only attempted to try writing when he was told by the classroom teacher “the principal will be looking at the work you complete for Miss Scott so you need to sit up and do your best” (Observation, March 6, 2012). Alex sat looking at his paper for a long time and finally was able to produce one sentence about what he had learned about in the previous social studies unit on geography. Alex is a student who Mrs. Howard sees struggling academically in many areas. Writing is frustrating and unrewarding for him because it takes him a long time to produce a small amount of work and in many cases the work he does create requires numerous revisions to get it up to grade level standards. Mrs. Howard states that writing can come to be viewed as a negative thing for some boys because “there are so many parts to writing and it is difficult sometimes for them to focus on all of them at the same time...they just don’t have the stamina to stay with it and complete it” (Teacher Interview, March 12, 2012). Boys have been found to be just as capable of writing as girls and no data has been found to support significant differences in their composing processes or linguistic characteristics. However, the learning processes of boys and girls must be looked at as uniquely different. Some researchers argue that this is because school-based writing is more “natural” for girls and that boys, who crave the social interactions that school has to offer, view writing as a solitary and

lonely activity that isolates them from their peers (Graham, 2001; Blair & Sanford, 2004). Second grade teacher Mrs. Howard agreed in her interview that students who struggle with writing enjoy making it a social activity but states that “students who struggle attempt to make writing a social act because they do not feel confident enough in their own skills to be able to complete the task independently” (Teacher Interview, March 8, 2012).

In looking at primary vs. intermediate writing samples and data in terms of how students cope with struggling to achieve and implement the elements of the writing process some distinct differences emerged. First, in grades 4 and 5 the behaviors of avoidance looked a lot more subtle as students were frequently observed to play with a pencil quietly in their seats, stare off at the wall, or cracked their knuckles (Observation, March 8, 2012). These students did not require any prompting to complete the writing assignments provided but rather based on their behaviors that they may have been more comfortable with submitting below grade level quality work than the boys in primary grades had. This is evidenced again by the data collected from teachers through the “Questionnaire of Student Attitude toward Writing”. Questions four and five on the survey questioned teachers about the amount of effort their student puts into writing and if they believe that this student is currently writing at their highest level of potential. Third grade teacher Mrs. French scored her students with a two for each question stating that she did not think her students put a great deal of effort into writing, nor were they currently performing at their highest potential. Fourth grade teacher Mrs. Ivory strongly disagreed that her student Drew put in effort into his writing and even added that his “behavior is completely avoidant during writing times as he often leaves the room or lies down on the floor” (Teacher Questionnaire, March 8th, 2012). Drew and Nathan from Mrs. Ivory’s fourth grade class had a particularly interesting perception of the writing process. Both agreed that writing was boring but Nathan was able to add that

writing is hard because “you have to think about what you are going to write...and if you don’t think about it then you are going to have to erase it and do it over again” (Student Interview, March 8, 2012). In struggling to achieve and successfully implement all parts of the writing process students demonstrate a major frustration with the persistence and endurance that writing many times requires. Question number 14 of the “Questionnaire of Student Attitude toward writing asked teachers to score their students from one to five (again, 1 being strongly disagree and five being strongly agree) on if their student avoids the process of writing whenever possible. Mrs. Ivory again stated that she frequently observes her students doing avoiding writing by zoning out or taking multiple bathroom breaks and scored Drew with a five for strongly agree and Nathan with a four. The planning process at this age can be overwhelming if students have not yet already mastered other components such as sentence structure, paragraphing, and spelling. Fifth grade teacher Miss Jones states that over her 16 years of experience she has come to find that “writing is a process that takes a lot of your different parts of your brain to work at once and that can be challenging, and to be able to persist at that can be challenging both for boys and girls” (Teacher Interview, March 12, 2012). The research collected is consistent with current research and claims about the reasoning behind the achievement gap between girls and boys. Writing “demands a high level of abstraction” which can be difficult for some learners (Olinghouse & Graham, 2009, p. 6). It should not be assumed that students possess knowledge about specific areas of writing; explicit instruction of small elements of the writing process can go a long way towards boosting the confidence and in turn the attitude of writers. All boys assessed in this study struggled in one or more areas of the writing process and in turn developed different methods for coping or accommodating for the deficiency.

### **Limited Amount of Attention Paid to Male Identity**

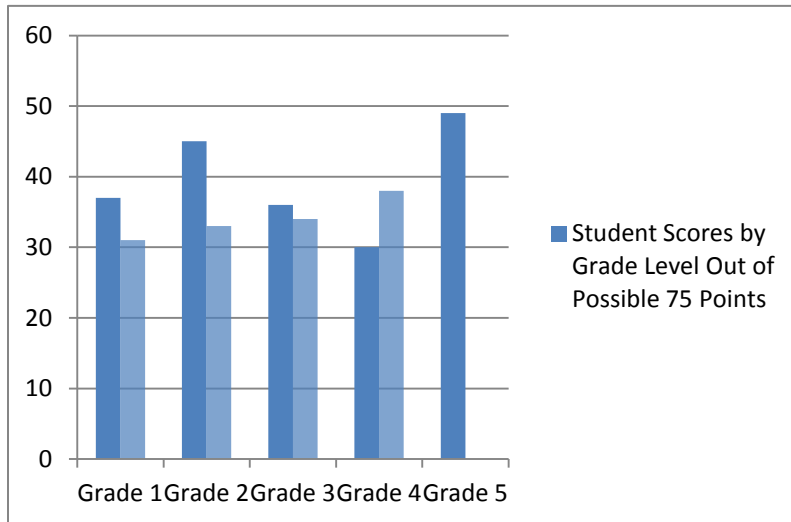
Attention to identity can be a difficult concept to address in the classroom. School based activities often require students to be still for long periods of time and to accomplish tasks that can be perceived by students as having no relevance to their lives. The male participants in this study are no exception to claim that the role boys learn through society directly clashes with the femininity associated with school based literacies (Young & Brozo, 2001). The innate need of boys to be social and active is a component of the male identity that often school cannot address. Through student interviews, every male participant named recess and lunch as their favorite subjects in school with no mention of enjoyment for academic areas (Student Interview, March 6, 2012). When asked what students liked to do outside of school, again most boys responded with answers indicating enjoyment of social and active activities such as karate, soccer, baseball, video games, and playing outside (Student Interview, March 8, 2012). Boys enjoy engaging in activities that stimulate their minds and bodies and appear to have trouble due to its stagnant nature as it confines them to their seats for extended periods of time. Activities like soccer and video games offer a form of instant entertainment and gratification that writing simply cannot give because it requires a complex process of brain based skills demonstrated over time by the writer.

One of the most interesting pieces of data collected relating to attention to male identity was that of the questionnaire filled out by teachers about student attitudes toward writing. Teachers were asked to rate their students based on varying questions on a scale from one to five. (One being the lowest and five being the highest) Scores were compiled out of a possible 75 points and results indicated by grade level below. The questions asked teachers about student ability in writing, attitude toward the process, and behaviors observed when the student is asked



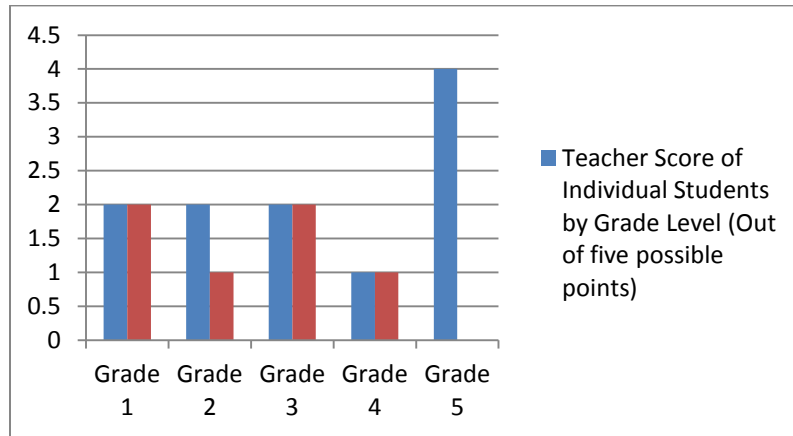
to write. Most students scored in the range of 30 to 40 points total based on their classroom teacher’s perception of their abilities and attitudes toward the writing process.

**Figure 1. Questionnaire of Student Attitude toward Writing**



Though all of the questions gave a clear picture about what perceptions instructors at various grade levels had about the abilities of their students as writers, it was interesting to note some specific trends that emerged regarding identity of male writers. For example, one of the questions on the questionnaire asked teachers to rate if they felt that this student was currently performing at their highest level of potential to which all except one fifth grade teacher answered in a score of 1- strongly disagree or a 2-disagree.

**Figure 2. Questionnaire of Student Attitude toward Writing - Question No. 5: Student is currently writing at their highest level of potential.**



The resonance of this consistency in data then raises the question of if teachers know that these students are not performing at their highest potential then what steps are being taken to help them achieve this level. The limited amount of attention paid to male identity in the classroom can also be perceived in the behaviors that uproot themselves as boys feel that their Discourse of masculinity is being threatened by school based literacies (Gee, 1996; Young & Brozo, 2001). Teachers have noticed a variety of different behaviors over time exhibited by students in response to this problem but some have stronger methods than others at combating the struggle with identity. Boys, especially in intermediate grades “thrive on competition and competing to get a good grade so that can be a motivating factor” (5<sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher Interview, March 8, 2012). Teachers who can find ways to publish student works and celebrate them also feel that they have had a higher level of success in dealing with the negative attitude of boys toward writing. Again, this comes back around to the Discourse of masculinity that has been socially constructed over time. The thread of masculinity is sewn deep into male students and comes out in varying degrees as it aligns or fails to align with the experiences which school is providing for them. A critical eye is needed to first appreciate the male identity and what it means for students and then to motivate teachers to challenge it in a constructive, rather than destructive, manner (Peyton & Brozo, 2001; King & Gurian, 2006).

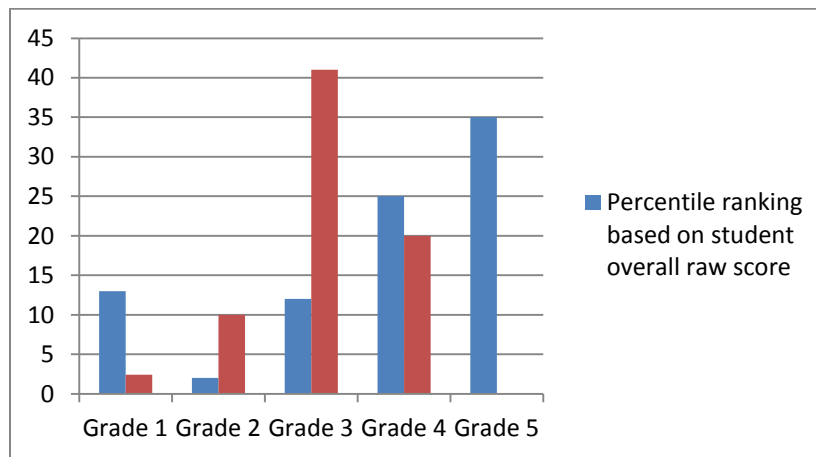
### **Negative Perception of Self as a Writer**

One of the more unusual themes uncovered through analysis of the data collected over the course of this study was the negative perception that boys have not only of the process of writing but of themselves as writers as well. Based on the results of the Garfield Writing Attitude survey combined with the behaviors observed at various grade levels it can be concluded that the negative perception the boys in this study have of themselves as writers is overwhelmingly high. Many boys also revealed through the student interviews that they were extremely perceptive about where they faltered in the writing process and where they personally felt incompetent. Through interviewing students it was alarming to hear how pessimistic these male students were about their specific components of the writing process. Alex from Mrs. Howard's second grade class stated that he was "the worst writer in the whole school" and adamantly stated that when he writes "most people can't read it anyway so I don't like doing it" (Second Grade Interview, March 6, 2012). Connor from Mrs. Jacobs first grade responded that the thing that was most difficult about writing is "upper and lower case letters" because "I never remember to do the right ones and then I get in trouble" (First Grade Interview, March 8, 2012). Primary grade level students consistently indicated trouble and frustration with capitalization and spelling while intermediate grade level students cited trouble with idea development and sentence fluency. Eric, a fifth grade student from Miss Jones' class, said "I have very messy handwriting...very messy. Sometimes like no one can read it, like I can't read it and sometimes writing can cause a lot of stress. I just feel like it's not one of my biggest strengths so I don't want to do it" (Fifth Grade Student Interview, 2012). This claim is consistent with what classroom teachers are seeing of reluctant male writers because "it's only normal that you don't like what you're not good at" (Second Grade Teacher Interview, 2012). First grade teacher Mrs. Jacobs states that after 30

years of teaching she has come to find that “motivation and the feeling the child has about themselves as a learner is going to impact quality greatly” (First Grade Teacher Interview, 2012). Attitudes toward literacy develop early and are highly influenced not only by the school based activities they are provided with but also the environment they are coming from at home. Many children come to school with a “relatively rich vocabulary and a sense of story structure” but they also come with a zest for learning (Graham, 2001, p.8). Research shows that over time this excitement for school and learning sharply declines for various reasons but does so at a faster rate for boys rather than girls (Hansen, 2001). Olinghouse and Graham (2009) studied writing performance and perceptions over time by collecting writing samples and surveying 32 boys and girls in grade 2 and 32 boys and girls in grade 4. Their findings supported the claim that student knowledge about the process of writing and how it applies to their lives allows students to become better writers over time and inevitably improves their attitudes toward the task. The findings of this study are consistent with the data collected from the *Garfield Elementary Writing Attitude Survey* (Kear, 2001). As earlier explained, the Garfield Elementary Writing Attitude Survey is a twenty eight question survey that asks students questions about completing writing tasks in various constructs and asks them to circle the picture of Garfield that best depicts their feelings about that activity. Students can earn up to four points for each answer as points are tallied by the scoring guide - four points for circling the happiest Garfield, three points for circling the slightly smiling Garfield, two points for circling the mildly upset Garfield, and one point for the very upset Garfield. Points are then tallied into a full raw score and analyzed using the provided percentile ranks by grade and scale chart. A percentile rank is the percentage of scores in its frequency distribution that are the same or lower. For example, a test score that is greater than seventy five percent of the scores of people taking the test is said to be in the

seventy fifth percentile. Nine out of the nine boys assessed in this study fell below the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile range for their grade level and in grades one and two all fell below the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile. The chart below reflects the percentile ranking of each student participant in the study by grade level using the Elementary Writing Attitude Survey (Kear, 2001).

**Figure 3. Garfield Writing Attitude Survey Results**



The particularly poor attitude of students in primary grades toward writing is reflected not only in interviews with students but most heavily in the behaviors they exhibit while writing. First grade student Connor stated while he was completing the first writing sample that he was “not good at writing and didn’t know how to do it” while twirling pencils on the table and then proceeding to throw them at one another (First Grade Behaviors Observed, March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012). Second grade student Alex also demonstrated behaviors of defiance to the task in similar ways such as tapping pencils, laying on chairs, frequent bathroom breaks, and tearing off small pieces of paper (Second Grade Behaviors Observed, March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012). Attitudes toward literacy develop early and are highly influenced not only by the school based activities they are provided with but also the environment they are coming from at home (Gee, 2001). Many children come from their home environment to school with a “relatively rich vocabulary and a sense of story structure” but

they also come with a zest for learning that can become stifled by the literacy based experiences that school is providing (Graham ,2001, p.8 ). For the primary grade students in this study, it is evident that the zest for learning how to write has quickly become more like a punishment for struggling to keep up with expectations. First grade student Connor repeatedly stated that he was not good at writing and did not know how to make capital and lower case letters or how to spell words (First Grade Behaviors Observed, March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012). A negative attitude toward any subject can be a destructive force to the development of it however when it comes to school based literacies, a poor attitude is a detrimental element to that student’s overall success (King and Gurian, 2006; Dutro, 2006).

### **School Based Tasks Don’t Allow for Creativity in Writing**

As expectations and standards continue to rise for students, elementary teachers have found it increasingly more difficult to develop activities that allow for individual creativity (Questionnaire of Student Attitude toward Writing, 2012). Boys in particular can feel stifled by being asked to expand in detail on a school based topic rather than one of their own choosing about which they feel they may have more knowledge. When asked if he enjoys writing in school, Eric from Miss Jones’ fifth grade class responded “It really depends on the assignment. If it gives me a basic idea and it gives me choices to write about then I really enjoy writing because I have a variety and I have a basic idea to write with but if they tell me what to write about it can get really hard for me” (Fifth Grade Student Interview, 2012). Male participants in the study all stated that what they enjoyed writing about the most was made up stories and things that have actually happened in their lives. When asked why students enjoy writing about creative topics, students responded with answers such as “because I have more insight about them and it flows a lot easier so I have fun with it” (Fifth Grade Student Interview, 2012). This attitude was evident

when comparing the behaviors observed during the first writing sample to those observed as students completed the second. The first writing sample was designed to be around a current social studies topic of study. Initial responses from students after hearing about this topic included groans, shrugs, and in two separate cases a refusal to write the piece all together. First and second grade students continually stated that they did not know what to write while third, fourth, and fifth grade students wrote a minimum amount of details and quietly stared off. One of the more interesting behaviors observed when students were completing the first writing sample was the social exchange between Mrs. French's third grade students. Max and Jacob began writing about Japan initially independently, but quickly turned it into a creative social act by seeing who could come up with more things to list about Japanese culture. Although their writing samples ended up to be remarkably similar in the content, organization, and the overall sentence fluency was very poor, it was very interesting to observe how these boys took an assignment they were initially reluctant to complete and formed it into something that more closely aligned with their desire to make writing a social and creative act they could take ownership of. Max and Jacob asked each other questions as they discussed and came up with new understandings until both agreed they had written down everything they knew about the topic. Though the third grade writing samples, as with all other grade levels, included concise topic with little details offered the process taken to completing the task offers great insight into how creativity shapes and molds the writing experience. This strategy is consistent with Williams' study of boys "morphing" the writing experience to cope with a topic that is not of interest to them (Williams, 2004).

When analyzing the differences between first and second writing samples using the 6 + 1 Writing Traits Rubric some distinctive differences emerged. (Mesa, 2007) As previously stated, the first writing sample topic was on a current social studies unit being covered at the time in that

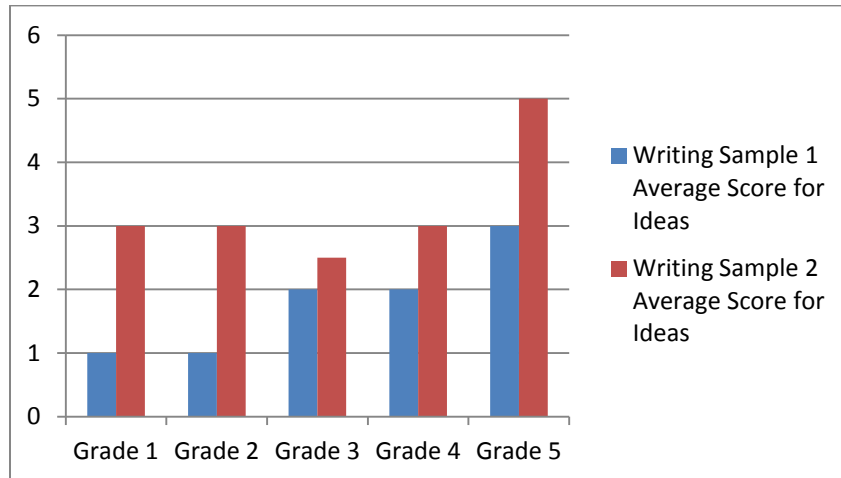
grade level. The second writing sample topic was generated from the evidence collected in student interviews about interest in creative and personal writing topics.

Across all grade levels a marked improvement in the quality of writing was seen from the first to the second writing samples. The graph below reflects average scores for ideas in writing samples per grade level and compares the scores of the first and second samples collected.

When analyzing for ideas I looked at how well the author was able to address their main idea and give details to support it. As reflected in the graph, the male participants in this study showed marked improvement in their writing in the second creative writing sample vs. the first school based topic sample. First grade student, Connor, who initially refused to complete the first writing sample, set right to work after learning about the topic and even asked if he could draw a picture to accompany his writing. Both third grade students again “morphed” the given topic and assignment into something even more creative by first drawing pictures and then writing a story to accompany it (Williams, 2004). Max even created a comic from his story and proudly shared it with a classmate when he finished. Fifth grade student Eric also showed a marked level of improvement as his creative story flowed with detail, organization, and innovative ideas.

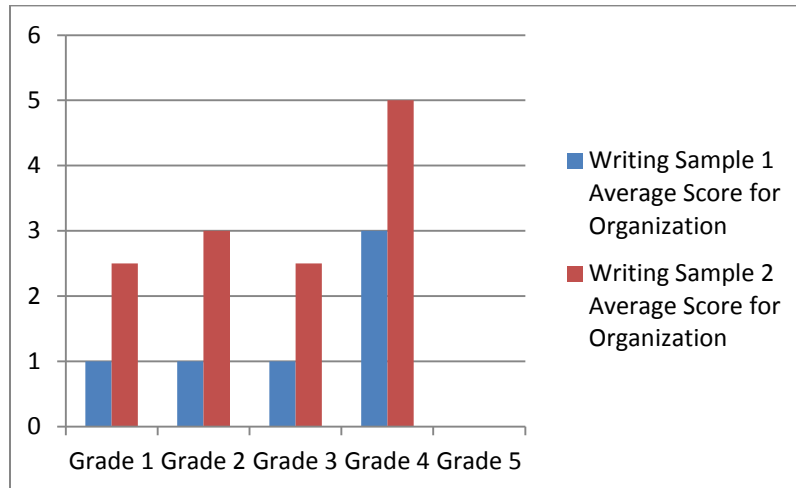
**Figure 4. Average Scores from Student Writing Samples Scored for Ideas Using 6 +1 Writing Traits Rubric**





The graph below shows analysis of average scores of the first and second writing samples completed from students analyzed for organization. Organization can be defined by how well the author categorizes and connects their thoughts from beginning to end. Again a marked level of improvement can be seen as all grade levels improved the organization of their work by at least one point. Students chose various ways of organizing their writing. Second grade students chose to each write a story that contained a beginning, middle, and end (Second Grade Writing Samples, March 14, 2012). Fourth grade students chose to begin their writing by rewording the question of “what is your favorite sports memory?” and then supplied supporting details (Fourth Grade Writing Samples, March 14, 2012).

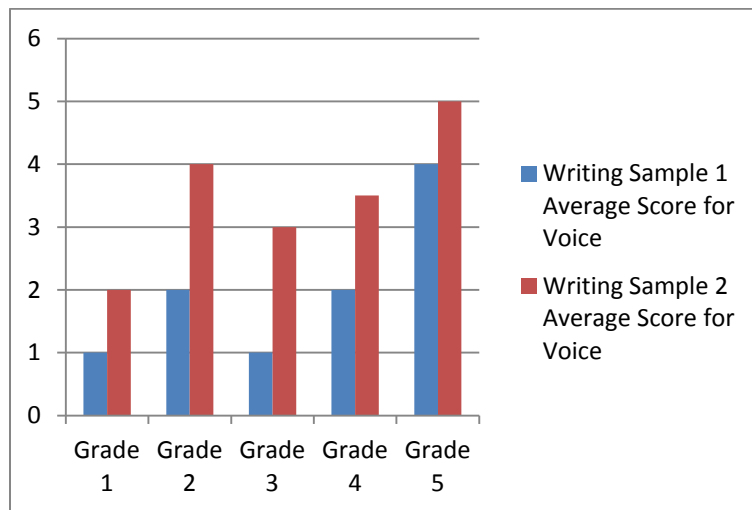
**Figure 5. Average Scores from Student Writing Samples Scored for Organization Using 6 +1 Writing Traits Rubric**



The following graph reflects average student scores per grade level compared for voice. Voice means how well the writer is able to get their point across as an individual and in their own words. The scores for voice also increased exponentially from the first writing sample on a school based topic to the second writing sample on a creative topic of choice.

**Figure 6. Average Scores from Student Writing Samples Scored for Voice Using 6 +1**

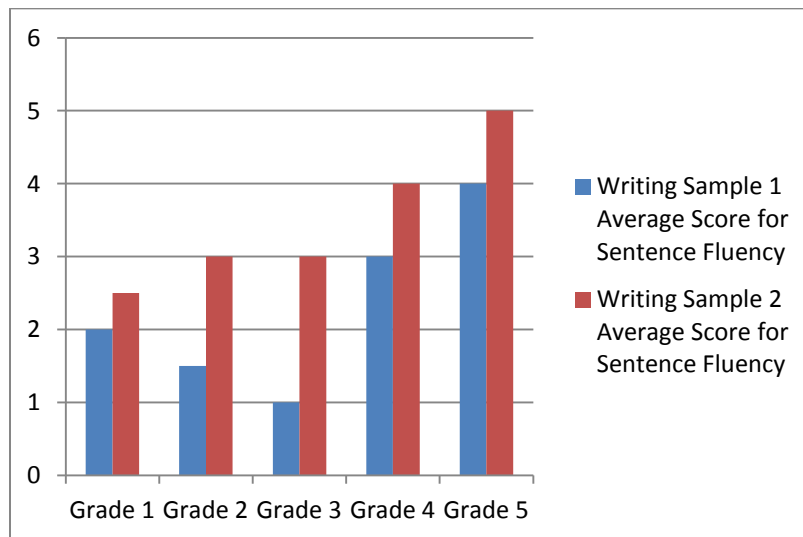
### Writing Traits Rubric



The next graph shows average scores by grade level from student writing samples one and two analyzed for sentence fluency. Sentence fluency includes the rhythm and flow of a sentence along with use of a variety of sentence beginnings and lengths. Again a level of

improvement can be seen across all grade levels but most notably in the second grade writing samples collected. For example, in the first writing sample, many simple sentence structures were observed. (i.e. “I walked the dog.”, “The park was fun.”) However, in the second writing sample in which students were asked to create an inventive story about a super hero sentence structure was observed to be more complex. In Danny’s story “The Ninja” he demonstrated control of sentence fluency in the following sentence: “One day he was eating his favorite food, spaghetti, when a weird looking man with a red eye and metal arm broke in!” (Second Grade Writing Sample, March 11, 2012).

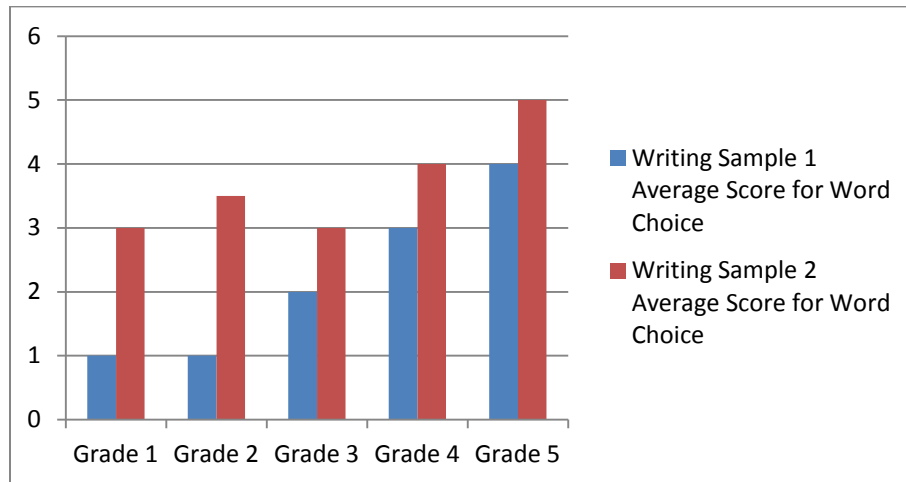
**Figure 7. Average Scores from Student Writing Samples Scored for Sentence Fluency Using 6 +1 Writing Traits Rubric**



The final trait analyzed using the 6 + 1 Writing Traits Rubric was student word choice. Word choice can be explained as the vocabulary used by the student to create a clear message such as use of strong verbs, sensory words, and precise nouns. Word choice improved again across grade levels as students demonstrated their knowledge of descriptive vocabulary in their creative works. Fifth grade student Eric showed the highest level of improvement as his second writing sample shined with words combinations such as “He started honking down the delicious,

meaty, fresh, cheesy breakfast...” (Fifth Grade Writing Sample, March 14, 2012). The graph below shows student scores for word choice compared from the first to the second writing samples.

**Figure 8. Average Scores from Student Writing Samples Scored for Word Choice Using 6 +1 Writing Traits Rubric**



Male participants at all grade levels also showed a vast difference in behaviors from the first writing sample to the second. When third grade students Max and Jacob were writing the creative piece, students sat up straight, immediately got to work, and in many cases were eager to share what they wrote (Third Grade Behaviors Observed, March 15, 2012). Second grade student, Danny, who originally wrote two words for the first writing sample, showed a great deal of focus and command in the creative piece by talking out what he was going to write and consistently pausing to read over his work.

Surprisingly, although all male participants in the study had previously articulated an enjoyment of playing violent video games outside of school in student interviews, the theme of violence was only used in two of their stories. Alex, from Mrs. Howard’s second grade, chose to create a story about ninjas with laser guns, nun chucks, and ninja stars attacking a “weird looking

man with a red eye and a metal arm” (Second Grade Writing Sample, March 11, 2012).

Although many teachers encourage students to shy away from topics of violence, it should be taken into account that this is a valid and creative topic which generates a high level of interest for an increasing number of male students (Ruttle, 2004; Beattie, 2007). The idea of violence can also many times be deeply woven into boys Discourse of masculinity (Gee, 1996; Hansen, 2001). First grade teacher Mrs. Jacobs notes that particularly for her student Connor, “the only writing I’ve ever seen him get excited about is something that is a little shocking or violent” (First Grade Teacher Interview, March 8, 2012). On the opposite end of the spectrum, most boys chose to write their creative stories about something that had happened to them personally. Both paths to creativity should be noted as viable paths to working toward competency with the writing process.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

The research conducted over the course of this study has led me to believe that there are many different elements playing into the negative perception that some boys have of writing. Writing is a stagnant process that goes against the innate need that most young boys have to be constantly active. Boys find it hard to sit still for long periods of time and concentrate on one solitary task, especially when it is something they are being forced to do every day. School based tasks are consistently seen by male students as restricting because their minds, like their bodies, is not being allowed to actively explore other creative options. It is important for teachers to keep an open mind when assigning writing topics and focus on developing skills rather than taking them for granted and only asking students to respond to content based questions. Teachers need to start listening to student frustrations and finding ways to address them that will appeal to the individual interests of a student. For example, as previously shown in the analysis of student

writing samples using the 6 + 1 Writing Traits Rubric, students did marginally better on the creative piece of writing they were asked to complete rather than the content based topic. The creative piece allowed students to free up their minds in terms of content and concentrate more completely on the elements of the writing process. In the elementary grades the methods and skills needed to be a good writer are still being taught and refined on a daily basis which makes it difficult for students to divide their attention to detail in writing with content based topics. Teachers should provide students with ample opportunities to demonstrate their literacy based skills in a creative manner to increase student confidence and engagement. Based on the results of this study it can be concluded that the individual differences and idea creation that students, male or female, bring to the table need to be celebrated and nurtured rather than stifled by the consistency of bland writing assignments that corner students into one size fits all answers.

A negative perception of anything is going to inevitably affect the way that someone approaches it. However a negative perception of the writing process, especially at an early age, can be extremely detrimental to a student's literacy development. Many students in this study not only had a negative perception of the writing process but also a negative perception of themselves as writers. All of these things combined appeared to greatly impact the quality of their work as shown through the variance in writing samples collected and data collected from student interviews. Before grabbing out the red pen and marking all over a student's paper, teachers need to first take into account how fragile that student may be about their skills and how deeply personal writing can be. Male students in this study did not enjoy the writing process because there were certain areas in which they felt incompetent. Teachers who are quick to criticize male students work or punish defiant behaviors are only creating a deeper wedge between that student and their attitude toward writing. The first step to improving the quality of

something is changing the way a student views it by allowing them to experience success with the task. Teachers can accomplish this through celebrating student successes by publishing works, sharing with the class, using student writing as an example, or sending home a letter praising the student's efforts. Quality will increase when students start feeling more confident in themselves and more like they are writing for a purpose as opposed to something that holds little to no meaning to their lives as individuals.

The writing process is a lot more complex and detail oriented than it may appear at first glance and it is difficult for young boys, particularly those who are used to being so active, to sit and attend for long periods of time. Boys in this study were also found to not only have a negative attitude of the writing process but to also have a negative attitude of themselves as writers which in turn had a severe impact on the quality of their work. Teachers in return found it difficult to address this need for attention to identity as they struggle to help learners achieve new heights while working combat the behaviors that surface as a result of this negative perception. The male student's negative attitude towards writing ultimately stems from a lack of endurance and frustration with the process of writing, as well as the view that boys have of their abilities to successfully write about content based topics. It is essential for teachers to first understand the areas this attitude is stemming from and then work to create meaningful lessons and topics that students can write about and build confidence in their abilities toward. The first step in changing the way that our boys view writing is to redesign our approach to it as teachers to make it a more positive experience for all and help our students achieve new heights of success.

### **Conclusion**

This study of the factors that influence why boys have a negative perception of writing and how that perception affects its quality drew many interesting results that can be used by

educators to inform future instruction. The limitations of this study are that it was only administered to one small group of male students who came from an upper middle class environment. If the study were to be conducted on a larger scale, a greater number of participants could be involved from schools of varying socioeconomic needs which may lead to a more universal understanding of the negative perception of writing. However, based on my analysis of current literature on the topic of boys and writing along with the data collected over the course of my research, I was able to gain insight into reasons why the boys involved in this study have a negative attitude toward writing. The writing process is a lot more complex and detail oriented than it may appear at first glance and it is difficult for young boys, particularly those who are used to being so active, to sit and attend for long periods of time. Boys in general were also found to not only have a negative attitude of the writing process but a negative attitude of themselves as writers which in turn had a severe impact on the quality of their work. Teachers in return found it difficult to address this need for attention to identity as they struggle to help learners achieve new heights while working combat the behaviors that surface as a result of this negative perception. The male student's negative attitude towards writing ultimately stems from a lack of endurance and frustration with the process of writing, as well as the view that boys have of their abilities to successfully write about content based topics. This research then raises the question of why do boys have such a lack of endurance toward the writing process. It is also wondered why boys have a more negative view of themselves as writers than girls do and if this is something that teachers are unconsciously promoting. Teachers need to think strategically about the approaches they are using to teaching the writing process and how they are working to address problems students are having as they arise. A positive and proactive approach is needed



by teachers to change the way boys view writing and ultimately help them reach their fullest level of potential and achieve optimum future success.

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## Appendix

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

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

Grade Level Taught: \_\_\_\_\_

Years of Experience: \_\_\_\_\_

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

### Questionnaire of Student Attitude toward Writing

*Answer each question with a score of 1-5 (1 -strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – unsure, 4 - agree and 5 - strongly agree) based on your knowledge of this student's attitudes and perceptions during the current school year.*

1.) Student sees writing as an enjoyable task.

1      2      3      4      5

2.) Student actively seeks out opportunities to write throughout the day.

1      2      3      4      5

3.) Student is a strong writer.

1      2      3      4      5

4.) Student puts in a great deal of effort when writing.

1      2      3      4      5

5.) Student is currently writing at their highest level of potential.

1      2      3      4      5

6.) Student enjoys writing about school based literacies.

1      2      3      4      5

7.) Student enjoys writing about their life and interests.

1      2      3      4      5

8.) Student enjoys writing with other students.

1      2      3      4      5

9.) Violence is frequently seen as a theme in this students writing.

1      2      3      4      5

10.) Student enjoys creative writing.

1      2      3      4      5

11.) Student frequently “zones out” when asked to write.

1      2      3      4      5

12.) Student displays defiant behaviors when asked to write.

1      2      3      4      5

13.) Student would rather explain something orally rather than in writing.

1      2      3      4      5

14.) Student avoids the task of writing whenever possible.

1      2      3      4      5

15.) Student has a positive attitude toward school in general.

1      2      3      4      5

**Additional Comments about student writing attitudes and performance:**

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**Student Interview Questions:**

- 1.) What kinds of things do you like to do when you are outside of school?
- 2.) What kinds of things do you like to do when you are in school?
- 3.) Do you ever like to write in school? Why or why not?
- 4.) What kinds of things do you like to write about? Why?
- 5.) What kinds of things do you not like to write about? Why?

**Teacher Interview Questions:**

- 1.) Why do you think some boys view writing as a negative thing?
- 2.) What elements do you think play into this negative perception?
- 3.) What types of behaviors have you observed from male writers?
- 4.) How do you work to combat the negative attitude of boys towards writing in your classroom?
- 5.) How do you think a student's perception of writing affects its quality?