
Three Avid Adolescent Male Writers' Experiences at a Residential Summer Writing Workshop

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Abstract

This study explored three purposefully-sampled avid adolescent male writers' experiences at a residential summer writing workshop program. It investigated how the social context of the program influenced the writing of the focal students, the ways that they identified themselves as writers, and the risks that they took in their works. It also examined if the participants' experiences at the program were influenced by their gender. The study used a cross-case analysis to explore in-common and unique themes in the students' experiences. The findings address three themes: community, risk-taking, and the perceived influence of gender, indicating the participants experienced these themes in ways that were common in some ways, but also distinct based on the participants' individual characteristics and the aspects of the Workshop each identified as most significant.

Keywords: Avid writers, adolescent males, community, risk-taking

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This study addressed the following research questions: (1) How did the social context of a residential summer writing workshop program shape three avid adolescent male writers' experiences at the program, specifically: the writing they completed, and the ways they identified themselves as writers, and the risks they took in their writing? (2) In what ways, if at all, did being male influence their experiences at the program?

Implications of Relevant Literature

My review of the literature on the writing experiences of adolescent males indicated four areas of significance with implications for further study: (1) the significance of social context to adolescent males' literacy experiences, (2) a need for further studies of avid male writers, (3) a need for case studies of older adolescent male writers, and (4) a need to understand how context shapes adolescent male writers' identities.

The Significance of Social Context

Many studies highlight the importance of social context in adolescents' literacy experiences (Abbott, 2000; Chiu & Chang, 2006; Knoester, 2009; Millard, 1997). Other studies (Cotterell, 1996; Messner, 2008) emphasize that peer groups influence the ways adolescent males construct their identities and experience activities. My study examined the role of social context in the experiences of adolescent male writers attending a residential summer writing workshop, referred to by participants as "the Workshop." The specific nature of this site allowed for an investigation into how the study's participants experienced the program's unique features and how these experiences influenced their perceptions of themselves as writers.

The Need for Studies of Avid Male Writers

The majority of studies focusing on pre-adolescent and adolescent males' experiences with literacy have dealt with their struggles and feelings of disengagement in the English classroom (Hansen, 2001; Martino, 1999; Merisuo-Storm, 2006; Newkirk, 2000; Taylor, 2004). In addition, much more research has been devoted to adolescent males' reading than their writing (Daly, 2002). There are connections between reading and writing, but there are also distinct differences, such as the nature of the tasks and the kinds of cognitive challenges students face (Coker & Lewis, 2008). Although Abbott (2000) describes the experiences of two avid male writers in the fourth and fifth grades, there is still a paucity of literature on the experiences of avid male writers and a need for studies of older avid male writers. Abbott's study suggests that studying avid male writers is important because it can provide insight into what makes them engaged, which can then have implications for future instruction of male writers of all interest and ability levels.

The Need for Case Studies of Older Adolescent Male Writers

Case studies provide information about phenomena within their local contexts (Yin, 2009). Henderson (2008) describes the importance of considering "the complexities that contribute to the social and discursive construction of boys and literacy learners within particular contexts" (p. 75). Case studies on male writers in the existing body of literature focus on pre- and early adolescents (Abbott, 2000; Dutro, Kazemi, & Balf, 2006; Henderson, 2008; Ruttle, 2004). This study addressed a gap in the literature by conducting case studies of male writers in their late teenage years.

The Need to Understand How Context Shapes Adolescent Male Writers' Identities

Previous research has suggested possible reasons for adolescent male writers' engagement and interest in writing, such as the social contexts in which they write (Abbott, 2000), the influences of family (Millard, 1997), and the ability to write about topics they enjoy (Williams, 2004). Studies such as these have focused on adolescent males' attitudes toward reading and writing, but have not explored how they identify themselves as writers. Dutro, Kazemi, and Balf (2006) suggest that future research focus on how a writer's identity interacts with contextual factors, in order to produce a greater understanding of "the experiences, interests, values, and attitudes that inform what ends up on the page" (p. 352).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by three perspectives related to the writing experiences of adolescent males and the Workshop community. The first two perspectives, discourse communities and students' curricular experiences, provided conceptual background for the study, while the third perspective, the social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation, provided a theoretical basis for the study's consideration of gender.

Discourse Communities

Community is considered to be a key aspect of many writing experiences: "We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things they say" (Harris, 1989, p. 12). I used Swales' (1987) description of the discourse community to inform this study. Swales lists the following criteria for identifying a discourse community: (1) the members of the community share common goals, (2) there are mechanisms of communication among the members, (3) the community provides information and feedback, (4) the community has a set of discursal expectations, (5) there is a community-specific terminology, and (6) members of the community generally possess a high level of expertise. Although other scholars have studied discourse communities (Gee, 1990; Nieto, 2000), I chose Swales' description of this concept to inform my study because of the way its characteristics align with the study's goals and the features I observed at the Workshop. I found all six of Swales' characteristics of discourse communities to be present in the communication among students at the program. Since this study focuses on avid writers, Swales' clear description of members of a discourse community possessing a high level of expertise struck me as especially relevant to this inquiry.

Students' Curricular Experiences

Students experience specific curricula; inquiry into such experiences seeks to gain insight into how and why students have the experiences they do. Erickson and Shultz (1992) argue that research has traditionally neglected the ways students experience curricula, resulting in limited research that views students only "from the perspective of the adult educators' interests and ways of seeing" (p. 467). Erickson and Shultz contend that social relationships are integral to the ways students experience classroom tasks and that research that neglects students' perspectives fails to factor in these relationships. They assert that students' relationships and previous experiences all play important roles in shaping students' curricular experiences, and they advocate for the particularizing quality of case study research to provide detailed insight into the nature of student experiences and to investigate the reasons behind those experiences. My study extends Erickson and Shultz' line of research by describing adolescent male writers' experiences in a program with a strong sense of community.

Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation

While Erickson and Shultz (1992) mention gender as a factor in the ways students experience the curriculum, Bussey and Bandura's (1999) work on the social and cognitive aspects of gender development and differentiation allows for a more substantive inquiry into the gender and identity construction of males. Bussey and Bandura identify three factors that influence gender development: personal, behavioral, and environmental. They explain that none of these factors are necessarily more influential than another: "The relative contribution of each of the constituent influences depends on the activities, situations, and sociostructural constraints and opportunities" (p. 685). This theory informed my study by raising questions about the impact of the students' gendered identities on their experiences, prompting me to consider the personal, behavioral, and environmental influences on the students' experiences.

Method

This investigation was a qualitative cross-case analysis: I examined the experiences of each of the focal students and then developed cross-case findings that addressed in-common and unique themes and patterns among the cases (Patton, 1990). Cross-case analysis is an especially effective way to describe a phenomenon in depth (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman explain that analysis of multiple cases can identify the specific conditions necessary for a finding to occur, as well as the ways that specific events and experiences can be related. Noblit and Hare (1988) caution against describing average results across multiple cases, saying that doing so can lead to misinterpretations and superficial descriptions of complex situations. Cross-case analyses can avoid these pitfalls by focusing on the specific experiences of the selected cases and the common and unique themes that emerge from them.

Setting

The site selected for this research project is the Workshop: a residential program for creative writers entering grades 9-12, situated on a public university campus in a mid-Atlantic state. The program was in its third decade of operation at the time the respondents in this study last attended. I selected this site through extreme sampling (Creswell, 2007). In this case, the site is an extreme example of a writing community, in which students have a wide range of writing-related experiences that far outnumber the amount they would have in a typical school environment. My review of the literature, choice of conceptual framework, and this study's focus all highlight the importance of studying social context in relation to students' writing experiences, which led me to select a site in which the social context is especially writing-focused. Doing so allowed me to gain insight into the impact of students' experiences, as members of a writing community, on their self-perceptions as writers.

Students apply to the Workshop by submitting writing samples and letters of recommendation from teachers or other adults familiar with their writing. The Workshop offers two sessions each summer; in 2009, when this study's focal students attended the program for the final time (following that summer, they would be too old to attend), they all came to the second session, a three-week session designed for practiced, strongly motivated young writers. The program selects up to 99 students for each session from a highly competitive applicant pool. In the following sections, I describe the program's student population, residential environment, and course offerings in order to provide basic contextual information for this study.

Student Population

The Workshop draws students from all regions of the United States, as well as from abroad. In 2009, students from 28 states and Washington, D.C. were represented, as well as international students from Canada, England, and Switzerland. In the 2009 second session, 81 female students and 15 male students attended. Of these male students, six were program alumni.

The socioeconomics of the program and this study's participants. While this study's primary focus is on gender, it is also important to note the socioeconomics of the program. Like other residential programs for high school students held on university campuses, the majority of the students who attended the Workshop were from families that lived in middle to upper-middle class communities, expected their children to attend college, and had the financial means to send them to academic summer programs and, eventually, to college. While the Workshop offers a limited amount of financial aid each summer to students whose families' financial situations warrant it, the number of students whose families' financial situations qualify them to receive financial aid are in the vast minority among the program's participants. None of this study's focal students applied for financial aid during the years they attended the Workshop. Because the program only collects financial information for students who apply for financial aid, I did not have access to the participants' financial information. However, one can make some general inferences about these students' financial situations from the fact that each of them attended the program at least three times without financial aid and all now attend college. The academic support and financial means of the focal students' families can be seen as playing a role in the writing-related opportunities available to them and, by extension, their abilities and interests in writing.

Residential Environment

The students who attend the Workshop live in an on-campus dormitory. There are a number of other residential academic and sports camp programs housed in nearby dormitories. The Workshop maintains distinct boundaries as one of several ways to define its community space. The dorm is divided into single-sex residential suites, and each suite houses up to nine students who live in either double- or triple-occupancy rooms. All program participants are in-residence; there are no day students. One counselor resides with the students in each dormitory suite. There is a scheduled nightly suite meeting devoted to community building.

Course Offerings

Each student at the Workshop focuses on one writing genre and attends a daily intensive studio workshop and related lab devoted to the study of that genre. The studio workshops are taught by professional writers; teaching assistants provide support and facilitate the daily lab sessions designed to support the work done in the studio workshops. The genre options for in-depth study are: creative nonfiction, fiction, poetry, screen and playwriting, and songwriting. Students apply to specific genres and are accepted into one as part of their enrollment in the program. They also attend elective mini-courses that vary each day, providing students with a wide range of opportunities that include the related arts, as well as recreational activities. A number of these electives provide students with opportunities to work in genres other than the one they study in the studio and lab settings.

Participant Selection Criteria

The three students chosen for this study were selected using stratified purposeful sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994), a sampling procedure that illustrates subgroups and facilitates

comparisons. I selected the students I did because of the specific characteristics they possessed, which included both similarities and differences. While 15 male students attended the Workshop in the summer of 2009, I chose these three students because they shared the following common characteristics: (1) all were 18 years old in the summer of 2010, when they were interviewed as part of this study, (2) all attended the Workshop at least three years, (3) all were identified by the Workshop staff as avid, engaged writers, and (4) all attended the program's advanced session in the summer of 2009.

The differences used for selection were: (1) the ways in which they represented their masculinity at the program, as observed by the Workshop's staff and (2) the writing genres they studied at the Workshop. I created these selection criteria so that the study's participants would represent especially avid male writers with common ages and experience levels, but also contain variations in their masculine identities and genre interests, allowing for a wider range of experiences to be reported in the study's findings than if the all of the students had exhibited masculinity similarly or had studied the same subject.

In addition to meeting the selection criteria outlined above, I also believe a sample of three students captures a range of students' identities and interests while remaining manageable for in-depth case studies and cross-case analysis. Because I sought to understand the specific experiences of these students at the program in depth, and the ways those experiences influenced their perceptions of themselves as writers, a larger sample was counter-indicated.

Participants

The following sections describe the three focal students who are the subjects of this study (all names used are pseudonyms). These descriptions draw from the students' basic demographic information, as well as behaviors observed by the Workshop's staff. Each of these students self-reported his ethnicity as Caucasian.

Michael. Michael attended the program three consecutive summers, from 2007 through 2009, and began his first year of college in the fall of 2009. He studied fiction each year he came to the Workshop. Michael was identified by members of the 2009 Workshop staff as demonstrating the most typically masculine behaviors of those males in attendance. The program's staff believed that Michael was especially masculine because the content of his writing contains action and violence, and because of his involvement in sports and the military.

Michael explains that his writing "ranges from soldiers to small town families, but always has some kind of violence in it" (Interview, 6-14-10). When interviewed for this study, Michael had just completed his first year at a large state university in a mid-Atlantic state, where he was also a member of a military organization.

Jonah. Jonah attended the program in 2006, 2008, and 2009 and was a high school senior when interviewed for this study. He attended twice as a fiction writer and once as a screen and playwriting student. Although 2009 was his first year in the screen and playwriting workshop, his instructors described him as someone whose ability and writing style were well suited for the genre. The 2009 Workshop staff members identified Jonah's masculine expressions as humor-oriented: he used irreverent jokes and a sharp wit to command attention and to express his point of view on social issues. Jonah expressed a similar identity in much of the writing he did at the Workshop, viewing many of his pieces as opportunities to delve into social commentary.

Kyle. Kyle attended the program for four consecutive years, from 2006 through 2009, studying songwriting each time, and was a high school senior when interviewed for this study. He was highly regarded by the program's staff for his maturity and sensitivity, as well as his songwriting ability. His 2009 Workshop instructor referred to him as someone who is inclusive of classmates and genuinely interested in their opinions. The Workshop staff members regarded Kyle's sensitive, reflective manner as atypical for males of his age group at the Workshop and something that they saw more frequently in female students at the program. The songs Kyle created at the Workshop reflected this maturity, as he used them to address important issues in his life.

Data for Analysis

This study utilized a wide range of data sources from the three years the focal students attended the Workshop. These data can be divided into three categories: (1) routinely collected materials from all years the students attended, (2) information from the Workshop's 2009 informal program inquiry into male students' experiences, and (3) interviews with focal students.

Routinely Collected Materials

The Workshop routinely collects certain materials related to the program experiences of all students that attend. These materials are: the writing samples that the students submit with their applications to the program (examples of writing in the genres to which each student applies and a personal statement, in which the student describes why s/he wants to attend), the end of session narratives written about each student by her/his workshop instructor and teaching assistant, and the student's portfolio: a collection of final drafts each student produced during a given year's program that s/he perceives as her/his best work. Portfolios also contain an artist statement, in which the student reflects on the work produced during that session.

Interviews with Focal Students

The third category is the follow-up interviews I conducted with Michael, Jonah, and Kyle during the summer of 2010. These interviews were conducted when each of these students were no longer eligible to apply to the program due to their ages. Each interview had a different focus: the first, on the writing produced by the students during their years of attendance at the Workshop, the second, on the aspects of the program they found to be the most significant, and the third, on how the students perceive themselves as writers and how those perceptions relate to their writing and program experiences. The interviews allowed for in-depth understandings of the students' perspectives and unique situations that would not be possible through archival data alone.

Further, the interviews gave me the opportunity to clarify ambiguous meanings in the data and, in doing so, enhanced the validity of my conclusions. For example, the participants' personal statements sometimes contained statements about the program and their desires to return, about which I wanted further clarification. One of Kyle's personal statements explained that he wanted to return to the Workshop to "Feel the amazing support" at the program, "which is nothing like the harshness of everyday life" (Personal statement, 2009). During interviews, I was able to ask Kyle follow-up questions to learn more about the support he felt he received at the program and how it contrasts with his "everyday life," allowing me clearly understand the meaning behind his statement.

Finally, the interviews provided evidence of what the students were like a year after attending the program and the extent to which the experiences described in the archival data contributed to the perspectives and identities they developed.

Data Analysis Process

My data analysis process consisted of four distinct steps: (1) initial coding, (2) recoding, (3) creating case-ordered displays, and (4) constructing a final cross-case analysis. After each of these steps, I wrote analytic memos to keep track of the ways I made sense of the data and to monitor my emerging conclusions.

Initial Coding

I conducted my initial coding by examining the data and taking note of patterns and themes that emerged. When conducting the initial coding, I used analytic memos to record my immediate reactions, which I returned to and refined in the later stages of data analysis.

Recoding

Krefting (1991) describes the code-recode procedure as a researcher initially coding the data, then waiting at least two weeks to recode and comparing the results. I followed this process, rereading the data as patterns continued to emerge. As I continued to code the data, I remained open to emerging themes and revised the codes as necessary. Miles and Huberman (1994) explain that codes that emerge progressively during data analysis are “better grounded empirically, and are especially satisfying to the researcher who has uncovered an important local factor” (p. 62). This statement is especially significant to this study because of the study’s focus on the local context of the Workshop and the influence of that context on the participants.

Creating Case-ordered Displays

As part of analyzing the data, I created case-ordered displays (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman suggest researchers using this approach build displays that are organized by case and include entry fields for data related to particular areas of interest. In this study, the areas of interest came from themes that emerged from the data. Miles and Huberman explain that, once the display is built, the researcher can return to relevant sections of each case report, look for coded material on relevant data, and summarize this information to be recorded in the matrix. After data are entered into the display, conclusions can be drawn about the individual cases and the ways that they experienced particular aspects of the situation. Grouping the information on the focal students this way allowed me to make sense of their individual situations while seeing differences and similarities across their experiences and perceptions.

Constructing a Cross-case Analysis

My data analysis ultimately took the form of a cross-case analysis, in which I focused on common and unique themes and patterns among the cases. This analytic strategy helped me to identify the similarities and differences in the focal students’ Workshop experiences and allowed me to draw conclusions about why they experienced the program in the ways that they did.

Findings

In this section, I present and describe three cross-case findings that provide insight into the common and unique themes in the focal students’ experiences at the Workshop.

These findings confirm commonalities in the experiences of the three participants, while also making manifest notable differences, offering a more nuanced understanding of the participants’

Workshop experiences than possible through individual case studies. The findings address three themes: (1) community, (2) risk-taking, and (3) the perceived influence of gender. The findings indicate that the participants experienced these themes in ways that at times were similar, but in other instances were distinct, based on their individual characteristics and the aspects of the Workshop that each participant identified as most significant to his unique experiences. The findings emphasize the impact of the Workshop's inclusive and supportive community while calling attention to the fact that the students were able to experience this community in unique ways based on their particular identities.

Community

Each of the focal students identified the program's community as an especially important aspect of their experiences. Jonah believed that community was "the number one thing" at the Workshop, explaining that "community is just the best word to describe all the support" that he believed existed at the program (Interview, 6-16-10). Kyle felt that the Workshop environment was one "where everyone is included and valued," comparing it to "a sink or swim proposition in which it is impossible to sink" because "the place is so inclusive and no one is ever left out" (Interview, 6-17-10). Michael described his experience as one of an "amazing, close-knit community" (Discussion group, 7-13-09) that greatly facilitated his growth as a writer and as a person. In each case, the Workshop community helped each of the focal students feel supported at the program and gave them a safe environment in which to write. While the focal students all found the sense of community at the Workshop to be important, they each found different aspects of the community to be especially significant to their experiences. In the following sections, I describe these community components, explaining their influences on the focal students' experiences.

Michael: The fiction workshop community most influenced his experience. Michael felt that the intensive fiction workshop was the most important aspect of his experience because he believed its sense of community to be especially strong and influential to his development as a writer. When Michael first attended the program, he was excited to share his writing with other students, but somewhat worried that his interests in action and violence would not be well-received by other writers: "I came here to share my work, and I was really excited, but I was a little nervous about what some people might think—like, will they just see me as a caricature because I write about violence?" (Interview, 6-14-10). However, Michael was immediately struck by the attention with which his peers read his work and how seriously they took it: "They read it closely and gave such useful feedback" (Interview, 6-14-10). This experience, and others in which he felt similarly supported, led Michael to conclude that he had never "been anywhere... where everyone wanted to help each other so much" (Interview, 5-31-10) as in the intensive fiction workshop.

While Jonah and Kyle also felt that their peers took their writing seriously, the thoughtful feedback Michael received on his work was especially meaningful to him given his "typically" male subject matter and his anxiety about how it would be received at the Workshop. Michael's desire to be part of the fiction workshop community was the primary reason for his continued return to the program: "I find that I miss being in the company of writers more than I miss any of the other things that make the [Workshop] experience so unique" (Personal narrative, 2009). Michael was the only one of the study's participants to identify the intensive genre workshop as the most significant aspect of his experience; his belief that his genre workshop was the primary influence on him as both a writer and a person differed notably from Jonah and Kyle.

It is noteworthy that Michael, identified by the program's staff as the most typically masculine of the 2009 male participants, placed great value on the constructive criticism of his peers, a trait not traditionally characterized as "male." Michael's unexpected appreciation for criticism suggests the challenge of defining one's gender identity and reveals a way that Michael acts outside of a typically masculine gender role. Although Michael was seen by the Workshop staff as representing a traditional form of masculinity, he also showed other aspects of his identity by valuing the community and constructive criticism the Workshop offered.

Jonah: The all-male residential suite community most influenced his experience. Jonah found the all-male residential suite to be most influential to his Workshop experience: he believed that a feeling of brotherhood existed in the male residential suite environment, allowing him to form closer connections with his suitemates than he did with any other students. The opportunity to spend time with other adolescent male writers in the residential suite contrasted with the dearth of peer male writers he believed existed at home and at the Workshop, and the marginalization that created: "There aren't a lot of guys that write, even here, so sometimes you do feel different" (Discussion group, 7-13-09). His residential suite experience was a "safety net" (Interview, 6-22-10) of fellow male writers who gave Jonah the security he needed to fully experience the program, knowing the brotherhood would be there for him should he need it: "It was like I knew I had that support in the suite, so it was easier to try out other things at the program without being nervous about them" (Interview, 6-22-10). While both Michael and Jonah identified community as important to their Workshop experiences, Jonah found the most influential community to be the all-male residential suite environment, where the strong bonds he formed made possible his enjoyment of the rest of the program.

Kyle: The Workshop residential counselor community most influenced his experience. Kyle identified a different sub-group of people at the Workshop as most influential: the Workshop residential counselors. Each year, counselors are college students and recent graduates who live in the residential suites with students and function as teaching assistants in the genre workshops. Kyle saw them as major influences on the larger community and felt that their actions and behaviors provided models for how he and the other students should act. Kyle felt that the acceptance evident at the Workshop was due in large part to the actions of the counselors: "The counselors show so much support for each other, and that puts you in a certain mindset where that's how you act" (Interview, 6-1-10). Kyle viewed the counselors as welcoming and as models for the rest of the community: "They are shimmering Adonises but they're also encouraging every young writer there to be best friends with them" (Interview, 6-1-10). He saw the actions of the counselor community as both impressive and attainable, a combination that made them a significant influence on the Workshop community: "I felt like [watching and listening to the counselors] gave me something to strive for that I thought I could reach" (Interview, 6-17-10). Since the counselors were a presence in all parts of the program, their influence on Kyle was not focused on a certain context within the Workshop program structure; rather, Kyle's experience of community could be described as holistic.

Risk-taking

The focal students all found the program to be a supportive environment that made it possible for them to take risks in their writing and allowed them to see themselves as writers who possessed the ability and confidence necessary to take chances. However, the specific risks they took varied, based on their individual goals and significant experiences at the Workshop. In the following sections, I identify the distinct ways Michael, Jonah, and Kyle took risks in the writing

that they created at the Workshop, the significant Workshop experiences that helped them to take risks, and the similarities and differences in their risks.

Michael's risk: Deepening content by incorporating philosophical and psychological perspectives into his writing. Michael's risk involved incorporating psychological and philosophical perspectives into descriptions of action and violence, which he characterizes as "definitely taking a chance" (Interview, 6-9-10). This, coupled with the seriousness with which his fellow fiction writers took his work and the safe environment of the fiction workshop, "changed the way [he] looked at [him]self and [his] writing" (Interview, 5-31-10), which in turn increased his ease with risk-taking. He identified his increased ability to explore the psychological and philosophical aspects of violence as a positive change in his work: "I kept writing and trying new things, and my writing went past just being all action. I'm really into why people do what they do, and I think [that incorporating this information] just makes my writing better, too" (Interview, 6-14-10). Michael's reported risks, specific to his intensive fiction workshop experience and content interests, represented his perception of himself as a serious writer and the development of his interest in the reasons characters engaged in violent behaviors.

Jonah's risks: Experimenting with humor and social commentary in his writing; trying a new genre. Like Michael, Jonah's risk-taking led him to a new aspect of his subject matter: in Jonah's case, humor and social commentary. Jonah felt that the writing prompts provided by his instructors were "low-stakes" yet "creative enough" for him to try out new things in his work (Interview, 6-22-10). These prompts created opportunities to incorporate humor into this writing: in particular, the comedic dimension of social commentary. Jonah saw these prompts as "really bouncy springboards" that helped him to compose imaginative works that reflected his thoughts on social issues: "The prompts definitely helped me write humorous pieces and I used [the humor in those pieces] to comment on issues I was interested in, like why people do certain things" (Interview, 6-22-10). The unique nature of these prompts made it possible for Jonah to experiment in new directions.

Jonah's risk-taking was also evident in his decision to study a new genre in his third summer at the program, and was consistent with his perception of the Workshop as "a place where it's normal to try new things" (Interview, 6-25-10). After studying fiction during his first two years of attendance, he applied to study screen and playwriting in his third summer, believing that such a choice would benefit him as an actor, as well as allow him to explore a new genre: "I wanted to go ahead and apply for playwriting because I thought it would help my acting, and I wanted to try something new" (Interview 6-25-10). He attributes his ability to take this risk to the nature of the Workshop environment: "If this was a place where people didn't try new things and go past what they've done before, I probably would have just stayed with fiction" (Interview, 6-25-10).

Kyle's risks: Drawing on personal content to create songs; expanding his musical style. While Michael and Jonah added new dimensions to their writing through the inclusion of psychological perspectives, Kyle took risks by creating songs premised on autobiographical information, representing a different type of risk. Kyle viewed the Workshop as a place where the self-disclosure inherent in personal writing was valued: "That's kind of what the [Workshop] experience is for me—the reward you get for putting your thoughts, feelings, and experiences on the line" (Interview, 6-1-10). Kyle's belief that the program encouraged and rewarded risk-taking resulted in songs that not only achieved such expression but were recognized as such: "[Kyle] showed bravery by making his songs reveal a lot about him" (Teaching Assistant narrative,

2006). Kyle asserted that this approach allowed him to produce his best work, saying it “made for better songs” (Interview, 6-17-10).

In addition, Kyle took risks in his musical choices. He made an effort to expand his musical style, learning new melodies and rhythms from other songs. In these attempts to stretch himself musically, Kyle incorporated new elements into his existing work, adapting already strong songs by experimenting with new musical components. These actions were recognized by his instructors, who explained that “[Kyle’s] melody [was] compelling, but that didn’t stop [him] from digging deeper. [He] looked at songs outside [his] comfort zone to learn from them” (Teacher narrative, 2006). Kyle continues to borrow from other songs to enhance his existing work: “Now, this is something I do a lot—learn from other kinds of music to expand what I do” (Interview, 6-10-10). This experimentation with new musical styles represents another way Kyle took chances at the Workshop.

The Perceived Influence of Gender

Each of the Workshop participants perceived gender influencing his experience differently. My discussion of this topic focuses on the similarities and differences of gender’s perceived influences on the participants’ Workshop experiences.

Michael: Perceived gender as influencing his intensive fiction workshop experience. When Michael began to attend the Workshop, he was afraid that his writing would not be accepted because of his interest in what he identified as typically masculine topics: “At first, I wasn’t sure what [his peers at the program] would think. I was afraid they’d say it was violent and wouldn’t really read it, like they wouldn’t get my writing” (Discussion group, 7-13-09). However, his fiction workshop peers took his work seriously and he, in turn, did the same, seeing himself as both a writer and an individual interested in the military, and reconciling these aspects of his identity.

Michael reported that the seriousness with which his workshop peers took his writing led to the confidence that he needed in college to balance the social pressures associated with being in a military organization and studying creative writing. Describing his ROTC membership and his creative writing minor “as two sides of the coin when it comes to things that guys usually do” (Interview, 6-14-10), he reflected: “I think the other writers in my fiction classes really showed me that it was okay to be who I was with [his interest in] the military and violence and action and still be a writer” (Interview, 6-14-10). In this way, Michael felt his gendered interests lent shape to his intensive fiction workshop experience, consistent with the importance that he attached to the intensive fiction workshop as the most significant aspect of his Workshop experience.

Jonah: Perceived gender as influencing his residential suite experience. In contrast to Michael, Jonah emphasized the all-male residential suite as especially significant, giving him the opportunity to be around other male writers. Jonah saw the scarcity of male counterpart writers inside and outside of the Workshop as contributing to the closeness that developed among those in his residential suite: “I think there being so few of us [male writers], both here and in our schools, may have made us closer. I don’t think the girls bonded this way” (Interview, 6-25-10).

While this statement provides insight into Jonah’s perception of the male residential suite, it is also important to note that this is one student’s perspective of the residential suite environment. It is possible that female students felt equally as bonded, given the strong friendships students of

both genders formed at the Workshop, and that this sense of connection was not actually gender-related. Still, Jonah's statement illustrates the value he placed on his experience in the all-male residential suites. Jonah believed that the close connections he formed with his residential suitemates helped him feel comfortable in the rest of the Workshop, explaining "everyone [at the Workshop] is awesome, but I think it would have been a lot harder for me to feel comfortable if I didn't have the really strong bonds with the guys in the suite" (Interview, 6-22-10). Jonah felt the all-male residential suite environment provided him with opportunities to discuss experiences specific to male writers, which led to a feeling of comfort at the program he believed he would not otherwise have had.

Kyle: Perceived gender as not influencing his Workshop experience. Kyle's belief that gender did not affect his Workshop experience was influenced by the program's counselors, who he felt regarded all students equally as writers: "[The counselors] didn't think of students as male or female, just as writers, and that had an impact on me" (Interview, 6-1-10). Kyle believed that the characteristics of the Workshop transcended gender. He saw all students there as writers and felt that distinctions did not exist between males and females at the program. While Kyle viewed gender as insignificant to this Workshop experience, others' perceptions of him were not ungendered. For example, he was identified by the 2009 Workshop staff as possessing a sensitive and reflective manner that differed significantly from the typical males in his age group.

This distinction suggests that Kyle may be less likely to identify gender as an influence on his Workshop experience than a student who performs his masculinity in a more traditional and self-conscious way. For example, Kyle's attitude toward the all-male residential suite environment directly contrasted with Jonah's, with Kyle attributing the closeness of the all-male suite environment to the atmosphere of the entire program: "I think it would be easier to say that [the suite experience] was different [from the rest of the program] because it was all guys, but I felt the whole [Workshop] was one big family and the suite was just one part of that" (Interview, 6-1-10). This statement shows Kyle's holistic experience of the Workshop and his belief that gender did not play a role in his experience.

Discussion

In this discussion, I identify this study's limitations, discuss the significance and implications of its findings, and offer recommendations for future research.

Limitations

I have identified three limitations of this study: (1) the predominance of data from the students' final year of attendance, (2) the limited diversity of the study's participants, and (3) the participants' masculinity being defined by others' observations.

The predominance of data from the students' final year of attendance. There were more data available from the participants' final year of attendance (2009) than the other years they came to the Workshop. Genre-workshop observations and male writer discussion groups were conducted in the summer of 2009 as part of a program inquiry and were designed to learn more about the experiences of male students at the Workshop. I was unable to compare these data with previous versions, creating an imbalance that may have skewed my findings toward the students' experiences during that summer and influenced the interview questions that I asked.

The limited diversity among the study's participants. This study's findings may be limited by the lack of diversity among its participants. A wider representation of ethnicities or levels of

socio-economic status could have allowed for a discussion of how those factors influenced the ways that the students experienced the Workshop and possibly produced specific recommendations for teachers who work with diverse student populations.

The participants' masculinity being defined by others' observations. This study's findings may also be limited by the fact that the participants' masculinity was defined by others' observations. Involving students in describing their masculinity could give a more nuanced perspective into their gendered identities, which could be incorporated into the study's findings.

Significance of Findings

I discuss the significance of this study's findings by addressing the following: (1) the Workshop's inclusive environment, (2) the relationship between the Workshop's environment and the social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation, (3) the unique aspects of the program identified by the participants as most significant to their experiences, and (4) the students' gendered identities, which influenced the ways in which they experienced the Workshop.

The Workshop's inclusive environment. One of the most significant aspects of the participants' experiences in the Workshop community was the inclusive environment that existed in the program. The Workshop's atmosphere of acceptance helped the focal students feel comfortable at the program, enabled them to take risks, and resulted in them taking themselves seriously as writers. The impact of the program's community on the focal students' views of themselves and their writing is consistent with previous findings that social context plays an important role in adolescent males' interests in literacy (Abbott, 2000; Atkinson, 2009; Knoester, 2009; Millard, 1997).

The relationship between the Workshop's environment and the social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation. Bussy and Bandura's (1999) social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation, which holds that the influences of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors depend on how strongly the others act as influences in a given situation, is relevant to the Workshop because the program's environment combined with the participants' individual characteristics and significant Workshop experiences to produce the unique ways that they experienced common themes.

The unique aspects of the program the participants identified as significant. Each of the participants identified different aspects of the program as most significant to their individual Workshop experiences; these distinct Workshop components influenced their actions at the program and how they perceived themselves as writers. This variation relates to Erickson and Shultz's (1992) theory of students' curricular experiences, which posits that students experience tasks and events differently based on their individual characteristics and social relationships. The students' identification of particular elements of the program as most significant to their experiences illustrates the ways that the Workshop environment combined with students' unique characteristics to form experiences that were especially meaningful to them as individuals.

The students' gendered identities influenced the ways they perceived their Workshop experiences. The participants' individual gendered identities influenced the ways they perceived their program experiences. The differences in their perceptions of their experiences relate to Martino's (1999) finding that adolescent males' experiences of the school curriculum are

influenced by how they position themselves relative to traditional representations of masculinity, suggesting the importance of the nuanced and specific ways that adolescent males represent themselves as masculine, and cautioning against making generalizations about what all adolescent male writers most enjoy or find beneficial.

Directions for Future Research

Further research on adolescent male writers can build on this study's results by looking at how avid adolescent male writers experience a typical secondary English class, how they negotiate tensions related to their identities as males, and what experiences create feelings of inclusion and community among adolescent male students. These feelings of inclusion are especially appropriate since all of this study's participants identified the sense of community at the Workshop as important to their experiences.

In addition, further research could examine the experiences of other male participants of the Workshop. This study's participants were selected with very specific selection criteria, and students who possess other characteristics may have different insights into their Workshop experiences. Future studies that examine other male students who attended the program can facilitate comparisons with this study's findings.

Finally, this study's findings about the experiences of avid adolescent male writers suggest the importance of studying avid female writers. Such studies could provide insight into how their experiences, self-perceptions, and challenges are similar to and different from those of avid male writers and whether the presence of a supportive writing community is as important to them as it was to this study's participants.

Conclusion

This study's findings support Martino and Kehler's (2007) assertion that adolescent males experience literacy instruction in individualized ways, based on their unique characteristics, and the findings affirm their suggestion that adolescent males' identities cannot be reduced to essentialized explanations. It also expands on earlier findings about how social context influences adolescent male writers' engagement, motivation, and attitudes (Abbott, 2000; Chiu & Chang, 2006; Knoester, 2009; Merisuo-Storm, 2006; Millard, 1997). My study describes the participants' experiences in an environment that supported collective their writing development, but enabled them to pursue individual interests and personal goals. The Workshop is an example of an environment that allows for adolescent male writers to succeed and develop in ways that are fundamental to the program's structural and instructional attributes, yet unique to students' identities and experiences. Researchers interested in adolescent male writers' experiences and self-perceptions may consider the ways that the community in this study facilitated the participants' growth and use that understanding to inform future studies.

The varied experiences of the three male writers in this study make evident how critical it is to create an environment where adolescent male writers feel supported to explore their individual identities and interests. The study's findings speak to the power of community: despite the differences in the participants' personal attributes and the fact that each found different aspects of the program most significant, all felt that the Workshop's community made it possible for them to take risks and grow as writers. The study also illustrates how important a supportive writing environment is to adolescent males' perceptions of themselves as writers. The participants' writing self-perceptions changed as they continued to attend the Workshop, shaping

their identities at the program, as well as their lives away from it: Michael's view of himself as a writer helped him balance the social pressures he associated with studying creative writing and military involvement; Jonah felt the supportive Workshop community helped him take a variety of risks; Kyle believed that the confidence he gained at the program influenced the writing he produced and his view of himself as a writer.

Since this study focused on avid adolescent male writers in a particular community, future research can expand on its results by investigating the influence of a similarly supportive writing community on adolescent female writers, creating the opportunity for comparison and providing insight into whether supportive writing communities have more of an impact on adolescent male or female writers. Results of such studies can lead to further understanding of the importance of supportive writing communities and the effects of such communities.

Because the Workshop was advertised as a residential program for high school aged creative writers, it naturally attracted students with a certain level of interest in writing. However, I believe that this study's findings relate to a wide range of adolescent male writers, not just those who think of themselves as avid writers, because of the emphasis previous research has placed on social context (Abbott, 2000; Chiu & Chang, 2006; Knoester, 2009; Millard, 1997), opportunities to write about one's own interests (Daly, 2002; Williams, 2004), and feelings of competence and control (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) in the experiences of adolescent male writers of varying ability and interest levels. The existing literature suggests that adolescent males' writing interests and abilities exist on a spectrum: instead of a situation in which some students are simply able to write and others are not, studies reveal that there are many adolescent males who may struggle with writing in school but are motivated writers in other contexts (Williams, 2004). The literature suggests that these boys would thrive if given writing opportunities in a supportive environment that coincide with their interests, goals, and needs (Abbott, 2000; Millard, 1997; Thomas, 1997).

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APPENDIX A

This cross-case table reveals the distinct ways that the participants experienced the common themes of community, risk-taking, and the perceived influence of gender.

Common themes:	Significance of Community	Risk-taking	The perceived influence of gender
Explanation of distinctions:	Each identified different aspects of Workshop community as most significant.	Participants took different kinds of risks related to their individual goals and significant Workshop experiences.	Each of the Workshop participants perceived gender as influencing his experience differently.
Michael:	Fiction workshop community most influenced his experience.	Risk: Deeping content by incorporating psychological and philosophical perspectives.	Perceived gender as influencing his intensive fiction workshop experience.
Jonah:	All-male residential suite community most influenced his experience.	Risks: Experimenting with humor in his work, trying a new genre.	Perceived gender as influencing his residential suite experience.
Kyle:	The residential counselor community most influenced his experience.	Risks: Drawing on personal content to create songs; expanding his musical style.	Perceived gender as not influencing his Workshop experience.

APPENDIX B

This appendix contains samples from the writing that Michael, Jonah, and Kyle completed during their final year at the Workshop. These samples are drawn from the writing the students selected to be part of their program portfolios, which means that the students identified these works as among the best they produced during that year's program.

Sample One: "Scattergun Opera" (excerpt): A short story by Michael

The neon sign of the cheap motel flickered, flooding the room with a sickly, pink glow. Even the coarse brown curtains could not keep out the insistent light. A tall man, his beard and shaggy hair unkempt, sat on the bed. It was warm and inviting, its sheets mussed and its pillows still bearing the impressions of sleeping heads. Slowly, knowing he must, he tied his work boots. He had to be going.

He heard the shower in the cramped bathroom shut off as he shrugged on his worn leather jacket. Moments later, a woman emerged from the bathroom. Her hair was wet and straight, its lustrous brown made black. Her body was wrapped in a towel, a rough hotel affair of placid white. It could not hide her bare shoulders and the graceful curve of her neck. He drank her in. He took all of her in at one glance. He drank her in like a hard ridden horse led to water. He tried to speak, but his voice came out thick, caught in his chest.

"We have to get goin'." He managed. "We have a long walk if we're gonna make it to the train station. If we can make it to the train we'll be safe, but that bike ain't gonna make it any further. I went out and looked at it a coupla minutes ago. We rode it too hard yesterday."

"It did what we needed it to do." She said. Her voice was deep for a woman's. Soothing. Melodious. "It got us off the Ridge. It got us away...together. God, Rob, I can't believe that we made it out. We won. We beat 'em all. My Daddy, my brothers, Whitlow, all of those Wheeler boys. I never thought we'd make it out.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"My Daddy seemed so sure. He never approved of my seein' you. He said that I needed to marry a better man...a man who was better off. He said 'Carla, you can't marry that Rambler boy. That's a bad family. Violent folk.' Said y'all need it. That when there ain't no war to fight you make one."

"Well," Rob Rambler said dully. "I guess I proved him right. We just rode outta one hell of a war, and I'll be damned if it wasn't us that started it."

Sample Two: “Rapunzel”: A fictional monologue by Jonah.

Inside a police station, Rapunzel sits at an interrogation table with all of her hair burned off, and she is quite singed. She addresses the police officer questioning her.

Rapunzel:

Look, Officer...Keeley, is it? We both know it was me, so there is no point in trying to deny it. Just lock me up and move on with our lives. There doesn't even have to be a trial. Let's just accept it for what it is, a crime. Because I did something wrong, a no-no. Well, I had my reasons. I don't need to tell them to you. Can't a girl burn down a museum without having to explain every little detail? Don't you already have the tapes? You know what happened. I did not burn my hair. I caught my hair on fire. Obviously it was on purpose. God, what kind of cop are you? Because I was tired of it. Do you know what a burden all of this is? I have to lug it around with me everywhere I go. It's always holding me down. Can't get into the pool, because then it turns into a marsh. Can't go on roller coasters because it gets caught in the gears. Can't hide from anyone because all they have to do is follow the frickin' line of hair! So, I went to the museum instead. It was cool, it was very interesting and I like learning. I was just wandering around, looking at all the different exhibits when I saw the one about Amelia Earhart. Did you know how amazing that woman was? She was free. She could do anything she wanted without ever having to worry about it. I want to be like that. I want to be free. But I couldn't be with that stupid hair. So, I grabbed one of the torches from the Egyptian exhibit and lit up. I forgot that my hair would all the way through the museum. Honest. I just wanted to get rid of the hair so I could be free.

Sample Three: "Tourniquet": A song by Kyle

Is this the way it has to be
I get jealous, you get mean
Your voice sounds just like blood on snow
Your voice sounds like blood on snow

Will you wrap a tourniquet
Around my head to stop
These thoughts from coming out
That I don't mean, cause I'm not sure
What you're thinking anymore
What were we fighting for?

Don't say you're sorry if you're not
Just scream as loud as you want
If looks could kill I'd be a ghost
If looks could kill I'd be a ghost

Will you wrap a bandage all
Around my eyes to stop
These tears from coming out
That blur the lines between
What's just in my head
And what you really said

You've been spending
An awful lot of time with him
I'm not sure if it's worth it
For me to feel this way again
I know this is
Mostly my imagination
But you're not doing
Much to help the situation

How many times have I heard that?
How many times have I bit back?
We've done this 1000 times before
Let's do it again, let's do it again

Will you wrap my legs up in casts
To keep me
From running away from the fact
That you're always
The abuser, the abused
But either way I lose