



## Sociological Inferences Deduced from Creative Writing Activities: Analyzing Gender Perceptions and Stereotypes of Children in terms of Child Development

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### ABSTRACT

Being a sample for the field of sociology of education, this research aims at analyzing the gender perceptions and gender stereotypes of students through their creative writing activities. The participants of the study chosen by purposeful sampling technique are 97 3rd grade students who study at a primary state school in Samsun, Turkey. A child of 9 years has knowledge of a person's behavior that is equal to his/her gender stereotypes in terms of child development. So, the participants were chosen intentionally of this age group. As the 82 writings of the students were valid for this research, the sample of the study is 82 writings, 43 of which were collected from girls and 39 of which are from boys. Carried out through qualitative and quantitative, that is, mixed type research paradigms, the design of this study is content analysis. As the data collection technique, document analysis is employed to the free topic creative writing activities of children. During data collection period and procedures, the students were free to choose the topic and the setting was their own classroom to create a natural accommodation. The parents of the students were asked to receive their consents before the activity. As for the data analysis, content analysis was also used as the data analysis technique. The children's writings were examined for five categories evaluated from the previous studies in literature. These categories were choice of the topic, frequency of male and female characters, attributes, occupational roles and domestic roles. The findings of the study, in short, show that stereotypical differences and gender perception differences occur in the creative writings of children.

**Keywords:** Sociology of education, child development, gender, creative writing, content analysis

## Yaratıcı Yazma Çalışmalarından Elde Edilen Sosyolojik Çıkarımlar: Çocukların Toplumsal Cinsiyet Algılarının ve Kalıp Yargılarının Çocuk Gelişimi Açısından İncelenmesi

### Öz

Eğitim sosyolojisi alanındaki çalışmalara örnek teşkil eden bu araştırma, öğrencilerin toplumsal cinsiyet algılarını ve kalıp yargılarını yaratıcı yazma çalışmalarını yoluyla incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Amaçlı örneklemeyle seçilen katılımcılar, Türkiye'de Samsun ilinde bir devlet ilkokulunun 3. sınıfında eğitim görmekte olan 97 adet ilkokul öğrencisidir. 9 yaşındaki bir çocuk, bir kişinin davranışları hakkında çocuk gelişimi açısından cinsiyet klişelerine ilişkin bilgiye sahip olduğundan, bu yaş grubu özellikle seçilmiştir. Toplanan çalışmaların 82 adeti geçerli olduğu için, çalışmanın örneklemini, 43'ü kız, 39'u erkek olan 82 öğrenci oluşturmuştur. Hem nitel hem nicel araştırma paradigmatları (karma) doğrultusunda yürütülen çalışmanın deseni içerik analizidir. Öğrencilerin serbest bir konuyla ilgili yazdıkları çalışmalardan elde edilen veriler, doküman analizi tekniğiyle incelenmiştir. Veri toplama sürecinde ve prosedürlerinde, öğrenciler, diledikleri bir konuda yazı çalışması yapabilmeleri üzerine serbest kılınmıştır ve bu çalışmalar, öğrencilerin doğal sınıf ortamında uygulanmıştır. Öğrencilerin ailelerinden, uygulamadan önce onay alınmıştır. İçerik analizi, aynı zamanda bu çalışmanın veri analiz tekniği olarak da kullanılmıştır. Öğrencilerden toplanan veriler -yaratıcı yazma çalışmaları-, daha önce alanyazında yapılmış çalışmalardan derlenen beş kategori çerçevesinde incelenmiştir. Bu kategoriler konu seçimi, kadın ve erkek karakterlerin sıklığı, kişilik özellikleri, mesleki roller ve ev içi rolleridir. Çalışmanın bulguları, çok öz olarak, öğrencilerin yaratıcı yazma çalışmalarında toplumsal cinsiyet algılarına ve kalıp yargılarına yönelik farklılıklar olduğunu ortaya koymuştur

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Eğitim sosyolojisi, çocuk gelişimi, toplumsal cinsiyet, yaratıcı yazma, içerik analizi

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Gender is a term referring to the responsibilities, traits and some other social interactions attributed to women and men in society. Children learn these different roles and traits called gender stereotypes within their socialization process. The term “gender” is generally used instead of “sex”, that is, the biological sex of a person. Formerly and firstly underlined by Money (1955), these terms are different. However, gender is a social phenomenon and it a culture-based sex (Bhasin, 2003; Dökmen, 2004; Butler, 1999).

Regarding the usage of the term, until 1970s, “gender” was used to indicate grammatical structures. When Oakley (1972) used the term in a sociological area, the term came into the field of sociology as today.

Once the children get these gender cognitions as gender stereotypes, they recreate these differences as their behavior when they develop into adults (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). These unequal assumptions for gender can be commented as social discrimination gathered by children after they learn how to sort men and women according to their roles and activities and then entrench in their long-term memories (Davies et al. 2005).

It is a very well-known theory of Kohlberg (1966) that the cognitive development stage of a child includes the child’s gathering her/his gender identity as the child made a cognitive judgment of the sex he or she belongs to. This means that a child who is 8 or 9 years old knows how a person behaves in parallel with the gender stereotypes and is aware of sex-typing. Based on this theory, the children of 9 years were selected as the participants of this study.

Language generally, use of language specifically, is a way of revealing the social and cultural approvals of children. Therefore, some social issues such as gender (Davies, 1989), culture, religion, etc. (Sumida, 2000) can be gathered from the products of children. Creative writing activities, for example, can be used as these kinds of materials to identify and describe children’s social views. With creative writing activities, as the writers of these genres are also the good observers of the society, they can observe and write the lives, actions and the attitudes of the human beings (Harper, 2013: 3).

Another reason for choosing a creative writing activity is that “creative writing is a rich, personal, value-laden language activity and can provide a record of thought which represents the writer’s ordering of reality.” (Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1991). In addition to this, allowing children to write what they want, that is, free choice of topic would have a positive effect on reproducing the gender stereotypes of the children that can be observed in their writing activities (Maryland, 1983). This is because the children are actually are not free, their gender would be in the practices they apply (Clark, 1989).

From this point of view, the aim of this study is to analyze the gender perceptions and gender stereotypes of children through their free topic creative writing activities.

The questions that are sought to be replied are:

- 1- Are there any differences in the choices of topic of male and female students?
- 2- Are there any differences in the frequency of male and female characters of male and female students?
- 3- Are there any differences in the attributes of male and female characters of male and female students?
- 4- Are there any differences in the occupational roles of male and female characters of male and female students?
- 5- Are there any differences in the domestic roles of male and female characters of male and female students?

- 6- Do the creative writing activities of children provide us with a sociological aspect as determining gender bias perceptions?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW FOR CREATIVE WRITING AND GENDER STUDIES**

Gender and creative writing are the two issues discussed together with in order to put forth the importance of creative writing to reveal the gender-biased or lack of gender-biased uses of the young authors.

Sometimes gender is taken as one of the variables or factors to reveal the difference in creative writing performance; whereas sometimes creative writing activities are used as a means of data collection technique to discuss some sociological issues such as gender stereotyping, economic, cultural, political and religious structures, etc.

One of the studies which took gender as a variable to show the difference in creative writing performance is done by Baer & Kaufman (2008). Using divergent thinking tests as a means of data collection, the researchers founded that there is not a concrete evidence to suggest a difference, but there is a fact that females are superior to males at creative tests.

Tsai (2013), for instance, aimed to evaluate creativity performance by using collage making activity as a CAT (Consensual Assessment Technique) to evaluate the gender differences in the students' writing performances. The participants of the study were 18 graduate or doctoral students from a university, 7 of which are males and 11 are females. As the results of the study, some gender differences were found. The males showed a tendency to use more abstract and original Picture structures then those of females. Moreover, there seems to show a negative correlation between the students' academic performance and their creativity.

There are many other studies suggesting that there are differences between the sexes of the students when the aim is evaluating the creativity. Including 122 children and 200 adults showing some markers of dyslexia in their genetics of families as the participants of their study, Berninger et al. (2008) found some gender differences in their writing. Vlachos & Bonoti (2006) found the same kind of differences between genders in creative writing. Ulu (2019), also revealed the gender differences in creativity of the 4th grade students in terms of gender and some other variables.

Another study done with 20 kindergarten students aimed at examining gender-based differences in the writing of young children. The findings of the study show that the students' choice of topics show gender differences, as boys chose gender specific topics such as dinosaurs, aliens, Mario Brothers, Star Wars, and sports whereas Girls chose the topics with baby, dolls, Hannah Montana, family, pets, and school (Buxton, 2011).

On the other hand, some other studies were carried out not to take gender as a factor or a variable for scaling the creativity performance; but to use creative writing activity as a means of data collection technique to reveal a child's social opinions from their own writings.

One of these, Sumida (2000), revealed the thoughts of the students about gender, society and economy by examining the writings of her students.

In his comprehensive study, Dobson (2017) used language-context discourse analysis in order to analyze the secondary school male students' gender identities and view of hegemonic masculinity. The study proposes some suggestions to review the curriculum and pedagogies.

Trepanier & Romanowski (1985) are the other researchers using creative writing activities as an evidence for revealing the gender differences and gender role perceptions of 180 elementary school children. The students wrote these activities in their own classrooms and they were free to choose the topic for their writings. Their stories were examined for the frequency of the male and female characters,

attributes and roles of the characters. The findings of the study suggested both similarities and differences between male and female students.

Another study close to our one examined the written completing of the students' writings to story starters. The characters were both stereotypical and non-stereotypical regarding their occupations. The results of the study suggested both gender differences and gender stereotyping between children (Trepanier-Street et al. 1990).

In their study to develop an instrument to determine whether the gender roles can be apparent from the characters written by the writing activities of children, Tuck, Andree and Bell (1985) created "ACTS-The Analysis of Character Traits-. As the results of the study, it was found that both male and female authors use gender stereotypic traits and the characters of both male and female students include these traits.

## 2 | METHOD

This study, the purpose of which is to examine the gender perceptions and gender stereotypes of the primary school students through their creative writing activities, is a mixed type of research in which both qualitative and quantitative research models were conducted. Regarding the qualitative research, to reveal the gender perceptions, qualitative method was used. Moreover, to remark the percentage and frequency of these perceptions, quantitative method was used to support the qualitative findings.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

As for the design of the study, in order to reveal these perceptions, content analysis was employed, as it describes 'the core consistencies and meanings' (Patton, 2002: 453) and/or "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004: 18). In other words, to set forth what the participants intend to say and mean, content analysis was conducted to the data that were collected.

### PARTICIPANTS

In order to strengthen the study, the samplings were not chosen randomly, but purposefully via purposeful sampling, involving selecting the participants who are the right people to have knowledge and experience about the phenomenon that is being studied (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). As stated in the introduction part of the study, a child of 9 years has knowledge of a person's behavior that is equal to his/her gender stereotypes. So, the participants were chosen intentionally of this age group.

The participants of the study are the 97 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students who were from a primary state school in Samsun, Turkey. As the replies of the 82 students were valid (as some students used some gender unspecified characters, only the writings with gender specified female and male characters were valid), the participants would be considered as 82 students, 52% of whom were female (43 girls) and 48% of whom were male (39 boys). Their ages were all 9.

### DATA COLLECTION AND PROCEDURE

As the data collection technique, document analysis, "in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic" (Bowen, 2009), was used. These documents consist of the creative writing studies of the students who were free to choose the topic.

This writing activity was fulfilled in students' own classroom settings to create an unstructured and natural atmosphere.

All the students were free to choose a topic to write during the activity. They also had the freedom to choose the plot and the number of the characters in their stories. They were given two course time (80 minutes) to complete the activity.

The researcher gave these instructions to the students:

"Dear students. I want you to write a story about any topic, on any plot you wish and use as many characters as you wish to create a story. I will give you a paper, and if it is not enough, I can give you more. Please use your imagination and creativity and write a story. You have two course times, that is, 80 minutes. Before you start, please do not forget to write your age, class and sex on the paper. I hope you will enjoy this activity. Good luck and thank you in advance!"

As for the rating procedure, three experts (one from Department of Gender Studies and two from the Faculty of Education) were asked to control the results that the researcher gathered from the writings of the students. After these judges arrived at a consensus, the rating procedure of this research was over.

### **LIMITATIONS**

In order to make the methodology and the possible findings of the study clearer, the limitations of this study should be considered:

The first limitation is about the valid writings of the study. At the beginning of the study, there were 97 students to participate to the activity. However, as 15 of them used gender unspecified characters, only the rest 82 writings were taken into account. Lastly, the participants, that is, samples of the study were not chosen randomly as it was easy to reach them. Of course, with a bigger number of participants, the study could be more forceful.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

Regarding the data analyses, content analysis was also used as the data analysis technique, just as the researchers confirmed this situation and regard content analysis both as a design and as a data analysis technique (Taylan, 2011:64; Merriam, 1998). The collected data were examined in order to come to the findings and get responses to the categories given below. These categories that were used during content analyses were gathered from the researches done before such as Trepanier & Romatowski (1985) and Tuck, Andree & Bell (1985).

These five categories are:

- Choice of the topic
- Frequency of male and female characters
- Attributes
- Occupational roles
- Domestic roles

### **RESEARCH ETHICS**

The ethical approval report of this research was taken from Ondokuz Mayıs University Ethical Committee on 2020, 26<sup>th</sup> August with the number of 220-494. The parental consent of the participants was received before the activity.

## **3 | FINDINGS**

### **FINDINGS FOR THE CHOICE OF THE TOPIC**

When the titles of the writing of the students were analyzed, as stated in Figure 1, it was found out that the 82 different topics could be classified into 11 categories: friendship, the life of a friend or a person, legendary characters, nature, animals, their own life or their dream world, space, extraordinary things, virus, a member of the family, school.

The students mostly preferred to write on the theme of "The Life of a Friend or a Person", 35,4 %, and "Their Own Life or Their Dream World", 18,3 %. The other topics that the students choose to write were Animals, Extraordinary Things, Legendary Characters, Space, Nature, Friendship, School, Virus and A Member of the Family.

**Table 1.** The Categories for Topics

Topic	Frequency	Percent (%)
The Life of a Friend or a Person	29	35,4
Their Own Life or Their Dream World	15	18,3
Animals	9	11
Extraordinary Things	8	9,8
Legendary Characters	5	6,1
Space	5	6,1
Nature	4	4,9
Friendship	3	3,7
School	2	2,4
Virus	1	1,2
A Member of the Family	1	1,2
TOTAL	82	100,0

**Table 2.** The Choices of Topic of Male and Female Students

Topic	Female Students	Male Students
The Life of a Friend or a Person	15	14
Their Own Life or Their Dream World	10	5
Animals	5	4
Extraordinary Things	4	4
Legendary Characters	3	2
Space	3	2
Nature	1	3
Friendship	2	1
School	0	2
Virus	1	0
A Member of the Family	0	1
TOTAL	43	39

These findings regarding the distribution of topic according to sex show that sex makes difference according to the choice of topic, but the rate is not the same with each topic. The most significant difference between the choice of female and male students' use of topic is on the topic "Their Own Life or Their Dream World Friendship and Virus", as Figure 2 indicates. While the 10 of the female students

preferred to write on the “Their Own Life or Their Dream World”, only 5 of the male students preferred the same. 2 of the girls wrote on the theme “Friendship” whereas only one of the boys wrote on the same issue. Lastly, one of the girls wrote on “Virus” while no male student wrote.

The boys wrote more than girls on the themes such as “Nature”; the 3 of the boys wrote on this theme while only one of the girls chose to write. Two of the boys wrote on school while no girl wrote on this theme. Lastly, one of the boys wrote on “A Member of the Family” while no girls wrote.

There seems to be no big differences between girls and boys regarding the choice of the topic. When the results of the former studies are compared to the findings of this study, there is no parallelism with former studies. In the study of Graves (1973), girls had a tendency to write about primary territory (about family, friends, class, animals, school, etc.) while boys did not have. But in our study, there is no clear-cut distinction between girls and boys.

### FINDINGS FOR THE FREQUENCY OF MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS

**Table 3.** Findings for the Frequency of Male and Female Characters

	Frequency of Female Characters	Percent %	Frequency of Male Characters	Percent %	
The Use of Female Students	93	72	56	46	149
The Use of Male Students	36	28	67	54	103
TOTAL	129	100,0	123	100,0	252

Each writing of the students was examined for the frequency of male and female characters that were created and/or used by the participants. The results gained from the frequency of male and female characters indicated that the students tend to create and/or use the characters of their own sex as Figure 3 demonstrates.

The findings demonstrate that the students totally used 252 characters, 129 (51%) were female and 123 (49%) were male characters, which shows no significant difference.

As a result of the analyses it was found out that the female students used 149 characters, 93 of which were female characters and 36 of which were male characters. Moreover, it was found out that the male students used 103 characters, 36 of which were female characters and 67 of which were male characters. The important point that must be underlined here is that the students used the characters of their own sexes mostly; female students used more female characters and male students used more male characters.

### FINDINGS FOR THE ATTRIBUTES

The children’s writings were also analyzed for the attributes of female and male characters created by the participants.

When the writings of the students were observed, it was found out that between the 82 writings, the 57 of the writings included attributes regarding gender. When the roles, attributions and responsibilities of women and men in the society are considered, both male and female students attributes domestic roles in the private sphere (child and elderly care, doing the washing up, cooking, helping children with their homework, taking children to school or zoo ) for women and the outer work in the public sphere (earning the livelihood, buying presents for children, taking his family to picnic, hunting, fighting or struggling for something, directing) for men.

### FINDINGS FOR THE OCCUPATIONAL ROLES

Another category analyzed within this study was the occupational roles of the characters created by the participants. The data shows that there are 20 different occupations used by the students, 16 (80 %) of which are the occupations for men and 4 (20 %) are for the women.

These occupations for men are hunter, pilot, director (manager or king), teacher, officer, woodsman, astronaut, scientist, doctor, basket maker, soldier, athlete, grocer, policeman, farmer, toy seller. The occupations of women are teacher, doctor, photographer and musician. The students created the characters with the occupations in parallel with the attributions of the society, that is, the men would be clever, powerful and strong, while the women are responsible for caring and teaching.

The occupations mostly used by the students are astronaut and female teacher (used 5 times by the students, 6,1 %) and director (manager or king; used 4 times by the students, 4,9 %). Following these, the students used hunter (used 3 times by the students, 3,7 %) and athlete, male teacher and officer (each was used 2 times by the students, 2,4 %). The other thirteen occupations were used for 1 time (1,2 %), equaling to 15,6 % in total.

**Table 4.** Findings for the Domestic Roles

	Frequency	Percent %
mother	35	19
children	34	18,3
daughter	25	13,5
father	21	11,4
son	17	9,2
sister	10	5,4
brother	9	4,8
grandfather	7	3,8
cousins	5	2,7
grandmother	5	2,7
aunt	4	2,2
wife	4	2,2
uncle	4	2,2
husband	3	1,6
twins	2	1
TOTAL	185	100

The last category to be applied for the data collected from the participants of this study is the domestic roles of the characters created by the participants.

When the frequencies of the domestic roles were considered, it was found out that the children used mother (19%), children (18,3%) and daughter (13,5 %) mostly. The other domestic or family roles that were used in the stories were father, son, sister, brother, grandfather, cousins, grandmother, aunt, wife, uncle, husband and twins. When the domestic roles created by the female and male authors are considered, there seems to be no significant difference in the use of these roles.

#### 4 | DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS



The findings of the study indicate that stereotypical differences and gender differences occur in the stories created by children which constitute a solid demonstration for a child's sexual development. The evidence for this situation can be seen in the choice of the topic, frequency of male and female characters, attributes, occupational roles and domestic roles, just as the other studies revealed before (Trepanier & Romatowski, 1985; Tuck, Andree & Bell, 1985).

As for the choice of topic, there seems to be difference between girls and boys, but not so big. The most important difference is on the topic of "Their Own Life or Their Dream World Friendship and Virus" on which the girls write mostly. On the other hand, the boys chose to write on the themes "Nature" and "Member of the Family" more than those of the girls. Unlike the other studies, in this study the choice to write about the primary territory and the other territories did not show differences between sexes. When the results of the former studies are compared to the findings of this study, there is no parallelism with former studies. In the study of Graves (1973), girls had a tendency to write about primary territory (about family, friends, class, animals, school, etc.) while boys did not have. But in our study, there is no clear-cut distinction between girls and boys.

The findings of the study also showed that the frequency of male and female characters differs according to sex. In other words, the girls have a tendency to create and/or use the characters of their own sex such as boys. This category was also used by Trepanier & Romanowski (1985) who found the same difference between male and female students.

The analyses of the study on the attributes of the characters suggested that both male and female students created and used the characters in parallel with the gender stereotypes; private sphere for female characters and public sphere for male characters. This is an indication that there is no difference in the use of attributions of female and male characters according to the sexes of the authors, just as Tuck, Andree & Bell (1985) put forth in their studies.

The study also reveals that it is possible to see 20 different occupational roles created both male and female characters. However, 80% of these occupations are for men whereas only 20% of these are for women. Moreover, the occupations referred to women are teacher and doctor, about teaching and caring, in parallel with the gendered attributions of the society. Moreover, the analyses of the occupational roles do not show differences according to the sexes of the students.

In short, the findings of the study suggested that the stories created by students show gender related differences between sexes on the categories such as choice of topic, frequency of male and female characters and occupational roles; whereas there seems to be gender related differences between sexes on the categories of attributes and domestic roles. These findings demonstrate that as many studies ascertain the gender differences between female and male students found as a result of creative writing activities (Berninger et al., 2008; Vlachos & Bonoti, 2006; Ulu, 2019); there are still gender inequality regarding the gender perceptions of the students. In order to struggle with this unequal condition and achieve a non-gendered education, these suggestions can be made:

- All the materials and curriculum related to students should be observed by the experts of gender studies in order to gain non gendered materials.
- A compulsory or optional course on gender studies should be included in the curriculum of all the grades of the educational system.
- The writers and preparators of the books and curriculums and teachers should take teacher training program on gender.
- The parents of the students should take a training program on gender.
- The legislations on gender equality should be thought and promoted to the public.
- More writing activities, whether free of topic or not, should be applied to the students.

**STATEMENT OF PUBLICATION ETHICS**

I declare that this research has no unethical problems that will limit the publication of the article.

**RESEARCHERS' CONTRIBUTION RATE**

Written by one writer, all the contribution rate of the study is of the author.

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