Boys' Writing Genre Choices

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Boys' Writing Genre Choices

by

Robert E. Stevens

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A thesis submitted to the
Department of Education and Human Development of the
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Master of Science in Education
Boys' Writing Genre Choices

by

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This thesis research and paper is dedicated to

Kerry Ann,

my wife, my support,

and lifelong partner in all that I do.
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ABSTRACT

Teaching students according to their learning styles has become one of the most accepted approaches for effective instruction. The purpose of this action research was to discover what elementary boys do when given the opportunity to choose the genre of their own writing within writing workshop.

More and more boys have resisted writing instruction and have slowly opted not to view themselves as writers. Boys' and girls' brains are structured differently and need different methods of instruction. Choice has been a motivating factor when encouraging boys to engage in any task. This is certainly true of writing. Students should view themselves as writers, so this study sought to find which genres were most enjoyable for males to write and how the opportunity to choose the genre changed participation in writing tasks.

Six third grade boys were given opportunities to choose their genres and were observed during pull-out writing instruction. The participants also completed questionnaires to express thoughts about boys' writing and aspects of writing related to genres. Each participant was also interviewed by the researcher in order to elaborate on actual writing choices. The researcher gathered qualitative information about each student's decision-making process as each participant chose a genre and crafted his writing.
Boys were found to appreciate the freedom to choose the genre of their writing. However, when given complete choice over all aspects of their writing, boys struggled in completing writing tasks one-third of the time. Teachers can take steps to have boys make choices regarding their writing by guiding them through the process, utilizing student’s learning styles, and encouraging each author’s strengths.
Chapter One

"I have a Spiderman notebook at home, and I like to write about Spiderman in that.... I wrote when I went to Florida, it was really special...I wrote about some of the [New Jersey] Devils players, especially Marten Brodeur...I have one story where my dad and mom live together, it tells what grade my brothers are in. It’s non-fiction, it’s real."

"What makes writing interesting?"

"That I can write anything I want" (Interviews, Evan, 3/13/07 and 5/3/07).

In these interview excerpts, Evan’s descriptions of some of the writing he has done in and out of school illustrate the wide array of interests and genres of one elementary boy. This is true for all of the boys who participated in choosing the genre for their writing and sharing their thoughts about the process.

Problem Statement

What happens when elementary boys are invited to choose the genre of their writing?

Significance of the Problem

Boys around the nation at all grade levels are falling behind girls in many aspects of language arts (Gurian & Stevens, 2005). Boys are not doing well, yet the system of schooling and the environments pertaining to schooling are not supporting boys or engaging them at new levels. Standardized test results indicate that boys are dropping behind, but excellent individual teachers are also indicating the failure of boys. The 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress finds boys one and one-half years behind girls in reading/writing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). In Washington State, 52.2 % of seventh grade boys compared to
70.9% of girls met the writing standard of Washington’s writing assessment (Fletcher, 2006).

Teachers see the day-to-day struggle in powerful ways too. A fourth-grade literacy teacher observes, “many boys have never seen writing as a viable option for them...Many of these boys get teachers who instead of seeing the inherent good in a piece of writing see only the deficits and ways to make it ‘better’” (Fletcher, 2006). Teacher Bruce Morgan says, “Even with all the things I do to entice boys to write and bring their interests into the classroom they still would avoid writing if they had the choice,” (Fletcher, 2006). With so many obstacles, boys will only continue to turn away from the way writing is taught, and maybe turn from writing all together.

The source of the problem boys are facing lies within the classroom environment and the functioning of the male brain. Schools are not structured to match the way that boys’ brains learn (Gurian & Stevens, 2004). Tasks and topics that children find interesting increase the stimulation of the brain. Traditional pedagogy in which teachers address the entire class in the same way is not engaging all students. Another reason schools are not providing these engaging environments is the expectations of classroom teachers. Teachers expect that students will bring motivation into the classroom and apply themselves with sustained attention to assigned tasks. When students respond to these expectations with misbehavior or lack of effort, teachers enforce consequences or lower expectations, causing boys to be even further excluded from opportunities to engage in meaningful learning opportunities (Newkirk, 2002).
Boys' brains are genetically and functionally different from females' brains (Sax, 2005). Therefore, teachers need training in how to engage brains differently. Boys' brains respond most positively to symbols, diagrams, and non-sensory material that engage them logically rather than emotionally. As a result, boys do not process descriptive language that appeals to their senses as well as females do. They tend to react with natural impulsiveness and will compartmentalize information rather than generalizing it. All of this functioning works against boys as they attempt to write (Gurian & Stevens, 2004; Sax, 2005).

I am researching the choices boys make in the genre of their writing to discover and share with classroom teachers and parents the preferences boys tend to have regarding their writing. All people want to know the reason for completing a given task. For boys in particular, the awareness of accomplishment is linked to their commitment and motivation (Fletcher, 2006). Genre is inherently linked to the purposes for which people write. As I find out what genres boys typically enjoy and why, this will guide my instructional decisions to meet the interests of boy writers.

Understanding the obstacles boys face when writing will help me to enhance my instruction with the boys I teach. This will mold my instruction and significantly impact the students I will teach in the future. Schools and families need to alter instructional methods and writing opportunities to better meet the interests of boys. Diane Ravitch (2003) noted that boys and girls in elementary and high schools agree that schools favor girls. I hope to uncover genres and methods of writing that boys enjoy. These new understandings can be shared with other educators through professional development to impact the practices of other teachers.
Boys are also having difficulties viewing themselves as writers and in achieving to the same level as their female peers. By involving male students in the research, they will discover various ways to enjoy writing more fully. I will encourage them to share these methods with their peers.

As a result of this research, I hope to become more open to the interests of boys and more able to help them utilize writing to explore their interests. I am also seeking to understand the purposes and methods boys enjoy as they craft a written piece. I am imploring teachers to connect with the frustrations half our population is having, and commit to alter the way they teach writing.

**Purpose and Rationale**

It seems more and more literature is surfacing about the concern of boys not enjoying writing. I hypothesize that it is because boys do not see any purpose for their writing. In *Boy Writers: Reclaiming Their Voices*, (Fletcher, 2006) educator and author Carl Anderson notes that so many genre studies leave out many genres in which boys enjoy writing. He goes on to explain that “limiting the genres that kids write in limits the purposes they can have as writers” (Fletcher, 2006, p. 136). Boys deserve to understand the relevance of their writing compared to other activities in their lives. “Once boys are given some space to simply write, it becomes much easier to see their natural bent and then go in and teach them some craft that really is connected to what they are already doing” (Fletcher, 2006, p. 46). Boys see greater purpose for their writing when the writing they do can be useful outside of the writing workshop.

For this research, purpose and genre are considered to be directly connected.
If students are only assigned to write narratives about teacher-chosen topics or in a structured format designed by someone else, they will choose to write the minimum just to get the assignment done. In some cases, some boy authors might elaborate with some gory details or intense action, then be told that it is not appropriate. In many classrooms, boys are not writing because they do not see any significance to their efforts. The purpose for writing is linked to the nature of the genre. For instance, if a person wants to see something changed, he would write a persuasive letter, not a narrative. If a boy sought to entertain, he might craft a funny poem or a creative fantasy rather than a how-to piece. Going beyond fiction and non-fiction, students should be taught purposeful reasons for writing in varied ways. Writers deserve and need opportunities to write in diverse genres.

Certainly, being able to write clearly and effectively is of utmost importance. Therefore, learning how to write properly in each genre requires teachers to provide excellent instruction. I hope to discover how boys identify with certain genres because of the inherent purpose behind each. Whether it is seeing a policy changed because of a persuasive letter to the principal or drawing conclusions about how or why something works because of careful observation and written notes. When given a choice, I think boys will choose differently than their teachers. When boys choose, and have a purpose for their choice, their writing will be more meaningful to them as authors and to their audience.

Terms

choice- one’s free decision making process to determine the topic, genre, and style of one’s writing
genre- the structure of how text is presented based on the purpose and audience of the text and nature of the content. Some examples are narrative, fantasy, non-fiction all-about (topical), biography, persuasive, how-to, book review, and poetry.

life journal- writing that describes occurrences in one’s life, usually written in a first-person narrative form about the author and his/her family, friends, and/or life experiences

purpose- the understanding of the application of what one is learning and how it can be used outside of school life

writing workshop- a method of writing instruction in which students participate in various stages within the writing process and engage in peer and teacher interaction to improve everyone’s writing ability and produce texts
Chapter Two

Current Practices for Writing Instruction

Writing workshop is an appropriate, successful, widely used format for writing instruction. Writing workshop usually invites each student to select the content of the writing he or she crafts. This is an authentic process since adult authors pursue topics and genres that have purposes for them according to their interests. The teacher acts as a model for writing and as an advisor for each author’s choices. The teacher’s careful observations enable him or her to plan instruction to meet the learning needs of many students. Mini-lessons, a short presentation of a skill to be learned, enable the teacher to convey new skills that student-authors can practice during the workshop (Calkins, 1994).

As with the writing process approach, extended periods of time for which students to write, revise, and publish their work is the foundation of the writing workshop. A workshop should also include opportunities for conferring both with peers and with the teacher in order to refine one’s self as a writer and to improve specific pieces. Boys who seem unwilling to revise require specific attention. The teacher who is cued into the boys’ interests and learning style will help each author revise with a purpose in mind. That purpose may be sharing the writing with a selected audience.

A time and place for sharing writing publicly creates a meaningful outlet for writing. This may occur daily in the classroom as well as outside the classroom through published pieces in newsletters or on a school web site. Sharing writing can occur at school or community performances.
In some cases it may also be effective, as Lucy Calkins (2006) recommends, for students to participate in a genre study, in which the teacher provides examples and all students work on the same genre for a period of time. When students see the value of various genres they will be more likely to try these genres in their writing. On the other hand, frequent opportunities to choose the genre of one’s writing invites a student author to carefully craft the piece according to the constructs of the genre so that it is most effective when read by the intended audience.

These methods of instruction are effective for many students, but are not making all students lifelong writers. This is especially true for boys. Therefore, further refinement and creativity in writing instruction is required to reach those who seem most reluctant to write.

Boys’ Learning Modalities

When teachers understand how their students learn best, they are better able to plan instruction and achieve a desired end. Students should view themselves as writers and have opportunities to write successfully while overcoming moderate challenges. However, many boys do not view themselves as writers.

Thomas Newkirk (2002) sites the Educational Testing Service’s meta-analysis concluding that fourth grade girls outperform boys in writing by 0.3 standard deviations. The gap increases to 0.6 standard deviations by eighth grade. Simply put; of all subject areas, boys and girls perform most drastically different when it comes to writing. This trend between genders has been clear for over forty years. In the same span of time, schools’ efforts to help girls in math and science has helped close that gap. Schools have made the philosophical and pedagogical changes to encourage
females to broaden horizons. Boys deserve to have the same encouragement in writing.

![Image of a graph showing gender differences in standardized testing]

**Figure 2-1** Trends by Subject, Fourth Through Twelfth Grades
*Source: Educational Testing Service Gender Study*

*Table A: Meta-Analysis of Gender Differences in Standardized Testing* (Newkirk, 2002, p. 35)

As pedagogy that engages the brains of males is implemented, more boys will succeed in writing. This can begin as teachers provide a strong connection between writing and its purpose. As boys share their writing and it is affirmed, they will see themselves as more successful writers. In turn, this will lead to further investment in writing.

**Brain Differences**

Gurian and Stevens (2005) note that children sitting behind desks has become typical in education, but that does not match the way that boys learn best. The differences between the male and female brain begins in-utero with chromosome markers and hormones. The differences continue to divide according to social norms.

Brain differences begin as the brain develops before birth. Before birth, the
cortex in females develops earlier than the cortex in males. The corpus callosum that connects left and right brain is larger in females because it longer to develop in-utero. Therefore, female brains are better able to use both parts of the brain at once. Activities such as reading or interpreting emotions are easier when both hemispheres of the brain are engaged (Gurian, 1996). “With more areas of the female brain devoted to verbal functioning, sensory memory, sitting still, listening, tonality, and neural cross-talk, the complexities of reading and writing come easier, on average, to the female brain than to the male” (Gurian & Stevens, 2005, p. 52). Therefore, boys are mainly seeking to learn through a spatial-mechanical brain. This is linked to the tendency for boys to develop language at a later age than girls.

Gurian identifies strengths in spatial tasks but deficiencies in verbal activities. “When verbal skills are tested, much less of the male brain is used than the female, and the intensity of activity in the left hemisphere is increased in the female over the male” (Gurian, 1996, p. 15). Since boys use differing portions and amount of the brain for verbal tasks, it is necessary to instruct them differently. It is because of these differences in the brain that girls produce more words than boys (Gurian, 2001). In addition, stressful pregnancies can cause language delays for the child (Jensen, 1996).

Research on stroke patients has helped to further prove that female and male brains function differently. While women generalize verbal skills using both hemispheres, men’s brains are compartmentalized into verbal and spatial hemispheres (Sax, 2005).
Past research has also examined the differences as demonstrated by boys' and girls' drawings. Boys typically portray verbs from an outsider's perspective (Sax, 2005). For instance, boys' drawings tend to show characters or objects in motion as shown from the side of the scene. This perspective illustrates the distance and placement of objects is clearly. The freedom to choose the genre and purpose for their writing will enlist boys in writing stories and texts that develop from their mental pictures.

The environment in which children are raised also influences a child's interest and ability in reading and writing. Parents who read and talk to their infants during the first year lay a foundation for future success in academic areas (Jensen, 1996). Large motor stimulation leads to improved reading and writing skills among others (Jensen, 1996). However, when young children are limited in their movement, it can be a detriment to success in school.

As children enter school, social differences become evident as boys are treated differently than girls. "Pecking orders are flagrantly important to boys, and they are often fragile learners when they are low in the pecking order" (Gurian, 2001, p. 47). This will impact a student's emotional and academic development. His attitude toward writing changes because of his place in the social environment.

Teacher to student relationships also factor into a boys success as a writer. In schools, boys are taught by mainly female teachers who are not aware of kinesthetic learning methods and are less able to serve as mentors to young men (Gurian, 2001). One method in overcoming this obstacle is inviting male role models to visit classrooms and correspond with students about reading and writing. Moreover any
adult, male or female, who takes time to listen and accept the topics and writing styles about which boys are passionate will connect with boys and be an encouragement to their growth as a writer.

Therefore, educators must take into account innate differences in the make up and functioning of the brain. It is because of these differences in the brain’s functioning that most of the time boys choose activities that engage spatial thinking and aggression rather than verbal interaction (Gurian, 2001). Teachers can bring about the best learning environment in their classrooms by understanding these differences, then constructing lessons that engage boys’ and girls’ brains in various ways.

Classroom Applications

It might also be of benefit to consider the tendency for boys to want to fail privately. Fletcher’s (2006) anecdote about his skateboarding son illustrated that the boy wanted to be alone to try and fail before he performed in public. His son relentlessly practiced a trick until he finally succeeded. With one goal in mind, the skateboarder did not quit until he got it right, but in private. We can carry this into the classroom by allowing students to try new things again and again before we expect mastery. In the classroom, this might mean that boys have the option to keep struggles private instead of sharing them publicly through an author’s sharing time. We can respect boys’ learning process by focusing on the positive attributes in their writing. Furthermore, we can respect boys’ learning process by focusing on what the author can do and encourage that rather than pointing out his fault in front of his peers. The macho image a boy upholds also impacts the way he writes.
Since conferring is an important element of the writing process, teachers must consider how we might confer differently with boys than girls. Drafting on large posters, planning with graphic organizers gives boys more space to plan their writing. Boys are helped by tangible, kinesthetic methods of revising and editing. Inviting a student to physically cut and paste a draft is helpful for students who are aided by seeing and feeling their writing being changed. Hands-on manipulatives such as macaroni can be used to practice punctuation and editing marks (Gurian, 2001).

Interaction with boys about the content of their drafts is more successful when teachers accept what boys are doing as new skills are gradually learned.

Boys can be offended or put out if a teacher responds negatively to the content or style. Teachers who find something to love in his writing and encourage that will enlist more lifelong writers. We can also encourage the writing they do and accept it as real writing. Newkirk (2002) suggests that teachers “view boys’ culture as viable, alive, and worthy of attention” (p. 21). When conferring, if nothing else, teachers should “back off sometimes” (Fletcher, 2006, p. 96) and allow the boy to be creative in his own way. This is especially true if the content of a boy’s writing does not totally align with a teacher’s style or values.

Ralph Fletcher (2006) notes that “a steady diet of personal narrative has turned off many boys who would prefer to compose wilder, edgier, more fantastic action pieces of writing,” (p. 135). If this is true, boys who regularly quip, “I don’t know what to write!” may be enthused to stage an action-packed plot or to create a fantastic world of their own.
Boys Choosing from a Variety of Genres

When boys are given choices, they will naturally select the option that most closely aligns with their interests. Furthermore, their motivation and attention increases significantly when this is the case. Recognizing that each genre of writing serves a unique purpose, boys should have a purpose for their writing in mind. Boys who craft their writing in a careful way and finalize a draft will accomplish their purpose. This requires models of the genre, persistence to write and re-write, and specific, meaningful feedback from encouraging adults and peers. Furthermore, an arena to share their writing with the intended audience is also beneficial to accomplishing the purpose.

Ralph Fletcher (2006) questioned 242 boys and found that two-thirds (164) of the boys chose fiction as their favorite genre to write about as opposed to personal narrative, poetry, and non-fiction. The situation in many classrooms is a perpetual cycle of personal narrative. Occasionally, teachers have students write non-fiction in a scripted format. Fletcher recommends that if one of our fundamental goals is to engage boy writers we should make sure to include fiction in the curriculum, a genre many teachers avoid because it sprawls in so many different directions it can be difficult to teach (Fletcher, 2006, p. 136).

If teachers want to engage boys in writing, invite them to choose, and when they latch on to a favorite genre, encourage this with excitement.

As writing is taught, teachers also need to consider the learning styles of our students. Gurian and Stevens (2005) recommend innovative physical and athletic activities to link a strength with weaker language learning. Also, Ralph Fletcher
(2006) has found that giving students more freedom to choose the style of their writing will increase the motivation with which boys approach writing workshop in school.

According to questionnaire responses compiled by Millard (2005), boys have several approaches to writing. Some prefer writing poems rather than stories. Each author will choose different genres based on his interests. In addition, some boys enjoy creating drawings based on films and books. Others write stories inspired by television and computer programs. It is evident that boys utilize a variety of sources for inspiration.

However, many teachers' opinions of "the worlds of WWF, computer graphics and television narratives are all too often seen as at best distractions, at worst a pervasive dumbing down of intellectual engagement with the world," (Millard, 2005, p. 61). If boys seek to use media as a source for ideas, teachers should help their male students create written pieces based on television, movies, or computers. Thomas Newkirk (2006) also encourages teachers to consider the value of the language in these media. If scaffolded appropriately, teachers can help young authors use the language from popular culture as a model for their writing. Newkirk recommends allowing students to tell their own versions of a favorite movie or video game. In doing so, a struggling writer may use the setting or characters and develop an extension or new twist in the plotline. Utilizing these techniques will certainly connect and even challenge students. After all, screen writing is a genre, and a possible career for some students.
Elements of camaraderie or competition can inspire boys to engage in writing. (Gurian, 2001). Learning teams have been found to help boys focus jointly on a goal. Students working together are able to encourage one another and answer each others questions or concerns about a task. Teams also lead to some sense of competition, which can be monitored so that all students feel successful. For the boys in a writing club, the camaraderie lead to enjoyment in seeing each other succeed, but also in comparing strengths and successes to one another.

Ralph Fletcher (2006) visited a writing club of fifth grade boys who choose to attend club gatherings weekly. The club allows for parallel expression of ideas and free experimentation with writing. Sam Zarfos, a student in the writing club, explained how helpful it is to be able to get ideas from friends in the group by talking to them at the club. He also explained, “Sometimes it’s competitive. And people can know who’s actually better than them, or they’ve caught up to. I mean, I know I’m not the best in that group in writing. Maybe someday I could be,” (Fletcher, 2006, p. 146).

The opportunity to write freely is one of the major reasons the boys in this school’s writing club were willing to miss recess to come and write together. When Ralph Fletcher (2006) asked what could make writing workshop better, Sam replied, “Maybe take a vote on what kind of writing we want to do: nonfiction, fiction, realistic fiction…the freedom to choose what we want to write about” (p. 146-147).

Applying these elements of choice and genre to classroom instruction requires examples and time. Deciding which genres to introduce and in what order can be determined by the teacher, based on the interests of students. Calkins (2006)
recommends that first we should simply show students that our writing goes beyond writing stories. In her example, a teacher who has shared many stories about running now shares a list of objects and a letter to her friend related to her treasured topic.

Students discover that they can write about meaningful topics in a variety of ways by choosing different genres. This is motivating for boys, who want to see their writing accomplish something. They are inspired by the thought of creating a long list of items. The prospect of sending and receiving letters in the mail can add a non-school purpose for writing. For boys, creating the longest list or connecting with a hero through a letter brings a great sense of accomplishment by creating something that no one else they know has been able to achieve.

Learning from those who have written and been published in the genre is an important step. Fletcher (2006) recommends spending time reading and examining examples of the genre before requiring students to write. Millard (2005) also supports the technique of discussing elements of a genre in relation to popular narratives to help both boys and girls understand the features of the genre. This will allow students to discover the conventions of the genre as well as people who write in the genre regularly.

Over time, students will be ready to select a genre that matches the purpose for their writing. Calkins & Mermelstein (2003) use examples from Leah Mermelstein’s teaching in which she shares her reasons for writing. During a minilesson, she actively engages the students in conversations about how they might use different genres of writing. Mermelstein asked a student what activities she did for fun. Then, students were directed to tell a partner what writing the student might
consider doing (Calkins & Mermelstein, 2003). At first, students may not think of a variety of genres, but as a class, they may think to write lists, letters, advertisements, how-to instructions, and informational texts about yo-yo’s. To engage boys, and all students, we can “encourage children to write in a variety of genres to accomplish a range of purposes,” (Calkins & Mermelstein, 2003, p. 94).

To improve the relationship between boys and literacy, teachers may provide opportunities for boys to demonstrate their strengths in connection with literate activities. A school environment in which literacy is valued by both adults and students of both genders will help reduce the stigma of boys not enjoying language-related tasks. A teacher can incite the utilization of various genres during minilessons or author’s share time by highlighting what the students might do with their finished pieces and providing meaningful avenues to carry out these goals. “I think we have swung too far toward predetermined units of study. Yes, I realize there will still be kinds of writing we must teach, but let’s include at least some genres that boys find stimulating” (Fletcher, 2006, p. 158).
Chapter Three

Objective

When given an opportunity to write, each participant chose a genre of writing that was meaningful to him as a writer. He expressed his reasons for choosing to write in that genre and explained how his writing fit into that genre. Interest in writing was measured through observation, questionnaire, and interview about the genre or genres chosen.

Participants

Six third grade boys participated in this action research study. Pseudonyms (Colin, George, Jim, Evan, Matt, and Casey) were used throughout this report. All of the participants were from middle class families with at least one parent in the home. The participants were chosen for the research because they were students of the researcher. All of the students have been identified as not meeting third grade level expectations for writing. This was determined prior to the research by past teacher recommendations and the decision of the building assistant principal based on the district's writing continuum. The assistant principal compared the remarks on the writing continuum to the grade level expectations and chose nineteen students to receive additional writing support in a pull-out setting. Of those nineteen students, six agreed to participate in the research study and remained involved throughout the seven weeks of the study.

Measures

The variable considered throughout was the genre choice of each student's writing. Each writing genre serves a different purpose and is written for various
audiences. Therefore, authors chose the genre of their writing according to the purpose they had. Calkins (2003) identifies persuasive, non-fiction procedural, non-fiction all-about a topic, realistic fiction, and fantasy as genres for students in third through fifth grade to learn to write. In this study, the researcher invited the participants to write freely at times. In other cases, the researcher taught each of the preceding genres with the exception of realistic fiction. Instruction took the forms of mini-lessons, shared writing, and guided practice. Students also opportunities to view, read, and listen to models of each genre. Therefore, each participant had the opportunity to try writing in each of these genres.

There was one occasion for each student to revise and publish one of their pieces. Depending on the opportunities for sharing, students considered the genre that best suited the audience of readers for their writing. For instance, a student may have written a narrative with characters and events that connected with children who had personalities similar to those characters. One example could have been boys going on a fantasy adventure to defeat an evil enemy. The author wrote for an audience of other boys who enjoyed reading adventure stories with plots of heroes conquering enemies by force. On the other hand, an author might have chosen to craft a letter to a specific recipient. In doing so, the author considered his relationship to the recipient and what he would have liked to communicate to that person. Finally, the genres of reflective writing and personal journals could have been written for a private audience. Students who wrote reflectively tended to have more expression of feelings and thoughts related to their view on life.
Direct observation and anecdotal notes were one way that the researcher found the genre of choice for each participant. During each writing session, students were given the first eight minutes of the writing group time to write freely on any topic and in any genre of their choosing. The rest of the 40 minute session was used for direct instruction, conferencing, and drafting of pieces suggested by the researcher. Observations of all participants were recorded during the free writing period. The researcher also looked back at the students' writing products after the sessions to record further observations. When students wrote less than one sentence, the observation was recorded as "did not write."

During the course of seven weeks, students were required to select a piece to revise, edit, and publish. The researcher observed the choices of pieces for this exercise as well. The genre of the pieces they published point out each author's preference for genres that are meaningful and purposeful for sharing their writing. At the end of the seven weeks, students were given an opportunity to share a final piece with peers. The researcher observed which genre they chose to share and recorded the oral comments made about their purpose for choosing to share that piece.

The observation of free writing was a valid and reliable measure of students' choices. Since students were given the opportunity to take part in writing, it would be assumed that the writing they chose to do showed what they enjoyed writing most. If students chose to write within the same genre or same piece for more than one free writing session, they could do so. The number of pages written quantified their enjoyment of writing that type of piece. The researcher also recorded observations for sessions in which a student chose to draw or re-read writing. While these
observations did not indicate the genre a boy might choose, they identified the student was not interested in writing or did not develop an idea about which to write during the free writing that day. In some instances, the participants demonstrated their interest in other tasks a student might choose to do instead of writing, such as drawing. Observations of the free writing were reliable because students were given a standard environment and procedure for free writing. At the beginning of each session, students wrote in any genre about a topic of their choosing in their writing notebooks. To increase the validity and reliability, the same directions were given to all students. All students also had the same instruction for learning different types of genres. Therefore, students all had equal opportunity to select a genre from several that were taught. Since the amount of time, time of day, and location of writing group were consistent, it can be expected that the writing choice was the only variable that changed. For this group of students in this setting, the results would be similar given continued instruction and observation in this setting.

Every participant also completed a questionnaire about his thoughts about boys’ writing and aspects of writing related to genres. The same questionnaires were given in early March and at the end of April. The directions were read to all participants in a group setting in the same way at the beginning and end of the study. Participants could be honest and open with their opinions about writing since the questionnaire was completed independently and would not be graded. Similar responses on the same questionnaire given seven weeks apart indicated the steadfastness of a student’s belief and the validity of the assessment. However, a change in response may have been brought about from a writing or life experience
that changed the participant’s view. Therefore, replicating the use of these questionnaires with similar students in a similar setting would produce similar results.

Interviews provided opportunities for students to express and explain the choices they had been making in recent writing. Using a standard set of interview questions (see appendix B), students were asked to describe the writing they were doing. Each student was interviewed during the writing group time in the same location as the writing group. Each interview lasted approximately ten minutes allowing for each student to respond to all questions. While some students were video-taped and others audio-taped, the interview itself remained the same. Additional probing questions were always open-ended to encourage the participant to give more information. The researcher completed the first and second interview in the same manner using the same questions. If replicated in a similar setting with similar participants, it can be anticipated that results would be similar.

The similarity and differences of responses between the questionnaire and the interview were considered along with the observations made during the free writing period to triangulate information gathered. To further support findings, the researcher compared information gathered to previously published literature.

Procedure and Instructions

Genre instruction was provided before and during the study. Based on observations of students' writing and students talking informally about writing during the first three months of school, the researcher determined several genres of which students were unfamiliar. The following genres were chosen as unfamiliar genres in which elementary boys could write: persuasive letters, reviews, fantasy, how-
to/procedural, and poetry. Models of these genres and mini-lessons about how to
craft writing in each of these genres were given before and during the action research.
Students were instructed to write at least one piece in each of those genres.

Persuasive writing was introduced as writing that attempts to convince the
reader to think the way the author does about a certain topic. A shared writing letter
was created by the researcher and the students as a model for what sort of sentences
should be included. A list of possible topics was generated by the students, then
supplemented and written on chart paper by the researcher. Topics included: more
time for recess, no homework, no students on the announcements, pets at school,
holiday celebrations, lunch choices, and class drama/plays. Students then chose a
topic and created a rough draft of a persuasive letter. Another mini-lesson about
considering the audience of persuasive letters helped students to think as both writers
and readers.

Reviews are a genre of writing in which the author strives to critically assess
the enjoyment obtained and successfulness of a product. For the purposes of writing
instruction, the researcher introduced students to writing reviews about books,
movies, or video games. A graphic organizer including: title, rating, features, and
audience was provided. First, the researcher demonstrated completing the graphic
organizer for a familiar children’s book, Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice
Sendak. Each element of the graphic organizer was explained. A list of possible
products was brainstormed, then each student selected a topic and completed a
graphic organizer.
Fantasy writing was introduced through the sharing of several published pieces of fantasy. Students saw the covers and topics of many books. A definition of fantasy writing was determined through discussion. This began as the researcher shared a portion of *Bunnicula* by James Howe. Then students identified the book as fiction because it was fake. The researcher further clarified that there are works of fiction that could happen—realistic fiction—and fiction that cannot happen in real life that are called fantasy. It was stated that *Bunnicula* and all of the books on display were fantasy because they could not really happen. Students were encouraged to try writing a story of fantasy by including characters, settings, or events that could not exist in real life.

How-to writing instructs its readers how-to do or make something or how-to go somewhere through specific steps. Examples of student writing in the how-to genre were shown, read aloud, and discussed. Students were given time to brainstorm activities of which they are experts. For instance, students might describe how to make a sandwich, how to catch a football, or how to care for a pet. After brainstorming, students selected one of the topics. Students were given the same “how-to paper” as shown in the models, then instructed to draw and write the steps of his or her activity. In another mini-lesson, students learned to make their writing clear enough so a reader could follow the steps exactly.

To learn the genre of poetry, students read two examples of humorous poetry that were provided as models. Then, working in teams of three or four, they created versions of humorous poetry on chart paper. Each team then had opportunities to share their humorous poetry with their classmates. Another opportunity to write
poetry was given for students to attempt making free verse poetry highly engaging with descriptive language. Students then had opportunities to revise, publish, and share the poem of their choosing.

In addition to genre instruction, free writing notebooks were passed out to all students in the writing group before the study began. All students were instructed to use the notebooks during the writing group to write in any genre or about topic of their choice. Each notebook consisted of a construction paper cover, a blank white page, and six lined pages that were the same as the writing paper students were accustomed to using. The blank white page was a drawing page for students who wished to illustrate any of the writing they chose to do. Students were limited to using the drawing paper for only a portion of the free writing time. The instructions given were to write about anything they wanted to write. Students were told they could write a new piece each session or could continue working on a previously started piece. The only other limitation was that the writing had to be the students’ best effort and had to care about the feelings of other people.

Questionnaires were created by the researcher as a means of capturing the participant’s opinions about writing. Triangulation with observations and interview responses helped the researcher determine the reliability of any one participant’s choice of a certain genre. Questions 1-22 of the questionnaire (see appendix A) were presented on a four-point Likert scale. Response options included: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree. The questions asked about various genres as well as conceptions about boys, choice, and teacher’s roles in relation to writing. Question 23 asked for the participants to rank different genres from favorite to least favorite.
Twelve genres were divided into three groups so that each group had at least one fiction and one non-fiction. Questions 24 and 25 were short answer questions that allowed participants to elaborate about their favorite genre and reasons for wanting or not wanting to choose the genre of one’s writing.

During the administration of the questionnaire, the participants were instructed to give honest responses and told that the questionnaires would not be graded. To provide clear instructions each question was read aloud for the benefit of students who may have had difficulty understanding any question. No further explanation or clarification was provided on any question.

Interviews were conducted to allow the participants to elaborate orally on the choices they had been making during the writing group or in writing outside of the writing group. This provided triangulation with the observation of participant’s writing and their responses on the questionnaires. Interviews were audio or videotaped to allow for the researcher to review participant responses as necessary. Participants were asked to bring their writing folders to the interview and prompted to look through the folder to help the participant remember some of the writing he had done over the past five months. Each interview consisted of seven questions (see appendix). To gather more or deeper information about a subject, the researcher probed with “tell me more about that” or “what else?”. Overall, the interview helped the researcher understand more deeply some of the choices observed during the writing group or indicated on the questionnaire.

Throughout the study, choice of genre was encouraged and valued through the time students had for free writing and instruction of new genres. As new genres were
introduced, each student was expected to try each genre, then return to genres that were most purposeful to him. The use of observations, questionnaires, and interviews enabled the researcher to identify favorite genres and reasons why a student may have selected a particular genre.

Data Analysis

A mixture of quantitative and qualitative data was gathered during the research. The results of the questionnaire only provide results for six participants, so it cannot be generalized. However the researcher was able to quantify participant responses according to the Likert scale used for the questionnaire. The researcher's main purpose was to gather qualitative data about the opinions and actions of the specific students participating. Based on the information gathered, the researcher has made recommendations for how his and other teachers' writing instruction might change.

Totaling the percent of student responses for each category in the Likert scale is one quantitative measure of genre preference or indifference. Higher percentages for a single response increased the reliability for agreement or disagreement with the correlating statement. The researcher also quantified the number of pages of each genre the participants wrote during the free writing time. If a certain genre was enjoyed, the number of pages would be higher indicating time spent and high motivation for writing in that genre.

All three measures have elements of qualitative assessment that denote reasons for students' choices. Through the observation of free writing, the researcher observed each participant's choices during the free writing period. This showed if
each participant had a single preference or enjoyed writing in a range of genres. In addition, a participant’s commitment to a favorite genre could be identified by observations made on consecutive days.

The observations were also compared qualitatively with questionnaire responses and interview data. Each participant’s reasons for writing a chosen genre were considered. The researcher looked for patterns in genres and reasons across the observations, questionnaires, and interviews.

Through this study, the researcher was seeking to identify if boys chose certain genres more frequently than others. Strong evidence for a certain genre could be identified through a pattern of choosing that genre in multiple circumstances. Observations made during the free writing time and a student’s description of the same genre on the questionnaire or during the interview would strengthen the preference for that genre. This also increased the likelihood that other boys would also choose to write in that genre.
Chapter Four

What happens when elementary boys are invited to choose the genre of their writing?

Six elementary boys took part in this study during pull-out writing sessions for supplemental writing instruction. The participants were all part of the supplemental writing group because they had been identified as writing below grade level.

Choice of Genre

Based on results of the free writing observation combined with the questionnaire and interview responses, the participants seemed pleased to have choice in what they wrote. The observations indicated some instances of not knowing what to write or drawing instead of writing. All students, both participants and non-participants were instructed to use the free writing time to write about anything that they wanted. They also had the option to draw as long as it was related to something they planned to write.

Interviews and questionnaire responses show a positive feeling toward choice. When asked if they liked choosing the genre, at least 80% marked they agree or strongly agree. During an interview, one participant said that choosing his genre allowed him to create “a series of [his] own.” Another said choosing his own genre makes writing easier. One participant gave mixed responses about choosing his genre. “I don’t like [choosing the genre for writing], but also saying that he “super agrees” when a teacher says he may write in any genre he likes.

The genre of writing chosen was observed and gathered through the observations, questionnaire, and interview. However, participant’s responses on the questionnaire did not usually match the researcher’s observations of free writing.
Observing Free Writing

Of the six participants, Caleb, George, and Jim attended the writing group on Mondays and Wednesdays while the Casey, Evan, and Matt came on Tuesdays and Thursdays according to their assigned schedule.

During each free writing period, participation would vary. For instance, the researcher observed 17 out of a possible 47 instances in which students did not write more than one sentence because they did not know what to write or claimed “I’m thinking” for the first five minutes of the eight-minute free writing period.

Specifically, on March 26th and 27th (two different groups), Caleb wrote how-to take care of cats, Casey started a fantasy story based on a book series, and Evan began a book review. The other three participants were deemed “did not write” since George took more than five minutes to decide on a topic, then wrote one sentence of fantasy, Jim spent all of the free writing time re-reading a previous piece, and Matt told the researcher that he did not have an idea. The researcher determined that it was not appropriate to give students ideas during the free writing period as this would alter students’ opportunity to choose. Participation was different during the free writing on April 18th and 19th. Caleb chose not to write by choosing a spot in the room under the table to hide from the researcher. Casey continued writing his fantasy/media-based story and Evan used free writing time to write a final copy of a personal narrative. George was distracted by other students moving about the room and wrote one sentence, Jim made a list of nicknames, and Michael wrote poetry that he described as a song. On any one day, one or two participants wrote less than one
sentence, but other participants were writing approximately one page in a genre of their choosing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Sessions</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>Media-based fantasy</td>
<td>5/5</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>Life journal</td>
<td>5/8</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>Life journal</td>
<td>5/8</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>Jokes</td>
<td>3/9</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Life journal</td>
<td>3/9</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>Fantasy or</td>
<td>1/9 or</td>
<td>11% or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>List</td>
<td>1/9</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table B: Each Participant’s Most-Written Genre*

The researcher also analyzed which genres were chosen most often by each participant over the course of 8-9 sessions. In the Monday/Wednesday group, Caleb decided on something to write about for seven out of nine days. The researcher observed him sometimes writing jokes, how-to, or autobiographical pieces. In his case, the genre was never the same genres in consecutive sessions. However, George’s and Jim’s writing was less than half a page on six out of eight and six out of nine days respectively, therefore considered “did not write.” In one of the other groups, Casey wrote the same fiction, media-based story for five out of five sessions that he was in attendance. Three of the six participants tended to work on the same piece for three or more days. Over the course of eight sessions, each of these three had selected a particular genre and written in that genre at least 63% of the time (5/8, 5/8, 5/5 sessions). Out of the six participants, the researcher observed that three of them wrote about their own lives on more than one day. This indicates the popularity of life journals as a genre since 50% chose this genre. Furthermore, for each of these participants, they chose to write about themselves more often than any other genre.
The second most common genre was fantasy since two participants choose to write in fantasy.

**Questionnaire Responses**

Using the Likert scale, the researcher analyzed the percentage of respondents that marked agree or strongly agree in responses to statements such as “I like to write fiction/made-up stories.” The questionnaire was completed on March 7th and 8th and again on April 25th and May 1st. At the end of the study, one participant was absent for a week, so he did not complete the questionnaire a second time.

The five participants who completed the questionnaire in March and April/May responded similarly to, “I like choosing the genre for my writing.” One participant who disagreed to choosing the genre still disagreed (strongly disagreed) at the end of the study. The other four participants strongly agreed that they like choosing the genre for their writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>March</th>
<th>April/May</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like choosing the genre for my writing</td>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table C: Questionnaire Responses for Choosing Genre*

When the results of both trials of the questionnaire were combined, the genres that at least 70% of the participants agreed with included non-fiction, narratives/stories, letters/emails, famous people or places, and fiction/made-up stories.
In March, 100% of participants marked they liked to write the following genres: non-fiction and narratives/stories. This dropped to 90% and 81% respectively after the questionnaire was completed in April/May.

In the short-answer section, two of the participants explained that life journals or writing about themselves was their favorite genre because “it holds all my stories” (Questionnaire, Evan, 3/8/07). This remained their favorite genre as indicated on the questionnaire completed in April/May. The items “I like to write about my life,” and “I like to write about people I know,” were marked agree or strongly agree by 64% and 55% of participants. The other genres identified as favorites in the short-answer section were non-fiction, jokes, letters to friends, science fiction, and poetry.

The questionnaire was a valid measure of the participants’ writing preferences since some of the items were worded in a different way to have participants respond
to a topic more than once. Also, the researcher was present to clarify any questions participants had about what was meant by each of the items. Most importantly, the researcher made it clear to participants that the questionnaire would not be graded so they could answer honestly about each one of the topics. It was a reliable measure since the same questionnaire was given in the same setting.

**Interview Results**

Students’ perceptions about their writing helped the researcher to identify what the participants felt were their preferred genres and some of the students’ thought processes and reasons for choosing a genre.

When students were asked to describe what they had been writing, two described life journals, but others each noted a different writing genre. In four interviews, participants described narratives having to do with their weekend, pets, or entering a contest for a trip. Matt told the researcher that he likes to write about things that really happen. Casey said he liked writing non-fiction about his dog and another piece of non-fiction about seeing Alex Rodriguez play baseball. Evan’s genres were mostly non-fiction about his family, pets, or famous athletes. Jim wrote about things that really happened too as he enjoyed writing a short description of his grandpa’s experience in a war.

Writing fantasy based on other media was also popular. George explained how he creates plots based on Star Wars and Casey informed the researcher that his humorous writing about bunnies was based on a book called *Dumb Bunnies*. Caleb, Evan, and Jim also wrote their own fantasies with themselves or animals as
characters. Caleb also described in April that he enjoys writing down jokes that he had heard in math class.

When participants were asked to describe their writing at home and at school, responses were mixed between fiction and non-fiction. Several students’ responses indicated a mixture of more than one genre such as biography and non-fiction about one’s family or media-based fiction about Batman or Poor Little Weiner Dog. As far as the genres that were taught, poetry was noted as enjoyable. Evan and George enjoyed writing poetry during the writing group. George liked writing silly poetry modeled after the poems we had read. Evan liked the serious poem about an object or person that was special to him.

When writing at home, Evan, Matt, and George referred to writing about home or family events. Evan keeps a folder at home where he writes biographical non-fiction about his family members and activities they do together. Matt writes about military facts he has learned from his dad. George has a life journal in which he writes about places he has been. When Caleb writes outside of school, it is for drawing and writing birthday cards or letters to his friends from summer camp. Jim only writes outside of school when he is bored or if his dad tells him to write something; for example, he sometimes writes while at a swim meet or baseball game. According to Casey, he does not write much outside of school, but if he does it would be non-fiction about cars.

Several interview questions inquired about what makes writing and interesting and how choice of genre impacted the participants’ view of writing. The opportunity to choose and imagine any topic makes writing interesting. Jim exclaimed, you can
“write whatever you want, even your imagination” (Interview, Jim, 3/12/07). Caleb listed that he could write a “story, joke, or what someone tells you to write.” (Interview, Caleb, 5/2/07). For Evan, writing about events in his life is most interesting. Casey explained that his writing about the Dumb Bunnies (based on a book) is according to his mood. “If you’re mad, you can write bad stuff” (Interview, Casey, 4/24/07).

The process of student-choice was important to all of the participants because it made writing more interesting or easier. “I like [choosing my genre] because it helps me think about what I want to write, so I start to write then figure out which genre” (Interview, Matt, 3/13/07).

Evan says that he likes to choose by himself, so “if it was Monday, he could write about the weekend” (Interview, Evan, 5/3/07). “If a teacher tells me I have to write something,” (Interview, Casey, 4/24/07), it is hard, but if he can choose a topic about which he knows, he can write about it. Casey gave the example of the time when his classroom teacher assigned him to write about John Kennedy. Since Casey did not know much about John Kennedy, he requested to write about something else.

Caleb has mixed feelings about choosing his own genre. “Some days it’s hard [to come up with an idea, so] sometimes I like when people tell what to write, because that helps me get an idea” (Interview, Caleb, 5/2/07). However, in the same interview, Caleb explained that he comes up with some new ideas he can write about from things that have happened, a story on the wall, or a new joke he has heard.

The researcher increased the validity of the interview process by probing for further information through open-ended questioning. Each participant also brought
his writing folder to the interview to provide evidence of the genres or pieces to which he referred during the interview. Some of the questions were intentionally similar to determine if a participant’s response would yield similar information.

Notice the similarity of the following questions:

| Question 1: Tell me about what you have been writing. |
| Question 6: Tell me about the writing that you do because you want to write. When, how, why? |
| Question 2: What makes writing interesting? |
| Question 5: When I (the researcher) teach different genres or ways of writing, which have you enjoyed learning about the most? Why? |
| Question 4: How do you feel when a teacher says you may write in any genre you like? |
| Question 7: Do you like choosing the genre for your writing. Why or why not? |

Table E: Reiteration of Topics through Similar Interview Questions

The researcher was also able to cross-reference responses from the interview with observations during free writing and the participants’ responses on the written questionnaire.

The interview was also reliable as indicated by similar responses from four out of six participants. Matt said that he likes to write about his life and noted that Jan Brett was a role model for his writing. In both interviews, George referred to Star Wars as something he likes to write.

The same interview questions were asked in the same way in the same order. Each time the researcher wanted more information, he would probe with an open-ended statement such as, “Tell me what you mean,” or “Give me an example.” Sometimes, it was necessary for the researcher to rephrase what the participant said to clarify the response or seek further explanation. This was done in a similar way for each participant in early March and April/May in order to increase the reliability. If
the same interviews were used in a similar setting with elementary boys in a writing group, similar results would be found.
Chapter Five

Attainment of Objective

What happens when elementary boys are invited to choose the genre of their writing?

When given the opportunity to choose the genre for their writing, some boys demonstrated a preference, but some did not take advantage of the opportunity to choose. Six elementary boys were invited to choose the genre of their writing during a free writing session twice per week for the duration of the study. Participants also completed questionnaires and interviews at the beginning and end of the study in which they expressed their attitudes and practices regarding choosing the genre for their writing. Boys verbalized and responded positively toward choosing a genre when responding on a questionnaire or in an interview. However, when given that option during free writing, carrying out the choice did not improve the quality or quantity of writing.

Discussion

Observing the choices made was an authentic measure of which genres are most desirable. Given the same instructions in a similar environment, these boys would likely choose the same genres.

During the free writing sessions, it seems that the freedom to choose the genre was not helpful in increasing the amount of writing. Two of the six participants did not write in more than 60% of free writing sessions. Since many free writing sessions resulted in two respondents usually drawing or otherwise not writing, the invitation to choose the genre may have been more freedom than these boys were prepared to utilize effectively. When elementary boys were given free writing time to write about
any topic and in any genre, as well as the freedom to choose from two types of paper, one out of three of authors did not write more than one sentence. It is probable that similar results would ensue in similar circumstances. With the freedom and responsibility of choosing a genre that matched the writer’s purpose for how he hoped to use the writing, free writing became less productive because of the decreased structure and direction for their writing.

One missing piece in the writing classroom used for this research was the opportunity for authentic publication and sharing of students’ writing. Participants had little idea of how they planned to share their writing with an audience because they did not have the advantage of witnessing authors sharing their writing on a regular basis. Calkins (1994) encourages that teachers help students find their identity as authors by providing opportunities for publication and sharing.

Of the writing that was completed during free writing, almost half was identified as life journals. It seems that boys enjoy writing about themselves and life events as it was the most common genre during free writing. It was also noted as the favorite of two of the six authors both times the questionnaire was completed. However, the other favorite genres were of wide variety.

Fletcher (2006) poses that personal narrative has been the mainstay for writing instruction in too many elementary classrooms. He asserts that boys are seeking more active writing genres driven by action. Cartoons and fantasy are genres that Fletcher recommends inviting boys to try.

During the free writing, 57% of writing was made up of a variety of genres as different as the authors themselves. In addition, the Likert scale portion of the
questionnaire indicates that writing narratives is second to writing non-fiction. "I like
to write letters/emails to other people," was equally well liked with writing narratives.
It seems that some boys, such as Evan and Matt, will choose to write in personal
narratives as much or more than other genres.

Caleb's interview indicates that for some students, the option to write in
response to a given prompt or other stimulus may be preferred to complete freedom
of choice. If students are given both choice of genre and opportunity to respond to a
prompt, more male students may be engaged in writing in school.

Current Study Compared to Literature Review

Current Writing Instruction

The research took place in a writing classroom that differs from a writing
workshop that would provide at least 30 minutes of writing instruction daily. Since
the researcher met with each group of students twice per week for 40 minutes each
session, he provided opportunities for students to write freely, look at models of
writing, and try writing new genres with support.

Learning to write in different genres was provided through scaffolded
instruction. As in a writing workshop, a mini-lesson provided an example of how an
author crafts a piece. This was followed by writing a piece together through shared
writing, then opportunities over two or three sessions to write in the demonstrated
genre with guided practice.

Boys Learning Modalities

The boys who participated in this study viewed themselves as writers. Even
though they were struggling writers as determined by the assistant principal's
determination using school’s writing continuum, they like writing. Five out of six participants marked on the questionnaire agree or strongly agree with “I enjoy writing.” It is also evident through the questionnaire and the interviews that choice is important to boys when they write. One hundred percent said they like choosing the topic and five out of six (March) and four out of five (May) said they like choosing the genre for their writing.

**Brain Differences**

The participants indicated through their questionnaire and interview responses that appreciated the opportunity to choose. Five of the respondents explained that it made writing more fun, interesting, or easier. An elementary boy will tend to choose what is “fun” when it comes to writing. The researcher strived to provide enjoyable writing opportunities through the genres themselves. Furthermore, active writing tasks like a team-centered poetry challenge got participants out of their seats to work together on writing poetry with markers on colored paper. One participant mentioned the poetry challenge as a genre learning experience he enjoyed most because it was “fun [to] take other poems and make them different.” The enjoyment for George was evident as the poem he and his partner wrote had a similar humorous style and idea to a poem about peanut butter that had been shared as a model. All of the students worked in groups of two or three to write poetry on posters. Working together also brought an element of fun for the participants.

Newkirk (2002) urges teachers to accept and affirm boys’ writing even if it does not fit into the norms of what they would like to see students write. This was true in the research as Casey adapted stories from a series of books called *The Dumb*
Bunnies. By allowing his view of what was funny—violent and idiotic actions between fictional characters—he was open to writing in this genre for five out of five sessions during the free writing time. Had Casey been writing in this under the instruction of another teacher, it may have been dismissed as inappropriate. Since the researcher was mindful of accepting more of boys’ writing, Casey was able to express his sense of humor in his writing.

The male brain’s view of humor laced with violence was evident in Casey and Jim’s writing. The male brain tends to think in movements rather than in sensory and emotional details. Furthermore, since it is difficult for boys to generalize, it is also difficult for them to appropriately separate humor and violence. What is humorous to an elementary boy may be perceived as crudely violent by adults or females. When given the opportunity to write in such a way, Casey and Jim chose to write more. As suggested by Fletcher (2006), teachers can scaffold boys in understanding how to appropriately include humor that is not specifically violent. In order to accept boys as authors, this must be done by encouraging what boys are doing well.

Boys Choosing From a Variety of Genres

When given choice, boys chose a variety of genres. Of the six participants, there was not a genre that was always a favorite. While three of the participants wrote within their own favorite genre more than 62% of the time, the other three participants did not demonstrate preference for one genre over another. This was supported in Boy Writers (Fletcher, 2006) by Carl Anderson when he indicated that boys desire the freedom to choose from among many genres that they enjoy writing.
Narrative writing about one’s own life—life journals—did prove to be a genre of choice. Three of six boys wrote life journal pieces during the free writing. Those three also indicated life journals as a number one choice on the questionnaire. As a result, teachers will want to include opportunities for students to write about themselves and their families. This supports what teachers have been doing as opposed to giving complete free choice as recommended by some of the literature. Students’ writing about themselves can lead to many genres of which narrative non-fiction is one. Students may also write poetry, biographies. With some creativity, students could write how-to pieces about being a member of a family.

Implications of Results

For teachers of writing, implementing choice of genre for all of their students must be done carefully. Too much choice may result in writers who struggle to get started with any form of writing. Therefore, teachers should provide opportunities for students to choose in the genre after the topic has been assigned or pre-determined by the student. For students to successfully choose and craft in each genre, they must experience the genre through modeling and practice with constructive feedback. Finally, students who have opportunity to share their published work in an authentic way will find the meaning in selecting each genre for a purpose. “The writer needs to see…possibilities for publication early and then write toward these possibilities” (Calkins, 1994, p. 269). Once again, the choice of genre and choice of publication lies in the hands of the authors.

Strengths and Limitations
One strength of this study was the consistency of the free writing and observations. Participants were in an established routine for writing instruction prior to the start of the research. They had been students of the researcher in the writing group for four months. The room and students in the room remained the same throughout the study. Participants felt comfortable learning new writing skills and sharing their ideas with the researcher. The high comfort level was important for the qualitative data gathering that occurred.

Qualitative measures enabled the researcher to gather information from the students’ perspectives as well as to understand the process of choosing a genre for each student. In order to hear the views of boys who are asked to write in school, the researcher used interviews and questionnaires. These forms of qualitative research enabled the researcher to capture the reasons and purposes boys have for writing. Participants described the reasons for the genres chosen through the interviews. The researcher was able to engage each participant in conversation and see first-hand what writing the participants had been working on. The researcher was able to understand and analyze participants’ comments beyond what they indicated through questionnaire responses and observation of their writing. This process added to the triangulation of the data.

On the other hand, the study did not extend beyond the small population of students that participated. Six participants shared each of the choices they made when invited to choose the genre of writing. However, it cannot be determined if a larger population of similar students would respond in a similar way. Also due to a small number of participants, 100% agreement on a questionnaire is more likely and
therefore less surprising. Because of the small sample and the nature of qualitative research, it is difficult to generalize the results to understand what happens when all boys are invited to choose the genre of their writing.

The free writing time was offered every writing session from the beginning to the end of the research. However, since the free writing time was only eight minutes long, it may have deterred some students from committing to serious writing. As Calkins (1994) says, a predictable time for students to write every day helps to make them writers. This must be an extended time of at least 45 minutes three to five days per week. However in this study, the free writing time was one portion of a 40 minutes supplemental writing group. The researcher planned other writing instruction and writing opportunities related to the students’ needs. More time to write freely may change the results of the free writing time.

Impact of Change

This research adds to a growing body of knowledge about how gender and choice impact students’ learning. A great deal of research in the field of gender and literacy deals with boys’ struggles with reading. This study adds to teachers’ awareness of how boys struggle with writing and what teachers can do to improve boys’ interest in writing.

Qualitative and quantitative data collections provide an appropriate fusion of information. The combination of qualitative interviews and observations with quantitative data collection makes this study particularly useful for classroom teachers or educational researchers.
The participants certainly appreciated the invitation to choose. Choice is empowering for any person; it naturally motivates. Participants of the study will go forward with a better awareness that choosing the genre is an important step in writing. They also have more knowledge about how different genres can be used to accomplish different purposes.

For teachers who truly want to see boys engage in their writing, they will take steps to make choosing genre one part of their writing workshop. Teachers can continue providing instruction through genre studies and structuring writing workshop with mini-lessons. Making writing workshop more boy-friendly requires a step more of openness to the genres that boys are interested in writing.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

One may choose to improve and extend the research presented here: What happens when elementary boys are invited to choose the genre of their writing? More time for participants to engage in free writing and on a more consistent schedule would help the free writing to take hold in the minds of the student authors. Fifteen to twenty minutes daily for free writing could improve the consistency of the writing environment. This may also increase the length of the pieces to better represent each of the chosen genres.

Continuing to research what happens when boys are given choices in their writing will advance teachers’ abilities to engage boys in the beautiful and useful craft of writing. While this research focused on the genre choices boys make, further research may consider other freedoms teachers could extend to students. For instance: how do boys draw as a means of planning for writing? Any topic relating to
visual, spatial, and kinesthetic means of engaging students in writing could also
further teachers’ abilities to capture boys’ interests and abilities as writers.

Some teachers choose written or verbal prompts to get students started with
writing. Another researcher might consider other means of prompting through
movement, drama, music, art, or other visuals. Boys’ choices of the mediums, types
of paper, or even using computers in place of drafting on paper are other possibilities
for discovering ways to engage boys in writing.

The challenge of engaging boys in writing will be facing educators for years
to come. The more teachers learn about what helps boys see themselves as writers
and what motivates them to use writing for their purposes will be useful for all
teachers and learners.
References


Appendices

Questionnaire........................................................................................................Appendix A

Interview Questions.............................................................................................. Appendix B
Appendix A

Rate your opinions for each of these statements. Put a check in one box for each question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I enjoy writing.</td>
<td>☒</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I like choosing my topic.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. I like choosing the genre for my writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. I want my teacher to tell me what to write.</td>
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<td>5. It is important to me that other people read my writing</td>
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<td>6. I like to write narratives/stories.</td>
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<td>7. I like to write non-fiction.</td>
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<td>8. I like to write about my life.</td>
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<td>9. I like to write about people I know.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 Boys enjoy writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 Boys write differently than girls.</td>
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<td>12 I like to share my writing with other people.</td>
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<td>13 I like to write about famous people or places.</td>
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<td>14 I like to write about fantasy characters.</td>
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<td>15 I like to write about topics or activities.</td>
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<td>16 Teachers usually tell students what to write about.</td>
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<td>17 Boys and girls writing is usually the same.</td>
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<td>18 I enjoy writing in this writing group.</td>
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<td>19 I like to write letters/emails to other people.</td>
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<td>20 I like to write to remember things.</td>
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<td>21 I like to write fiction/made-up stories.</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 Teachers usually let students write what they want to.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
23. Number these genres in order from 1-4 for favorite to least favorite to write. 
1=favorite........4=least favorite

____ life journal
____ letters
____ observations
____ jokes

*************************************************
1=favorite........4=least favorite

____ how-to / instructions
____ poetry
____ persuasive
____ non-fiction / all-about topic

 *************************************************
1=favorite........4=least favorite

____ autobiography
____ science fiction / fantasy
____ commercial / advertisement
____ list

24. Choose one of your #1 responses. Explain why you like to write in that genre.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

25. Turn over to #3 and #4. Explain why you like or don’t like choose the genre for your writing.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your help and all of your hard work!
Appendix B

Student name: ___________________________ Date: ____________

Interview:
I would like to video/audio tape our interview so I can make sure I hear all of your answers correctly. Is it okay if I videotape you today?

1. Tell me about what you have been writing.
2. What makes writing interesting?
3. Who is a good writer that you know? A writing role-model?
4. How do you feel when a teacher says you may write in any genre you like?
5. When I (the researcher) teach different genres or ways of writing, which have enjoyed learning about the most? Why?
6. Tell me about the writing that you do because you want to write. When, how, why?
7. Do you like choosing the genre for your writing. Why or why not?