“Boys and Girls Are Kind of Similar But Different”: Examining the Gendered Nature of Children’s Self-chosen Writing Topics in the Writing Workshop

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I. Introduction

Children experience various gendered discourses and gender stereotypes in their daily lives not only through their interaction with others but also through various kinds of media production (Carrington & Hodgetts, 2010; Wohlwend, 2012). Their play and talk often reflect their experience with discourses on gender differences and how they take up those discourses and enact certain identities (McCarthey & Moje, 2002). How children express their experience with gender related discourses have been examined in the literacy research on children's talk in classrooms (e.g., Wohlwend, 2012). Children's writing practices also reveal the ways in which children express, explore, and experiment the discourses on gender that they internalize (Myhill, 2009; Newkirk, 2000). However, little research has focused on how children recapitulate gender related discourses as they choose and talk about their topics for writing (Peterson, 2006; Trepanier-Street & Romantowski, 1991). It is also particularly so in the context of Korean language arts education. Considering that gender discourses and stereotypes deeply embedded in the Korean society, we assume that investigating children's construction of gender in relation to their writing topics can add to the scholarly and pedagogical discussion on

how language arts education can address social and ideological discourses that children bring to the classrooms.

In this paper, we explored children's choice of their writing topics and their perceptions of topics in relation to gender by examining a third grade classroom in which children chose their own topics for writing in the writing workshop. We chose the writing workshop as a site of our investigation in order to understand children's conception of gender reflected in their writing topics. The writing workshop is an approach to teach process writing. It stipulates a child-centered and individualized format in which children can determine what and how to write (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983). Free choice of writing topics and flexible nature of independent writing time provide children with opportunities to explore their thoughts and experiences, and to negotiate and modify their writings through interactions with their peers and teacher. Such a nature of the writing workshop, therefore, shifts the focus in writing instruction away from the only emphasis on mechanical aspects toward personally meaningful expression of ideas and feelings (Gilbert & Taylor, 1991). As students engage in conversation about their lives, thoughts, and their own writing processes, they develop ownership and agency of what to write and how to write (Dyson, 1996, 2003; McCarthey & Ro, 2011). Within such a flexible, collaborative setting, students' writing and talk often unveil their identities as cultural explorers and social participators (Dyson, 2003).

Despite the pedagogical benefits evidenced in many foundational texts (e.g., Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1986), the writing workshop is a contested space in which students may experience conflicts and tensions as they encounter various discourses in interactions with peers (Kamler, 1994; Lensmire, 1994). Such discourses deal with gender-related issues, social status in the classroom, and power relations among peers. Therefore, examining the actual content of student writings and their perspectives can contribute to a critical look at how writing practices with personal choices reveal children's enactment of

their internalized gendered discourses and gender stereotypes.

In this study, we explored the gendered nature of children's self-chosen writing topics and their perspectives on topic choices by focusing on a group of third grade children in a class. In doing so, our intention was not to evaluate how the writing workshop should be carried out, but rather to render multiple perspectives in order to understand how students' understandings of gender during a writing workshop.

The following research questions guided this study: 1) How were students' multiple and contradictory conceptions of gender, if at all, are represented in their choices of topics; 2) in what ways did the teacher and students perceive their choices of writing topics and those of their peers?

II. Literature Review

In examining the relationship between young children's choice of writing topics and their perspectives on topics in relation to gender, we situated our work in the following lines of literature: 1) children's writing and gender; and 2) the influence of gendered stereotypes reflected on multimedia production for children on children's play and talk.

1. Children's writing and gender

As for the gendered nature of writing, literacy researchers have discussed that girls and boys have different writing agendas, characteristics, and styles. Focusing on two children's writing development throughout three years, Kamler (1994) revealed that although most of the children's writings were about their personal experiences, each child constructed their stories in different ways: the girl's writings were constructed from the viewpoint of a passive observer; and the

boy's writings were written from that of an active participant. Examining a group of second grade children, Fleming (1995) found that girls tended to write about everyday events or relationships (e.g., family, friends) whereas boys were likely to choose adventures as their writing topics.

Such gender division in students' writing has been examined in upper grade level classrooms. Peterson (2002) found that boys and girls in a grade 8 classroom took up widely recognized gendered discourses in order to explore masculinity and femininity identities through their topic choices. Ivinson and Murphy's (2006) study in high school English classrooms revealed that the students' choices of writing topics were influenced and constrained by their construction of gender and social representations of gender shared with their peers. Boys tended to write stories to explore masculinity (e.g., sports and events with violence) whereas girls were likely to write about those representing femininity (e.g., romantic narratives). In both studies, however, it was evident that the gender division in students' writing choices was not always static. Students traversed the gender boundary as they experimented with different writing styles, topics, and genres.

Albers, Frederrick, and Cowan (2009) extended the discussion on the gendered nature of children's writing in order to understand children's perception of gender stereotypes. Examining third grade children's pictures, they found that students' visual texts often represented gender stereotypes and gender binary that children perceived. For example, boys identified girls with specific activities or objects such as dancing, shopping, flowers, and unicorns. Girls associated boys with sports, camping, soldiers, and scientists. Therefore, in the children's drawings, girls were identified as "objects of gaze" and boys as "active doers" (p. 253).

Collectively, these studies acknowledged that children's choice of their writing topics is influenced by gendered discourse, stereotypes, and roles shared by their peers. Although students can write about

personally meaningful topics in the writing workshop, free choice writing may narrow students' navigation of and experiment with various writing topics because their choices can be influenced and censored by their peers. Nevertheless, this gender binary evidenced in students' writings is often challenged and contested as students make attempts to explore other topics that the dominant gender discourse does not encompass.

In these studies on the relationship between gender and writing, the voices of students about their writing topics have often been masked by the researchers' interpretation built on their construction of gender identities. Not only did these studies overlook students' active roles in processing of gendered discourses, but they also tended to provide dualistic versions of femininity and masculinity to elucidate student writings, thus limiting other possibilities for students to explore gender stereotypes and binary views. Despite the fixed gender configurations evidenced in the previous literature, gender differences in children's writing are not always consistent. In fact, children experience conflicting multiple gender roles, instead of simply internalizing and executing unitary gender roles, and even resist the normalization process of gender construction (Choi, 2004; Marsh, 2005). Therefore, focusing on students' voices that (re)construct and negotiate themselves through various discursive practices can provide critical insights for educators to consider ways to support students to explore multiple identities without being constrained from the dominant gender discourse.

2. Gender Stereotypes in Children's Media Production

The second line of literature informing this study discussed how media production generate gender stereotypes and how children explore and appropriate such discourses in literacy practices. According to Wohlwend (2009), children's media-based toys and products convey particular identities, emphasizing and reinforcing gender ste-

reotypes. Thus, such media products often create hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine discourses that become evident and pervasive in children's play. Focusing on a website, *Barbie Girls*, Carrington and Hodgetts (2010) discussed the website's highly structured setting only allowed the users to communicate with pre-constructed messages or words that highlighted and promoted consumerism among girls. Such pre-constructed and regulated environment only positioned the users (mostly girls) as passive observers rather than active producers or creators.

By examining two websites, *Barbie Girls* and *Xtractaurs*, Black, Korobkova, and Elper (2014) added the discussion on gender stereotypical discourses embedded in the structure, messages, format, and images of websites for children. Whereas *Barbie Girls* promoted short and breezy messages on fashion, design, and houses, *Xtractaurs* highlighted more quasi-scientific and journalistic literacies. Not only written texts but also symbols and images in children's multimedia production lead particular narratives positioning and shaping young children in relation to particular gender identities constructed in ideological society.

Gender stereotypical discourses and behaviors embedded in children's media production and toys are ideological content that young children experience on daily basis. Therefore, children are likely to explore, test, and enact such gender-related discourses in play as they monitor each other's behavior and talk, as well as materials with which they chose to play (Blaise, 2005). Thus, children reproduce and maintain dominant gender discourses that they acquire from the media, and they enact such anticipated identities. When children disrupt binary gender construction, they are likely to be marginalized and redirected (Wohlwend, 2012).

Cumulatively, these studies suggested that discourses available in these virtual worlds might have a significant impact on children's perception of their expected gender roles while limiting more sophisticated and creative use of literacies, especially in writing practices

focused on in this paper. Critical engagement with virtual and commercial texts and toys can provide children with an opportunity to question and deconstruct the somewhat naturalized discourses embedded in these texts and to build awareness of various gender stereotypes that they encounter in their everyday lives (정현선, 2007).

III. Method

This study is a qualitative case study that employed an ethnographic approach for data collection and content analysis for data analysis.

1. Participants and Classroom Context

The site for this study was a third grade classroom of a public school in the Midwestern United States. Locating in a suburban area, this particular school served predominantly European American students from middle and lower-middle class families. Participants of this study included 20 children and their teacher, Mrs. Hudson (All names are pseudonyms). The class consisted of 12 boys and eight girls including two African-Americans and one Asian.

Mrs. Hudson was European American in her mid-forties with 22 years of teaching experience including 11 years in Australia. Mrs. Hudson expressed her strong commitment to a writing workshop approach. She also recollected that her interest in the writing workshop inspired by her teaching experience in Australia: "When I moved over there [Australia], they had already worked out the bugs and kinks of the writing workshop." Thus, Mrs. Hudson had an extensive experience with the writing workshop.

In Mrs. Hudson's classroom, the writing workshop occurred four mornings a week for a 45-70 minute period. Mrs. Hudson followed the workshop model recommended by the workshop approach ad-

vocates (Atwell, 1983; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001): She started each session with a mini-lesson on conventions (e.g., how to use punctuations and when to use capital letters) and other writing strategies and crafts (e.g., how to craft a title, how to make a stronger beginning, etc.). Then, students had independent writing time while the teacher had a conference with an individual student and monitored the class. When students volunteered to share their stories, the whole class attended the sharing portion of the workshop.

At the back of the classroom, there was a writing workshop interactive bulletin board that showed the six stages of the writing process in graphics: 1) Explore ideas; 2) write drafts; 3) revise with peer reading; 4) edit; 5) conference with a teacher; and 6) write a final draft or publish. Students placed their nametags under the stage at which they were working. By looking at this board, both the teacher and students could see at which stage each student was working for how long, with whom the teacher had had a conference, and who was ready to publish their work. Near this board was located a table for writing supplies (e.g., various types of paper, lined or with a box for picture) and for a box that contained each student's writing folder, as well as a bookshelf with reference books.

Students enjoyed free choice of writing topics, flexibility with which they adjusted and controlled their writing pace, and the social nature of writing conferences with their teacher or peers, as demonstrated in their comments. John said, "We are always making stories and ready to publish. It's fun."; and Andrea also stated, "I like it [writing workshop] because I can choose whatever I want to write about." Mrs. Hudson concurred with the students in that writing workshop provided an explorative and flexible space in which "students have options of what to write." The writing workshop in this particular classroom seemingly generated opportunities for students to explore topics meaningful to them without limiting their experiments with diverse texts.

2. Data Collection

I (the first author) collected data for this study, employing an ethnographic approach. Data collection consisted of participant observation, formal and informal interviews with the participants, and collection of student' writing samples. Participant observation allowed me to access student talk in a natural setting and to examine and understand situated meanings of how students perceive and construct gender in their talk and writing. For 5 months, I observed in the classroom three times a week, spending approximately 3 to 4 hours per visit. The writing workshop was video-recorded once per week to capture peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher interactions. I kept field notes during my visit and extended them with my reflections on observations by adding methodological, personal, and theoretical notes (Corsaro, 1985). Students' writing samples, both published and unpublished, were collected. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews with the students and the teacher were audio-recorded and transcribed. The informal interviews with the students addressed how they perceived girls' or boys' writing topics, and the interviews with the teacher was to understand her beliefs about gender and students' literacy practices.

Data triangulation was achieved as the data were collected through various techniques and an as the data sources provided reliable explanations of what happened. Credibility and validity were also obtained as member checking was conducted by asking the participants to read the findings and to indicate any misinterpretation.

During data collection, I (the first author) traversed the continuum of a participant and an observer. As I became a regular member of the classroom, I maintained the role of a friend-like adult (Corsaro, 1985). Students were free to talk to me, and they refused to answer my questions. My interaction with the students might have influenced on the natural conversation and interactions among students. My own subjectivity and beliefs in relation to gender as a socially constructed

binary term may have guided the focus of my observation and interpretation of student talk and behavior. It also led me to pay more attention to certain events than others, to form interview questions in certain ways, and to interpret students' talk and behavior in particular ways. Aware of my subjective position as a researcher, I continuously monitored how my presence and my interactions would shape student interactions and responses in the classroom.

3. Data Sources and Analysis

Data sources of this study included the first author's field notes, video-clips, students' writing samples (N=59), and interview transcripts. Although the students in this classroom wrote in various genres such as different types of poetry, research papers, and fictional stories, we focused on fictional story writing because students had more varieties of topics in this particular genre than other genres that they wrote.

The first author categorized the students' writings by reading each writing sample. Through the detailed content analysis of student writings, main aspects of the writings such as a topic, a plot, and characters were analyzed. The categories were developed and merged as the analysis continued. The second and third authors joined the first author to analyze the data from the interviews. We read the interview transcripts as we took detailed notes. Then, we discussed what we noticed in order to find patterns.

One of the main characteristics of ethnographic research is not to analyze data through a prescriptive hypothesis to prove, but to let the data guide recurrent patterns and themes to emerge (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). There were initial interview questions (attached as an appendix) to engage with the students regarding their writing practice and perception on gender. However, as new patterns and themes drawn from the data appeared, specific aspects of a culture such as patterns of choosing partners during the writing workshop and students' gen-

der-binary perceptions of stories became more explicit than others (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In our analysis, we tried to balance between the formal elements of the stories and symbolic contents, developing interpretive perspectives by examining the linguistic structures and deeper patterns of stories.

IV. Findings

In this section, we discussed the findings in three parts. In the first section, we focused on descriptive statistics of students' writing samples to represent students' conceptions of gender in writing. The second part addressed students' perspectives of their topic choices in relation to gender and the teacher's view of students' choice of gender-related topics. In the last section, we unpacked the complexities in students' writing topics and their perspectives of gender-related topics.

1. Students' Topic Selection in Writings

The students (eight girls and 12 boys) in Mrs. Hudson's class produced 59 stories in fictional writing: Girls wrote 22; and boys wrote 37 stories. All stories were composed independently. After conducting content analysis of student writings, seven topics were distinctive across the writing samples. As shown in the table, seven topics were chosen by the students: Friends, family, sports, action, pets, wild animals, and adventure. The stories about friends were often set in school and the stories about school often included friends. Although all of writings about wild animals were about dinosaurs, we chose "wild animals" for the category because "wild animals" was also used as a overarching category in the previous literature. Action stories were often based on the cartoons or video games. We categorized these seven topics into three superordinate categories: 1) girl-favored

topics; 2) boy-favored topics; and 3) gender-neutral topics by using the categories from the previous studies. Table 1 provides the summary of topics chosen by students and the frequency of the topics by gender.

Table 1. Students' writing topics by gender with number of students and percentage within each category

	Topics	Girls	Boys	Total
Girl favored topics	Friends	8 (36%)	3 (8%)	11
	Family	4 (18%)	6 (16%)	10
Subtotal		12 (54%)	9 (24%)	21
Boy favored topics	Sports	1 (5%)	9 (24%)	10
	Action	0 (0%)	4 (11%)	4
Subtotal		1 (5%)	13 (35%)	14
Gender-neutral topics	Pets	7 (32%)	2 (6%)	9
	Wild animals	0 (0%)	4 (11%)	4
	Adventure	2 (9%)	9 (24%)	11
Subtotal		9 (41%)	16 (41%)	27
Total		22	37	59

More than half of the girls' writings (n=12; 54%) were about girl-favored topics (e.g., friends and family) whereas 35% of the boys' writings were about boy-related topics. Additionally, there were high incidents of gender-neutral topics for both girls and boys, respectively representing 41%. Thus, the overall findings seemed to indicate students' gender-typical topic choices. When taking a closer look, we found that girls tended to write about school or friends (36%) and pets (32%) whereas the higher number of writing samples (n=18) by the boys was about sports (24%) and adventure (24%). Although friends and family were identified as girl-favored topics in the literature, nine (24%) out of 37 stories about these topics were written by the boys. Interestingly, the girls did not choose to write about action

and wild animals, and hardly chose a topic related to sports. However, the topics chosen by boys were distributed across topics. Although the gender-neutral topics were quite a popular choice from both girls and boys, there was also distinctive gender differences: Seven (32%) out of 22 girls' stories were about pets; and boys' stories were mostly about adventure (n=9; 24%) and wild animals (n=4; 11%). The most popular topics chosen by the students in this class were somewhat gender-typical as discussed in other studies in that particular topics (e.g., friends) were chosen by girls more often than boys or vice versa (e.g., sports) (e.g., Fleming, 1995; Kamler, 1993, 1994). However, the gender-specific topics were not as conspicuous as the previous studies have suggested.

Further analysis of each child's writing topic choices revealed interesting phenomena. For example, eight out of nine sports stories were produced by only two boys who had a keen interest in sports. The titles of their stories reflected their knowledge about the U.S. professional-sports leagues such as NFL (National Football League), MLB (Major League Baseball), and MSL (Major Soccer League). Likewise, all stories about wild animals (dinosaurs) were created by one boy whereas four out of seven stories about pets were authored by one girl. Therefore, there are as many gender stereotypical stories as not-gender specific stories. We assumed that it would be possible that the participants of this study were in the lower grade level than those in the previous studies. Therefore, their experience with gendered discourses may be different from those in the upper grade levels.

2. Students' Perspectives of Writing Topics and Gender

In this section, we discussed the findings from the qualitative analysis of the interviews with the students and teacher along with classroom observations. When shared the findings about their topic choices several students pointed out the differences between boys and girls in general. Their comments often indicated gender stereo-

types about boys and girls, implying the gender binary. For example, Youngho (boy) said, "Girls don't like sports as much as boys." Likewise, Sarah indicated, "I think boys are real active, and most of girls I know don't have that active thing." These comments suggested that students have preconceptions about what girls or boys like or do not like, and that both genders are different in nature because of their different interests and preferences. As Tobin (2000) indicated, when it comes to gender issues, there is tendency to exaggerate gender differences by attaining to hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine traits and by ignoring the continuum of gender performances.

The students described the differences in writing topics between by girls and by boys with the "ideal" topics for each gender, not reflecting their actual writing topics. For example, John said, "Most girls are writing about dogs and cats…. [Girls] are always writing about themselves and we [boys] are writing about others." His preconception of the gender binary in writing topics seemed to indicate that there were topics that girls or boys tended to choose. Perhaps, what John meant by "Girls are always writing about themselves and we [boys] are writing about others" was that girls tended to write about the personally important or subjectively attached matters whereas boys were likely to choose objective and detached topics in their writing (Davies, 1993). Unlike John's perspective, in fact, only three out of eight girls wrote about pets, and several boys including John himself used themselves as main characters of their stories.

When asked whether she had questioned the students' topic choices, Mrs. Hudson did not show specific concerns about how the writing workshop could contribute to a construction of stereotyped gender identity. Mrs. Hudson further added, "I am not sure…usually they work in same-gender groups. A lot of them work on writing because they are still learning a lot about writing." Because the students in her classroom kept producing any types of writings, Mrs. Hudson seemed to feel no need to intervene or analyze students' topic choices or the gendered positions that students were taking in

their writings. Mrs. Hudson, like other teachers, tended to think that the advantage of the writing workshop would exceed the gendered effects on students' topic choices as long as students keep writing and produce some writing (Gilbert & Taylor, 1991).

3. Unpacking Students' Gender-Related Topics

A careful analysis of students' stories revealed that students' topic choices were more varied and subtle than a simplistic feminine/masculine dualism would account for. For example, girls were writing about subjects close to home such as family or friends, but girls do not always write about domestic concerns or interpersonal relationships that encompass compromise and cooperation. None of the girls' stories about family dealt with simple domestic issues, but instead combined the family theme with suspenseful and adventure-like components. For instance, Heather wrote a story entitled "Miss Rat and the Bad Thanksgiving," in which Miss Rat and her 12 family members cleverly escaped a fake Thanksgiving invitation from a cat family. Although her overall topic choice is about a rat family, the storyline dealt with an adventure. Like Heather, other children chose gender-favored topics, but they experimented with and expanded to various story lines that were not necessarily gender-favored topics.

Although the students' identification of topic preferences were related to gender binary, their conceptualization of topics were not as consistent as their views of ideal topics for girls or boys. When asked to identify who might like to write about certain topics and any difference between girl-favored topics and boy-favored ones, the students answered with ideal topics for each gender. For example, Casey stated, "Anthony and Kurt might write about superheroes, and Ann likes to write about fairytales. [Boys] don't read fairy tales." Casey's comment represented gender divisions in topic preferences perceived by the students. Whereas Casey rejected the idea of associating fairy tales as a possible topic choice for boys, some students, often associated

fairy tales with magic and fantasy. This connection seemed to disassociate fairytales with a particular gender as shown in Kevin's comment: "A fairy tale is like magic. Superhero stories are usually about a guy saving things with a cape. They are similar." Considering that the boys in this class preferred chapter book series with magical elements such as 『*Harry Potter*』 (Rowling, 2001-2007) and 『*Magic tree house*』 (Osborne, 1992-2014), we assumed that Kevin's connection between a fairy tale and superhero stories were quite reasonable. As students connected fairy tales to fantasy and magical matters, topics that were typically related to femininity in the previous literature were not perceived as such by the students in this classroom.

When provided a counterexample of gender-related topic preferences, the students shared their awareness that both boys and girls would chose similar topics. For example, Anthony stated, "I know they [girls] are not writing about princess, beauty stuff. It's something boys know about girls, though. I think girls and boys write sort of the same, like adventure." Casey also confirmed Anthony's idea: "They [boys] can write the same story, like girls can write a soccer story. Mike thought that I couldn't play football, but I did, and [I was] one of the best players in the school." Therefore, the students seemed to admit that their views of girls' or boys' writings were rather exaggerated and stereotypical.

V. Discussion

The findings of this study showed that many students still appeared to idealize images of what were appropriate for girls or boys even when they knew these were not the case in their own classroom. When challenged students' gender boundaries, the students tried to rationalize their gender-stereotypes by drawing on a variety of gender discourses. They also organized and engaged in their social world based on their expected gender roles (Blaise, 2005; Wohlwend,

2009). For example, several boys followed dominant gender norms by writing only about sports and action stories. Although the students paid little attention to the alternative construction in their explanations, there were moments in which students displayed contradictions and perplexity in their responses. Some students were willing to negotiate and reshape gender norms by writing stories with alternative gender images and shifting gender boundaries.

Overemphasizing the most popular and salient features of student writings may obscure the diversity existing in students' writing. Although free choice writing practices may allow students' gender stereotyped texts to be remained unexamined as the previous literature suggested (e.g., Kalmer, 1991; Lensmire, 1994), such writing practices did not explicitly encourage students to reproduce gender stereotypes. In a flexible setting, students may have more opportunities to explore and disrupt gender-related discourses (Wohlwend, 2012). Therefore, the writing workshop is a context in which multiple layers of students' construction of gender can emerge.

Because this study was conducted in one classroom that served the children from particular sociocultural backgrounds in the United States, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to other classrooms in different sociocultural settings. However, the findings of this study urges teachers and literacy researchers to pay attention to students' choices in writing and their construction of gender revealed in their writings and talk. Therefore, this study has several implications.

First, a process approach to writing, evidenced in the writing workshop of the focal classroom, can provide students with a space in which they explore and experiment multiple social positions and roles with freedom and independence. Unlike a traditional teacher-directed writing instructional approach, the writing workshop promotes peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher social interaction around writing (정혜승, 2014). In relation to the findings of this study specifically, the writing workshop may allow students to explore, experiment, and express gender-related discourses through their writing topic choices,

the content of their writings, and their talk during the writing workshop. A democratic and collaborative classroom setting evidenced in the writing workshop provides a teacher with opportunities to understand what perspectives and ideas in relation to gender students bring to the classroom. Such an understanding of students' perspectives may enable teachers to create a space in which students can deconstruct such gender-related discourses when discussions on gender are initiated by students.

Secondly, it is imperative to recognize that students' writing choices are often contested by the ideological discourses on gender that students share in the classroom. Therefore, it may be necessary to re-conceptualize the writing workshop as a site in which teachers and students can question and discuss dualistic gender ideology and experiment with multiple gendered positions represented in their writing topics. The explicit discussion on gender stereotypes in relation to their topic choices may help students revisit and deconstruct the neutralized discourses on gender related issues. It does not mean that students whose stories maintain conventional gender orders should be silenced. Instead, students can be invited to experiment with more choices and information that can help them see other possibilities of expressing and enacting gender, and therefore to disrupt taken-for-granted gender relations.

Finally, along with discussions about gender binary, students could be encouraged to reconstruct alternative texts by themselves. Such a practice is the key "to know ways of being which might replace the existing one" (Davies, 1993: 174). Under teacher's guide, students can discuss how peers' writing describes boys and girls in certain ways. As they discuss, students may be able to see what needs to be considered in order to include fair representations of boys and girls and to understand the complexities and intricacies in gender-related discourses rather than the gender binary (Preston, 2000). For example, when students write sports stories whose characters are boys only, they can be encouraged to discuss why there are no

female characters, or whether students know any females who are good at sports. Additionally, with stories describing girls as strong and mischievous or boys as empathetic or sensitive, students can explore the ways in which these images are the same as or different from socially constructed, idealized gender images. Students can also examine how individuals are represented in their stories and whether they are authentic representations of individuals they know in their life.

As young children experience various gender related discourses in their daily lives through various kinds of media productions and interactions with others, they experiment with those discourses in their play, talk, and writing. Children's gender construction is influenced by ideologies situated in particular sociocultural, historical contexts. Further research can examine how students in different sociocultural backgrounds perceive the gender identities and roles in relation to writing topic choices and writing styles.

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ABSTRACT

"Boys and Girls Are Kind of Similar But Different" : Examining the Gendered Nature of Children's Self-chosen Writing Topics in the Writing Workshop

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This ethnographic study investigated how the students in a third-grade classroom chose their writing topics and how they perceived their peers' choice of writing topics in relation to gender. The study is situated in the literature on the children's writing and gender discourses as well as children's enactment of gender identities taken from the media production. Data collections included a semester-long participant observation, field notes, semi-structured interviews, informal, retrospective conversations with the teacher and students, and collection of the students' writing artifacts.

Unlike the findings from the previous studies that demonstrated students' representations of gender stereotypes in their stories, the students' stories in this study were not consistent with conventional gender binaries. Instead, there were several unrecognized and unnoticed moments at which the students were not subjected to the conventional gender binaries. Implications suggested that teachers can create a classroom environment that invites students to become aware of question and disrupt taken-for-granted gender relations and discourses. Such an explicit effort to address multiple gender constructions with students would contribute to creating more inclusive and socio-culturally sensitive literacy education.

KEYWORDS gender identity, writing, the writing workshop, ethnographic study, literacy education

APPENDIX

Initial Interview Questions

- What do you like to write about the most/ the least?
- Why or why not do you like to write about these topics?
- Where do you get ideas for the writing topics?
- Have you ever written a story that has characters with non-traditional gender roles? Why or why not?
- Do you like being a boy (or girl)?
- Is there anything you cannot do because you are a boy (or girl)?
- What are boys supposed to do? What are girls supposed to do? Are there any differences between what boys and girls are supposed to do?
- What do you want to do if you are a boy (to girl) or a girl (to boy)?
- What do you think about a tomboy (boy-like girl) or a sissy (a girl-like boy)? Could you give me examples of how a tomboy or a sissy acts? Do you know anyone who acts like a tomboy or a sissy?
- Does your parent say what boys (or girls) are supposed to do? Are you allowed to do anything you want to do?