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Grades four and eight students' and teachers' perceptions of girls' and boys' writing competencies

Shelley Peterson

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ABSTRACT

Addressing gender disparities in the results of large-scale tests of student writing, this study examined fourth- and eighth-grade teachers' and students' perspectives on boys' and girls' relative writing competence. Interview and questionnaire responses showed a privileging of girls' writing over boys' writing. Girls' writing was viewed as more detailed, descriptive, and showing greater conformity to writing conventions. To some extent, girls' relative success on large-scale writing assessment may be related to students' and teachers' expectations that girls are more competent than boys in the areas measured in the evaluation rubrics. The results of this study indicate a need for conversations that question an emphasis on conformity in writing and that explore ways to nurture boys' and girls' identified strengths in areas that are overlooked on evaluation rubrics, as well as their identified needs in areas that are emphasized.

Historically and across international borders, large-scale examination of middle-grade students' narrative writing competencies favor girls over boys in their assignment of proficient scores (Afflerbach, 1985; Alberta Education, 1995; Applebee, Langer and Mullis, 1986; Danielson and Wendelin, 1992; Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1995). This trend, together with research indicating a positive correlation between (1) students' self-perceptions and their performance (McCarthy, Meier and Rinderer, 1985; Wachholz and Etheridge, 1996) and (2) teachers' expectations and students' performance (Johnson, 1973-74; Palardy, 1969), indicates a need to examine teachers' and students' perspectives on boys' and

girls' relative writing competence to propose possible relationships between expectations for writing success and the writing performance of girls and boys.

This research investigated the following questions:

- How do fourth- and eighth-grade students in urban, suburban and rural school districts describe the writing competencies of the writers of six narrative papers written by girls and boys at their grade level?
- How do these students describe their own writing strengths and weaknesses?
- How do fourth- and eighth-grade teachers characterize girls' and boys' writing competencies?

RELATED RESEARCH

Nistler's (1989) study of first- through fifth-grade elementary students' concepts of authorship is one of a number of studies that found relationships between students' writing success and their goals as writers. In Nistler's study, students' self-perceptions as writers fell along a developmental continuum. At the low end of the continuum was a preoccupation with physical aspects of writing, such as neatness and handwriting. At the high end of the continuum was a focus on the "sense of the text, its appeal to their audience, its form and its topics" (Nistler, 1989, p. 11). No developmental patterns were observed in Danielson's and Wendelin's (1992) study of sixth-grade, eleventh-grade and college students' perceptions of their writing needs. Consistent across all grade levels, however, was a perceived need for more writing and reading experience and a need to improve on skills in using writing conventions in order to achieve greater success as writers. Similarly, Donlon (1986) found an interaction between fifth-grade students' high apprehension and their preoccupation with spelling, staying on track, and selecting a topic.

Gender played a role in students' perceptions of their writing abilities in Cumming's (1994) study of eleventh-grade students. Participating students viewed literacy skills as being more natural for females and perceived hands-on activities to be more natural for males. Furthermore, 29% of females and 37% of males felt that superiority in reading/literature or math

was determined by one's sex. Students whose writing scored in the low and middle ranges comprised the majority (88%) of the group espousing this view. In studies of elementary and middle grade students in Great Britain and in North America (Davies and Brember, 1994; Pottorff, Phels-Zientarski and Skovera, 1996) students consistently described girls as being more competent writers than boys. However, boys considered male writers to be competent to a greater degree than girls did.

A study of nine and eleven year old girls' and boys' literacy attitudes and performance conducted in the United Kingdom revealed that girls were more likely than boys to have positive feelings about literacy and to experience success with literacy tasks (Assessment of Performance Unit, 1982). Swann (1992) proposed that these gender differences may have been the result of students' perceptions of writing as: (1) a passive, quiet feminine activity that elicited little interest from boys; and (2) less intellectually demanding and requiring greater conformity than other subjects. Swann believed that girls' positive attitudes toward writing may have been formed through a perception that they could achieve success through non-intellectual factors such as legible handwriting. In contrast, few or no differences in the reading abilities of girls and boys were found in research studies in Japan (Kagan, 1969), Finland (Thorndike, 1973), and Germany (DePillis and Singer, 1985).

Finally, in research (Palardy, 1969) exploring teachers' gender expectations there was an interaction between American teachers' beliefs about first-grade girls' and boys' relative success in learning to read and the children's actual reading achievement. Year-end reading test results were consistent with teachers' expectations of girls as better literacy learners. A similar study (Johnson, 1973) of Nigerian teachers' expectations also revealed a Pygmalion Effect of self-fulfilling prophecies (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). In Nigeria, where teachers expected better performance in literacy learning from boys, males performed better than their female peers.

The results of previous studies are mixed in terms of finding relationships between students' and teachers' expectations for girls' and boys' literacy performance and their actual performance. This study contributes further information by examining students' perspectives on the writing of other students at their grade level and their self-assessments of personal writing strengths and weaknesses. The students' expectations are compared and contrasted with those of their teachers.

METHOD

Participants

I selected three classrooms at each grade level (fourth and eighth) within one urban, one rural, and one suburban school district in north central Ohio. In the urban district, a language arts consultant provided a list of teachers who were interested in participating in the study, whereas the principals of the rural and suburban schools provided a list of teachers who could be approached as potential participants. Ninety-seven grade four girls (37 urban, 39 rural and 21 suburban), 104 grade four boys (35 urban, 37 rural and 32 suburban), 85 grade eight girls (30 urban, 21 rural and 34 suburban) and 100 grade eight boys (27 urban, 37 rural and 36 suburban) participated in this study. Multiple classes taught by the eighth-grade teachers participated in the research study. As a result, though nine grade four teachers participated (three females from the urban district; two females and one male from the suburban district; and two females and one male from the rural district) only three grade eight teachers (one female from the urban district; one female from the suburban district; and one male from the rural district) took part in the study.

Procedure

Participating students read three stories written by students at their grade level. On a questionnaire students noted whether they thought that the writer was male or female or if they were uncertain of the writer's gender, and identified gender markers within each story. The stories, written by Ohio students from a nearby district that had not participated in the study, were selected because they exhibited characteristics of both girls' and boys' writing as identified in previous research studies (Gray-Schlegel and Gray-Schlegel, 1995-96; McAuliffe, 1994; Trepanier-Street and Romatowski, 1991). According to these studies, boys' writing can be characterized by a limited offering of roles for female characters and a positioning of male characters in powerful, risk-filled roles that require independent problem solving to overcome obstacles. Violence and crime are typically found in boys' writing. Girls' writing is defined less rigidly, with the positioning of female characters in both powerful and powerless roles, and the presence of some male characters. Violence may be an element in girls' stories. Characters are more likely to resolve conflicts through the creation of alliances with others, however, than through independent, aggressive action. I pre-

sented the papers to participating students in type-written form, unedited by adults.

In addition, students indicated their own gender and responded to the following questions: (1) What are you good at as an author?; (2) What are you trying to do better as an author?

I elicited teachers' perspectives on girls' and boys' writing competence in half-hour interviews that took place in their classrooms after school hours. Interview questions found in Appendix A served as starting points for the interviews.

Data analysis

Following the calculation of frequencies of students' assignment of gender to the writers of the three papers, a graduate research assistant and I analyzed gender markers within the nine stories using three categories that had guided previous studies (Gray-Schlegel and Gray-Schlegel, 1995-96; McAuliffe, 1994; Trepanier-Street and Romatowski, 1991): (1) relative proximity of the topic to the writer's immediate experience; (2) gender of character in control; and (3) level of violence. In addition, we used one category that emerged from the data; and (4) linguistic competence. The graduate research assistant and I categorized gender markers independently, then compared our analyses, clarifying our rationales for the placement of gender markers when disagreements arose until we reached consensus. A description of all categories of the gender markers is in press (Peterson, 2000). In this paper I focus on linguistic competence, the category that had not been identified in previous studies of gender differences in student writing.

I calculated the frequencies of features that boys and girls at each grade level identified as their writing strengths and needs. Five categories of writing strengths and needs emerged: (1) audience appeal/creativity; (2) description, (3) organization; (4) writing conventions; and (5) length. In addition, some students wrote that they had no writing strengths. I calculated the percentages of the total number of comments written by students of the same gender, grade and school district.

I grouped the gender markers gathered through interviews with the 12 teachers into two categories: (1) demonstrates competence; and (2) demonstrates a lack of competence.

RESULTS

Students describe competencies of writers of six narrative papers

Students in both grades identified the gender of the writers of the three papers they read with less than 100% accuracy. As shown in Table 1, fourth-grade students' accuracy in identifying writers' gender ranged from a low of 4.8% of boys' guesses for a story written by a girl to a high of 69.9% of boys' guesses for a story written by a boy. Eighth-grade students' accuracy in identifying the writer's gender was lowest for a story written by a girl (28.3% of boys' guesses). The highest rate of accuracy (65.9% of girls' guesses) occurred for a paper written by a girl.

Whether students correctly identified the writer's gender or not, their assessment of the writer's linguistic competence revealed a perception of girls as better writers, particularly at the eighth-grade level. Often students who identified the writer as female highlighted certain features, describing them in favorable terms. Students who thought that the writer was male, however, highlighted the same features and described them in unfavorable terms. In the following discussion I compare and contrast gender markers showing linguistic competence that students identified within each of the six narrative papers.

Eighth-grade students privileged female writers over male writers, for the most part, in their description of the story, "Zookeepers," written by a boy. In this story, Anne, who had a "bizarre imagination," came to school with bruises and scratches, telling Byron that the zookeepers were really animals who ate children. Byron visited Anne that night and found half-human and half-beast creatures crawling all over her. He ran to his home for safety, and the story ended with his glimpsing a "small human-like footprint on the window sill." Of students who identified the writer as a girl, four female students described the story as imaginative, and four male students described it as a long story. One female student observed that boys "don't take the time to write a long interesting story." Another female student asserted that "girls have a wider vocabulary like this writer does." Two boys thought that the "big words" were identifiers of a female writer and three girls felt that the story was descriptive and had "great detail." Another girl noted that "boys are not into detail." Finally, a male student identified the "good grammar" as a female gender marker within the story. Students who deemed the writer to be male identified different gender markers. One male

student noted that the writer “uses short words like ‘c’mon.” Two female students assessed the story as weird; one of them adding “it doesn’t make a lot of sense.” Four students, however, felt that the story was imaginative.

Table 1
Students’ Identification of Writer’s Gender

Grade; Gender; Title of Narrative	# of Girls & Boys at Each Grade	Guessed Girl		Guessed Boy		Uncertain	
		% Girls	% Boys	% Girls	% Boys	% Girls	% Boys
Grade 4							
Girl	95						
<i>Magic Shoes</i>		7.4	4.8	90.5	95.2	2.1	0.0
<i>Clock That Rang</i>		49.5	60.8	12.9	4.9	37.6	34.3
Boy	105						
<i>Aliens Attack</i>		6.5	8.7	66.3	69.9	27.2	21.4
Grade 8							
Girl	85						
<i>Untitled #1</i>		32.1	28.3	40.5	45.5	27.4	26.2
<i>Untitled #2</i>		65.9	47.0	21.2	41.0	12.9	12.0
Boy	100						
<i>Zookeepers</i>		36.5	42.0	51.5	46.8	11.8	12.0

Of the eighth-grade students who identified the writer of an untitled paper as male, one boy labeled the story as short and another boy stated that the story “wasn’t complete, though it sounded good.” In this story, the protagonist, Amber Pierson, turned on the television upon arriving home on the last day of her Junior year. She listened to a journalist reporting on the murder of two Juniors in their home. The story ended as “Amber’s piercing scream broke the stillness ...” Another male student assessed the plot as simple and stated that there was “not a great ending.” A female student felt that the writing lacked description and detail. A male student thought that the writing “made no sense” and observed that the writer “used ‘went’ in pretty much all of ‘his’ sentences.” One boy did find the story to be interesting and asserted, “boys write interesting things better.” The story was penned by an eighth-grade girl. Of those who correctly identified the writer’s gender, a female student thought that the writer was female because

“girls are very creative and imaginative.” Two boys who identified the writer as female explained that the writer had used “big” and “precise” words. Two girls and a boy found the writing detailed and descriptive. In contrast, one boy thought that a male writer would have written a better ending, and another boy felt that male writers would use “better grammar.”

Eighth-grade students who identified the writer of an untitled story about an archaeological dig as a boy described the writing in mainly pejorative terms. This story, written by a girl, is told in the first person by the leader of a team of “famous archaeologists.” In the year 3785, the protagonist finds an “enchanted bag,” produces two million replicas, and gives the original to a museum. The income from the sale of these replicas is given to charities such as “Save the Whales” and is used to buy a house and many pets. Two boys described the story as having “poor grammar,” one boy found it to have “short sentences,” three boys stated there was “not a lot of detail,” and two boys felt that there were “no big words.” One boy elaborated after identifying spelling errors, “Usually girls would go back and correct them.” A female student explained, “there’s no main character, plot and setting” and another female student asserted that the story did not have a good ending. A boy observed that male writers “write stuff short and simple” and a girl assessed the writing as “boring and short.” One female student stated that the writer “doesn’t make any sense.” One male student did state that “boys write cool stuff like that,” however. Of the students who identified the writer as female, one girl assessed the writing as “imaginative with descriptive words.” Two boys felt that the paper was “not exciting.” Students who identified the writer as female used no other gender markers showing linguistic competence.

Far fewer fourth-grade students identified gender markers of linguistic competence in the three narratives they read. In a story written by a girl entitled “The Magic Shoes” a boy who identified the writer as male stated, “boys make more mistakes” and a girl assessed the writing in these terms: “not proper English.” The assessment of a girl who thought the writer was female was more favorable. She explained that there was “more expression to it.” Written in the first person, this story tells of a boy, Miky, who was the last one to be picked when the class played basketball in gym class. After Miky’s parents bought him running shoes for his birthday, Miky began “jamming above the rim and was so popular. So everybody was picking [him].”

Students did not use linguistic gender markers to identify the writer of a story, "The Clock that Rang at Twelve Noon," as male. Written by a fourth-grade girl, this story tells of mysterious events that began to occur to a boy and girl after the clock rang at noon. Finally, the little girl made the connection between the clock and the mysteries and abruptly solved the problem by throwing away the clock. Of the students who identified the writer as female, one male student noted that the writer "gave some ideas" and another felt that there was "a lot of excitement in the story." A third male student asserted, "girls mess up on their spelling and sentences," however.

When identifying gender markers in a third narrative, "Aliens Attack" two male students and a female student assessed girls' and boys' writing competence in general terms. This story, written by a boy, is about a boy and a girl who conduct a nonviolent rescue of several humans who have been captured by aliens attacking with guns. One student wrote, "Some boys write kind of good stories" to identify the writer as male. The other student, who felt that a girl had written the story, observed, "Most kids think a girl can't write a good story as that." A female student asserted, "boys write about stupid things like that," identifying the writer as male.

Overall, at the fourth grade level students did not favor one gender over the other in terms of use of writing conventions nor in the writer's success in entertaining a fourth-grade audience. At the eighth grade level, however, there are marked patterns of perceptions of linguistic competence favoring girls.

BOYS' AND GIRLS' ASSESSMENT OF THEIR WRITING COMPETENCIES

Perceptions of writing strengths

Responses to the question regarding students' perceptions of their writing strengths are featured in Table 2. Girls and boys within the same grade level and school district identified similar writing strengths. Few gender patterns emerged. Missing from this table are statements by a number of students at the fourth-grade level asserting their competence at writing and advice on writing a story offered by an eighth-grade boy. All students from the suburban schools gave a response to this question, whereas small percentages of students from other schools did not. The largest percentage of students who did not respond to this question were eighth-graders from the

urban school. Small numbers of fourth-grade students in the urban and rural students and eighth-grade boys in the suburban school stated that they were not good writers.

Students' assessment of their writing success appeared to be contingent to a large degree on their peers' responses to their writing. They identified writing strengths in terms of the audience's emotional response. Whereas exciting, funny, scary/suspenseful, action-filled, emotional, and interesting stories were valued evenly by eighth-grade students, fourth-grade girls and boys singled out their writing of humorous and scary, action-filled stories as particular strengths. Eighth-grade urban girls identified writing strengths in this category with the greatest frequency (68.8%) and their counterparts in the suburban school identified the smallest percentage of writing strengths in this category (30.0%).

No gender patterns exist in the "description" category in which vocabulary, characterization and details are included. Within this category, the interaction between identified writing strengths and grade level and school was most pronounced. The differences between girls and boys within a particular grade and school district were less than 10%. Urban eighth-grade girls identified the smallest percentage of writing strengths (3.1%) and suburban eighth-grade girls identified the greatest percentage of writing strengths (40.0%) in this category.

At the fourth-grade level, girls identified the organization of ideas as a strength to a greater degree than boys did, though the differences were small. The "organization" category I included story and paragraph structure. Eighth-grade students perceived organization as a strength to a greater degree than fourth-grade students did. The greatest gender difference (12.5%) occurred at the eighth-grade level in the rural students' responses.

With the exception of 5.7% of suburban boys, fourth-grade students did not identify their use of writing conventions as a strength. Only rural and suburban eighth-grade students stated that they were strong in their use of grammar and spelling. Suburban girls identified the greatest percentage of strengths (12.5%) within the category of "writing conventions."

Length was not considered a strength by great numbers of students at any grade level and there were no gender patterns in this category. How-

ever, length is a significant factor in students' identification of areas needing improvement

Table 2
Students' Identification of Writing Strengths
Percentages of Comments in Six Categories

Strength	Grade 4 Girls			Grade 4 Boys			Grade 8 Girls			Grade 8 Boys		
	U	R	S	U	R	S	U	R	S	U	R	S
School District and # of comments within each group	N= 50	N= 40	N= 23	N= 34	N= 33	N= 35	N= 32	N= 26	N= 50	N= 25	N= 41	N= 42
Audience Appeal and creativity	56.6	67.5	47.8	55.9	69.6	42.9	68.8	38.4	30.0	36.0	46.2	42.9
Description	30.0	17.5	34.7	29.4	18.2	37.2	3.1	26.9	40.0	20.0	17.0	35.7
Organization	6.7	7.5	13.0	0.0	6.1	5.7	15.6	19.2	14.0	28.0	31.7	7.1
Conventions	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.7	0.0	11.5	16.0	0.0	2.4	4.8
Write Long Stories	0.0	0.0	4.3	2.9	0.0	8.6	3.	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.4
Could not identify strengths	6.7	5.0	0.0	5.9	6.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.2
No response	0.0	2.5	0.0	5.9	0.0	0.0	9.4	3.8	0.0	16.0	2.4	0.0

- Note: Percentages may not add to 100 within each column because students wrote comments that could not be classified as writing strengths.

PERCEPTIONS OF WRITING NEEDS

Similar to the patterns established in students' identified writing strengths, there was a greater interaction between perceived needs and students' grade and school district than between gender and students' perceived needs. Students identified writing needs within the categories of "audience appeal/creativity" and "writing conventions" with the greatest frequency. The percentages of students who did not respond to this question ranged from 0.0% of rural and suburban eighth-grade girls and suburban fourth-

grade boys to 12.5% of urban eighth-grade boys. Thirty-nine fourth-grade students' comments and 17 eighth-grade students' comments indicated a general need to become a better writer. The remaining features that students identified as their writing needs are presented in Table 3. This table presents percentages of writing needs within five categories identified by girls and boys at each grade level in each of the three participating school districts.

With the exception of rural fourth-grade students, girls were more likely than boys in their school district to perceive creativity and audience appeal as an area in which they needed to improve as writers. The greatest gender differences occurred in the rural school at the eighth grade where 40.9% of girls compared to 10.1% of boys stated that they wanted to write "more creative and exciting stories." Other descriptors included within this category were: "better ideas," "interesting things and not boring," "funnier," and "more action."

In a gender comparison, the percentages of students identifying writing needs within the categories of "description" and "length" were fairly uniform. Urban grade eight students provided the exception, as 22.3% of girls' descriptors identified a need to write longer stories whereas 8.3% of boys' descriptors did.

With the exception of eighth-grade students in the urban school and fourth-grade students in the suburban school, boys identified writing conventions as an area needing improvement with greater frequency than girls did. Students in the suburban school district identified the greatest number of descriptors within the "writing conventions" category at both the fourth- and eighth-grade levels. Fourth-grade students identified spelling as an area needing greatest improvement, whereas eighth-grade students identified grammar as the area of greatest need.

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF GIRLS' AND BOYS' WRITING COMPETENCIES

Teachers who identified gender differences characterized girls as more competent writers than boys. At both grade levels, they described girls' writing as more detailed, descriptive, creative, legible, and showing greater conformity to writing conventions at both grade levels. Teachers explained that girls have a greater propensity toward verbal and written communication than do boys. At both grade levels, teachers also credited girls with greater emotional and intellectual maturity, with more conscientious atti-

tudes, with greater self-confidence as writers, and with a greater willingness to conform to teachers' expectations. With greatest frequency, teachers in both grades across school districts identified girls as careful, hardworking writers and boys as careless writers whose goal was to finish quickly. In addition, the eighth-grade female suburban teacher and one fourth-grade teacher from each of the urban and rural school districts stated that they tried to dispel boys' perceptions of writing as a "sissy kind of thing."

Table 3
Students' Identification of their Writing Needs
Percentages of Comments in Five Categories

Areas Needing Improvement	Grade 4 Girls			Grade 4 Boys			Grade 8 Girls			Grade 8 Boys		
	U	R	S	U	R	S	U	R	S	U	R	S
School District and # of comments within each group	N= 30	N= 41	N= 20	N= 41	N= 37	N= 33	N= 36	N= 22	N= 52	N= 24	N= 40	N= 38
Audience Appeal and creativity	30.1	14.7	30.0	21.9	21.3	21.6	22.3	40.9	21.1	12.5	10.1	13.2
Description	6.7	24.4	10.0	7.3	18.9	6.0	8.4	18.1	13.5	8.3	15.0	15.9
Organization	23.3	12.2	10.0	34.1	18.9	12.1	13.9	4.5	19.2	45.8	5.0	10.5
Conventions	10.0	14.6	30.0	12.2	16.6	27.3	13.9	13.6	17.3	8.3	40.0	31.6
Write Longer Stories	13.3	19.5	15.0	9.8	13.5	18.2	22.2	9.1	7.7	8.3	15.0	7.9
No response	3.3	4.9	5.0	9.8	2.7	0.0	11.1	0.0	0.0	12.5	2.5	5.3

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 within each column because students wrote comments that could not be classified as writing needs.

The only exceptions to this trend were in two eighth-grade teachers' perceptions of the best male writers' stories as "more exciting and interesting" than the best female writers' stories and in the urban eighth-grade teacher's observation that girls tended to "use more words than are necessary to express themselves." Table 4 summarizes teachers' perceptions of girls' and boys' writing competencies.

Teachers who felt that writing competence is unrelated to gender explained that they focused on students' individual cognitive abilities and were unaware of any gender differences in students' writing. A fourth-grade female suburban teacher stated, "I don't feel that gender plays as much a part in ability to write as intellectual ability." Two female rural and urban fourth-grade teachers explained that they had "never thought about or noticed gender differences and another rural female fourth-grade teacher asserted that she had not thought about gender differences because she was "too busy with individuals." All teachers observed that they had had good writers of both genders in their classrooms over the years.

These teachers' comments either presented a view of writing as an idiosyncratic process that is not influenced by social or cultural factors, or highlighted the family environment in terms of parents' education levels and home literacy practices as the only significant social influence on students' writing.

DISCUSSION

Previous studies of gender differences (Davies and Brember, 1994; Potorff, Phelps-Zientarski and Skovera, 1996) in perceptions of writing competence advocated the need for teachers to examine their gender expectations for student writing achievement. These studies also recommended that teachers promote literacy as both a desirable activity for boys and one in which boys' competencies match those of girls. These recommendations are indicated by the data in the present study, as fourth- and eighth-grade teachers perceived female students to be more careful writers who were willing to take the time to meet the expectations of a writing assignment. They viewed girls' writing as more detailed, descriptive, creative, and showing greater conformity to writing conventions. A shared perception of girls as more highly motivated, more conscientious and more competent as writers than boys was also evident in gender markers identified by eighth-grade students within three narrative papers. In addition, in their identification of gender markers within the six narratives, students at both grade levels perceived that girls' use of writing conventions was superior to boys' usage.

However, the results of this study also indicate a need to examine dominant values and standards of good writing. It appears that students' and teachers' assessment of gender differences in student writing competencies were intertwined with values of conformity to writing conventions. Students' perceptions of their personal writing needs also revealed gender patterns in the category of conformity to writing conventions. With the exception of fourth-grade suburban students and eighth-grade urban students, boys identified the use of writing conventions as a need to a greater extent than girls did.

With few exceptions, teachers in this study described the writing strengths of male and female students in terms of the criteria in the scoring rubrics used in the state-wide writing examinations. Because the teachers participating in this study were expected to prepare their students to demonstrate proficiency on a state writing examination, they used the state education department's rubrics to evaluate classroom writing. The rubric focused their evaluation of student writing on criteria that demand conformity to rhetorical conventions: providing supporting details, organization, word choice, grammar, and the conventions of punctuation, capitalization, and spelling (Ohio Department of Education, 1990, p. 3). These scoring criteria parallel students' identified areas for improvement, but they do not reflect the creativity and audience appeal that all participating students identified with greatest frequency as their writing strengths. In particular, the scoring criteria privilege the strengths that teachers and students attribute to girls' writing. To some extent, girls' relative success on large-scale writing assessment may be related to students' and teachers' expectations that girls are more competent than boys in the areas measured in the rubrics.

At the classroom level, teachers might extend the parameters of what is valued in narrative writing by adding criteria to their evaluation rubrics that assess the audience appeal and creativity of student writing, as well as evidence of conformity to writing standards. Student self-assessment could play an important role in redefining dominant values of good writing, as well. In their self-assessment, students might identify the unique twists on familiar ideas that they expressed in their writing and the parts of their writing that they feel express their personality, those that give students the greatest pleasure to create, those that reflect a new discovery about themselves or their world, and those that reflect students' experimentation with new ideas. By asking students to consider these aspects in the assessment of their own writing, teachers would demonstrate that the competencies viewed by boys

and girls as strengths are at least as important as the quality of conforming to conventions that teachers and students attribute to girls.

Change must take place on a broader level, as well. In order to address the disparities in measured writing competence of female and male student writers, teachers, teacher educators and designers of large-scale writing evaluation must take part in conversations that question an emphasis on conformity in writing evaluation. What are the social and political motives and implications of an emphasis on conformity? How do prevailing assumptions and beliefs about good writing privilege some groups and deny other groups success as writers? How do the scoring criteria reflect what students, teachers and the wider society believe about the role of writing in students' lives within and beyond the classroom? What alternative values of good writing need to be considered? Finally, teachers and teacher educators must participate in conversations centered on ways to address boys' and girls' identified needs in areas that are emphasized on the evaluation rubrics and at the same time nurture their identified strengths in areas that are overlooked on evaluation rubrics. Through these conversations, teachers and teacher educators may transform classroom and large-scale evaluation practices and extend possibilities for writing success to greater numbers of students.

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APPENDIX A

1. Tell me about the better writers in your class and whether they tend to be boys or girls.
2. Tell me about the differences and similarities you see in the topics, characters and writing styles of narratives written by boys and girls in your classroom.
3. Tell me about the similarities and differences you have observed in the kinds of feedback which boys and girls provide on their peers' narrative writing during peer conferences or authors' chair.
4. Tell me about the similarities and differences you have observed in boys' and girls' attitudes toward narrative writing.
5. Girls tend to do better on writing proficiency tests than boys do. Does that surprise you? Why? If it doesn't surprise you, what possible reasons do you have to explain this trend?