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Boys and Writing: Strategies to Support Struggling Boy Writers

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BOYS AND WRITING:
STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT STRUGGLING BOY WRITERS

A Project Report

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

Central Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Education

Master Teacher

By

Dionne Corinne Ellingsen

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Dionne Ellingsen

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ABSTRACT

BOYS AND WRITING: STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT STRUGGLING BOY WRITERS

By

Dionne Ellingsen

May 2011

The purpose of this project was to develop a guide for elementary teachers to improve writing strategies and motivation of boys. Nationally, boys are more likely than girls to struggle with writing in the elementary classroom. Teachers need to understand the differences that boys and girls bring to their classroom and develop strategies and lessons that make writing more inviting to boys. The project discusses current research about why boys are more likely to struggle than girls, because of innate differences in the brain, the classroom arrangement, and issues of motivation. It also provides a guide of activities and strategies that teachers can use in their classroom to promote enjoyment and motivation for boys who struggle with all aspects of the writing process. This includes idea brainstorming, editing and revising, and handwriting skills. By implementing ideas from the guide, teachers may find that boys in their classroom are more excited about expressing themselves through writing and experience success in writing that is vital to their education in the future.

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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

In the elementary classroom there is a wide gap between the achievement of girls and boys in the subject of writing. Data shows that males are consistently lagging behind females throughout the country, and the world as well. According to Ralph Fletcher, author of Boy Writers, “It’s true that writing tests are not the only measure of writing ability, but surely the difference between boys’ and girls’ test scores should send up a warning flare” (Fletcher, 2006, p.12).

It is important to remember that not all boys struggle with language and writing in the elementary classroom. Many boys are strong writers and excel in all language areas. However, test results show that as a group, boys score significantly lower on standardized writing tests than do girls at all ages. According to the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction website, males scored lower than females on the fourth grade Measurement of Student Progress (MSP) in writing. While 30.1% of girls scored the highest level of a 4 on the test, only 15.7% of boys met that goal. On the opposite spectrum, 18.7% of boys received the lowest score of a 1 on the test, while only 8.4% of girls received the same score. When looking at passing and failing on the test, 51% of boys passed the writing MSP, while 70.1% of girls passed. These trends continue into middle school, with 58.2% of boys passing the seventh grade writing MSP compared to 80.3% of girls (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction website, 2010.)

Looking across the country, this trend continues. On the 2010 state writing assessment in Massachusetts, 48% of fourth grade boys passed while 60% of fourth grade girls passed (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website, 2010). Clearly,

there is a common discrepancy between the writing scores of boys and girls on standardized testing, regardless of where they live. In addition to standardized testing scores, research has been done that has shown that girls perform better than males in writing tasks. In a study by Natalie G. Olinghouse on predictors of narrative writing in third grade students, it was found that gender is a strong contributing factor to compositional fluency and quality (Olinghouse, 2008).

Obviously, this is a bigger issue than simply standardized test scores. But what is causing such a significant gap? One explanation may be the physiological differences between the brains of boys and girls. In the article "With Boys and Girls in Mind," Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens found that functional and structural differences between boys' and girls' brains profoundly affect their learning, and the differences are consistent throughout the world (Gurian & Stevens, 2004). However, current instructional strategies used by teachers do not always take into account the innate differences between the ways that boys and girls learn best. While touring writing classrooms around the country, Fletcher found "the general demeanor of those boys troubled me. The boys seemed... turned off, checked out, disengaged, disenfranchised," (Fletcher, 2006, p. 4). In order to help boy writers succeed in the elementary classroom, teachers need to address three important questions. First, what are the differences between the brains of boys and girls that impact them in the classroom? Second, what other classroom factors may contribute to the struggles that boys face in writing? And finally, what role does motivation play in boys with writing troubles?

PURPOSE

The purpose of this project was to develop a guide for elementary teachers to improve writing strategies and motivation of boys. Teachers need to understand why boys

are disinterested in writing and what makes writing difficult for them. Writing is an essential component of success later in life, and students need to learn how to clearly and effectively communicate their thoughts and ideas in writing. Regardless of the essential classroom curriculum and quality of their teachers, boys are still lagging behind girls in their writing performance. This project educates teachers about why boys in their classrooms are struggling. It explains the innate differences between the brains of boys and girls, determines external factors for why boys struggle with writing, and investigates motivational issues that boys may face that discourages them from writing.

Using this information, a guide was created for elementary teachers to assist with the improvement of writing skills and writing motivation for boys in the classroom. The guide focuses on three specific areas. First, it includes key information on the different ways that boys and girls learn. Second, it contains a variety of strategies that elementary teachers can use to help boys meet the Grade Level Expectations (GLEs) in writing, including idea brainstorming, editing and revising, and handwriting skills. Finally, it offers teachers who want more information with some valuable resources to continue helping boys succeed. The guide will be shared with teachers in the Snoqualmie Valley School District in Snoqualmie, Washington.

PROJECT LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE

This project only focuses on the subject of writing, and while some of the research includes other areas of literacy, only tips and suggestions on elements of writing were included in the project. Another limitation is that this project is focused on boys in general, and does not take into consideration the diversity of experiences and beliefs that boys bring with them into the classroom. Issues of learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder or low socioeconomic status

are not discussed. However, the research shows that in general, boys score lower than girls on standardized writing tests, regardless of their socioeconomic status or specific disabilities.

Finally, this guide for teachers is specifically geared towards teachers in the Snoqualmie Valley School District, as it is centered on the Washington State Grade Level Expectations and the Snoqualmie Valley School District writing expectations.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Grade Level Expectations- State of Washington Essential Academic Learning Requirements broken down by grade level for each subject taught kindergarten to tenth grade. These expectations describe what all students in Washington State should know and be able to do as a result of their elementary and secondary education (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction website, 2011).

Self-efficacy- the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations (Bandura, 1995, pg. 2).

Working memory- the temporary memory wherein information is processed consciously (Sousa, 2006, p.290).

Writer's Workshop- an instructional and organizational strategy, in which the student makes the decisions of what to write and the teacher provides assistance, guidance and support (Fletcher, 2006).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The review of the literature includes three sections. The first section discusses the gender differences in brain research that contribute to the wide gap between language abilities of boys and girls. The second section investigates why more boys than girls struggle with writing in the elementary grades. The final section addresses issues of motivation for boys with writing.

Brain Research and Gender Differences

In order to understand how students learn and why they struggle, teachers need to know more about the brain and how gender differences between boys and girls may impact their learning. Gender based brain research gained momentum in the past decade because of advanced scanning tools, such as positron-emission tomography (PET) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans (Cahill, 2005). Scientists have learned a great deal since then about the differences between genders in terms of processing, hearing, sight and other areas that affect learning in the classroom. In their book, *The Minds of Boys*, Gurian and Stevens cite researcher Nancy Forger, who reported that “at least 100 differences in male and female brains have been described so far” (Gurian & Stevens, 2005, p. 46).

When discussing the human brain, it is important to understand the essential components and how these play a part in the differences between genders. All human brains are divided into two hemispheres, with each side sending information to the opposite side of the body. The left hemisphere is primarily the language center of the brain, focused on reading, writing, verbal communication, and memory. The right hemisphere is more concentrated on emotions, music,

facial expressions, and visual and spatial awareness, among other things. According to Gurian, females have a more highly developed left hemisphere than males, while males use the right hemisphere to solve abstract problems (Gurian, 2001).

Recent research, such as *Age- and Gender-Related Differences in the Cortical Anatomical Network* confirms that women have higher cortical connectivity than men do. This means that the female brain has more connections between different areas of the brain, which leads to higher efficiency in language capabilities (Gong, Rosa-Neto, Carbonell, Chen, He, and Evans, 2009). In addition, the corpus callosum, which connects the right and left hemispheres, is larger in females, which helps with communication between them (Gurian, 2001). A larger corpus callosum also helps in multi-tasking, which females tend to do more easily (Gurian & Stevens, 2005).

Located in the left side of the brain are two specific areas called the Wernicke's area and the Broca's area. These areas are important because they are responsible for essential language skills. Wernicke's area is thought to be responsible for understanding and making sense of native language, while Broca's area processes vocabulary and grammar (Sousa, 2006.) Since females usually have earlier language development than boys, the Wernicke's and Broca's areas are also larger in their brains at an earlier age.

Another area of interest in the brain is the prefrontal cortex, which controls decision making and emotions. Boys are more likely than girls to act impulsively, and this may be because this area also tends to develop later in males than females (Neu & Weinfeld, 2007). Girls usually have better self control of their emotions and contemplate decisions before they act. The prefrontal cortex also plays a part in motivation, as it is the chief decision maker for the desire to learn or continue to learn. The prefrontal cortex is contained in the frontal lobe of the

brain, which is responsible for speech, thought, and emotion. As it is also more active in females, it is just another reason why females are more verbal than males.

Taking a closer look at the right and left hemispheres of the brain, research has shown that males and females use these areas very differently. Males typically use only the left hemisphere for language development and the right hemisphere for spatial activity, while females use both sides equally. Studies have shown that when a male suffers a stroke in the left hemisphere of the brain, his language skills may be disrupted. However, if he suffers a stroke on the right side, language is virtually unharmed. Females who suffer strokes in either hemisphere will suffer language skill disruptions (Sax, 2005). Because females use both sides of their brain for language and have more connections between the hemispheres, verbal tasks are easier for them to complete.

While all brains have the same basic anatomy, males and females use their brains in different ways. These differences manifest themselves in the cognitive strengths and weaknesses between genders, including verbal and spatial abilities. This has a definite impact in the classroom, as some styles of teaching and learning work better for each gender.

It is clear that when it comes to verbal abilities, females are stronger than males. There are many more areas of the female brain that are involved in language than in male brains. Girls tend to have a larger vocabulary at a younger age than boys and their speech is more understandable by others at an early age. This has an impact on classroom achievement because by the first grade, girls are roughly a whole year ahead of boys in language development (Neu & Weinfeld, 2007).

Males tend to have a higher level of spatial abilities than females. This includes the skills of mental rotation, spatial perception, and spatial visualization (James, 2007). The right

hemisphere of the brain is the primary area of spatial intelligence, which has been seen to develop earlier in the male brain. Research shows that this is because of increased testosterone production in males. In the classroom, boys are more skilled in tasks such as navigation, geography, and movement activities (Neu & Weinfeld, 2007).

In addition to the brain, there are other physical differences in the senses between males and females that affect their learning and achievement. Sensory information travels from the eyes and ears to the brain and influences what individuals pay attention to and remember. Research shows that both hearing and eyesight are different between males and females and affects learning in the classroom.

The ear of a male and female contain some important anatomical differences that affect the way different genders hear. The innermost part of the ear, called the cochlea, is longer in the male ear than the female ear. This means it takes a longer time for boys to hear a sound than a girl (James, 2007). Another difference is the way that males and females hear a sound. Research has been done that shows females have more sensitive hearing than males, and can hear at higher frequencies (Sax, 2005). Boys have more difficulty hearing in the range of sounds associated with speech. This can affect them in the classroom if the voice of the speaker is in a range that they do not hear very well or if they do not talk loud enough. Girls are often able to hear a wider variety of tones and volumes and are more sensitive to the sound of a tapping pencil or a distracting noise (Sax, 2005).

The eyes of a male and a female also differ anatomically and this contributes to differences in the way that genders see and what they pay attention to. In addition to the rods and cones, which are photoreceptors, there are ganglion cells that retrieve information from the rods and cones. The two types of cells are the smaller P (parvocellular) and the larger M

(magnocellular) cells (Sax, 2005). Women have more of the smaller P cells, which are more receptive to color and texture, and contribute to a thinner retina than men. In contrast, men have a higher concentration of the larger M cells, which are specialized in detecting motion and location of objects. This difference can be seen in the classroom with the types of pictures that students choose to draw and the colors they use. Girls will often choose to draw pictures with multiple, warm colors and details, while boys will choose to draw action pictures with fewer, cooler colors, such as silver, blue, or black.

One last component of brain anatomy that is clearly different between genders is the neural rest rate of the brain. Scans show that when at rest, a female brain has as much activity occurring in it as when it is solving problems. A male brain, however, has much less neural activity going on during a rest state, which takes place many times every day (King & Gurian, 2006). When a male brain is bored it goes into a state of rest, which negatively impacts listening and learning because some of his brain functioning is shutting down. A bored female brain does not go into a state of rest, so a bored girl is more able to listen carefully and understand than a bored male. This may impact boys in the classroom because they need to stay active in order to learn. Because writing lessons traditionally involve listening and sitting still, boys may have a harder time staying focused on the lesson.

Why Boys Struggle with Writing

Besides the biological brain differences between genders that contribute to the initial struggles that boys face when entering school, there are other factors that influence boys in the classroom when it comes to writing. These factors range from early fine motor development

issues, a traditional classroom situation that may not take into account how boys learn best, and the level of activity that boys need to stay engaged in learning.

Writing is a very complex task, with many different elements that the writer needs to focus on at the same time. Even if a student has a firm grasp of his or her idea, the details of spelling, handwriting, punctuation, grammar and conventions can cause a student to struggle (Levine, 2002). Multi-tasking and attention to detail becomes a crucial skill when developing writing ability, because the writer needs to be able to combine all of these elements together at the same time. As mentioned previously, girls have more connections between the hemispheres, which help them multi-task more easily.

One of the key elements of writing is being able to correctly form the letters and words that make up our written text. Because fine motor skills develop later in males than females, this may contribute to why boys struggle with the process of writing. In his book, Boy Writers: Reclaiming Their Voices, Ralph Fletcher found that when interviewing boys, handwriting contributes to why writing is difficult for them (Fletcher, 2006). According to a study completed by researchers at Virginia Tech, girls' development in language and fine motor skills happens about six years earlier than boys' (Hanlon, Thatcher & Cline, 1999). This provides a clear disadvantage to boys when asked to write because they do not have the automaticity in letter formation that is so vital to the writing process. A study conducted by Carol A. Christensen found that "there is a very strong relationship between the orthographic-motor integration and the length and quality of children's writing," (Christensen, 2005, p. 444). Even when students are able to generate good ideas for their writing and have strong vocabulary skills, if their handwriting automaticity is lacking, the length and quality of their writing will be impacted.

Another factor regarding handwriting automaticity and composing a piece of writing is the amount of working memory needed. David A. Sousa defines working memory as “the temporary memory wherein information is processed consciously,” (Sousa, 2006, p.290). If handwriting is automatic, a student does not need to consciously think about it and more thought can be spent on the actual content they are writing. However, if working memory needs to be devoted to handwriting, there is less space available for thinking about ideas, word choice and the complexity of the story being written. Since boys are more likely than girls to have handwriting problems, they may have a harder time composing their writing. When they are allowed to dictate their stories to an adult, the quality of their writing improves significantly (Medwell & Wray, 2007).

The current elementary school classroom is another factor that contributes to higher levels of boys struggling with writing. This begins in the kindergarten classroom and continues up through the elementary grades. Instead of a focus on playing with blocks, exploration and socialization, kindergarten has become the new first grade, where students are expected to learn to read and write (Mulvey, 2010). This can be detrimental to boys because they are on average two years behind girls in formal learning readiness and the changes in kindergarten curriculum emphasize the weaknesses of boys and the strengths of girls (Sax, 2001). Boys that naturally want to be active, play and experience their world kinesthetically must sit still, listen passively, and write clearly (Mulvey, 2010). It must also be remembered that because the brains of boys and girls develop along different paths, with girls developing language abilities earlier than boys, the language center of a five year old boy is like that of a three and a half year old girl. Therefore, it is inappropriate to try to teach a five year old boy to read and write (Sax, 2007).

When boys cannot meet these expectations like most girls can, their interest in school and sense of self-worth changes (Sax, 2001).

Moving on into later grade levels, the expectations of sitting still, listening quietly, and completing written work continues. Increased amounts of time in the classroom focused on language arts is now common, with up to 90 minutes of reading instruction per day (Neu & Weinfeld, 2007). There is less time for science and social studies, two of the subjects that are high interest for students. Increasingly, school becomes a place that boys do not want to be, as their favorite subjects are now being taken away. When science and social studies are included in the elementary curriculum, writing is an essential component. Instead of simply doing science experiments, students are now required to read and write about them, thus taking away the kinesthetic element of doing the experiment.

In addition to the traditional elementary curriculum, the structure of classrooms may also be impacting boys in a negative way. King and Gurian found at Douglass Elementary school, in Boulder, Colorado, that the classrooms were geared towards the students who could sit still, listen quietly and do written work neatly, mainly the girls. They also found that the skills boys brought to the classroom were seen as a problem, such as physical aggression, spatial kinesthetic learning, and impulsivity (King & Gurian, 2006). As writing is primarily an independent and quiet activity, boys may find it difficult to sit still for a set amount of time when they would rather be doing something active or cooperative.

One final aspect of the traditional classroom that may make writing hard for boys is the "current narrow definitions of literacy," (Taylor, 2005, p. 292). Taylor mentions that the kinds of literacy activities that boys enjoy, such as informational books, magazines, and internet sites are not the kinds of literacy that are taught and expected at school. Instead, fictional novels are

the norm, which many boys do not choose to read. When touring classrooms, Fletcher found that in many, the writing options are severely limited, with personal narratives dominating the writer's workshop time (Fletcher, 2006.) Many boys are turned off by this type of writing, and would rather write in other genres. After completing a survey of 242 boys on the kind of writing they would choose to do, 146 boys chose fiction, far more than personal narrative, poetry, or non-fiction (Fletcher, 2006). While the aspect of choice in writing will be discussed more in the next section, it is important to note that with the current focus in today's schools on test preparation, writing prompts, and structured writing lessons, choice is getting less emphasis, and boys are struggling because of it.

Issues of Motivation and Self Efficacy for Writing

One of the key factors determining success in school is motivation. Studies have shown that when students have a high self-concept and are motivated to succeed their academic achievement improves (Guay, Marsh, & Boivin, 2003). Boys that experience struggles with writing in their early schooling years can develop a poor self-concept of themselves as writers, and their motivation to write will decrease. As mentioned in the previous section, this can happen as early as kindergarten for some boys and plague their entire educational experience.

Research in the past 15 years has begun to focus on the impact motivation, including self-efficacy, interest, apprehension, attitude, and attributions for success (the evaluations that individuals make about the cause for their success or failure) have on a student's academic achievement, including writing (Graham, Berninger, & Fan, 2007). In a 2007 study of the relationship between writing attitude (a specific element of motivation) and writing achievement in first and third grade students, Graham, Berninger, and Fan wanted to determine whether

attitude impacts achievement, achievement impacts attitude, or whether the relationship was reciprocal. They defined writing attitude as “an affective disposition involving how the act of writing makes the author feel, ranging from happy to unhappy” (Graham, Berninger, & Fan, 2007, pg. 518). In the study, the researchers assessed first and third grade students on their writing attitude and writing achievement. Students were asked to write an essay and answer survey questions about how they felt about writing. The results of the study found that students who felt positively about writing were able to write better than students who felt negatively about writing (Graham, Berninger, & Fan, 2007). In addition, the researchers in this study found that girls have a more positive attitude about writing than do boys. While the writing achievement of the students in this study was not significantly different between genders, it is important to note that attitude for writing does affect achievement and may have a bigger impact later in a student’s academic career.

Other elements of motivation are self-influences, such as self-efficacy, attributions, and perceived competence. Self-efficacy is a term coined by Albert Bandura and is defined as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations,” (Bandura, 1995, pg. 2). Attributions are “evaluations that individuals make about the cause for their success or failure following the completion of a task,” and perceptions of competence are “beliefs about ability and proficiency in domain-centered tasks,” (Wilson & Trainin, 2007, pg. 258).

Research has also been done to compare the motivation for writing between genders and between grade levels. In 2007, a study entitled *First-Grade Students’ Motivation and Achievement for Reading, Writing and Spelling* was completed by Kathleen M. Wilson and Guy Trainin. They investigated the factors of self-efficacy, attributions and perceived competence

that affected motivation for language activities in first grade students. Using a survey with 198 first grade students, they found that there is a strong relationship between literacy achievement and attributions, and that higher achieving students attributed their success to their efforts, while lower achieving students attributed their failure to factors outside their control, such as luck (Wilson & Trainin, 2007). The study also concluded that “enhancing early literacy skills in all young readers and writers should promote the development of positive self-influences and internal attributions to effort, thereby heightening the likelihood of future academic success,” (Wilson & Trainin, 2007, p. 278). When boys struggle with their writing skills at an early age, their self-perceptions of their abilities go down, which is difficult to reverse for later success. As Dr. Levine states in his book A Mind at a Time, “Motivation is complicated. Success nourishes motivation and motivation makes further success more likely. Failure dampens motivation and a lack of motivation makes continued failure a near certainty,” (Levine, 2002, p. 263).

In a similar study on self-efficacy and writing, researchers Frank Pajares and Gio Valiante wanted to discover what impact self-efficacy has on elementary students’ writing. They based their research on the belief that “students who are confident in their writing capabilities experience less apprehension when faced with a writing assignment and find writing more useful than do students who believe they are poor writers,” (Pajares & Valiante, 1997, p. 354). The purpose of the study was to determine what predictive and mediational role self-efficacy has on the writing achievement of fifth grade students. They found that higher self-efficacy beliefs of students led to higher writing achievement, less apprehension towards writing tasks, and higher perceived usefulness of writing. In addition, the study indicated that fifth grade girls had a higher self-efficacy than boys, and the researchers suggested that it is a good idea for

teachers to pay just as much attention to how students feel about their writing as the quality of their writing (Pajares & Valiante, 1997).

While self-efficacy beliefs are essential to writing motivation, interest is yet another factor of motivation that affects boys in the writing classroom. Earlier it was mentioned that today's writing classrooms give students fewer and fewer opportunities to choose what they want to write about. This has a lasting impact on boys because they feel that the genres they are interested in have little value in their classroom. In addition to genres, the subject matter, word choice, and format of writing that boys like to write is often frowned upon in classrooms.

It is important to consider the impact that media has on the lives of students coming into the classroom and the influence it has on what students want to read and write about. Thomas Newkirk states "the idea of the popular media as 'the problem'-and not as a valuable resource-may be reassuring to literacy teachers devoted to book reading," but feels that it is unproductive not to use what students are interested in as a way to get them reading and writing (Newkirk, 2006, p. 63). He suggests that students, and specifically boys, should be allowed to write about media-based plots, improvise within those plots, and create stories using many different modes. While some teachers may not feel that this is authentic writing, using a movie such as Star Wars offers boys a structure of characters, props, and story types that they can manipulate into their own story (Newkirk, 2006). Or boys can use formats such as comics, graphic novels, or artwork to support their writing, because often, boys are more adept with drawing than handwriting.

Another roadblock to writing for boys in the classroom is the issue of the subject matter that they want to write about. Fletcher notes that one of the tenets of writer's workshop is "kids choose what they want to write about," (Fletcher, 2006, p. 42). But he also finds in the classrooms that he visits that this choice is being very severely limited and that teachers look

down on topics such as hunting, favorite movies, comics, outer space adventures, video games, and war (Fletcher 2006). When this happens, boys tend to check out and choose not to write because what they value has no place in the classroom.

Boys face the same issue when dealing with violence and crude humor in their writing. Violence and aggression in writing has particularly become a concern due to the current 'No Tolerance' climate in our nation's public schools. While not all boys want to write about violent topics, research done on gender and creative story writing found that stories written by individual boys or groups of boys have a larger proportion of overtly aggressive ideas than stories written by girls (Strough & Diriwächter, 2000). Boys want to write about such topics as heroes, fighting and guns, accidents and injuries, blood and guts, among other seemingly violent topics and schools are generally not allowing them to do so.

Humor, especially crude humor, seems to get the same kind of treatment in the elementary classroom. When reading, boys enjoy books such as the Captain Underpants series by Dav Pilkey or Diary of a Wimpy Kid series by Jeff Kinney. These series, along with Harry Potter and others are popular because they are funny (Goebel, 2009). It only makes sense that boys want to write funny stories too. Unfortunately, many times teachers either do not understand the humor in boy's writing, or they feel that it is inappropriate for the classroom. When talking to teachers, Fletcher discovered that many of the teachers did not understand what was so funny about the boys writing, or they felt that boys were using humorous writing so they did not have to apply themselves to the more serious task of thoughtful writing (Fletcher, 2006).

One last major motivational roadblock to boys and writing may be a condition called "boy code." "Boy Code" is a term coined by Dr. William Pollack in 1998 and is defined as a set of rules that boys learn to live by at a very young age. These rules include no crying, no asking

questions when unsure of something, and no showing tenderness and love (Pollack & Cushman, 2001). These qualities are all primarily seen as socially acceptable for females, but not for males, so boys are taught that to follow the boy code means to not act like a girl. Boys see that the expectation is to shut down their emotions, act cool and behave as they believe a man would (Pollack, 2006).

As literacy has primarily been seen as a female activity in society, it is socially acceptable for boys to choose not to engage in reading and writing activities that may be seen as feminine (Neu & Weinfeld, 2007). In addition, emotion and detail are highly regarded qualities of strong writing. One of the key elements of the boy code is to not show any emotion. When boys do not add these elements to their writing, they may receive lower scores, which may impact their self-concept for writing even further.

In summary, the research shows that there are many reasons why boys struggle more with writing than girls do. Brain research in the past twenty years has show that there are clear differences between the brains of males and females and that language abilities develop earlier in girls than boys. However, both girls and boys enter school at the same age, even though their brain development is different. When boys enter school, they may face more challenges with handwriting, working memory, and writing tasks. If boys face struggles in writing early on in school, their motivation for writing may decrease. The research shows that motivation is an essential component for academic success, and when a student loses their motivation, it is very hard to help them get it back.

CHAPTER III

PROCEDURES

Having encountered boys who struggle with writing or refuse to write each year, the author of this project has always had a desire to find new and innovative ways to encourage them to succeed and find joy in expressing themselves in writing. Boys who struggle often find multiple ways to avoid writing, including multiple trips to the restroom, stops at the drinking fountain or pencil sharpener, and staring at their paper for the entire writing time. The author was inspired by the book Boy Writers: Reclaiming Their Voices, by Ralph Fletcher because of his interest in helping boys succeed and his insight into working with young writers.

The author developed this guide for elementary teachers to improve writing strategies and motivation of boys. This guide provides teachers in the Snoqualmie Valley School District with activities and strategies that will encourage boys that refuse to write, support boys that find the writing process laborious and time consuming, and motivate boys who have a low self-concept of themselves as writers. The guide is not a replacement writing curriculum. Rather, it includes innovative ideas to supplement what teachers in the Snoqualmie Valley School District already do to teach writing in their classrooms.

In order to complete the guide, the author performed a review of the literature. The review discusses the current brain research in terms of gender differences, which has a significant impact for all students in the classroom. It is important for teachers to be aware of the differences that boys and girls bring to the classroom so that they can adjust their teaching accordingly. The review also summarizes some of the writing difficulties that boys face in the general elementary classroom and reasons why they are not motivated to write. These include a low self concept of themselves as writers, not being allowed to choose the genres and topics they want to write about, and a view of writing as a subject for girls and not something that real boys

do. The author utilized studies and anecdotal evidence to form the basis of the guide, and chose strategies based on their success in classrooms researched. In addition, the Washington State Grade Level Expectations and the Snoqualmie Valley School District writing curriculum were consulted to ensure that the activities and suggestions listed in the guide supported the curriculum expectations of the state and district.

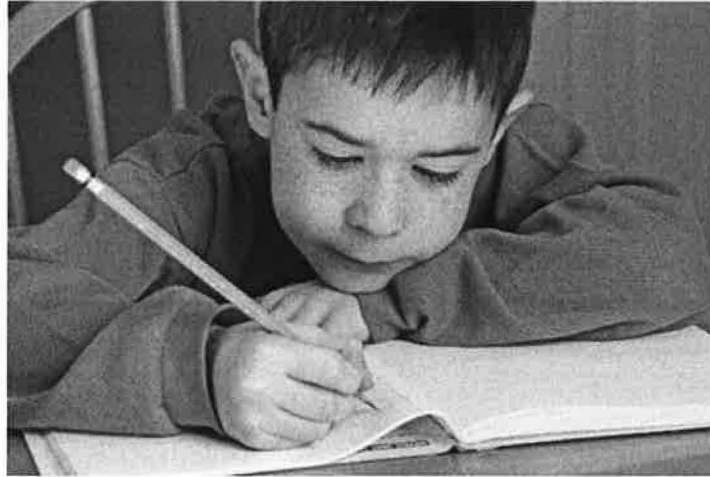
The guide includes five sections, each with a different focus. First, a review of the current gender brain research will help teachers understand some of the important differences between the boys and girls they are teaching in their classroom. The second section discusses student choice and generating topics, which can be a major obstacle in getting students to begin writing. The third section identifies important issues of handwriting and conventions, which have an impact on automaticity in the writing process. The fourth section addresses motivation and encouragement, as more boys will struggle with low self-efficacy or poor attitude for writing. The final section includes a list of resources for teachers who want to find more information or resources on the subject.

The author shared this guide with staff members at Cascade View Elementary School in the Snoqualmie Valley School District. While it is general enough to be used at all grade levels, it is best suited to Kindergarten through fifth grade, where young writers need more encouragement and support to develop their writing skills and motivation.

CHAPTER IV

THE PROJECT

The author used professional literature and personal experience teaching elementary writing to create a guide of suggestions and tips for teachers of elementary boys who struggle with writing. Some of the tips are designed to remind teachers of the basic brain differences between boys and girls and why boys in their classes may struggle more with writing than girls do. The other suggestions that are included give teachers strategies for structuring their writer's workshop time to engage boys with meaningful, relevant writing for them. The strategies are meant to create a writing environment that is safe, comfortable and enjoyable for boys who face anxiety or low self-concept of themselves as writers. These suggestions also take the Washington State Grade Level Expectations and the Snoqualmie Valley School District Expectations into account, as self-generating topics and self-assessment of writing skills are essential components of both.



**Boys and Writing:
Strategies to Support Struggling Boy Writers**

A Guide for Elementary Teachers on the Struggles Boys Face in Writing

Created by:
Dionne Ellingsen

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Introduction

Thank you for your interest in supporting the struggling boy writers in your classroom. Have you found boys in your classroom that cannot develop topics on their own, have to get a sharp pencil every few minutes, or just refuse to write? If you have experienced these boys in your classroom, you may have wondered exactly what struggles they are going through and how you can help to motivate and get them writing on their own.

The goal of this guide is to introduce elementary teachers to some of the recent research regarding the struggles that boys face with writing in the classroom. It begins with a review of the brain differences between boys and girls that has a significant impact on how students learn in the classroom. Research shows that male and female brains are fundamentally different in certain ways and teachers need to consider these differences when designing learning activities for the classroom.

Secondly, some boys face real difficulties with writing when they enter the general education classroom. These difficulties range from fine motor development, the traditional classroom setting that may not take into account how boys learn best, and the amount of activity that boys need to stay engaged in their learning.

Finally, motivation plays a key part in helping boys succeed in the writing classroom. If boys have trouble early on in their writing, they may be less motivated to continue writing. It is normal for individuals to continue with a task that they feel successful in. Motivation is comprised of a variety of elements, including self-efficacy, interest, apprehension, attitude, and attributions for success. If boys feel anxious about writing, do not like it, or feel that they cannot do it, they will not put in the effort to improve.

Brain Basics: What Makes Boys and Girls Different

In order to understand how students learn and why they struggle, teachers need to know more about the brain and how gender differences between boys and girls may impact their learning. In the past decade, scientists have learned more about the differences between genders in terms of processing, hearing, sight and other areas that affect learning in the classroom.

Right and Left Hemispheres

- The left hemisphere is the language center of the brain, focused on reading, writing, communication and memory. The right hemisphere of the brain is concentrated on emotions, music, facial expressions, and visual and spatial awareness.
- Females have a more highly developed left hemisphere than males, while males use the right hemisphere more.
- Cortical connectivity refers to the number of connections between areas of the brain. Research has shown that the female brain has more connections, which leads to higher efficiency in language capabilities.
- The corpus callosum, which connects the two hemispheres, is larger in females than males. This assists in communication between the two hemispheres, which aids in multi-tasking, a key element in writing.

Key Components of the Brain

- Wernicke's and Broca's areas are located in the left hemisphere of the brain. They are responsible for essential language skills, such as understanding and making sense of native language, processing vocabulary and grammar.

- The prefrontal cortex controls decision-making and emotions, which develops later in males than females. This may contribute to impulsivity of boys at a younger age.
- The prefrontal cortex also plays a part in motivation, which is a key element in the desire to learn or continue to learn.

Using the Hemispheres Differently

- Males and females use their brains very differently, which explains the cognitive strengths and weaknesses between genders, including verbal and spatial abilities.
- Females are stronger in verbal abilities because there are many more areas of the female brain that are involved in language than in male brains.
- Females develop a larger vocabulary and their speech is more understandable at a younger age. Girls are a whole year ahead of boys in language development by the first grade.
- Males have a higher level of spatial abilities than females, including the skills of mental rotation, spatial perception, and spatial visualization. This is because the right hemisphere develops earlier in males than females.

Ears

- The cochlea, or innermost part of the ear, is longer in the male ear than the female ear, which means it takes longer for boys to hear a sound than girls.
- Females have more sensitive hearing than males and can hear at higher frequencies, so girls are more distracted than boys are to the sounds of talking or a tapping pencil.
- Males have more difficulty than females hearing in the range of sounds associated with speech, which can affect what they are able to pay attention to in the classroom.

Eyes

- The eyes of males and females differ anatomically, which contributes to the way that they see and what they pay attention to.
- The eyes are composed of rods, cones, and ganglion cells that retrieve information from the rods and cones.
- Parvocellular (P) cells are smaller and more receptive to color and texture. They are more prevalent in the eyes of females and contribute to a thinner retina than in men.
- Magnocellular (M) cells are larger and specialized in detecting motion and location of objects, and more prevalent in the eyes of men than in women.
- In the classroom, teachers will notice the difference between boys and girls, because girls often choose to draw pictures with multiple warm colors and details, while boys tend to draw action pictures with fewer, cooler colors.

Neural Rest Rate

- Scans show that when at rest, a female brain has as much activity occurring in it as when it is solving problems. A bored female brain is able to listen carefully and understand the lesson.
- Male brains have much less neural activity going on during a rest state, which takes place many times each day. This negatively affects listening and learning because some brain functioning is shutting down.

In the Classroom: Struggles Boys Face with Writing in School

Besides the biological brain differences between genders that contribute to the initial struggles that boys face when entering school, there are other factors that influence boys in the classroom when it comes to writing. Writing is a very complex task with many different elements that the writer needs to focus on at the same time. Multi-tasking and attention to detail become crucial skills when developing writing ability, because the writer needs to be able to combine all of these elements together at the same time.

Handwriting

- Fine motor skills develop later in males than females, which contributes to why boys struggle with the process of writing. When interviewed, boys stated that handwriting makes writing difficult.
- Girls' development in fine motor skills happens about six years earlier than boys'. Boys do not have the automaticity in letter formation that is vital to the writing process at the same time that girls do.
- Research shows that there is a clear relationship between handwriting automaticity and the length and quality of writing. Even if a student has good ideas, they will still struggle to get them written if their handwriting is not automatic.
- When students who struggle with handwriting, especially boys, are allowed to dictate their writing to an adult, the quality improves significantly.

Current Elementary School Classroom

- Kindergarten has become the new first grade, where instead of an emphasis on socialization and exploration, schools expect students to learn to read and write.
- Because boys are on average two years behind girls in formal learning readiness, the changes in kindergarten curriculum emphasize the strengths of girls and the weakness of boys.
- The brains of boys and girls develop along different paths, so the language center of a five-year old boy is about the same of a three and a half year old girl. It is inappropriate to try to teach a five-year old boy to read and write.
- Many of today's classrooms are structured for the students who can sit still, listen quietly and complete written work quietly.
- The skills that boys bring into the classroom are often seen as problems, like physical aggression, spatial kinesthetic learning, and impulsivity.
- Traditionally, literacy in the classroom focuses on fictional novels and personal narratives, which boys tend not to like as much. The genres that boys are interested in, such as informational reading, and choice writing are not as available for them.

Motivation Matters: Impact on Success in Writing

One of the key factors determining success in school is motivation. Research shows that when students have a high self-concept and are motivated to succeed their academic achievement improves. However, when boys experience struggles with writing early in their schooling, they can develop a poor self-concept of themselves as writers and their motivation to write will decrease. This can happen as early as kindergarten and plague their entire educational experience.

Elements of Motivation

- **Attitude-** an affective disposition involving how the act of writing makes the author feel, ranging from happy to unhappy. When students feel positively about their writing, they write better than students who feel negatively about writing. Girls tend to have better attitudes toward writing than boys do.
- **Self-efficacy-** the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations. Self-efficacy in writing refers to how confident the writer feels about their abilities.
- **Interest-** the feeling of a person whose attention, concern or curiosity is particularly engaged by something. When students are interested in writing, they are more likely to engage in the activity. Boys that are not interested in writing will not choose to write.
- **Apprehension-** a feeling of anticipation about future adversity or misfortune. Students that feel more apprehensive about their writing abilities will not choose to write, making writing achievement that much more difficult.
- **Attributions for Success-** the evaluations that individuals make about the cause for their success or failure. Higher achieving students attribute their success to their efforts, while lower achieving students attribute their failure to factors outside their control, like luck.

- Perceived Competence- beliefs about ability and proficiency in domain-centered tasks. When boys struggle early on with their writing, their perceived competence goes down. It is very difficult for teachers to help boys reverse this later on.

Interest and the Writing Classroom

- Today's classrooms give students fewer and fewer opportunities to self-select writing topics, due to state testing and curriculum requirements.
- Students, and particularly boys, are interested in many genres and topics for writing that their teachers do not value. These include popular media, such as movies, comics, and television shows, as well as genres like, space adventures, war, violent writing and crude humor.
- When schools do not allow boys to write about things that are important or interesting to them in the classroom, they tend to check out and choose not to write.

Boy Code and Writing

- In 1998, William Pollack coined the term "boy code" as "a set of rules that boys learn to live by at a very young age. These rules include no crying, no asking questions when unsure of something and no showing tenderness and love."
- Society sees literacy as primarily a female activity, so it seems socially acceptable for boys to choose not to engage in reading and writing activities that seem feminine.
- One of the key elements of the boy code is not to show any emotion. Since emotion and detail are highly regarded qualities of strong writing, when boys do not add these to their writing, they may receive a lower score, which contributes to their resistance to write.

Resources

There were many resources used to put together this guide. If you are looking for more information or ideas to help you find new ways to encourage boys in your classroom to write or to help them with the writing process, please utilize the following books and articles.

Books:

- Fletcher, R. (2006). *Boy writers: Reclaiming their voices*. Portland, ME. Stenhouse Publishers.
- Gurian, M. (2001). *Boys and girls learn differently! A guide for teachers and parents*. San Francisco, CA. Jossey-Bass.
- Gurian, M., & Stevens, K. (2005). *The minds of boys: Saving our sons from falling behind in school and life*. San Francisco, CA. Jossey-Bass.
- James, A. N. (2007). *Teaching the male brain: How boys think, feel, and learn in school*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Levine, M. (2002). *A mind at a time*. New York, NY: Simon and Shuster.
- Neu, T. W., & Weinfeld, T. (2007). *Helping boys succeed in school: A practical guide for parents and teachers*. Waco, TX. Prufrock Press, Inc.
- Sax, L. (2005). *Why gender matters: What parents and teachers need to know about the Emerging science of sex differences*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Sax, L. (2007). *Boys adrift: The five factors driving the growing epidemic of unmotivated boys and underachieving young men*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Sousa, D. (2006). *How the brain learns*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Articles:

- Cahill, L. (2005). His brain, her brain. *Scientific American Mind*, 20(3), 40-47.
- Goebel, B. A. (2009). Comic relief: Engaging students through humor writing. *English Journal*, 98(6), 38-43.
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- King, K. & Gurian, M. (2006). Teaching to the minds of boys. *Educational Leadership*, 64(1), 56-61.
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- Sax, L. (2001). Reclaiming kindergarten: Making kindergarten less harmful to boys. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 2(1), 3-12.
- Taylor, D. L. (2005). "Not just boring stories": Reconsidering the gender gap for boys. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 48(4) 290-298.
- Wilson, K.M., & Trainin, G. (2007). First-grade students' motivation and achievement for reading, writing, and spelling. *Reading Psychology*, (28). 257-282

Motivation

Motivation is a key element for successful writing. Boys that are not motivated to write, won't.

- Choice, choice, choice!
- Allow all students to sit where they want during writing, so they can be more comfortable.
- Boys should be encouraged to share their writing with the class or a friend, so they can feel proud of their work.
- During the conference process, be very specific with the suggestions you offer to struggling boys, so they have a clear place to begin.
- Show boys that real men write, including fathers, other teachers, and authors.
- Discuss with students how they feel about themselves as writers. A higher self concept as a writer translates into higher achievement.



Resources

Need more ideas? These books about boys have plenty of helpful suggestions for helping boys with writing.

Boy Writers: Reclaiming their Voices by Ralph Fletcher

Teaching the Male Brain: How Boys Think, Feel, and Learn in School by Abigail Norfleer James

Helping Boys Succeed in School: A Practical guide for Parents and Teachers By Terry W. Neu and Rich Weinfeld

The Minds of Boys: Saving Our Sons from Falling Behind in School and Life by Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens



Boys Are Writers!

A guide for improving writing skill and motivation in elementary boys.



By *Dionne Ellingsen*

Brain Basics

In your classroom, you probably come across a wide variety of differences between boys and girls. When helping boys who struggle with writing, here are some basic differences to consider:

- ◆ The left hemisphere of the brain is primarily the language center, and it develops earlier in females than males.
- ◆ Females have more connections between hemispheres, which aids in multi-tasking, an essential skill in writing.
- ◆ When illustrating or drawing pictures, boys tend to use fewer colors and more action.
- ◆ It takes longer for the male ear to hear and respond to voices. It is also harder for boys to hear softer sounds and the range of sounds associated with female voices.
- ◆ Girls are more verbal than boys at an earlier age and their vocabulary is more developed.
- ◆ When writing, boys tend to use more action, and less sensory detail or emotion.



Choice Matters!



Boys crave choice! When they do not get to choose what they write about, their motivation declines and they become non-writers.

- ◆ Let boys make storyboards to plan out their writing. They may have an easier time remembering their story with a picture representation.
- ◆ Let kids choose their topics, including things such as movies, comics, outer space, video games, or war (Fletcher, 2006).
- ◆ Offer free choice writing times for students, where they can write about anything they want.
- ◆ Let boys see that writing doesn't have to be simply reports or stories. Comics, articles, and journal writing all communicate information as.
- ◆ Before writing, establish reasonable guidelines for the language used in boys' writing. Help boys determine between school and street language.
- ◆ Remember, just because a topic isn't interesting to you, it doesn't make it worthless.

Handwriting and Conventions

The writing process can be difficult for boys because their brains may not be ready for writing.

- ◆ Allow boys to dictate stories to an adult at times. The quality of these stories are much improved than if they had to write them all out themselves.
- ◆ Sometimes it is okay to be lenient with grammatical issues, especially when the writing is a free choice piece. Even published authors use incorrect grammar at times.
- ◆ Utilize dictation programs or typing on the computer to help boys with handwriting difficulties. On average, boys develop handwriting fluency six years later than girls do.
- ◆ Do not require neatness in a rough draft. As long as they can read it, it is fine.
- ◆ Not all stories have to be published or perfected and don't have to go through the whole writing process. Allow students to write for themselves.



CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

Writing is an essential communication skill that students in the elementary classroom need to learn. Unfortunately, in today's classrooms, boys are generally lagging behind girls in writing achievement. Current research shows that the brains of boys and girls are physiologically different and that in general, boys gain verbal and fine motor skills later than girls, which are key elements to successful writing. In addition, many boys are not motivated to write, because they are not allowed to do the kind of writing they want, they do not feel successful at it, or they feel that writing is something only girls do. Regardless of the reason why boys struggle with writing more than girls do, it is cause for concern because all students need to leave our classroom with the writing skills to help them succeed in life. If boys fail, we fail.

After researching the related literature and experiencing many struggling boy writers in her own classroom, the author prepared a guide for teachers to use when teaching writing in the classroom. The guide contains information for elementary teachers about the brain research and strategies to support and encourage boys to write in the classroom.

Conclusions

The information included in the guide about brain research was chosen because it highlighted differences between the brains of boys and girls and offered insight into why some boys struggle more than girls do in the subject of writing. The strategies in the guide were chosen because they are ideas that will be beneficial in the author's own classroom and with the boys that she has experienced in her teaching career. These strategies focus mostly on areas that

boys struggle with in writing, including motivation, idea development, and issues of conventions. The author has found that in her classroom, these areas are the primary roadblocks that boys face in writing.

Recommendations

The author designed the strategies in this guide for use with the traditional elementary classroom. Specifically, the author created them for the Snoqualmie Valley School District, which is not very culturally diverse and does not have a high percentage of students with low socioeconomic status. Future research is needed to determine what boys from more diverse backgrounds need to improve their writing. In addition, the author recommends further research on helping boys with writing when they have learning disabilities or attention deficit disorder.

One of the major elements recommended in the guide is to offer more choice to boys in their writing. However, in today's writing classroom, much of the writing that takes place is predetermined based on preparations for writing assessments, such as the Washington State fourth grade Measurement of Student Progress (MSP). The author encourages teachers to remember choice when designing classroom writing lessons and activities. While preparation for state tests is important, it does not teach a love of the craft of writing and should be implemented in a balanced writing program. Boys are drawn to many types of writing, and resent being asked to write to a prompt all the time.

Another important recommendation is to use the strategies in the guide with all students, not just boys. While girls do not struggle with issues of handwriting or motivation as often as boys in the classroom, these strategies cannot hurt their writing development and may encourage

them to love writing even more. The ideas in the guide are general enough to utilize with all students at all elementary grade levels.

Finally, the author recommends that elementary teachers truly keep an open mind when it comes to the writing that students want to do in class. Simply because the topic is not interesting to the teacher or does not seem like traditional writing, does not make what students write worthless or not appropriate for the classroom. If the goal is to get boys to love to write and love the process of expressing themselves through writing, it is important to value what they write for what it is; an expression of themselves. As Fletcher says in the closing of his book, "Writing is personal. We want every boy to connect with writing in a personal way, to say to himself: *Yeah, I can do that. I'm a writer,*" (Fletcher, 2006, p. 167).

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