

The Sounds of Writing: Students' Perceptions of their Writing Histories and their Effect on
Current Dispositions toward Writing

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
under the Executive Committee
of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2020

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Abstract

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This qualitative teacher action research project investigates students' perceptions of past writing performance and the influence of these perceptions on current attitudes about academic writing, specifically writing in a workshop-model class. Too often, at the very mention of "essay" or "writing assignment," students' demeanors change from benign to distress. Even students at the Honors level often hate writing and believe they just "can't write." This begs the question, "Why?" Why do so many students at the highest academic level available to them believe they can't write? Why are students so intimidated by writing certain writing activities? Is there something in students' writing histories that drives this apprehension? Is there a relationship between students' self-initiated writing and writing assigned by a teacher? Do the demands of standardized testing play a role?

The project under study was conducted in a tenth grade Honors American Literature and Composition class in an urban high school in the mid-Atlantic United States. Students in this

class have traditionally been in an honors track since entering middle school (currently grade 6), although some may have been moved up in more recent years. Nine students participated in the project: seven girls and two boys. The district demographics identify eight of the students as “White (Non-Hispanic)” and one female student as “Multi Racial.” One female student qualifies for special education services due to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Data collection methods include student interviews; artifacts such as writing histories, journal entries, and writing samples; researcher field notes and observations; and class surveys. Results indicate that once students’ beliefs about themselves as writers - their writing self-efficacy - have been established, it is very difficult to change these perceptions, even in the light of positive learning outcomes. However, writing in a workshop model class does improve students’ writing self-efficacy, at least in the time and space of the workshop. Results also indicate that students’ dispositions toward writing are vastly different between self-initiated writing (home) writing and writing done at school. The role of standardized testing is also discussed, as are implications for classroom teachers.

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Acknowledgments

They say there is strength in numbers; and without a number of you, my success in this endeavor would not have been possible. You each provided me with the confidence to complete this project in different ways.

To my students

I sit in tears just thinking about you, how close some of us have grown, especially those of you whom I had the pleasure of teaching for two years. Thank you all for your input, your honesty even when you were afraid I wouldn't like what you were about to say, and your patience with me when on numerous occasions I asked you to clarify what you said in interviews and in your writing. Your honesty and willingness to be vulnerable in this study is truly its core. Thank you for indulging me as I tried to get your stories right. I could not have done this without you!

To my dissertation committee

Dr. Maria Paula Ghiso, although I only had one class with you, I feel that I can see your passion in what you do working with young students. I learned as much about teaching from you as I did content material! Your transparency with us, your students, was truly an inspiration to me. Thank you -- for being part of this committee and for being so genuine with us. Both being Pennsylvanians, perhaps our paths will cross again some time in the near future!

Dr. Adele Bruni, thank you so much for agreeing to be part of this committee! During the brief times we've worked together, you were so supportive and helpful in sharing sources and materials -- I truly appreciate that! I wish we had been able to work

together more! You are the spirit of positivity, and I consider it a privilege to have you as part of this committee. Thank you for helping to make me so comfortable at TC while I instructed there, and, of course, for your input on this project!

Dr. Joe Shosh, wow! We've come a long way, baby! Teaching cert advisor, grad advisor, ARNA, London and York St. John (we'll always have London! :-)), and now this! You are the reason I'm here! It was your suggestion that I continue my studies past the master's program. I never would have dreamed this if it weren't for your encouragement. I honestly cannot thank you enough. I've always said you were my personal cheerleader, and you've been my advisor both in and outside of the classroom. Thank you for all you've done for me, dear, dear friend! You are truly one of the breezes beneath my wings!

Dr. Ruth Vinz, I will never forget your kindness and gentleness toward me as a first year doc student. As shy and insecure as I then was, you always made me feel that my voice in any a discussion was valuable. Thank you! I honestly wish I could take classes with you and sit under your mentorship for another five years – you've inspired me in so many ways, especially in the craft of my own writing. It is truly an honor to have learned from and with you during my time at TC. In you, not only did I have an awesome instructor (I was always blown away by the creativity and relevance of your classes), I have a trusted friend – and I so value that relationship! Again, thank you!

Dr. Sheridan Blau, I cannot thank you enough for all your support throughout the past five years. You provided me with opportunities to teach, to share my work, and, in essence, to prepare me for a future in academia. Thank you! Thank you, too, for your patience with me, for tolerating the numerous texts and emails I sent you being the Nervous Nellie that I am. Thank

you for how kind and considerate you were upon the passing of my mother – that truly meant a lot to me. I am so honored to have had you as my advisor! You are a rock star!

To my children

You have been so supportive of me in my educational endeavors. Some of us actually “went to college” together! Thank you for never making me feel guilty for following my dreams, especially when it meant I would be missing an event. You’ve all been so patient, and I truly appreciate it. And the times you’ve said that my pursuit of education served as an example to you, that you realized that one of my gifts was “Learner,” you put tears in my eyes! I am blessed to have such a wonderful family – children, spouses, grandchildren -- and I love you all more than you can ever know!

To my husband

Where do I begin? You allowed me to chase my dreams; you picked up the slack at home; you even became the house chef! In many ways, our roles have totally reversed, and I appreciate your willingness to allow it to happen. I’ve put a lot on you in the past fifteen years – I’m sure you didn’t sign up for life with a perpetual grad student! (At least most of that occurred once the kids were gone!) And a lot of “life” happened during my time in this program. But through it all, you continued to be supportive of this endeavor. Thank you, again, for being my Excel genius, my proofreader, and at times my editor. I’m so grateful for all your love and support! You’re a good man, Charlie Brown! I love you!

Chapter 1: Introduction

Pianissimo – Early Whispers

One of the best kept secrets in my professional career is that I'm a fairly musical person. Perhaps even more than fair. I began playing piano at the age of four, and I began singing and reciting poetry publicly at about that time also. I even began college as a music major. My piano skills are not what they should be, but I can say with some degree of certainty that I can sing. I've sung in choirs throughout my life, am often the soprano soloist, been called upon to sing at weddings, funerals, special events, etc. My last vocal coach encouraged me to try to go professional, and I've actually had a few people offer to back me. Unfortunately, that was when I was already in my 30s with five young children at home. As they say, it's all about the timing, and the timing wasn't right for me.

All that said, I have another secret. I suffer from massive stage fright. There have been times during concerts when I completely blanked -- the notes on the page could've been written in Chinese or Arabic -- they made no sense to me due to overwhelming anxiety. There have been times (too many to think about), when the first few lines of a solo I sang exposed me -- my voice literally shook until I became comfortable. All this begs the question, "Why?" Why do (or did?) I lack the confidence to do something I had done many times before with great success? Why am I often still scared silly prior to singing or playing in front of a crowd when I've publicly led a team of musicians for fifteen years and have been offered professional support? There must be something in my abilities, right? Otherwise, I wouldn't be asked at all. Why,

then, the lack of belief in myself? Did something happen long ago that traumatized me? Is there something in my past, my musical history, that I haven't dealt with yet?

Sadly, although I've settled these questions in my musical life (yes, there is some historical relevance), they have also eked into my writing life, although I can honestly say I've never had a "negative" writing experience. Throughout my elementary and high school years, I've almost always managed to do whatever I was called upon to do, and do it well enough to receive a decent grade -- or at least a grade I was content with. Even throughout college, I never felt like I was really "struggling" with my writing, even when called upon to write a five-page paper on one of John Donne's sonnets -- five pages on fourteen lines. To be honest, I felt that I had become quite adept at "slinging it" because I always managed to earn at least a B+. (Sadly, this was not a skill I was able to accomplish in my musical life!) Regardless, that's the theory of my own writing that I adopted and kept throughout most of my life -- that I was very good at stretching what needed to be said, ad nauseum in my mind, but to my professors' liking. It wasn't until I was accepted to a doctoral program at an Ivy League institution of higher education that I began to doubt my abilities.

How did I get here? I never dreamed I would be attending a school of this calibre... for anything!

What does academic writing at this level look like? I've written "academic" papers before -- my master's thesis is a mini-dissertation -- but what does it look like, sound like, here?

What if I expose myself as a fraud?? I'm just a high school English teacher from Pennsylvania! I'm nobody special -- I just try to do my job, be a reflective practitioner (ala Schon) and do what I think is best for my students!

These voices, at times harmonic, at times discordant, still resound in my head.

In preparing for my first certification exam, I tried to create an outline to use in my notes to keep me focused. I spent three full days working on that outline and the notes I'd need to support it. After the second 9+ hour day of getting nowhere, I found myself near panic. My husband came home from work and said, "You're still here? That's where you were when I left this morning!" I had barely moved from my spot at my kitchen work-station -- our breakfast nook -- all day. Hearing this and realizing that another full day had gone by and still I was nowhere, I fell to tears. Over and over I tried, but I felt I was not making headway in how to organize the massive piece of writing I had before me.

Shortly thereafter, as I was conceptualizing my 5504 project during a small group activity in class, and after relaying my summer of angst in Cert 1 prep to a fellow doc-student before the class began, this fellow-doc student and member of my small group said to me, "Berni, I've had several classes with you, so I know this: you can write. And what you're studying is exactly what you just did!" Although dumbstruck by his observation -- I guess we're more blind to ourselves than we realize -- I now understand. If I, a writer with a few minor publications under my belt, at times feel completely overwhelmed by writing tasks before me, even though I've written academic texts before, even though I've received good grades (although what do grades really mean?); if I feel that insecure about my writing, if I struggle that much with lengthy (albeit new) writing tasks, how can I expect anything different from my students? I underestimate the "newness" of academic writing for them; I underestimate the nervousness, angst, malaise; I forget that they, as much as I, want to do well -- not just for my teacher(s), but for myself, my self-worth, my identity as student- writer and teacher-writer.

Why would things be any different for students? Do the same voices that float around my mind float around theirs? Is it just a matter of lack of confidence?

As is often the case, questions lead to more questions, and I find myself wondering why my students, some of whom have had success at writing, still feel such angst at the very thought of a writing project. What is it about writing that bothers them? Are there events or experiences in their pasts, in their personal histories, writing or other, that causes them to avoid, if not dread, writing?

Prelude -- The Back Story

Beginning of the school year, Day 2, Sophomore English.

“I want you to spend a few minutes reflecting on your writing history. What are your earliest memories of writing, either inside or outside of school? Were your experiences positive? Negative? How do you feel about yourselves as a writer? Be honest!”

I asked these questions to my fifteen-year-old Honors American Literature and Composition students on the second day of school as a write-in to our discussion of writing and as a lead-in to what I was hoping would springboard our Writer’s Workshop. Once the students had a few minutes to respond to the prompt, I asked for volunteers. At first, no one volunteered; so I offered to go first if someone would go second. No takers. Then I told them I’d go first and then MAKE someone go second. They smirked.

After I shared my story, two students did volunteer. Both, instead of reading what they wrote, just talked about what they wrote -- which was fine. They both had positive early writing experiences. But I wanted to have more voices involved, so I randomly

began to select students using Varela's Fickle Finger of Fate, my term for cold-calling.

The fateful finger chose Beth first -- she, too, talked through what she wrote, and she, too, spoke of positive experiences.

Then the fateful finger turned to Vivian. Vivian was not happy. She smiled that "Oh man, I can't believe she's calling on me" smile, rolled her eyes, shifted back and forth in her seat, opened her notebook and announced, "I didn't have very good writing experiences. I can't write," and slammed shut her notebook. When pushed, she explained that she doesn't do well on writing assignments and dreads writing. "Is that pretty much what you wrote?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"And then you just stopped because you really just don't like to write?"

"Yeah," she replied again. I think she was surprised I got it.

As soon as she uttered that she had had negative writing experiences, I announced that this was perfect --that I was going to ask that anyway because I knew that not everyone has great writing experiences, and that these experiences, and the pits we get in our stomachs as a result, are common and quite real. When I asked how many others had had negative writing experiences, four other hands went up -- and quickly. Five of my fourteen students in this class had negative writing experiences, and all five believed they were poor writers. Most of them expressed that they loved writing and were good at it prior to 5th grade. That's when they were introduced to the research paper, and they mostly remembered these negative experiences quite vividly, or at least they remembered the emotions quite vividly.

"You know what?" I announced, "People need to hear these stories...
Let's write a book!"

Minus the book idea, the scenario above is not new to me -- it's the same song over and over again. Every year I have several students at the Honors level who hate writing and believe they just "can't write." But why? Why do so many students at the highest academic level they can be in this grade in my school think they can't write? What about writing makes them dread it so much? Does this affect how they view themselves as students? How may I allay this negative spirit and dread? Is there a way I can prevent them from experiencing the same disquiet that I often do?

These are the questions that percolate in my mind when I think about my high-achieving students' disinclination to writing, and these questions are what pique my interest in studying students in this population. As I continued the conversation with this particular class that day, the same story kept entering the discussion:

"I used to love writing... until 5th grade."

"I was really good at writing in third grade. And then in 5th grade..." Heads nodded as several students relayed their stories. Up through third grade, they thought of themselves as "good writers"; and then in fifth grade... and then in fifth grade... and then in fifth grade. I found myself wondering, "What happened in fifth grade that made so many of them feel that they were no longer 'good writers'?" What sinister thing came into the curriculum that changed, drastically I believe, these students' self-conceptions of themselves as being able to write well? *Was* it the curriculum? The teachers?? *What happened* in those two years – the years between third and fifth grade – that affected them so negatively?

In my quest for more insight on what was becoming for me a very strange phenomenon, I pushed the conversation with my students: "Who did you guys have? Who were your teachers? Would you mind sharing who some of them were?" Most of the students declined to

name names, fearing they would “get somebody in trouble.” Although I assured them this conversation would remain in the classroom, I respected their reticence and let the conversation go at that. In my head, however, I remained curious and somewhat confused. My own children completed their primary and secondary education in this same district, the youngest only having graduated in 2013, and it was very likely that my children had some of these same teachers; yet none of my five children had ever mentioned such a turnaround. Now, all of my children are decent writers, but I’m not naïve enough to think that they were all such stellar writers that nothing like this would or could ever have happened to them. Nor was I convinced that many of the elementary and middle school teachers in my district were poor educators, or that they had suddenly become poor educators. Something had happened. But what?

Ah! A possible answer came to me after considering the time-frame. Kyle, my youngest son, graduated from high school in 2013. My current students would have been in elementary school at that time, most likely in 4th or 5th grade. That would have been around the time that our state, Pennsylvania, began the implementation of the Keystone Examinations, the End-of-Course exams administered to students in tenth grade to assess proficiency in Algebra, Literature, and Biology. This examination was to be a graduation requirement for all high school students in Pennsylvania. Around that time, there was a district- wide “push” to prepare students for these upcoming exams by more aggressively preparing them for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), which is administered every year from third through eighth grades to students in English Language Arts and math classes. (PSSA is also administered in science, but only in fourth and eighth grades.) Could there be a connection between my students’ negative dispositions toward writing and this push in testing and test prep? Did something change in how

writing was being taught since the implementation of the Keystone exams?? I had a strong hunch, but I also had many questions.

My hunch led me to further consider my honors students and their attitudes toward writing. I was never surprised when my lower-tracked students claimed to dislike writing; I was always sure they'd had negative experiences, hence the reason, at least partially, for their placement in academic tracks. But my honors students? This was more baffling. When discussing students at the honors level, the assumption by many administrators and teachers, myself included, is that those are the kids we don't need to worry about; they're the ones who will "get it," whether or not they have an effective teacher; they'll "figure it out on their own." Quite honestly, I've uttered similar statements to my students. Just last semester, a very high-functioning honors student came to me, worried about her research paper. I told her, "Sarah, I'm not worried about you. I know you'll get it and you'll make it work. You're going to be fine." This little exchange, although meant to be an encouragement to her, although meant to boost her self-confidence, "the teacher has every confidence that I'll write a strong paper!" actually didn't do either of those things. Sarah left feeling as though she wasn't heard, that I didn't take the time to give her what she thought she needed. Was I right in my assessment of her abilities? Absolutely -- she nailed the paper with 198/200 points. Did I ease her angst, her worry? Most likely not, although she did make it work.

As I reflect on my own experiences seeking help when I didn't feel as if I were "getting it," I, too, was told by a beloved professor in my post-baccalaureate teacher certification program (and probably again as I wrote my master's thesis under his tutelage), "Berni, I'm not worried about you! You'll be fine!" UGH! That was not what I wanted to hear! However, was

he right in assessing my abilities? Yes, I wrote my thesis and received a minor recognition. But... did he ease my angst and worry at that time? Most definitely not.

Why would I expect anything different for my students?

The bottom line is that many students at the honors level still feel as though they struggle with writing, and many of them actually do. In the past three years, at least one of my roughly 90 honors students does not receive a Proficient score on the newly adopted Keystone Examination, our state's standardized assessment, and that number has grown every year. These high-achieving students aren't achieving as highly as projected. And they dread writing. Why? Why does writing seem to become such a struggle for these students once they begin writing argument (as in the research paper they write in 5th grade), and what influence does the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and/or Keystone exam have on them?

These are just the beginning of my questions. For the purpose of this project, however, I will be limiting my questions to the following:

- *How do students' perceptions of their writing histories affect their dispositions toward future writing assignments?*
- *How do students' descriptions of their experiences in a Writer's Workshop-modeled class correlate with their current attitudes toward writing?*
- *What effect do standardized tests have on student disposition towards writing?*

Andante – Walking through the Rationale

As I consider my own history and past experiences, I consider, too, the genesis of these questions – what do I already believe about them? For one, I believe that past

experiences affect current dispositions and attitudes. This belief aligns, at least somewhat, with Dewey's (1938) philosophy that "every experience lives on in further experiences" (p. 27). Dewey explains that "the quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences" (p. 27). In other words, Dewey believes that positive past experiences may influence later experiences positively, and negative past experiences may influence subsequent experiences negatively.

In pondering the cases of my own students, I wonder about their past experiences: how many of them have had experiences where they worked steadily on a writing assignment only to receive a low score, and for how many of them did this happen often? How many times does such an experience need to happen to cause us to feel negatively about future endeavors? In his principle of continuity, Dewey (1938) posits that every experience takes with it and modifies something that has gone before – "there is *some* kind of continuity in every case" (p. 35, original emphasis). Dewey appears to be saying that our reaction to and/or attitude towards every experience we have is based in some way on something that has occurred before, and each subsequent reaction/attitude revises or shapes our previous attitude as well as our future attitudes – the interaction among experiences is ongoing. If this is, indeed, true, I wonder if, for my students, negative attitudes towards writing that were generated by past negative experiences with writing can be modified to more positive attitudes if current experiences are positive, and if reflecting on the histories of these experiences, i.e. being aware of them, cognizant of them, may lead to more positive attitudes. Their histories are their perceptions of their stories, and according to

Elbow (1990) stories are an important form of knowledge (p. vii). How might this knowledge affect my students?

Further considering the role of our personal histories, in the introduction to Vygotsky's *Mind in Society* (1978), Cole and Scribner write that "not only does every phenomenon have its history, but this history is characterized by changes both qualitative (changes in form and structure and basic characteristics) and quantitative" (p. 7). Their term "phenomenon" could easily be interpreted in terms of experiences, as many experiences could be viewed as phenomenological— what is the perception of the history, or what is the perception of the experience? Surely changes in one's history, from having usually negative experiences to having more positive experiences, could occur, and the more positive experiences, the better for my students. Jeffrey and Wilcox (2013) concur. They write: "Writing research suggests students' stances are not fixed but rather are highly susceptible to change over time and across settings as students socially construct variable subjectivities as writers" (p. 1096). If we define "stance" as "attitude" or "disposition" (as I will refer to them through the remainder of this paper), Jeffrey and Wilcox (2013) seem to imply that a student's disposition towards writing could change if s/he experience positive outcomes through socially constructed learning opportunities and activities.

Perhaps I was on to something...

So again, I find myself wondering about the connection of their perceptions of their past stories to their current attitudes towards writing. My desire to ameliorate, in some way, my students' negative attitudes about writing leads me to consider the social dimensions of education in general, and writing, more specifically. As a National Writing Project (NWP) fellow, I truly believe in the workshop model of learning and writing: Collaboration is hugely

beneficial as we bounce ideas off of one another, listen to each other's perspectives and problems, revise our own thinking as a result. I think back to my experiences completing the NWP Summer Institute (SI) -- the experience shaped who I was to become as a teacher of writing -- and as a writer myself. I had never before fully realized the importance of social participation in communities of practice, as expounded by Lave and Wenger (1991). Whitney (2006), too, in her study of the transformative capabilities of writing, found that "...a key role in a transformative learning process [is] the experience of sharing and receiving feedback on that writing in a writing group" (p. 260). Being a member in such a community -- a community of writers -- I experienced first-hand what it was like to listen to others share their work, as we often read aloud to one another. I experienced first-hand what Gere (1987) suggests: "Knowledge conceived as socially constructed... validates the 'learning' part of collaborative learning because it assumes that the interactions of collaboration can lead to new knowledge or learning" (p. 72-73). I myself fell into the category of "participants [who] frame comments in terms of their own experience with writing... 'Usually I write everything I can think of first and then cut it down later. What do you do?' ... These participants involve others directly in the forms and processes of their own writing" (Gere, p. 74). Listening even to others' *processes* in addition to their words certainly influenced my consideration of my own writing process and helped me learn how to be a stronger, more confident writer. Could the same thing happen for my students?

As I ponder this further, I am convinced that it is the sociocultural, perhaps even the socio-emotional, aspect of writing that helped me develop as a writer -- this collaborative spirit allowed me to participate in this community of writers, not just as a novice writer, but as a

writer. I was a writer because I wrote. I was an active part of the group. Beach, Newell, and VanDerHeide (2016) discuss this in terms of

...the activity theory of learning... a sociocultural model of writing development [that] examines how participation in a particular activity mediated by uses of social practices leads to employment of certain composing practices...[This] approach presupposes that students inductively acquire knowledge of language, genres, discourses, and tools through active participation in writing. (p. 90)

In other words, when students actively engage in writing as a social practice (i.e. working with peers in writing groups), they obtain certain writing skills tacitly – inductively – and then they may transfer or apply these skills to new writing activities. Thus, by allowing my students to work on their writing in groups, collaboratively, sharing their work with one another, they may learn from one another – what others do or don't do – which may, in turn, influence their own writing in terms of development and even affect. It worked for me...!

All that considered, I remember, too, the awkwardness of sharing my work -- it's something akin to stagefright. Sharing my thoughts with others brought me a definite sense of vulnerability – what would they say about it? If it was bad, would they be kind? Would they rip it apart? Would they think less of *me*? But I also realized that we were *all* feeling that vulnerability – that none of us had arrived as writers or as teachers – and I quickly discovered the truth of Gere's (1987) words: "Collaboration ameliorates alienation by reorienting writers toward their readers... Because it works against alienation, the collaboration of writing groups hastens [the] breakthrough" (p. 68). The "breakthrough" Gere (1987) writes of is the one she attributes to John Trimble, who believes that novice writers who work in collaborative groups experience a type of breakthrough when they realize that there are social implications to writing and when they can conceptualize their readers as real individuals in

some real time and space (as cited in Gere, 1987, p. 68). Sharing my writing with my group members, and at times with all the SI participants, not only taught me audience awareness, but it also taught me to be mindful of tone, word choice, specificity. It taught me what Spandel (2005) refers to as “sentence sense,” being aware of how sentences sound in tandem, juxtaposed one against another. It taught me to listen to the sound of my own voice in my writing. Again, I wonder, if this is true for me and my learning to write, can I assume it may also be true for my students? Will they, too, reevaluate their own writing when they hear the writing of others and consider their work in relation? Will this lead them to engage in a type of “metacognitive reflection” (Beach, Newell, & VanDerHeide, 2016), where they contemplate the rhetorical choices they make when writing?

Further noting the “breakthrough” Gere (1987) mentioned above, this breakthrough may occur on the socio-*emotional* level of writing, as well. Vulnerability, alienation – these emotions may be allayed by the collaboration, as Gere suggests. In a similar vein, Larson (1985) tells us that “emotions can bring a person to life...[and] therefore would appear to have an uncertain status in writers’ experiential worlds... They may be disruptive or they may be facilitative” (as cited in Rose, 1985, p.20). Perhaps once my students become accustomed to working with peers and sharing their work with them, the disruptive emotions may be replaced by ones more facilitative to the writing process – a breakthrough – and student writers will bring to life new ways of making meaning in and through their writing; and hence, the socio-emotional aspect of writing collaboratively would potentially reap positive benefits in terms of affect and writing development. Again, it worked for me...!

This leads me to further consider the meaning making aspects of writing. Elbow (1990) writes: “The construction of meaning tends to be a social enterprise as much as if not more than an individual one” (p. 135). If this is true, then students should be able to learn, through working with peers, to make meaning for themselves as writers, as well as make meaning clear for their readers, which again, would tie to a more developed sense of audience, as mentioned previously. This would also, then, align with Jeffrey and Wilcox’s (2013) conception of writing as “socially co-constructed by individuals and disciplinary discourse communities within which they write” (p. 1098). In other words, students who participate in discourse communities should develop a disciplinary discourse – in my class, the discourse of the writer– that may encourage them to experiment more with language in the safety of peer groups and before it lands in the hands of the teacher.

As I contemplate this, I cannot help but also consider the role of talk in writing. In training to be an Advanced Placement Language and Composition instructor, I participated in a type of Fishbowl activity. After reading several articles on a given topic, I was to “talk out,” with the help of a partner, a plan for an argument essay. The interplay of the discussion between Jesse, my partner, and me illustrated for me the importance of both talk as prewriting and talking to another peer as an aid to my thinking. When I wasn’t sure how to support a point or how to organize several sub-points into a larger frame, Jesse pointed out ideas I could use or where something might work better; thus we talked through it together. Along similar lines, Dixon (1967) speaks of the importance of talk in learning to write. He believes teachers should “let exploratory talk precede writing” (p. 46), much as Jesse and I did. Dixon’s (1967) “exploratory talk” can be interpreted as part of the brainstorming prewriting process, a process essential in writing, again, essentially what I did with Jesse. Rowe (2010) tells us that “for

young children, writing is inextricably interwoven with talk, gesture, gaze...” (p. 406). In the Fishbowl activity, Jesse and I used both talk and gesture, as I gestured with my hands which paragraphs I could move up or down to support my thesis. If this use of talk is important for young children, shouldn't it be true for us all? Isn't talk as beneficial for older children and adults? Clearly, for Jesse and me it was extremely beneficial. Also, Elbow (1990) writes:

“Young children turn out to be able to write much more than they can read... if they are given just a little help and encouragement” (p.180). Help and encouragement. Don't all writers need a little help from our friends, especially when entering a new discourse community? I believe that in allowing my students to be part of writing groups where they can brainstorm and talk through ideas and organization methods together, I am teaching them to be more agentic in their writing, and thus develop their writing according to their own interests, needs, and learning styles.

All of this said, I still find myself wondering about the time between third and fifth grade. What happened? What might have happened to make students dislike writing so? As I consider the teachers my own students had in those grades, and the shift in educational philosophy in the Age of Accountability, I find myself thinking about the elementary school curriculum. To be quite honest, I have zero experience with elementary education or curriculum development in el. ed. besides what my own children encountered. But my children didn't have those negative experiences my students spoke of, as I already mentioned. So what may have changed? What may have changed in how writing was being taught? What may have changed in how writing was being spoken of by teachers in the classroom? As I thought about whom those teachers – the ones my students alluded to – were or might be, I began to consider the pressures on the classroom teacher due to the changes in public education since the

implementation of No Child Left Behind. Were teachers being instructed by administrators to abandon past (and potentially effective) writing instruction practices and replace them with new, Common Core-friendly practices? Were they being encouraged to teach writing in ways that focus on passing state assessments instead of developing strong writing skills? Were they spending so much time talking about the need for high scores on these assessments that they were inadvertently instilling fear of writing instead of joy in their students? What has changed in Pennsylvania public schools' writing curriculum?

In the past few years, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has implemented a new assessment system, as mentioned earlier. In addition to the adoption of the Keystone Exam for secondary students, the state adopted the Pennsylvania Value Added Assessment System, or PVAAS, which would link student performance to individual teachers, giving a "Teacher Specific Rating" on our *PDE 82-1: Classroom Teacher Rating Form*. In my building, I was one of only eighteen teachers (out of roughly 180) for whom three years of data was collected and released to my district through PVAAS at that time, which was roughly four years ago. My score supposedly indicates my level of proficiency as an educator as demonstrated by how much my students did or did not show "growth" on their test scores. (Students' scores have followed them since middle school, with the score prior to the one they received under my tutelage having been collected in eighth grade.) The PVAAS was to account for 30% of my overall teacher effectiveness score over time and could eventually affect my salary. Interestingly, Peter Elbow mentioned this phenomenon back in 1990 (*What Is English*, p. 157).

Furthermore, every year teachers in my district are also evaluated according to the Danielson Framework. We receive a Classroom Teacher Observation and Practice Rating on our Planning and Preparation, Classroom Environment, Instruction, and

Professional Responsibilities, and this rating, along with our Teacher Specific Rating, Building Level Rating, and Electives Rating, all add up to our overall Performance Rating of Distinguished, Proficient, Needs Improvement, or Failing. To allow us to contribute to our rating and at the same time self-assess, we also submit mid-year and end of year data tags that demonstrate our level of proficiency. We choose artifacts that we believe demonstrate one of the criteria of that domain, and we complete a data tag to explain what the artifact is and how it demonstrates our proficiency. There are 22 criteria distributed across the four domains of the Framework, so each data tag submitted should align with one of those criteria. These data tags, along with classroom observations conducted by our administrators via the Danielson Framework, are then assessed by an administrator and contribute to our overall Performance Rating. Last year, we were told that there was no specific number of data tags we needed to submit. Instead, we should just submit ones that we believed would clearly indicate our proficiency, but submitting data tags for all fields would not necessarily earn us a rating of Distinguished. In fact, we are told every year, very few of us will earn that rating – perhaps only four or five of the 180 of us. I am only aware of one teacher who received a rating of Distinguished. My own rating was .02 shy of Distinguished last year. It’s not a hill worth dying on.

As I consider this system of teacher evaluation, I am reminded of Mayher’s (1990) “uncommonsense” approach to learning – an approach that argues against the current norms of teaching and testing. Almost thirty years ago

Mayher wrote:

Teachers who attempt to change their approach to an uncommonsense one frequently find themselves confronting the reality that their professional performance is evaluated

not by how much uncommonsense learning their pupils actually attain, but by how well they perform on standardized tests. The basic view of common sense that direct teaching is necessary to successful performance on such tests is so powerful that teachers are understandably fearful that they may be threatening both their own careers and their students' future success in the commonsense school system if they don't go along with the system. By direct teaching in this context I mean devoting time in class to drills which are, in effect, practice versions of the test, thereby both robbing students of the chance to experience the broader context of learning which the test is supposed to be sampling, further emphasizing test passing as the central goal of schooling. (p.69)

It appears that much of what I discussed on the previous page is condensed here, and I'm struck by the fact that this was written almost 30 years ago. Clearly, not much has changed in public education over the past three decades! I wonder if this is how many teachers at the elementary level feel – that they need to teach to the test, and if they don't, their careers may be jeopardized. My own daughter, an elementary school teacher in Texas, has expressed feeling this way. She and I have had many conversations in which she conveyed concern for her fourth-grade students' scores on their state assessment. In a conversation we once had she said:

If I don't prepare them well enough in fourth grade to pass the fifth grades assessment, they will never escape poverty, because their score gets them into a better middle school, which feeds into one of the better high schools, which can get them into college. Their fate is pretty much sealed by how they do in fifth grade. I *have* to teach to the test!

Although the case isn't as dire in Pennsylvania, I wonder: how many elementary and middle school teachers in my district feel these kinds of pressures? Does teaching to the test make these teachers default to pedagogical practices that do not align with known best practices?

The idea of teaching to the test is no new song. As a matter of fact, it is the basis of many books, one of which is Hillocks' (2002) *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning*. In his foreword to the book, Myles Myers mentioned the problem of "the inconsistency between state assessments and state standards" (p. viii); this may, in fact, be one of the factors that led to the development and adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Yet Marshall (2009) believes that "there is a serious incompatibility between the current

standards and assessment movement and our long-established, research supported best practices in the teaching of literacy” (p. 122). I agree. As a National Writing Project fellow, I see that the methods teachers are encouraged to use to teach students how to pass the writing portion of the state exam run counter to good writing pedagogy. The teaching of writing for the test is formulaic, at best, with little to no encouragement for the students to demonstrate critical thinking, which is what teaching writing entails (Hillocks, 2002). I myself have defaulted to teaching a writing formula to the students in my academic track, students who are unlikely to pass the Keystone – I use the ACE method of Answer the question, Cite an example, and Explain how the example you cited supports your answer. Does this teach my students good writing practices or critical thinking? Arguably, no -- but it does offer an almost fool-proof technique to a passing score on the state assessment. As they say, desperate times call for desperate measures, so it was worth a try. And I know that in my “real” argument writing unit, I do follow practices that encourage my students to think deeply about the subject matter they write about. Do other teachers make such negotiations??

I can’t help wondering, though... If best practices are ignored in the face of new standards and assessments, could it be that this incompatibility is what forces, or at least encourages, teachers to teach to the test, if in fact that is what is going on at the elementary level in my district? And is this an illustration of what Burroughs and Smagorinsky (2009) call the “*washback effect*: ‘the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning’” (p. 179, original emphasis)? Elbow (1990) would certainly argue, yes, as he writes that with the push for accountability through standardized testing in American public schools, the teaching of critical thinking has declined (p. 157-158). Elbow (1990), in citing Linda

Darling-Hammond, further argues that ““there [has been] a decline in methods such as student-centered discussion, writing essays or themes, and project or laboratory work”” (p.156) since the explosion of standardized testing. Could this, then, be at least part of the reason that my students dislike writing? Could it be that in the push for higher test scores, teachers are focusing on writing in ways that are detrimental to, or that may stymie, how students learn to express themselves in writing? Has something changed in the teaching of writing in the past ten years or so?

The answers to these questions may reside in my students’ stories, but they may also reside in teacher stories – before and after stories – stories of how teachers taught writing before the adoption of the CCSS and how they teach writing now. I’ll have to ask. And I’ll have to listen... closely.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Polyphonics -- Voices of the Masters

(Writing) Identity -- The voice that tells me who I am

“What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one...Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. That's how being eleven years old is. You don't feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say Eleven when they ask you. And you don't feel smart eleven, not until you're almost twelve. That's the way it is.”

Sandra Cisneros, “Eleven.”

In the excerpt above, the speaker, Rachel, tells the reader what it is like turning eleven, or in other words, she briefly explains her identity as a new eleven year-old. She tells us that her identity as an eleven year-old doesn't come immediately -- it develops over time -- “it takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months.” And her current identity as a new eleven year-old doesn't exclude her other ages -- they remain with her, part of who she now is, just “like the rings inside a tree trunk.” So it is with growing up... so it is with life histories... so it is with writing identities.

A leading voice in the scholarship of writing identity, Ivanič (1998) states, “all our writing is influenced by our life-histories. Each word we write represents an encounter, possibly a struggle, between our multiple past experiences and the demands of a new context... it implicates every fibre of the writer's multifaceted being. Who we are affects how we write, whatever we are writing...” (p. 181). If this is true, then we must ask, who are we as writers? What is our writer identity? Or perhaps even, what is “identity”?

In discussions of identity in itself, the question actually becomes “what do we mean by ‘identity’?” Hyland (2010) defines identity as “a person’s relationship to his or her social world, a joint, two-way production and language allows us to create and present a coherent self to others because it ties us into webs of commonsense, interest, and shared meanings” (p. 160). In other words, Hyland sees identity as ontologically and inherently social, and he sees language as the representation of this self in a social context – a sort of variation on a theme. Gee (2001) speaks of a similar relationship. He sees identity as “being *recognized* as a certain ‘kind of person,’ in a given context” (p. 99). For Gee, part of identity -- an important part -- is recognition. In his discussion of identity and discourses, Gee sees four different recognitions of identity: natural identities which he refers to as N-Identities; institutionally sanctioned identities which he calls I-Identities; identities that are affected by our discourse communities, which he calls D-Identities; and the identities we choose by our affiliations with certain groups, which he refers to as A-Identities. Any of these must be *recognized* in incumbent members by existing members of the group in order for incumbents to be full members of that discourse community. Gee sees these identities as connected to our “performances in society” (p.99), and as such, we may alter our identities to reflect the practices of the particular communities we are in. This performativity aligns with Goffman’s (1959) theory of performance, where he defines the term as “the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (p. 22). Thus, at any given time, a person may be donning, or *performing*, an identity for the primary purpose of appearing to be an authentic member of a certain social group, a writing group or other.

Goffman (1959), Hyland (2010) and Gee (2001), then, clearly view identity as socially constructed -- to coin Hyland and Gee, being a “kind of. person” in “relationship(s)” in our world – being a writer when with writers, being a musician when with musicians, and using the discourse of the group. Ivanič (2006) concurs. She believes that “every aspect of behavior constructs identity in the eyes of others” (p. 7). Again, it is the perception, the recognition, the relationship to *others* which shapes identity. But Ivanič (2006) extends the concept. Ivanič considers the degree of the relationship and discusses it in terms of not just *identity*, but identification: “Identification ... is essential to full participation, and is what makes identity work happen” (p. 14). By calling for “full participation,” Ivanič (2006) alludes to studies conducted by Lave and Wenger (1991), where identification comes as a result of full participation in communities of practice such as midwifery or tailory. Discourse communities, at least for written discourse, then, can be viewed as communities of practice where writers begin to shape and hone their identities as writers of certain kinds of discourse, whether the discourse of midwives or tailors as noted above, or academic discourses. This is especially important to Ivanič (1998), as she writes:

The notion of discourse communities is particularly relevant to the study of writer identity, because each individual takes on an identity in relation to the communities they [sic] come into contact with. Discourse communities are the 'social' element in the expression 'the social construction of identity': a person's identity is constructed by their [sic] membership of, their identification with, the values and practices of one or more communities. One of the ways in which people identify with a community is through the intertextual process of adopting its discourse. (p.83)

Therefore, learning the discourse of the community is how “[new members] achieve credibility as insiders” (Hyland, p. 160) as they learn to wield the language, references, even the jargon, of the community. For example, in a community of student writers like those in my classroom,

novices learn to discuss hooks and leads, motifs and themes, sentence constructions and rhetorical choices. And this, in turn, helps construct identity as a legitimate member of the group, or more specifically, a legitimate member of the community of writers of a given discourse. Much of this identification occurs through the “*intertextual* process of adopting [the] discourse” (Ivanič, 1998; italics added), which will be discussed later.

Flowerdew and Wang (2015) discuss the development of writer identity similarly: “Writer identity construction may be studied as a process situated in multiple temporal dimensions... [N]ovice scholars learn to adopt more appropriate disciplinary voices over time as they become more senior members of the academic community” (p. 88-89). That is to say, developing a writer identity takes time, and only over time do we develop the skills necessary to be viewed as masters of an academic writer community. For Flowerdew and Wang (2015), however, this temporality becomes problematic for novices. In their studies, they found that at times novice members whose development was slower than expected may have run the risk of not being allowed access to the discourse community by gatekeepers who required them to follow certain rules (most likely, rules of grammar and usage). This illustrates a theory of deficiency that often drives the limitation of access to certain communities of discourse by gatekeepers. Flowerdew and Wang (2015), therefore, suggest that the discourse community “may need to change as a result of the participation of new members” (p. 84), at the very least until the new members become full “insiders.”

In light of the above, Ivanič (1998) tells us that “becoming more literate is itself an issue of identity” (p. 70), and Whitney (2008) furthers the point by saying that “...writing in general shapes identity” (p. 149). However, Ivanič’s (1998) use of the word “more” here indicates a tie to a discourse community to which the novice writer is hoping to gain entry -- perhaps moving

from peripheral to full participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Entrance to such a community, an academic discourse community for example, requires a use of discourse appropriate for that academic discipline. So the “more literate” to which Ivanič (1998) refers is actually a more precise written academic discourse, one in which the new-comer takes on the jargon of the community. For example, in a community of rhetoricians, a new-comer may begin using terms such as “ethos” and “kairos” instead of “credibility” and “right time.” Once the new-comer has learned and adopted this discourse, s/he may be considered “more literate” in that discourse and perceived as a member of that discourse community. Gee (2000) would view such membership into a discourse community as an “achievement” (p. 104) if it is a discourse community into which we hope to gain entry, or an “ascription” (p. 104) if membership is ascribed to or assigned to us, again implying a deficit theory. In thinking of my students, I wonder how these achievements or ascriptions may have influenced their perceptions of themselves as literate members of different discourse communities.

This discussion leads to the fact, then, that an identity -- for writers or others -- is not a fixed entity, and therefore identity should be viewed as *identities*. Ivanič (2006) writes that “‘identity’ is misleadingly static... it is more productive to think about identity as a continuous process of identification... A person's identity is in a continuous process of reconstruction and realignment, rather than a static entity” (p. 1, 8), as also mentioned by our 11-year old speaker, Rachel, in the introduction. Ivanič (1998) further argues that our writing identities come from what we’ve read, what we’ve heard, what we’ve spoken and what we’ve written, implying an intertextuality which manifests itself in discussions of voice. This intertextuality may also present itself when a person becomes at least a “partial” or “peripheral participant” (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in a community of learners, where “...peripherality, when it is

enabled, suggests an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement” (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In other words, as we identify more closely with a group, even if marginally at first, we may take on the voices of other, more skilled members of the group as we engage in the practices of that community.

Flowerdew and Wang (2015) define voice as “the way individuals represent or identify themselves in their discourse” (p. 85). They continue: “In the context of the academy, voice is at the same time personal and social, in that individual writers express their individual stance towards their subject matter while at the same time appropriating the voices of others through intertextual practices” (p. 85). Hyland (2010) describes this phenomenon in this way: “Identity is said to be implicated in the texts we engage in and the linguistic choices we make, thus relocating it from the private to the public sphere and from hidden processes of cognition to its social and dynamic construction in discourse...so that writers often consciously or unconsciously take up the identity options [a] discourse makes available” (p. 160-161). In other words, both Flowerdew and Wang (2015) and Hyland (2010) consider that the voices of writers we’ve read may unconsciously slip into our own writer identities and as a result (re)shape our writer identities. In terms of academic writing and academic discourse communities, Hyland (2010) states that “we draw on a repertoire of voices as we write, bringing to task our own experiences, purposes, and conceptions of self to recombine the options offered by the genre we are writing in to perform a professional identity” (p. 162), thus again alluding to the social construction of writer identity through voice.

Matsuda (2015), although reifying voice in his definition, brings in the role of the reader. He first defines voice as “the amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive features that language users choose, deliberately or otherwise, from socially available yet ever-

changing repertoire” (p. 144). His denotation of “‘voice as effect’ recognizes the role of the reader as well as the writer and the text” (p. 145). For him, then, “voice is a phenomenological concept; the writer’s discursive identity -- which is created by the writer’s choices and the textual manifestations of those choices -- is ultimately perceived by the reader” (p. 145). In other words, the writer’s voice is contingent on the reader’s interpretation of his writing (discursive features) and perhaps his status in the discourse community for which he is writing (non-discursive features). This brings to mind Foucault’s (1977) position on discursual authorship: “...its status and its manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates” (p. 19). Here, Foucault seems to be agreeing with Matsuda (2015) in that non- discursive features, i.e. “the culture in which it circulates” are also at play in the conception of writer identity. Matsuda (2015) cautions us, however, that “written discourse [also] exists outside of academic contexts, and theories of identity need to account for more than what is relevant in academic contexts” (p. 150). In other words, writer identity should not be limited to academic discourses.

The above discussion has implied the inextricable nature of intertextuality and writer voice, but this point needs to be expanded. Identity, or rather *identities*, are inherently intertextual. The old adage “You are what you read” tells us this, and by default then, if we consider that we often write to respond to what we’ve read, then our writing will very likely at least whisper the voice of another author or text at some point in time, whether consciously or not, as Hyland (2010) stated. Bakhtin (1981), too, speaks of intertextuality in his discussion of heteroglossia: “Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life... As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s” (p. 293). Here, Bakhtin (1981) implies that all language,

whether spoken, written, has already existed in *another*, in someone else, since language is socially constructed; the words we use are and have been someone else's, despite that they have now become ours, and this new language shapes our identity. This adoption of another's language, often a more sophisticated one, may or may not be conscious, and this conscious or unconscious development of more refined discourse speaks to intertextuality. Ivanič (1998) writes of the intertextuality of identity this way:

Intertextuality contributes to a theory of writer identity in two ways. A writer's identity is not individual and new, but constituted by the discourses s/he adopts. On the other hand, a writer's identity is determined not completely by other discourses, but rather by the unique way in which she draws on and combines them. (p. 86)

It is the novelty or nuances of the discourse as employed by the members of the discourse community, then, that illustrate the intertextual nature of identity. For novice writers, though, this may be problematic as they sometimes try to adopt a voice for which they have not yet developed the skill to “own” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 86). In this way, intertextuality may be said to help develop writer identity through voice.

Flowerdew and Wang (2015), too, speak of the intertextual nature of identity, as stated earlier, when writers “appropriat[e] the voices of others through intertextual practices” (p. 85). Whether this appropriation is through citing others or through the unconscious “tak[ing] up [of] identity options” (Hyland, p. 161), the absorbance of other voices and blending with our own makes clear the intertextuality of discourse in writer identity.

As Rachel, our speaker in the introduction, tells us, an identity -- being eleven, a writer or something other -- doesn't happen right away: “it takes days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say [Writer] when they ask you,”but hopefully, eventually it does happen. Perhaps it will happen as we explore our perceptions of our past writing experiences. Perhaps it will happen as we write with peers. But my greatest hope in considering my students'

perceptions of themselves as writers is that, over time and as part of a workshop-model class, as their writer identities continue to develop and form around them like the rings of a tree, they won't feel like the itchy red sweater that plagued Rachel -- at least, not for very long.

Self-Efficacy - The voice that thinks about me

An old proverb says, "You are what you think." While this sounds like something your grandmother would tell you, many believe it to be true. This proverb can be interpreted as a very loose definition of self-efficacy: students' belief that they are capable of performing a task successfully, or not. A leading expert in the field of psychology, and educational psychology specifically, Albert Bandura (1986) defines self-efficacy as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (p. 391; as cited in Pajares, Johnson & Usher, 2007). For students, this may indicate several different things: it may influence how they approach a task, for example, a writing task (Villalon, Mateos & Cuevas, 2015); it may influence how they perceive the (writing) task (Corkett, Hatt & Benevides, 2011; Pajares, Johnson & Usher, 2007); and it may influence whether and to what degree they persevere through a difficult (writing) task (Corkett, Hatt & Benevides, 2011; Pajares, Johnson & Usher, 2007; Villalon, Mateos & Cuevas, 2015). Accordingly, then, there may be a tie between self-efficacy and agency, but that is beyond the scope of this project.

Recent studies on self-efficacy beliefs indicate correlations between students' self-efficacy beliefs and student achievement. Although there are some inconsistencies (Pajares, Johnson & Usher, 2007), most studies indicate that high self-efficacy leads to high achievement, specifically in writing tasks (Bruning, Dempsey & Kauffman, 2013; Corkett, Hatt & Benevides,

2011). Villalon, Mateos & Cuevas (2015), particularly, hold this view. In their work with high school students and their self-efficacy beliefs, they write: “self-efficacy predicts the quality of the text produced” (p. 670). In other words, students who believe they can write a decent essay will do so, and those who do not believe they can, probably will not. Along these lines, findings indicate that once self-efficacy beliefs are formed, they may not readily change. In their study of student and teacher self-efficacy in reading and writing, Corkett, Hatt & Benevides (2011) posit that teachers should focus on student self-efficacy beliefs because once they have been established, these beliefs may be resistant to change, especially in the case of negative self-efficacy (p. 67). In their review of previous literature on self-efficacy studies, they found that students may indeed possess skills necessary for successful completion of a task, but their lack of belief in their abilities may prevent them from doing so.

Many studies have been conducted on students’ self-efficacy, but oddly, not much has been conducted on writing self-efficacy, in particular. Pajares, Johnson & Usher (2007) see this as problematic: “The area of writing has received modest attention in self-efficacy research, and none in investigations of the sources. This is a noteworthy omission given the importance of writing skills to students’ academic success, and the strong relationship typically reported between writing self-efficacy beliefs and students’ writing performances and achievement” (p. 109). Here, Pajares et al. speculate that it could be the *source* of the self-efficacy that could be at issue, especially in students with low writing self-efficacy beliefs. They posit: “...only by understanding the genesis of self- beliefs can educators engage in practices... aimed at nurturing adaptive self- conceptions or eradicating maladaptive ones” (p. 106). In other words, it could be students’ histories of writing -- what they’ve experienced in previous writing tasks -- that influence their current self-efficacy beliefs

pertaining to writing. If their previous experiences with writing led to poor assessments of their writing, they may consider themselves to be “bad” writers, as in the case of Vivian mentioned previously, and therefore, they may be less inclined to enjoy writing and even less inclined to fully engage in writing activities.

The idea of these negative experiences aligns with Dewey’s (1938) belief that “everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had” (*Experience*, p. 27). According to Dewey, then, if a student has experiences that are poor in “quality,” or negative, this may impact the future experiences they have: “Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into” (*Experience*, p. 38). This can be interpreted to mean that experiences, both positive and negative, move us to future experiences that we may interpret as positive or negative based on those past experiences. If we find those experiences “valuable,” they may influence our future experiences in either direction: even a negative experience, if deemed valuable, may lead to a positive outcome and therefore, potentially positive future experiences; or, on the other hand, a negative experience judged as *invaluable* may perpetuate further negative outcomes.

This is especially important when it comes to experiences in school settings. Vygotsky (1978), in his theory on learning in school settings, writes that “any learning a child encounters in school always has a previous history” (p.84). Vygotsky (1978) speaks here of young children and their learning before formal schooling begins for them. In most cases, the learning experiences of young children at home are positive and lead them to have positive self- perceptions that carry them into their school years. Children with positive previous learning histories will most likely enter school with positive notions of themselves as learners. Once in school, however, these perceptions may

change. For example, a child who had previously believed she was an adequate storyteller and story writer may either continue in these beliefs due to positive feedback from teachers and peers, or, in some cases, if the feedback was not positive over time, it may lead the child to change her self-perception and consider herself less-skilled than she had previously thought. This supports Corkett, Hatt & Benevides' (2011) suggestion that teachers heed their role in promoting or obstructing students' self-efficacy beliefs. To be fair, however, the child's self-perception, if strong enough to begin with, may not be influenced by negative teacher and/or peer feedback at all.

Having strong self-efficacy beliefs to begin with may be a key in students' perceptions of their writing abilities. For example, in a study of gifted and talented students, Webb, Vandiver and Jeung (2016) found that students' self-efficacy may not change from the beginning to the end of an enriched writing program. They indicated that some students "reported a high level of self-efficacy at the onset of the study; thus, it is possible that the change in self-efficacy was too small" to influence any changes in their grades (p. 57). In other words, students with high writing self-efficacy may not have attributed a higher grade on an assessment to an increase in self-efficacy. However, in the same study, these researchers also noted that "it is possible to increase talented students' writing self-efficacy" (p. 57), but they also stress that this is an area that warrants further investigation.

As Pajares, Johnson & Usher (2007) state, "student's beliefs about their own writing competence are instrumental to their ultimate success as writers" (p. 105). Their study examined the sources of writing self-efficacy, further establishing that "the beliefs students hold about their writing capabilities powerfully influence their writing performances, as well as their academic choices they make in high school and college" (p. 117). They suggest that

teachers abandon the deficit model of assessment and focus on process over product: “when encouraged to reflect on their writing progress rather than their writing deficiencies, young people develop robust efficacy beliefs that lead to growth and perseverance” (p. 116-117). In other words, if teachers teach students how to monitor their progress and accept the probable need for revision, students may develop positive self-efficacy that will serve them well later in their academic and/or professional careers. And, over time, this positive self-efficacy may even lead to more positive dispositions toward writing.

Student Dispositions - The voice that thinks about it

Self-efficacy has been defined as “students' perception of their abilities influencing how much effort they put into a task and the extent to which they persist in the face of obstacles” (Corkett, tHatt & Benevides, 2011). Student *disposition*, although possibly related, is different. Disposition, stance, attitude. These terms all basically refer to an inclination or an approach to a learning activity. In other words, in studies of student disposition, how students perceive an activity may influence how they approach it. A positive perception would potentially yield a positive disposition towards an activity, and a negative perception of the activity would yield a negative disposition. Jeffrey and Wilcox (2014) use the word “stance” as a synonym for disposition and define it as “a display of a socially recognized point of view or attitude' which includes students' expressions of how they feel about writing (affective stances) and what they know about writing (epistemic stances)” (p. 1096). Although others may disagree with the epistemological tie to dispositions, student affect, i.e. emotion, is clearly influenced by their dispositions. Jeffrey and Wilcox (2014) further tell us: “Writing research suggests students' stances are not fixed but rather are highly susceptible to change over time and across settings as

students socially construct variable subjectivities as writers” (p. 1096). “Stance” is Jeffrey & Wilcox’s (2014) word for disposition, one of the synonyms noted above. Here, they posit that students’ dispositions toward writing may change as they develop into more skilled writers in or out of school, with or without the help of teachers or peers.

Furthermore, in their study of writing dispositions among students in 20 schools with school-wide literacy initiatives across the United States, Jeffrey and Wilcox (2014) found that 74% of all positive affective stances towards writing occurred in English Language Arts (ELA) classes. Interestingly, they also found that 44% of the total negative stances appeared with regard to ELA classes. They discuss several reasons for this, but I will focus on the ones most important to my point. Students may have these stances toward ELA classes because those are the one where students are offered the most opportunities to write. This being the case, students who like to write would have more positive dispositions since they are able to write using their own “voices” and “opinions” (p. 1104). On the contrary, students who had negative dispositions to writing often cited genre differences as the cause -- they found literary analysis essays, for example, as “rigidly bound by criteria for formal features, topic, and accuracy (e.g. grammar)” (p. 1105), and students also mentioned that subjects other than ELA often limited students’ writing to “facts” and “accuracy” (p. 1104), also causing a negative writing disposition. It is easy to see that students’ dispositions to writing are influenced by what types of writing they are permitted or encouraged to do in school settings

These findings are consistent with Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod & Rosen’s (1975) analysis of writing development in adolescents. Students often perceive school writing as for the teacher only as audience. For this reason, they may feel more limited to express themselves freely when writing formal essays such as literary analyses or other research papers. In their

discussion of a writer's sense of audience, Britton et al. (1975) address this: "The more powerful point is that the conventions of this particular audience category may be a severe restriction upon a young writer" (p. 127). Here, Britton et al. are referring to the relationship they call "pupil to examiner," where students write solely for the teacher as the main audience and assessor of their writing. When this is the case, they posit, young writers often feel that they need to take on a formal tone, perhaps even trying on language that they would not use if they were writing for themselves, even in an epistemological sense, and as stated previously, this "severe restriction" causes them to have negative writing dispositions. Britton et al. (1975) further write: "In transactional writing then ... the expressive language of the writer is modified, under the demands of the participant role, to perform a transaction that seeks outcomes in the real world" (p. 160). Here, "transactional writing" refers to "language to get things done: to inform people..., to advise or persuade or instruct people" (p. 88), and "expressive language" may refer to a number of modes, such as "writing addressed to a limited public audience assumed to share much of the writer's context and many of his values and opinions and interests" (p. 89) or "writing, intended to be read by a public audience, in which the writer chooses to approach his reader as though he were a personal friend..." (p. 90). In either case, expressive writing as defined by Britton et al. (1975) is more intimate and personal than transactional writing, and as a result, the expressive mode becomes "modified" or reserved when writing for transactional, "real world" purposes, which in turn, creates a negative writing disposition in students. Although Britton et al. (1975) don't specifically speak of writing *dispositions* -- they use the words "functions" and "approaches to functions" -- the "approaches" students take toward these "functions" can easily be interpreted as the *dispositions* they take toward writing tasks.

Sengul (2015) investigated the writing dispositions of gifted students, looking for a significant relationship between students' intelligence domains as per Gardner's (1983) Multiple Intelligence Inventory and their writing dispositions. Findings indicated that most gifted students in the study demonstrated only "developed" verbal-linguistic intelligence (the fourth-highest level on a five-point Likert scale), whereas they demonstrated "highly developed" logical-mathematical intelligence (the highest level). The study, which examined writing dispositions according to Piazza and Siebert's (2008) Writing Disposition Scale, indicated that gifted students had strong positive attitudes towards confidence in their writing abilities, but negative attitudes in their passion for writing and writing continuity (or persistence) (p. 211). Furthermore, according to Sengul (2015), "the findings ... showed that a 'lack of will to write'... and 'the failure of teachers in making students like writing' are true for gifted students and there is a need to include activities to improve gifted students' writing dispositions" (p. 213). This finding puts much of the onus of positive writing dispositions on the teacher and leads to the question of how students' writing dispositions may be influenced by their self-efficacy. In other words, according to Sengul's findings, it is the job of the teacher to make students like writing and help them attain the will to write -- to try to influence in students a positive disposition towards writing; however, according to Corkett, Hatt & Benevides' (2011) definition, at least part of the definition of self-efficacy deals with the influence of the students' effort.

This is interesting, because one of the four components of Weiner's (1974) Attribution Theory (as cited in McLeod, 1987), which examines people's explanations of the causes of behavior and events, is effort. This theory lists four causes of success or failure: ability, effort, task difficulty and luck. Two of these (ability and effort) are internal, meaning they are

controlled by the individual; two (task difficulty and luck) are external, lying outside an individual's control. Therefore, according to McLeod (1987), when students come to us believing, perhaps rightly due to their previous writing experiences (or writing histories), that their writing teachers are finicky so their success in that writing class will have little to do with their ability or their effort, this belief will hinder their writing effort (p. 430). MacLeod further states that, in accordance with attribution theory, "attributional patterns are also related to an individual's self- concept... Individuals with a high self-concept tend to attribute successes to internal causes and failures to external causes, while those with a low self-concept tend to attribute success to external and failure to internal factors" (p. 430). Here we see the close tie between writing disposition and writing self-efficacy. In other words, it may be poor self-efficacy and not a negative disposition towards writing that causes students to look only to the teacher "to make [them] like writing." If, then, it is possible to help students build more positive self-efficacy and develop more positive dispositions toward writing, perhaps it is also possible to allay their anxieties about writing.

Writing Anxiety - The voice that speaks fear

Many studies have been conducted on writing anxiety's tie to students' self-efficacy, and even to their disposition towards writing. One such study, conducted by Cocuk, Yelken & Ozer (2016), examined the relationship between Turkish secondary students' writing anxiety and writing disposition. Citing several researchers, they defined writing anxiety as "a general avoidance of writing and of situations perceived by the individuals to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation of that writing" and "the worry a person feels toward a task of qualified writing" (p. 336). Their findings found a positive

correlation between writing anxiety and writing dispositions, although they felt this was not enough to make a cause-and-effect statement. But they also note that the severity of the writing anxiety could “drain students’ motivation to become more competent writers” (p. 346). In other words, students may be so anxious about writing situations that they become enervated, thus unable to work through the challenges necessary to improve. These researchers suggest that engaging in writing workshops may help students improve their dispositions toward writing and reduce their level of writing anxiety.

Berk and Unal (2017), also studying Turkish students - these in sixth through eighth grades - found a clearer connection. Their research showed that writing disposition was, indeed, a significant predictor of writing anxiety. Using a regression analysis model, their findings indicated that “when writing disposition increases, writing anxiety decreases” (p. 247). This study also found that students’ gender and grade level affect writing anxiety. They found that at this educational level (middle school), writing anxiety in male students was greater than in female students (p. 247). This is interesting, because Cocuk, Yelken & Ozer (2016) found that at the secondary level, writing anxiety affected female students more negatively than male students. Comparatively speaking, it appears that findings in this area are inconsistent, at best, and gender issues are beyond the scope of my study.

In terms of writing anxiety and self-efficacy, Singh and Rajalingam (2012) found a correlation. In their study of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pre-university students’ self-efficacy beliefs, they wrote: “for the relationship between level of writing apprehension and self- efficacy beliefs, it was found that ... with high self-efficacy beliefs, the students had lower writing apprehension levels” (p. 49). However, they also found that “highly apprehensive writers seldom participate in writing... [and] were more

inclined to procrastinate” (p. 49-50). This suggests a type of Goldilocks effect, where too little self-efficacy yields more anxiety or apprehension, yet the right amount acts as a motivator, as suggested by Cocuk, Yelken & Ozer (2016).

Pajares, Johnson & Usher (2007), in their work with elementary and middle school students, too, reported that students’ writing anxiety informed their self-efficacy beliefs about writing. Pajares (2003) refers to Bandura’s (1986) argument that “anxiety is mediated by self-efficacy beliefs; that is, feelings of anxiety are largely a result of the confidence with which students approach a task” (p. 146). Here, Pajares seems to be saying that the greater the confidence in the task, writing or other, the less anxiety the student may experience. This is quite similar to Berk and Unal’s (2017) discussion of the link between writing anxiety and writing disposition, as mentioned above.

Other studies (Al Asmari, 2013; Ball, Zhang & Tachiyami, 2008; Lavelle, Smith, & O’Ryan, 2002; Wellington, 2010) concur, citing further evidence that when a student’s affective domain is negatively impacted by prior negative learning experiences, the student makes rhetorical choices based on these experiences, which in turn, affects their effort. Wellington’s (2010) work shows that this is true even for post-graduate students, who often use words like “stress, fear, isolation and anxiety” to express their feelings towards writing (p. 146). Al Asmani (2013) voices a similar outcome in his work with undergraduate students: “A significant negative correlation was found between students’ writing apprehension and their writing achievement” (p. 130). We can speculate that if these feelings exist in students in higher academia, the same may be true for younger students, who perhaps never overcome negative associations. And although as Larson (1988) tells us, some anxiety is to be expected, it is when

“... [writing anxiety] creates emotional and cognitive havoc that makes writing impossible” (p. 157) that it may lead to associations that stymie success in future writing activities.

On a similar note, L.Z. Bloom (as cited in Rose, 1985) brings our attention to the contextual aspect of writing and anxiety. She writes: “An anxious writer out of context may be neither anxious nor a writer... To understand the difficulties of anxious writers we must examine them in context, for in the context may lie clues to the solutions, as well as to the problems” (p. 121). L.Z. Bloom seems to suggest that outside of the context of school, for example, novice writers may feel no anxiety towards writing events at all. They may approach writing with a sense of confidence and perhaps even enjoyment. How, then, to dispel writing apprehension in the classroom, where students may have had prior negative experiences? How may I use the context of school to influence positive writing experiences, if this is at all possible? Would it help if students worked together, shared their apprehension with each other, either directly or indirectly? Would a workshop model classroom where students responded to their peers allay some of the trepidation they feel? These questions bring me to consider the viability of using such a classroom along with peer response groups to instill in my students more positive associations to writing in the school context.

Writer’s Workshop and Peer Response Groups - Multiplicity in voices

Peer response groups and/or writing workshops, or what Gere (1987) calls “writing groups,” (p. 1) have a long history. Contrary to the popular belief that they originated as outcomes of the Dartmouth Conference of 1966 (Gere, 1987), and although they did gain popularity after this time, these groups had their beginnings as early as the 1890s, during which time they were referred to as “literary societies” (Applebee, p. 12) where college students would

meet to discuss contemporary literature, as well as their own writing (Gere, 1987). The purpose of these early groups was "...to improve the participants' skills as writers by allowing each member to have a turn reading his or her original work, after which the groups would respond with suggestions and literary criticism" (Gere, 1987, p. 15) -- much like the form these groups take today.

Over time, these writing groups progressed from being called "literary societies" to "writer's clubs" to "classroom workshops," and they were instituted in colleges and eventually in high schools and primary schools as well (Gere, 1987), much with the help of Peter Elbow's 1974 publication of *Writing Without Teachers*. What is evident here, especially in the progression of these groups throughout the educational spectrum, is the sociocultural aspect of writing specifically, and learning in general: students gathering to read and critique one another's work as well as to hone their own writing skills. Classroom implications lead me to first discuss the sociocultural theories of learning in the school setting.

As a point of clarification, for the remainder of this paper, I will use the terms "writer's workshop," "peer response groups," and "writing groups" interchangeably as per the researcher(s) reference. However, I also fully believe that the terms themselves are interchangeable -- Gere (1987) tells us that in the early days of the literary groups and clubs in the late 1890s, "the method [of peer response]" was renamed: "*later...called the 'workshop' approach...*" (emphasis added) and was adopted by the University of Iowa in its first creative writing class in 1897 (p. 15). Thus, splitting these terms seems to be a matter of semantics, as the methods themselves indicate their sociocultural nature, especially in relation to learners in a classroom environment.

It is not news that teens are highly social creatures. As a matter of fact, it's their social-ness that often causes teachers distress in trying to quiet them down long enough to teach. But this social-ness is actually what teachers should aspire to in construction of classroom practices, for as Vygotsky (1978) tells us, "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (p. 88). Adults should, in other words, anticipate and expect social influences, and even socio-cultural influences in a classroom community, to be active in the learning processes of all children, teenagers, in particular.

These socio-cultural influences are, as a matter of fact, exactly what Lave and Wenger (1991) describe in their seminal work, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Here, learning is done in situ, i.e. by doing, as in an apprenticeship. When learning takes place in learning communities, students work with peers as well as with skilled practitioners to develop skills necessary for full participation in whatever the learning community calls for. Opportunities for learning are situated -- i.e. placed specifically for developing new practices -- and participation is negotiated by practitioners according to the skill level mastered to date (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In the case of tailors, for example, a novice may begin working in a tailor's shop sewing on buttons, and once s/he has mastered that, would move on to sewing seams, then eventually to whole jackets. Reaching mastery is key to achieving full participation, and the situatedness helps the novice achieve full participation with much practice.

Gee (2004), too, discusses the situatedness of learning. In *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling*, Gee (2004) speaks of learning as situational and provides an example of children watching television. He posits that those who watch with an

adult or parent often learn more about the program than those who watch alone. This happens because of the interaction, the discussion pertaining to the events in the program watched by parent and child: "It's the situation that counts" (p. 21), meaning that learning happens in the situation of community more readily than in the situation of isolation. He later states, "if language is to be learned and used, it has to be situated" (p.117). This gives rise to discussions of situatedness in classroom environments. If learning is situated and mediated (Kwok, Ganding III, Hull & Moje, 2016) by the culture, it can be said that writing can be both situated and mediated by the classroom community.

Schultz (2009) furthers ties sociocultural learning theories to the classroom:

"Sociocultural theories of learning suggest that learning is fundamentally a social and cultural activity (rather than an internal or cognitive/behavioral one), which cannot be separated from its historical, cultural, and institutional contexts" (14). The historical and institutional contexts could be viewed as school settings, and since learning takes place as we read and write, it may be the outcomes from events in these settings that influence our attitude towards academics.

In a similar vein, Beach et al. (2010) believe that writing development may be assessed looking through a sociocultural lens. They state: "A sociocultural perspective suggests the need to determine writing development based on changes in students' use of social practices over time through participation in particular contexts" (p. 95). In other words, a student's progress may be monitored and assessed by his/her engagement, active or not, in a particular environment. These "particular contexts" may be what Gee (2001) refers to as "discourse communities" (p. 110) where students develop the discourse, i.e. language, of the community through interaction with peers. Elbow (1973) refers to this development in writing as a "transaction with other people" (p. 76). In discussing what to do when writer's block sets in or

when a writer gets “stuck,” Elbow writes: “There is nothing better than finding one person, or more, to talk to” (p. 49); in other words, engaging in dialogue, a give-and-take of sorts -- a transaction -- with others. For Penny Kittle, (2008) who has spent most of her career working with teen writers, collaboration, i.e. working with peers, is a main tenet. Kittle (2008) believes that “writers grow with regular response to their work and to the work of other writers” (p. 85). Understanding, too, that teachers cannot possibly read and respond as much as students need (Gallagher, 2006), Kittle (2008) believes that by creating groups of good responders, students learn more (p. 91). And Moffett (as cited in National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006) lists “collaboration with others” (p. 10) as one of the critical phases of writing development.

To encourage socio-cultural practices in the classroom, setting up workshops and peer response groups may be of paramount importance to the development of writers. Decades ago, Dixon (1967) in his seminal work *Growth through English*, called for classrooms, English classrooms in particular, to adopt a “ ‘workshop’ method, with individuals working with each other in groups of changing pattern” (p. 98) Dixon (1967) believed that in the most effective classrooms, students learn to take the onus of learning upon themselves, sometimes working with peers, sometimes working alone, this after the teacher has provided a framework for such a learning system to take place (p. 96). Blau (2010) follows suit, suggesting a workshop model where students write commentaries and share them with a small group. He claims that this workshop requires students to participate in academic discourse by placing them in an environment where the writing is academic and will lead to the development of critical thinking, as well. Blau (2010) believes that it is the sociocultural aspect of the workshop itself that encourages engagement in academic discourse.

In a similar vein, Rowe (2010) writes: “From a sociocultural perspective, learning to write is about social participation” (p. 402) because “writing occurs between people” (p. 410) and Gee (2004) would concur, offering that children (or students in general) often learn more from peers than from authority figures (p. 55). Here, the benefits of the workshop model are clear, illustrating the social aspect of participation. Beach, Newell & VanDerHeide (2016), too, believe in writing as social participation. They state that a “sociocultural perspective foregrounds the social practices student writers acquire through learning to adopt and adapt in constructing social and cultural contexts for their writing” (p. 90). In other words, when teachers view writing as a sociocultural practice, students learn to navigate writing activities as they work together, learning from one another in different learning environments and making necessary adjustments to writing activities. These researchers further cite activity theory of learning, positing that “a sociocultural model of writing development examines how participation in a particular activity mediated by uses of social practices leads to employment of certain composing practices” (p. 90). Here again, they indicate that when students write in groups with their peers, they learn from one another by working together, exchanging ideas, and presumably sharing their work by reading aloud to one another or providing copies of their written pieces. Again, the benefits of a sociocultural perspective via a workshop model are clear.

An important benefit of working with peer groups in the classroom is the immediate feedback students receive. Any classroom teacher knows that providing quick response to student writing is of utter importance, yet the realities of classroom life can make that difficult at best (MacArthur, 2016). Bazerman (2016), however, asserts that here is where peer response groups can be helpful:

Peer response and other collaborative practices have also provided more immediate reactions to student writing in terms that may be more familiar and perhaps more immediately useful to students.... In collaborative writing, students explicitly share their problem-solving thinking, planning, revising, and other processes. Providing peer feedback on the writing of others provides better understanding of one's own writing (p. 17).

We see, then, that it is not only the immediate feedback that makes peer groups work, but it is also the language that students use in their interactions with one another that may be more understandable and relatable than “teacher talk.”

Other studies on workshops and peer response groups indicate similar outcomes of students writing together. Hussein and Al Ashri (2013) discuss the benefits of Peer Response Groups (PRGs). In their study of first year secondary students in Egypt, they found that PRG strategies “were effective in developing the writing performance and self-efficacy of the students” (p. 3). Loretto, DeMartino & Godley (2016) also found positive outcomes from PRGs. Findings from their study indicated that “peer review is a practice that can benefit students from varying backgrounds and school contexts: urban and suburban communities, high and low socioeconomic status, and multiple grade levels” (p. 147). In their study, mostly conducted in online writing forums, they further discovered that one of the potential benefits of peer review to have students take ownership of their work and develop audience awareness (p. 137). Also, because online forums can be anonymous, as in the method they chose, for some students, the anonymity was problematic because students wanted to know who reviewed their papers so they could decide how much stock to put into the feedback (p. 150). In other words, sometimes students feel that their peers are unqualified, so they prefer teacher feedback.

Gallagher (2006), too, speaks to the issue of peers who may not be “qualified” enough to provide proper feedback, but his focus regards peer *editing*, specifically. He believes that although students often do not possess the skills to effectively edit peer papers, “they do have

the ability to help one another revise (make the content of their papers better)" (p. 12). So it appears that when responding to the ideas of their contemporaries, student-to-student feedback may be more effective than teacher-to-student feedback.

Similarly, a study conducted by MacArthur (2016), found that sometimes students prefer peer feedback to teacher feedback because they deem teacher feedback ineffective (p. 275). MacArthur asserts the benefits of peer feedback: "First, giving feedback requires students to take the perspective of readers, which may increase awareness of audience... Second, peer review engages students in reading critically, applying evaluation criteria, and recommending solutions" (p. 277). MacArthur (2016) seems to be saying that students learn best from feedback from one another, perhaps because they become more aware of how their own writing may sound.

There are, however, pitfalls to feedback solely from peers, as Loretto et al. (2017) suggest: "When students are concerned about how peers will perceive them if they give critical feedback, they tend to give only general praise rather than suggestions for improvement" (p. 147). But on this point, Gray (2000) would argue for a "crucial balance between praise and critique" (p. 93) in peer response groups.

A common feature in much of the discussion of peer response groups is the role of talk. The value of talk cannot be overlooked. Saidy & Early (2016), in their work with peer groups, indicate talk as one of the three components of their workshop model: first students read and write, then they talk and listen, then they reflect and plan (p. 55). These researchers further cite Hillocks, who believes that "listening and talking are integral elements of any relationship and are also an integral part of the revision process" (p. 57). Hillocks here

compares the act of working with peers during the writing process to any relationship, where, of course, verbal communication is essential.

Romano (1987) refers to talking as part of “percolation” (p. 62) of ideas, i.e. what many refer to as brainstorming. Since students talking about their writing is a main goal of his peer response groups, he believes that students will “fall short of that goal” (p. 69) if they share their work only with him. Romano (1987) further states:

...talking in peer response groups -- without the teacher present -- gives students opportunities to be more freewheeling in their conversation, so they will more readily speak the tentative idea, say the irreverent phrase, reveal a lack of knowledge, attempt to communicate the emotion they only dimly realize they feel. (p. 70)

In other words, students are freer to speak their minds and be vulnerable when they share their writing with peers as opposed to doing so with their teacher. Kittle (2008) agrees. In her work with high school students, she encourages talking. When students meet with their workshop groups, Kittle (2008) has them first complete specific tasks; then she asks them to just talk through their process or drafts. She believes that the activity of talking with their peers encourages students’ growth in writing (p. 85). Like Romano (1987), Kittle’s encouragement of talk in writing workshops demonstrates exactly what the literary societies of the nineteenth century called for: the “dialogue between writer and context” (Gere, 1987, p.73). The context here, of course, is writing in the classroom setting.

Allowing student talk as part of their writing process does not come without challenges. Sady & Early (2016) state that “one of the greatest challenges of the talk/listen section is teaching students *how* to talk and listen to one another” (p. 57, emphasis added). A remedy for this, however, could simply be for the teacher to model the behaviors of how to talk and listen (Kittle, 2008; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006; Romano, 1987; Schultz, 2009). And Kittle (2008) mentions the challenge of keeping students on-task

during their allotted talk time (p. 82). As a remedy to this problem, however, she relies on her beliefs about what a workshop should look like:

If writer's workshop is going to remain a 'happy, productive place' as Katie Wood Ray suggests, then I can't disturb it with an insistent background beat of "Get back to work! Stop talking!" ... It doesn't mean I give myself over to students' laziness and inattention, but rather, I address it when I see it in a consistently *kind* tone. (p. 82-83, original emphasis)

Here, Kittle (2008) respects the students' need to talk, but she also reminds them *gently* to return to writing when the talk becomes non-germane.

Thirty years ago, Gere (1987) wrote: "A century ago, as now, advantages attributed to writing groups included increasing student motivation toward writing, and particularly toward revising, ... developing greater audience awareness...; fostering critical capacities and intellectual precision...; and creating a positive classroom atmosphere along w/ enhancing the self-image of individual students" (p. 17). The advantages listed herein, although not without inherent problems, were as important then as they are today.

* * * * *

As I consider the utilization of writing groups in my classroom as a method to dispel at least some of the angst my students feel towards writing activities that are assessed, I find myself still haunted by the sounds of my students' voices reiterating, "I loved writing up through third grade, and then..." ... "...and then..." ... "and then in fifth grade..." I find myself wondering, as mentioned previously, how the teaching of writing in my district may have changed not only between third and fifth grade, but also as a result of the push for standardization, the push for accountability via testing and standardized testing in particular – the PSSA and Keystone Exam in Pennsylvania, the SAT, ACT, ETC. There appears, to me, to be a link (a missing link?) between how teaching was taught prior to the adoption of the CCSS

and the adoption of the Keystone Exam in Pennsylvania and how it is being taught today. How is the testing craze influencing how teachers are being encouraged to teach writing, if at all? How may changes in how standardized tests are being used today be influencing all of our educational procedures? These questions lead me to consider and review the development of and rationale behind standardized testing in the United States and in Pennsylvania, specifically.

* * * * *

Standardized Testing - The Audition

Standardized testing has had a long and somewhat sordid past in the United States, now some 150 years in the making. The recent mandate for accountability has left educators from virtually every state in the Union tasked with preparing students for high-stakes tests. To understand the push for standardization and accountability, perhaps it is best to begin with a historical overview of high-stakes standardized testing in America.

As early as the mid-1830s with the growing number of immigrants in the US around the time of the Industrial Revolution, there was a call for the public education system to provide “universal schooling... [in order to] ‘Americanize’ the masses” (Congress). Even prior to this, American leaders such as Thomas Jefferson and Noah Webster advocated for education to promote citizenship and pro-American ideology (Maranto). In 1845, Horace Mann, a pioneer in the evolving educational system, spearheaded the first written standardized tests in order to “classify children (in pursuit of more efficient learning) and to monitor school systems by external authorities” (Congress) -- thus the establishment of early tracking, monitoring and accountability systems in the American public school system. These methods

were originally aimed at the neighborhood primary schools of the time, but soon thereafter were implemented in Mann's "common schools" (Myers) as the Standards Movement began.

Shortly thereafter, then Harvard President Charles Eliot, unhappy with the quality of education of some of the recent enrollees which he believed was caused by slipping standards (Congress), called for a system of college entrance examinations, and the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) was established, with the first round of testing in nine subjects administered around the country in 1901 ("History of Standardized Testing"). Here began the inclusion of the university sector in the development of public school standardized testing. Eliot further influenced testing in America with development of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in 1926, when he called for "a 'comprehensive' exam designed to measure ability to synthesize and creatively interpret factual knowledge" (Congress, p. 125). By this time, testing in America was becoming firmly established.

In 1912, the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test was developed, combining French psychologist/neurologist Alfred Binet's research with that of scholars at Stanford University ("History of Standardized Testing"). This test became the standard for measurement of human intelligence and is still in use today.

The next push towards standardization and standardized tests came with the United States' involvement in World War 1 in 1917. The American Psychology Association helped the Army develop group intelligence tests to be administered to incoming soldiers in order for them to be placed in positions where they would be most effective (Applebee; Congress), and the Army Alpha Tests were established. These tests were the first multiple choice tests used for assessment purposes and ignited the most rapid expansion of the standardized testing movement ("History of Standardized Testing"). By this point in time, standardized tests became the norm

(Myers), and, due to the rise of the “scientific method, “the word “scientific” itself became synonymous with “efficient” (Applebee) -- almost anything deemed “scientific” was expected to be accurate.

In 1929, another wave of rapid expansion of standardized testing came onto the front with the development of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. These tests, used statewide in Iowa and outside Iowa by the end of the following decade, illustrated the feasibility of wide-scale testing at a reasonable cost (the cost of testing will be addressed later in this section) and swung the pendulum of educational testing away from ranking students and back toward diagnostics and monitoring (Congress).

Efficiency, as stated earlier, has always been at the base of the standardized testing movement in the US. Efficiency played an even greater role in the mid-1930s with the application of electronic data processing equipment to testing, and again, in the same vein, in the late 1950s with the introduction of more computerized scoring and the added benefit of reporting results to schools (“History of Standardized Testing”). These scoring systems, some in the form of what is commonly known as “scantron” machines, themselves caused an enormous jump in testing writ large. By 1961 an estimated 100 million standardized tests were administered to students in grades K-12 (Congress). Currently, with over 50 million students attending American public schools (US Department of Education) and an estimated 112 mandatory standardized tests per student during his/her academic tenure (Strauss), that number would be in excess of 600 million tests administered.

The launching of Sputnik by Russia in 1958 led to the widespread call for higher standards in mathematics and science teaching. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 began the process by allocating federal monies for the development of “...a program for testing

aptitude and abilities of students in public secondary schools, and... to identify students with outstanding aptitudes and abilities..." (National Defense Education Act) -- thus more testing. The following decade, too, saw an increase of norm-referenced testing as a result of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Congress).

In the past thirty years, one of the greatest waves of increased testing came as a result of the publication of "A Nation at Risk" in 1983, during the Reagan administration. Au and Gourd (2013) claim that "fifty-four state-level commissions on education were created within one year of the report's publication" (p. 14) and within ten years, every state but Iowa had administered some form of state-mandated test. Since then, every president has had some promise for educational reform, with, arguably, the greatest influence coming from President G.W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) legislation in 2001 (Maranto), which mandated that every student be proficient in math and reading by 2014, an item Ravitch (2010) calls its "most toxic flaw." The Obama administration, too, with its "Race to the Top" (RTTT) version of NCLB, supported using standardized test scores to evaluate students and their teachers, and committed to using state adoption of the Common Core State Standards to privilege federally supported educational reforms (Au and Hollar).

The early ideology for standardization called for testing as an efficient way to educate all students. Horace Mann, for example, believed in education for groups of students, but he also believed in individuality, and therefore, thought that the job of the classroom teacher "was to tailor lessons in the classroom to meet the needs of individual children: [since] children differ in temperament, ability, and interest' [they] need to be treated accordingly" (Congress). American educationist Henry Barnard believed having students of different abilities in the same classroom to be "inhumane" (Congress), calling for differentiation

also, and advocating for testing to provide the data that would enable this type of differentiation. So here we see that the initial *intentions* of these early educational leaders were for what they believed would be the betterment of our educational system. It is safe to say that the developers of intelligence tests, the Iowa Test, the SAT, the scantron machine, etc. all had good intentions. Arguably, even the developers of NCLB had good intentions. However, an old proverb tells us that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and many believe we are, and perhaps have been, on the road to hell as a result of the standardization movement.

Standardized tests, often coming with high stakes, are rife with problems - - too many to discuss in any great detail within the confines of this paper -- but among them the fact that although intended to “close the achievement gap” (NCLB site), studies since the inception of the Standards Movement show declines (Costigan, 2008). Elbow (1990) speaks of declines in critical thinking, Luke and Woods (2009) cite a decline in reading and math scores on standardized tests since the passing of NCLB; and studies by Marshall, et al. indicate that although the proponents of the Standards Movement claim that there is one best system of teaching and assessing for public schools, there is little empirical evidence to support such claims. They claim a “serious incompatibility” between the standardization/assessment movement and long-established best practices. Moffett (1992) spoke of the same dilemma almost three decades ago. He believes that schools may be finding improvement difficult because states and districts have been required by law to build standardized tests into their curriculum and any new textbooks “so that everybody has to teach to the tests and ignore both their personal expertise and the urging of their professional organizations” (p. 2). Au (2009) writes that NCLB actually *increased* the achievement gap, especially for students of color (p. 65), at least in part due to racial biases (Au & Gourd; Kozol; Willis; Wang); and research by

Beach, et al. (2016) suggests a "widening gap between high-stakes, standardized assessments of writing as decontextualized skill measured by limited rubrics versus writing to produce meaning within a social context" (p. 96). Costigan (2008), too, writes that "...gaps between Hispanics and African American on the one hand and Whites on the other are not narrowing, and even in some cases growing" (p. 6).

Another major problem with standardized tests is that they have become the primary basis for judging students' abilities (Congress). And one of the many problems with basing achievement and effectiveness on only standardized test scores is that evaluators avoid assessing other things such as what Kozol (2005) lists as "charm or humor or sincerity or, on the reverse side, dutiful banality" (p. 329). Taubman (2009) makes a similar remark. He believes that in focusing so rigidly on the outcomes of standardized tests, "...it becomes increasingly difficult to employ a language attentive to the nuances of meaning, to the beauty of the idiosyncratic, to the variegated hues of experience" (p. 52). Kozol (2005 and Taubman (2009) allude specifically to writing instruction and assessment. In speaking of testing and writing, Hillocks (2002) writes:

"Multiple choice tests present the correct answer with three or more distractors... Therefore, the test taker cannot *create* an answer (emphasis added)... The more class time devoted to such [test prep], the less class time can be devoted to higher-level thinking... When schools are truly interested in higher level thinking, they demand a good deal of writing on complex topics... In the past 30 years, researchers and theorists have come to know that teaching writing entails teaching thinking" (p.5-6).

Here, Hillocks seems to believe that the creativity and critical thinking required by writing is stifled because of preparation for multiple-choice tests; and because of the amount of time many districts require for test preparation, there is not enough time left for the time-consuming act of writing. He also practically predicts what Au & Gourd (2013) found in their study of standardized tests of writing in Massachusetts public schools: "Writing instruction... has

succumbed to time, genre, length, and process constraints required by the tests, resulting in less student voice in writing, less integration of writing with other content, less time for students to explore diverse genres, and more formulaic writing” (p. 17-18). Here again, critical thinking and creativity are stymied by preparation for standardized tests -- not only are teachers not teaching students to write, they are also not teaching them to think.

One other problematic factor pertaining to standardized testing that cannot be overlooked is its tie to the economy. While many educational reformers claim that standardizing testing is relatively inexpensive as compared to hiring more teachers, reducing class sizes, allowing more time for collaboration with other teachers (Costigan, 2008), the market for the preparation, testing, assessment, and data analysis for standardized tests for K-12 education in the US is estimated at over \$700 billion (Au & Hollar), and 90% of the revenues are in the hands of only a small number of businesses (Au, 2008). It appears that a monopoly of sorts exists, as it is likely that the businesses producing these resources lobby strongly for standardization as the best method to truly assess student learning. Also, this influence of business on educational policy through the efforts of lobbyists and CEOs, which has risen in recent decades, allows businesses a great deal of input regarding what appears on the tests as they align the skill set possessed by high school graduates going to college with the skill sets they deem necessary for success in certain fields (Nichols and Berliner, 2008), thus completely ignoring (and perhaps undermining) the fact that not all students will attend college at all, and dismissing that career-readiness may not require the same skills as college- readiness.

There is, however, an antidote to the testing craze: opting out. The Opt- Out Movement is a grassroots advocacy group begun in 2015 by parents and teachers (with the union's

endorsement) in New York state after the New York Board of Education rolled out a new assessment system based on the Common Core State Standards without providing teachers adequate time to prepare themselves or their students for the test (“Making Sense”; Wang). The term “opt- out” literally means that parents could “opt” their children “out” of taking these standardized tests -- and many did.

Proponents of the group have several objections to the current standardized testing craze. According to Scott Levy, a New York State public school parent and local school board member, several of the objections deal with the length and/or frequency of the tests; the time test prep takes away from other academic areas; the quality of the tests since they did not appear to align with the Common Core curriculum; the lack of timely results (results were often not disseminated until the following school year); and the linkage of test scores to teacher evaluations, which appeared to be “arbitrary and capricious” (“Making Sense” p. 60). Interestingly, the 2015 Schooling in America Survey confirms at least the Movement’s first objection: the survey indicates that “a plurality of Americans (42% said the amount of time spent on standardized testing is ‘too high,’ compared with 19% who said ‘too low’” (DiPerna, p. 58). The survey also claims that these statistics show an increase and decrease, respectively, to the results of 2014.

The group gained momentum and spread to several other states, one of which is Pennsylvania, which I will discuss below. The growing number of students opting out of these tests brings the validity of the results into question, since test-based accountability is compromised (Beaver & Westmaas). In her study of the Movement in New York, Wang (2017) found that despite “threats and punishment” (p. 14) issued by district school boards to parents who chose to have their children opt out, the group maintains a well-constructed

network structure with a sub-group fragmentation rate of zero, indicating that all Movement supporters were connected to one another (p. 10). This, Wang believes, is significant since the opponents of the Movement, consisting mainly of school administrators, school board members, and state education officials, had much more “authority-based power” (p. 11) over standardized testing. This authority-based power became discounted in New Jersey when Opt-Out parents created a counter-narrative by “problematizing [the usage of the state test], discounting [its validity], and repositioning [themselves]” as active stake-holders with deep concern for the education of their children (Abraham, Wassell, Luet, & Vitalone-Racarro, 2019). It appears, then, that well-organized, strongly determined parent groups may actually hold more power than other stake - holders.

One of the main concerns that opponents of the Opt-Out Movement have is that a growing number of students opting out will negatively affect the school’s ratings, and as a result, affect federal funding, especially Title 1 funding. In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, for example, research has shown that the number of students opting-out of the state standardized tests will, indeed, affect the school’s rating, known as the School Performance Profile (SPP). Regarding a study based on Pennsylvania schools, Beaver and Westmaas state: “Our analysis showed that the SPP scores were indeed sensitive to opt-outs. For example... if high-achieving students opt-out, schools’ scores will fall (p. 22). These researchers further claim that as few as a dozen or so high-achieving students opting-out could cause a school to fall below the score for an “acceptable” performance. This is of especial significance, since opponents of the Opt-Out Movement also claim that those who opt-out are mostly white, high-achieving students (“Making Sense”; Wang), and the demographic of those usually scoring

poorly on these tests are often students of color, English language learners, and/or those from families with low socio-economic status.

With a 150 year-old history, it is safe to say that standardized testing is here to stay. And despite the good intentions of its founders, we can only hope that these tests have not put us on the road to hell, or worse, the highway to hell.

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Interlude

Oftentimes when we're listening to music and we hear dissonance - that chord that opens up a mood or tone of suspense or something almost ominous, something that catches our attention and leaves us with a feeling of "Ooooooh" - this dissonance makes us wonder, "What's happening next?" or perhaps only "What's happening?" or as Goswami, et al. (2009) ask, "What's going on here?" There is a sense of questioning, of wondering. And this sense of questioning, from a teacher's perspective, can lead to inquiry, where the main premise is to discover answers to these questions.

For me, the question that lies parallel to Goswami et al.'s (2009) "What's going on here" is "What happened?" as I mentioned previously. In my heart I believe that something may have changed, perhaps in how writing was being taught since the introduction of the Common Core State Standards and the implementation of the Keystone Exam in Pennsylvania. I envision my students as third graders, eager to learn, eager to write. This *is* part of the story they've given me, after all. And then things changed. And as I consider this, I remember a particular experience I had with one of my daughters: When Kira was little, prior to fifth grade, she dressed only in pink. Pink tops, pink skirts, pink dresses, pink accessories -- everything pink. Her dresser drawers overflowed with all things pink. This went on for years. I feared, though,

that one day she would wake up and decide that she no longer liked pink and have nothing to wear. And this did indeed happen -- one day she loved pink; the next day, not at all. Nothing happened to turn her off -- she just stopped liking pink.

I provide this anecdote as a point of reference, or rather, of non-reference. Although it is possible that as children grow and mature, they outgrow things they formerly loved, as in the case of my daughter and her yen for pink, I highly doubt that the same happened to my students and writing, and this is one of my “acknowledged, or at least conscious... assumptions” (Goswami, et al., 2009). I do not believe that one day they woke up and suddenly disliked, even hated, writing. In my heart, I believe there was an event, an occurrence, a statement -- more than one, perhaps -- something must have happened to turn these students off to writing, and that something is the backbeat of this inquiry. How will I learn this? Through their experiences, their stories.

Their stories, however, are cushioned in my own, much like a piano pedal cushions the sounds of notes succeeding one another --blending them while they remain distinguishable from one another. But a question arises: what *is* a story?

Schaafsma and Vinz (2011) define story through the lens of “narrative inquiry” which is a method of “describ[ing] the potential and the role of storytelling in educational experience” (p. 2). Thus, stories, in the field of education, may be considered experiences shared through narrative inquiry projects, such as this one. They further explain that “... they define narrative in its broadest sense -- an account, tale, interview with narrator/s; artifact, object, or action with inherent narrative; co-constructed narratives -- all containing a story or stories” (p. 2). And Bruner (2002) tells us that stories “...require a cast of characters, ...that these characters have recognizable expectations about the ordinary state of the world, the story’s world, though these experiences may be somewhat enigmatic, ... [and contain] some breach in the expected state of

things... Something goes awry, [sic] otherwise there's nothing to tell about" (p. 16-17). Thus, my definition of story contains all these elements: I will recount the experiences/ accounts of students and teachers, their educational experiences (i.e. those experiences in classroom settings), as provided to me through interviews, artifacts, objects, and/or actions, (i.e. data). The events, accounts, interviews, artifacts (to be discussed in a later section) -- *all* the stories -- are indeed co-constructed by my participants and me, as we are all the "cast of characters...the tellers" and you are the "told" (Bruner, 2002, p. 16-17) in this story of our classroom experiences. Keeping in mind also the correlation between "story" and "experience," I consider the writing experiences my students have had, as well as my own, being mindful that "stor[ies]... [are] an instrument not so much for solving problems as for finding them" (Bruner, 2002, p. 15). In the forthcoming stories, there has indeed been a breach that has led to many of my students' disinclination to write. And it is this problem -- and what may have caused it -- that I am eager to find.

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Chapter 3: Methodology

Orchestration -- Methodology -- Methods -- Me

Project Design -- Writing the score

Before any musician begins to write a musical score, s/he must consider what type of music s/he wants to create: elements such as genre, instrumentation, the size of the ensemble; musicians and their musicianship; tempo, tessitura, theme; even consideration of the audience and venue is important. Designing a research project isn't much different. The researcher must consider the "elements" necessary to design and conduct the project. My project investigates students' perceptions of past writing performance and compares them to current dispositions toward writing, specifically writing in a workshop-model class. I conducted this study in my classroom in what is considered an urban high school in the northeastern United States. The school's population consists of approximately 2,600 students. Of these, 55% are Caucasian, 21% Black, 19% Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 1% who consider themselves of two or more races. Approximately 44% of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

For this project, I studied students in my Honors American Literature and Composition class in the 2017 Fall term. This is the highest track available to tenth grade students in my district. Students in this class have traditionally been in an honors track since entering middle school (currently grade 6), although some may have been moved up in more recent years. Three of those students fell into this category, having been in our middle track (college preparatory) the previous year. I was fortunate to have only fourteen students in this particular class, nine girls and five boys all between the ages of 15 and 16. Nine of these

students chose to be participants in this study. The district demographics identifies eight of these as “White (non-Hispanic)” and one female student as “Multi- Racial.” Another female student qualifies for special education services due to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, and anxiety. Of these nine, I interviewed four to serve as a focus group.

My choice to work with students at the Honors level raises the question “Why? Why work with *those* students, since they’re often the ones who ‘get it,’ anyway?” I was even once publicly challenged for working with this population of students while sitting on a panel discussion at an action research conference. The answer to this question is multi-faceted. For one, I’ve always been intrigued by this population of students -- “honors,” “gifted” -- since both of my own daughters were identified as gifted at an early age and maintained that status throughout much of their educational careers. Hearing the conversations among my older daughter and her friends led me to believe that these students are not as confident in their abilities as many people often think, and most students in this population hold themselves to a very high standard, often chastising themselves for receiving a 98/100 on a test, believing that “now the teacher thinks I’m stupid,” as I overheard the young woman who was later class salutatorian lament. Often maintaining the position of fly-on-the-wall, I was privy to many such conversations, and they left me wondering “Why? These are the kids that ‘get it!’ Why are they so hard on themselves?”

Another reason for my intrigue with this population is that many assumptions are made about them. Parents, teachers, administrators, community stakeholders tend to think that these students are there because they are the ones who “get it,” things come easy for them, they’ll be fine, et cetera. However, this is not always the case, as I stated above. With several of my

former honors students not receiving a passing score on our state assessments, I find myself asking, “What is going on here? What is happening in American public schools that causes even the supposed top students to fail a standardized test?” These questions, coupled with my observations and discussions with students like Vivian, whom I mentioned in my prelude, have always piqued my interest in closely studying this population and compelled me to investigate at least my own students’ feelings and perceptions about English class, and writing, more specifically. The new question, then, is how?

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Impromptu

One of my favorite things about Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons* is how it tells the story of a year. From chasing winds, to softly falling snow, to the new birth of spring buds and languidness of summer, along with the tensions of each season, a year is depicted through the story of a song, *The Story of a Year*, or at the very least, a *Musical Perception of a Year*. I remember, too, a hymn I learned many years ago: “This is my story, this is my song” ... or in other words, this is my perception of a religious experience. So I find myself thinking about my students, their former teachers, their perceptions of their experiences learning and teaching writing, and asking, “What’s your story?”

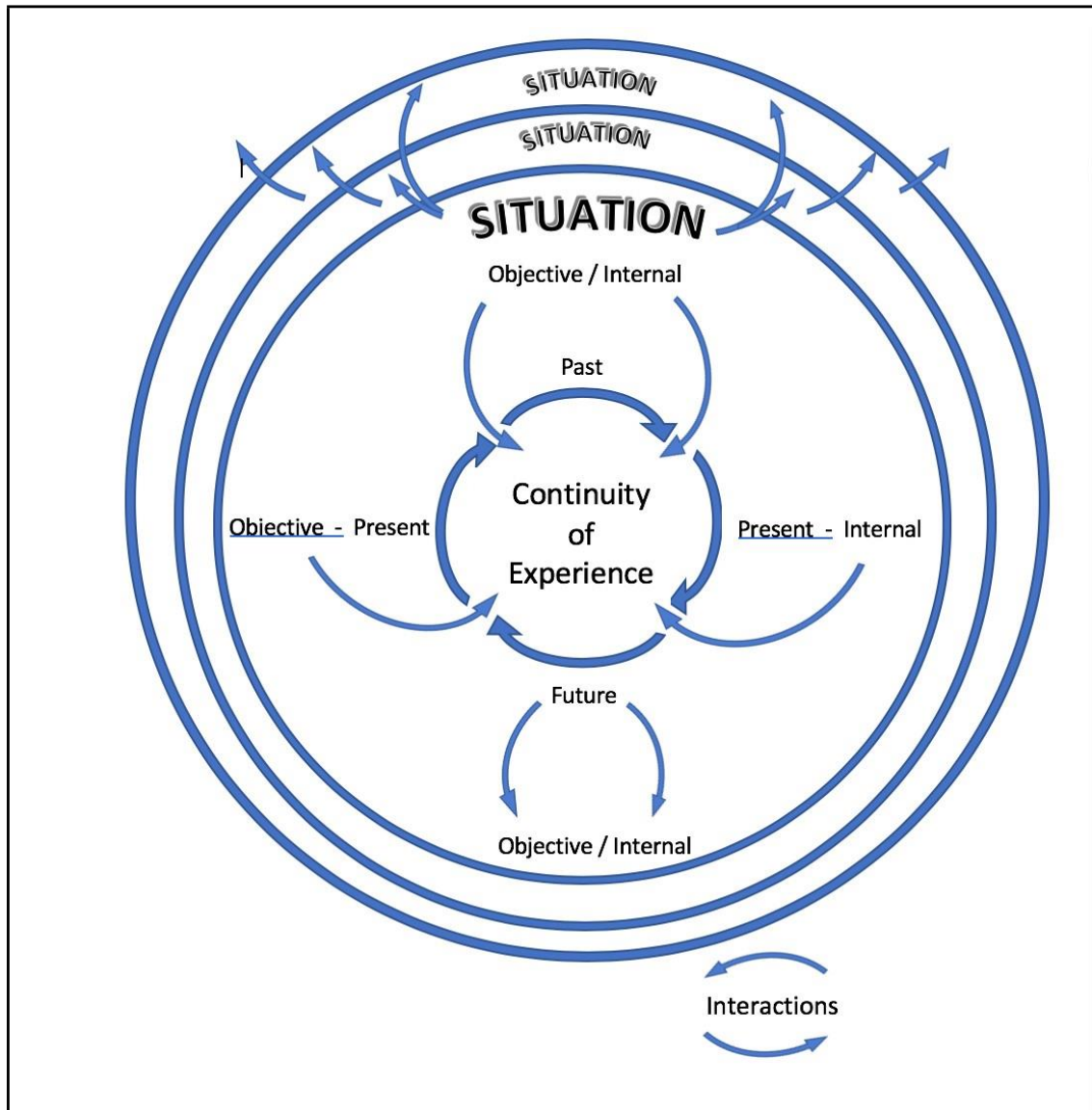
I frame the story of this project loosely according to Schaafsam and Vinz’ (2011) framework for narrative, as we all share a view hinged on Dewey’s (1938) philosophy of experience, specifically continuity, interaction, and situation. Dewey writes:

...the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after...The word “interaction”... assigns equal rights to both factors in

experience -- objective and internal conditions. Any normal experience is an interplay of these two sets of conditions. Taken together, or in their interaction, they form what we call a *situation* (original emphasis) (p.35, 42 respectively).

In Figure 1, I provide a graphic interpretation of Dewey's Continuity of Experience principle.

FIGURE 1 -- Dewey's Continuity of Experience



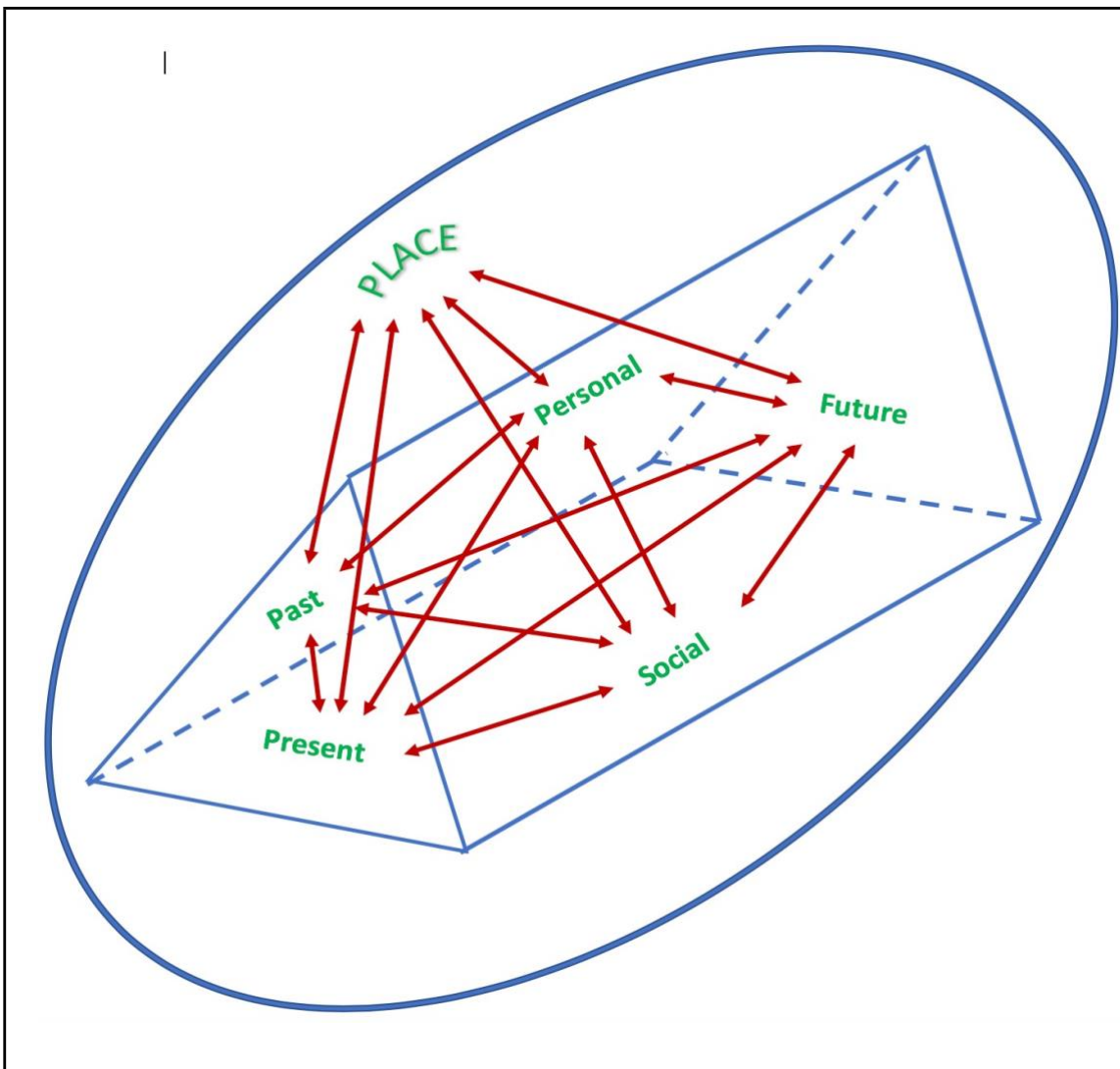
Every experience takes something from the past and in some way modifies how it is used in the future; “something is carried over from the earlier to the later” (Dewey, 1938, p. 44). These experiences have both internal and objective conditions that work toward this modification. The interaction between these, as marked by arrows, is what Dewey refers to as the situation, and as such, the situation is the interaction between objective and internal conditions created (or influenced) by past and, arguably, present experiences. According to Dewey, “As an individual passes from one situation to another, his world, his environment expands or contracts... What he has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow” (p.44). For the purposes of my study, then, I consider the past situations (or what I will later refer to as “events”) and experiences in them that led to the dispositions my students have toward writing, specifically, the experiences that led to negative dispositions.

As I study the continuity and interaction of my students’ experiences, I also consider the reflexive nature of inquiry and my inquiry space(s). Citing Clandinin and Connolly (1990) in their interpretation and extension of Dewey’s terms, Schaafsma and Vinz write:

Our terms are *personal* and *social* (interaction); *past*, *present*, and *future* (continuity); combined with the notion of *place* (situation). This set of terms creates a metaphorical *three-dimensional narrative inquiry space*... Within this three-dimensional inquiry space, investigations can travel *inward*, *outward*, *backward*, *forward*, and *situated within place*... Inquiry space then, is a metaphoric way of conceptualizing a framework for an inquiry project, a space where the researcher “addresses both personal and social issues by looking inward and outward, and addresses temporal issues by looking not only to the event but to its past and to its future.” (p. 60)

In Figure 2, I provide a graphic interpretation of Schaafsma and Vinz' (2011) re-imagining of Dewey's principles through the lens of inquiry spaces. The prism itself represents the three-dimensionality of experience, with arrows connecting to and from present, past, and future events, also relating to personal and social conditions both into and out from places/ situations (or inquiry spaces). In looking to the past, what situations or events did my students write about? Which did they tell? Where did these events occur? How long ago and for how long?

FIGURE 2 -- Schaafsma & Vinz' Re-Imagining of Dewey's Continuity of Experience



Who else was involved? In looking to the future, what may I do, in the present, to change any negative disposition towards writing my students may have so that they approach future writing assignments with less angst? Is it even possible for me to ameliorate these dispositions? As I merge Dewey (1938) and Schaafsma and Vinz' (2011) views into a triad on the staff of my story, I consider not only the place(s) of my students' past experiences, but also the experiences they are currently having in my classroom -- my inquiry space. How does school factor into their writing experiences? What is "writing" to them? How may I make the experience different in my class? Is that possible? Where do *I* fit into their experience(s)?

* * * * *

Recording Options

First Movement -- Artifacts

Goswami, et al. (2009) tell us that "student work is essential data in all teacher inquiries" (p. 26). For this reason, I collected artifacts of student work via reflective journals, essays/written work, and surveys in order to "add important contextual details to the data available for analysis" (Lankshear and Knobel, p.235). In the past, very early in the semester, I had asked my students to respond to a prompt reflecting on their "writing histories" and their memories of their earliest writing experiences (Appendix A) -- my first pieces of data. These pieces of information help me assess my students' initial feelings, hesitancies, worries about writing and give me a quick gauge on how to approach writing units in terms of developing their writing abilities and understandings on how to respond to each student's writing in terms of building confidence.

The next piece of data I collected, an artifact I used, was in the form of reflections on various parts of the Writing Workshop (WW) at the end of our research unit (Appendix B). I asked my students questions regarding their writing processes, their experiences in a workshop-model class, and their experiences in Peer Response Groups (PRGs) among other things. Past experience has shown me that our 5-7 page researched literary analysis paper is what causes my students the greatest deal of trepidation, so I focused my attention on their self-efficacy and dispositions towards writing during this unit; however, I first “tested the waters” during one of our shorter writing units, our book review writing unit. During this unit I provided my students with some do’s and don’ts of working with peers and offered suggestions on what types of feedback they should try to elicit from peers; and then, once we moved into “workshop mode,” I asked them to reflect on their experiences before and after their final drafts of the book review were completed. Through reflections, students provide “personal accounts of growth and learning,” as Hendricks (2009) suggests. These reflections provided me with information pertaining to the effectiveness of the PRGs so that I could tweak any inefficiencies before we began our research unit. Also, the reflections showed me my students’ own perceptions of their experiences and allowed me to consider interview questions that would broaden my understanding of my students as writers. Although I used the information I gathered from these early reflections to guide my instruction, I did not use that data in this project; I only used data from the reflection on the research paper writing.

Second Movement -- Student Surveys

During the research unit where we primarily worked in Peer Response Groups as part of Writing Workshop, I conducted two surveys based on attitude scales. Johnson (2008) writes, “Attitude scales... can quickly provide you with information about students’ attitudes and yield

quantitative data that can be used to make comparisons” (p. 96). Although I was not necessarily looking for quantifiable data, I hoped to compare what students indicated on the attitude scale with what/how they talked about their writing experiences to see if the data is complementary or contradictory. I structured these scales on a 10-point continuum, where 1 shows negative attitudes or dispositions and 10 indicates more positive ones.

The first attitude survey (Appendix C) is a general survey on students’ perceptions about writing and themselves as writers. In this survey, I intended to obtain some general information about my student’s general feelings about writing and their writing abilities and had my students complete it before we begin the research unit. This survey is modeled partially after Daly and Miller’s (1975) Writing Apprehension Scale, because I wondered if it is the apprehension of writing that makes my students adopt a negative stance toward it or if it is something else; and if it is something else, what is the “something”?

I conducted the second survey (Appendix D) once the students completed their research papers. I modeled this survey partially following Bandura’s (2006) guide for constructing self-efficacy scales. Bandura believes that “self-efficacy scales must be tailored to the particular domain of functioning that is the object of interest (p. 307-8). He also suggests that “items should be phrased in terms of *can do*... [since] *can* is a judgment of capability” (p. 308). Tailoring to the domain of writing, I constructed seven prompts in the fashion Bandura (2006) suggests, and I also included three open-ended questions to allow students to give voice to their experiences, while also following Johnson’s (2008) advice to include at least one open-ended question in any attitude scale (p.95). Despite Piazza & Siebert’s (2008) devaluation of survey data as “data only used for anecdotes and triangulation” (p. 276), I believe this method of data collection would be an effective avenue to obtaining an overview of student perceptions in a

confined space; and according to Hubbard and Power (1999), survey data could also help me “tap information that may otherwise be inaccessible” (p. 94). Using these two surveys in tandem allowed me to assess the effectiveness and utility of the Writing Workshop and Peer Response Groups to allay negative writing dispositions.

Third Movement -- Interviews

Bruner (2002) tells us that “stories... provide models of the world...to tell a story [is] to issue an invitation not to be as the story is but to see the world as embodied in the story...” (p.25). With this in mind, then, I used interviews as my primary means of data collection. Through these interviews, I gleaned the stories of the experiences of students and teachers. I conducted two interviews with each of the four members of my focus group: one at the beginning of the study to learn how they feel about writing in general; and the other at the conclusion of the study, both as a follow-up and to see if anything changed for them after workshopping a research paper. I also conducted two interviews with the teachers: one to learn what may have changed in the teaching of writing since the adoption of the Common Core State Standards; and the second strictly as a follow up to check my interpretations of their responses and to ask additional questions for clarification, if necessary. Since teachers are busy people, I conducted these interviews according to the teachers’ availability.

The interviews were semi-structured, where I pre-prepared a few questions to use as a guide (Appendix E), but followed up on any of the interviewee’s responses of interest to me, thus “encourag[ing] elaboration of important themes” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004, p. 202). This also follows the advice of Yin (2016), who states that in qualitative interviews, “the relationship between the researcher and the participant is not strictly scripted... but the questions as actually posed to any given participant will differ according to the context and setting of the

interview” (p. 142). Fully realizing that “semi-structured interviews can never be repeated in exactly the same way with each interviewee” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004, p. 202), and although I led with the same question in the interviews with students and teachers, respectively, I also remained mindful of keeping all questions open-ended enough for each interviewee to respond in ways that allowed them ample freedom to tell the story they want heard.

Now the question of recording these interviews arises: how should the retelling of these experiences be recorded? Of the three practical means to collect interview data - hand-recording, audio-recording, or video-recording - I chose to conduct one-on-one audio-recorded interviews. Since “taking notes during interviews is a laborious task and is not well suited to interviews lasting more than 10 to 20 minutes” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004, p. 200), I used my cell phone as the device to record the interviews. My hope was that once I set the phone down and pressed the red “Record” button, my interviewees would actually forget that they were being recorded, relax, and simply tell their stories. I also chose to audio-record rather than video-record for other reasons. For one, as Lankshear and Knobel (2004) tell us: “[Audio] recording enables interviewers to maintain good eye contact with speakers, to concentrate more on what is being said rather than on copying it down, and to obtain a verbatim record of what was said that can be revisited time and again” (p.200). For another, video-recording may make the interviewees more uncomfortable and self-conscious; it may distract them, perhaps from even telling the story they would under less ominous circumstances. Luttrell (2010) addresses this point on two fronts. She discusses the feasibility of the video-recorder, now a common technological device used worldwide, as more “intrusive” than any audio-recording device, despite the argument that audio-recording is more intrusive than recording notes by hand. And she states that, in her opinion, “nothing is more intrusive - even among some groups and in some contexts, rude - than

a listener scribbling madly rather than looking at you while you talk” (p. 251). Having been in the position of trying to “scribble madly” during interviews in the past, I fully concur that it is more important for the researcher to listen to participants with ears *and eyes* than to discredit the available less-intrusive means of recording, and it is equally as important to record *exactly* what the interviewees say.

As mentioned previously, I conducted interviews to capture my participants’ experiences. This “spoken data” (Lankshear and Knobel) not only allowed me to revisit what is said, but it allowed me “to investigate spoken language uses and languages processes...in their own right” (p. 173). In other words, the spoken data allows me to analyze how my participants talk about experiences and how they disclose these stories in their own words. Although I could certainly recapitulate their stories - and perhaps in some ways I will -- I mostly wanted my participants to speak for themselves, “to give voice to the previously silenced research subjects” (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 77). Through these interviews, I also followed the advice of Gubrium and Holstein (2002) and allowed my students to give voice to “their own interpretations and thoughts rather than rely solely on [my] adult interpretations” (p. 181). By allowing my students to tell the stories of their experiences in their own words, I was able to focus on their ideologies - what they believe, perceive as their experiences writing and how they feel about writing as a result - taking particular note of their *language* - the words, descriptions they use to tell their stories. Bakhtin (1981), in his discussion of common language, speaks of language that is “...conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion...” (p. 271). I believe that much of the language students used in our interviews provides me with an insight into their ideologies - what do they believe about writing and/or their writing experiences? Which parts

are “saturated”? With what are they “saturated”? What is the “worldview” that they have adopted as a result? These beliefs and perceptions may truly be, for them, “concrete opinions,” unchanging views of their worlds; but, truth be told, I hoped that these opinions are more malleable than concrete.

All of this considered, I realized that through these interviews, I needed to listen -- to tune to each note, each word. Goswami, et al. (2009) speak of the potential difficulties that may be encountered in listening: “Listening is not easy. It requires a deep awareness and at the same time a suspension of our judgments and above all our prejudices; it requires openness to change” (p.58). In considering these words, I am mindful of my own biases, judgments and prejudices. There are things I already suspect, even believe - that somehow students may have been turned off to writing with the introduction of research at perhaps an age where they were not developmentally prepared for it; and that there may have been a change in how writing was being taught. As a result, I realize that I needed to be reflexive. On this topic, Schaafsma and Vinz (2011) write:

To engage in reflexive examination is to commit to including your ‘selves’ in the process of knowledge creation. Reflexivity is an act of deep reflection on the values, beliefs, person, and certainly the ideologies that influence the way a researcher engages in the research. (p.73).

In the spirit of reflexivity, then, I acknowledged that I needed to keep in check my already looming suspicions and beliefs; therefore, I was vigilant about not allowing my biases to skew my data collection, especially when interviewing my students. I followed the advice of Yin (2016) who says, “Stay neutral” (p. 146). He further explains that although complete neutrality may not actually exist, the researcher and the participant create a “negotiated text” of the data,

and that the researcher is part of a “hermeneutic circle” (p.146) - in other words, part of the learning curve - so I tried to be at all times aware of my presence and part of the circle, and I trust that I maintained a “strong ethical standard” (Yin, 2016, p. 42) in my collection of data.

The need to maintain strong ethics when collecting data, especially interview data, calls to mind power issues that may be present (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004; Luttrell, 2010). Clearly, when interviewing students, teachers hold power just in their positions as teacher, so an adult-to-child interview could be perceived as intimidating. On this point, Luttrell (2010) reminds us that from a young age, “[children] have usually learned that almost anything they say can be the ‘wrong’ answer, can get them into trouble” (p. 334). Although this is less of an issue in conducting adult-to-adult interviews, an interviewer surely has the upper-hand. For this reason, I sought “ways of minimizing overt displays of power [by] establishing an easy-going but respectful rapport with the interviewee” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004, p. 211), even by engaging in small-talk at the onset of the interview to help my interviewees feel more relaxed and at ease. I hoped to set the tone of the interview as “a special form of conversation” (Luttrell, 2010, p.241) where stories and openness are encouraged.

Rondo -- Return to the First Movement

To complete my study, I collected one last artifact -- students’ narrative stories, literal stories of their writing lives. Years ago, part of the 10th grade curriculum in my district had been writing an autobiography project; students were encouraged to tell the story of their lives, with parent input where needed, as an artifact for themselves -- the story of their lives from birth through the age of sixteen. So, I resurrected this project, but tweaked it towards writing - their recollections of their writing lives from their earliest recollections to the

present (Appendix F). They chose four from six possible chapter headings or “vignettes” and composed narratives around these memories. I hoped that the data I collected from these stories would “complement the information obtained from interviews” (Yin, p. 156), and allow me to “...start comparing information from the different sources of evidence that became available during [my] fieldwork, to see whether [I] have been accumulating conflicting or complementary renditions of the same real-world happenings” (Yin p. 178). In other words, am I finding harmony or dissonance? Therefore, in interpreting the data from these vignettes, one “real- world happening” I hoped to hear about is *change*. What, if anything, *changed*? In the “before and after” stories from my students - stories of when students loved to write “but then” -- I noted the “what happened” aspect, if anything happened at all. I hoped that something they said would help my understanding of *when* shifts in their dispositions may have occurred, and if anything we did together in our 10th grade honors class influenced these dispositions for the better or for the worse.

In view of seeking indicators of change, I loosely base my suppositions on Mezirow’s (1991) Transformative Learning Theory. Mezirow believes that transformative learning, in adults, occurs in ten phases with new information acquisition. He writes:

To become meaningful, learning requires that new information be incorporated by the learner into an already well-developed symbolic frame of reference, an active process involving thought, feelings, and disposition. The learner may also have to be helped to transform his or her frame of reference to fully understand the experience... To promote discovery learning... methods that have been found useful include critical incidents, metaphor analysis, concept mapping, consciousness raising, life histories... (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10).

Mezirow’s discussion of frames of reference here alludes to Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development, where learning of a new skill takes place, with help, after mastery of the preceding skill. For example, before a pianist can learn to play Ellmenreich’s “The Spinning

Song” or Guiraldi’s “Linus and Lucy,” s/he must first learn about eighth notes, syncopation, dynamics, etc. Only after achieving mastery of eighth notes, etc. by him- or herself will s/he be able to move on to more difficult pieces with the help of an instructor. Mezirow (1997) states that “we transform our frames of reference through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind are based...Self-reflection can lead to significant personal transformation” (p. 7), and he provides phases through which transformation takes place. Extending the previous example, if a pianist believes or assumes that s/he has had success in mastering “The Spinning Song” and has reflected on the processes used for such mastery, his/her frame of reference puts him in the position of approaching the new piece, “Linus and Lucy,” with less trepidation. If, however, the young pianist had trouble with mastering “The Spinning Song,” or in mastering eighth notes, his frame of reference when encountering “Linus and Lucy” may leave him reluctant to pursue learning that song. Changing that frame of reference would require a great deal of success (in the eyes of the aspiring pianist) in other songs with syncopation and/or eighth notes.

Here, I do not include or even allude to Mezirow’s ten phases -- I do not expect my students to encounter a “disorienting dilemma” -- nor do I expect my students to move through all ten phases during the time they are in my class. I do, however, consider any transformative properties they encounter while either engaging in WW and PRGs or in reflecting on their writing histories thereafter. The question of transformation, then, becomes a matter of whether changes have taken place in their perceptions of their writing histories, as a result of working with peers in WW and PRGs, or in their overall perceptions of themselves as writers, if at all.

Contrapuntal -- Field Notes and Observations

Throughout the course of this study, woven between the harmonies and dischords, is another source of data: my field notes and observations. Here, I attempted to gather notes from the goings-on of daily classroom life, especially while my students engaged in Writer's Workshop (WW) and Peer Response Group (PRG) activities. Goswami et al. (2009) tell us that since student- participants are "live examples..., [their] 'data collection site' was wherever and whenever they were actively engaged in [the activities they were studying]" (p. 23). So in addition to the classroom as my site of data collection, I also tried to collect data while we were in the library, since this is where our WW and PRG work was done. These notes took shape from a combination of detailed descriptions of classroom happenings, reflective journals, my reactions and responses to events in the classroom, and analytic memos connecting data, forming concepts, and deploying my own theories of the events, as suggested by Luttrell (2010, p. 9). I had hoped this field data would give me a bird's eye view of how my students viewed and talked about writing.

Since Goswami et al. (2009) warn of the difficulties of teaching and collecting data simultaneously (p. 26), and I've already experienced this difficulty while conducting my master's thesis action research study, I planned to review my notes daily to look for emerging themes, anticipate "codes," etc., realizing that "field notes may both clarify and represent [my] constructions," as per Yin (2016, p. 176). Yin further suggests that this daily review may enable me to identify loose ends that need additional fieldwork: "Examining the notes and records from this perspective, while fieldwork is still ongoing, provides opportunities to tighten your data collection" (p. 176). Thus by daily review, I hoped to be able to anticipate and find possible "holes" in my data.

Keeping in mind the effects of my interpretations of my fieldwork, I also needed to be mindful that “sometimes field notes may take on the aura of fact, when perception may be flawed and perspective obscured” (Schaafma and Vinz, p.111). That is to say, what I think may be going on may not be factual, but only my viewpoint, my interpretation. For this reason, I was sure to identify my own “*governing gaze* -- how and why... we see and perceive what we see” (Goswami, et al., p. 6, original emphasis). I anticipated that in considering my governing gaze, I need to be aware of my own history, as Schaafsma and Vinz (2011), citing Clandinin and Connelly, remind:

[How] important it is that researchers reflect on their own identities by incorporating their research stories into their narratives...Narrators may stereotype experience and events or not come to terms with the struggle within themselves to distinguish the life as told from the life as lived...that ‘when I tell my story it is an interpretive feat,’ a construction of my life...This conversation calls into question the *interpretive authority* not only of researchers’ work with others’ stories but also of researchers’ storying and reflecting on their own stories. (p.20, original emphasis)

In light of this project, and since it partially hinges on my interpretation of my own past writing experiences and identity as a writer, I realize that my history may play a vital role in how my gaze governs; so I will do my best to be mindful of how my interpretations of my students’ actions, reactions, and speech among themselves may (or may not) represent them in as unbiased a view as possible. Bakhtin (1981) speaks of this tangentially: “Every conversation is full of transmissions and interpretations of other people’s words” (p.338). If this is true, it will be my role, then, in observing my students discussions and conversations among themselves, to interpret these interactions - these transmissions of spoken and observed data - as carefully as possible in my field notes, “...paying attention to the effects [my] word choices have on representations of people, places and events, and to the personal values laid bare by [my] word choices” (Lankshear and Knobel, p.232). Although I know I need to focus on

observable data, I also realize that recording tone and body language will also influence interpretation, so I will be mindful of my “interpretive authority,” being careful not to project my past and my biases onto my students.

Cadenza -- Other considerations

Consent

Before conducting any research study, the researcher must obtain permission from all parties involved. I obtained informed consent from all participants: teacher-participants, my student-participants, and their caregivers since the students are minors, as per Lankshear and Knobel (p.104). I obtained signed consent from the teachers, letters of assent for the students, parental consent from students’ parents, and consent from my building principal. In these letters, not only did I ask for permission to interview the students and use their work as data when applicable, I also spelled out the goals of the study, any risks that may be involved, and assured all participants that their identities and all data would remain confidential by assigning all participants pseudonyms and keeping all data in a secure location in my home, as suggested by Yin (p.49). All of this is also criteria sought by Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB), whose approval I obtained as well.

Trustworthiness

In every research study, ensuring trustworthiness of interpretation is of utmost concern. How do researchers prove that they are seeing what they think they’re seeing, and that their interpretations are trustworthy, if not fully accurate? How may I ensure the credibility of the story of this research project? On this subject, Bruner (2002) reminds us that “narrative...

presents an ontological dilemma. Are stories real or imagined? ... [A]re perception and memory yardsticks of the real, or are they artifices in the employ of convention? ... [E]yewitness and even flashbulb memories serve many masters aside from Truth” (p. 22-23). How do I, then, maintain the truth, the credibility, of my study?

Yin (2016) tells us that “a **credible study** is one that provides assurance that you have properly collected and interpreted the data, so that the findings and conclusions accurately reflect and represent the world that was studied” (p. 85, original emphasis). Here, the word “accurately” is key. In order to present the study as accurately as possible, I conducted “member checks” (Yin, p. 113) by sharing my understandings with my participants so that they could clarify any misconceptions that I may have had and/or affirm my understandings. And I also solicited the help of several “critical friends,” -- one, a colleague; one a professor of education -- as suggested by Costa and Kallick (2009), to provide me with yet other perspectives to ensure that my own biases were not interfering with the meaning the participants conveyed.

Similarly, Luttrell (2010) states that “there is a need to recognize the fallibility of *any* particular method or data” (p.285, original emphasis). She further notes, “Explaining your possible biases and how you will deal with these is a key task of your research proposal,” (p. 281) and she suggests that these explanations are “not the result of indifference, but of integrity” (p. 281). In other words, Luttrell (2010) suggests anticipating and being open to viewpoints that may contradict my own understandings. Keeping all this in mind, I sought to maintain my integrity not necessarily by triangulating, but by following Luttrell’s concept of a star, where, “like the North Star, it serves as a sign that you are traveling in the right direction” (p.160). I hoped that this star concept would guide my research, my data collection, and my

interpretations to point me to the possible relationships interwoven through this research project. My goal is to portray my participants' stories as accurately as possible, being mindful of my own biases, and as previously stated, keep them in check. I fully realize, as Luttrell points out, that "eliminating the actual influence of the researcher is impossible..., and the goal in a qualitative study is not to eliminate the influence, but to understand it and to use it productively" (p.282).

In trying to use my use my influence productively, I remembered again Bruner's (2002) "ontological dilemma." He writes: "We try to take the sting out of this dilemma by gracefully admitting that, indeed, stories are always told from a particular perspective" (p. 23). This perspective led me to seriously consider and acknowledge my own perspective(s), my biases. For one, I, like my students, worry about the effectiveness of my writing -- I think it's good -- it sounds good -- but is it good *enough*? I, too, have experiences where I received a grade lower than I expected when my writing was assessed by an instructor; and I remember not always understanding what I did "wrong." I, too, feared sharing my writing with peers. But I learned, through participation in a National Writing Project Summer Institute, that sharing my writing has more benefits than drawbacks. I learned that writing with and sharing with peers not only gave me fresh insights on my writing, but also taught me "what other writers do" so I could use techniques of others in my own writing - thus the intertextuality of *all* writing. To be fair, however, I must acknowledge that this was something I've always done. From as far back as I can remember writing formal essays, I can remember playing with a new sentence structure or even a word and thinking, "Oh, I think I remember Hawthorne did something like this in *The Scarlet Letter*," or "I think I can use the word 'camaraderie' here to talk about friendship because I think it's like 'comrade'" (although I did have a difficult time looking it up in the

dictionary because of the different spelling!). But I wonder, too, if my students make such connections. Or would they if they heard a peer mention it?

Other biases: as a teacher-learner, I do believe in the power of Writing Workshops and Peer Response Groups due to my own very positive experiences. I believe sharing becomes easier over time, and I believe strongly that we can learn from one another. As a former student, I realize that I did not have the worries caused by passing standardized tests that my students have. Any standardized tests I took in school for strictly to inform our stakeholders on how our (private) school compared with the local public schools; therefore, there was really very little pressure on the students -- simply take the test and we'll see. So I do believe there may be a link between my students' negative dispositions to writing and all the writing they need to do for tests in this Age of Accountability. The pressure for success may be enough to sully students' dispositions toward writing, especially writing done for assessment purposes. And lastly, I do believe that we carry early experiences with writing into our futures. Although I've never had what I perceived as a negative writing experience, I do understand the fear of failure, of "messing up," as mentioned before, mostly in my musical history. And I do agree with Dewey (1938) that the past can be "a means of understanding the present" (p. 78), and as a result an influence on the future. The question then, is, are the influences reparable? My hope is that they are.

Coda-ing the Data

Full Disclosure: This study is a continuation -- or perhaps a re- envisioning -- of a previous study I conducted using a variation of some of the same research questions; therefore, much of the student data I collected has been "pre-coded," as I had initially coded for different purposes and to extract different findings. In both studies, I utilized a content analysis approach,

aligning to the methodologies posited by White and Marsh (2006). They define content analysis, citing Krippendorff (2004), as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p.27). The key word for me, here, is “inference,” since much of my data analysis is based on inferences I made regarding my students’ language and word choice, specifically in any written artifacts. And since these inferences may be based on connotations, I employed what Weber (2011) calls “semantic validity... [which] exists when persons familiar with the language and texts examine lists of words ... and agree that these words have similar meanings or connotations” (p.7). As previously mentioned, I did this through my “critical friends,” who provided confirmation that they would have coded the data similarly. In this way I validated possible meanings and interpretations based on common ways with words.

Having already conducted several minor as well as two major research projects where I collected qualitative data to answer my research questions, I implemented coding strategies, following in part the suggestions of Ely et al. (1997), which encourage “identifying a meaning unit [i.e.] coding..., sorting [codes] into categories [or] bins... and look[ing] for relationships among the categories and arrang[ing] them into some sort of organized form... as a basis for ‘lifting’ to a more abstract theme statement” (p.162). I’ve coded, sorted, binned and themed before. Although White and Marsh (2006) use different terms, the process of analyzing these lifted themes continues in the same direction: “The researcher continually checks his growing interpretation of answers to his research questions against the documents and notes, especially situations that do not fit the interpretation or suggest new connections... [as a] *constant comparison* approach” (p. 37, original emphasis), thus taking a recursive approach in analyzing my data.

Despite Weber's (2011) warning against human / hand coding, I did hand code my data. In my initial study, I simply coded for positive and negative writing experiences and the events in which they occurred, which informed my questions about students' writing histories, and how they described their experiences in a Writing Workshop-modeled class. I did so to determine if anything in their perceptions changed after the writing activities we did in that class. In the present study, I am including many more facets to analyze. For example, not only am I still analyzing the experiences in the events, but I am also studying students' evaluations of themselves (self-perception) within or as a result of those experiences, if they mention any, as well as direct shifts in their feelings or perceptions of them. For example, in my first interview with Rylan, she said, "I usually feel fine with writing, unless it's something like research or informative where I need information from different sources." I had initially coded her first sentence "Positive Experience" --a code I continue to use. However, upon further examination (and upon subsequent readings), I saw that there was a clear shift in her perception of writing, as indicated by the word, "unless." This indicated to me a change -- "I'm fine *unless*..." -- which I coded "Shift" as well as "Self- Perception/ Metacognition" due to her mention of the modes of writing she disliked.

As I coded, I identified the words and phrases above as well as other "meaning units" (Ely, et al. 1997). A meaning unit, as defined by these researchers, is "a sentence, a paragraph, even a sequence of paragraphs... [or] only a word or phrase if so brief a segment signals meaning to the researcher" (p. 162). My definition of a meaning unit is much simpler; for me, a meaning unit, in other words, anything I coded, was something I believed would be salient to my study. For the purpose of my study, then, the word "unless" signaled a meaning to me: something changes for Rylan when she writes more formal pieces. I based my interpretation of the shift

that Rylan's statement suggested to me on Bakhtin's (1981) discussion of words and their contexts: "Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by *intentions*" (p. 293, emphasis added). I interpreted and coded meaning units such as "unless," "but," "I used to," etc. as their respective speakers' intention to indicate to me that something had changed from their previous experience; that, in most cases, there was a previous, more positive context -- an event -- that was altered by a subsequent context or event. In other words, in Rylan's case, I "lifted" (Ely, et al., 1997) her positive experience statement "I'm usually fine with writing," and interpreted the statement following it "...unless it's something like research or informative..." as an intentional signal to me that she did *not* "feel fine" with "research or informative," the writing we did in our class. Here, the "socially charged life" of the word(s) Rylan used, as Bakhtin (1981) posits, may be "populated" by her intention of letting me know that she was not, actually, fine with most of the writing in my class at all -- a message that I did not initially perceive.

I continued my process of coding, pen in hand, marginalia on nearly every paragraph of transcribed text. I read with several highlighters nearby, so that as I found salient information, I could highlight different findings in different colors and mark them accordingly. I also used Post-it page marker signets to correspond with the code I was assigning to each topic I found. I kept track of these by writing the code on the signet and placing it in my field notebook for easy reference. For example, when I read through Rylan's interview during the course of my first study, I highlighted "I usually feel fine with writing" in yellow, and coded it *Positive Experience*. She went on here to mention that she "used to have a lot of creativity when [I] was younger... but now I don't." Because she mentioned creativity, which I interpreted as a salient rendering of a positive phenomenon, I highlighted that, too, in yellow. However, during my

analysis of this interview during my current study, I realized that although creativity and positive experiences are, indeed, related, they are still different. For this reason, I re-coded her discussion of creativity with a lighter yellow highlighter, labeled it *Creativity*, and chose a new signet for it as well.

The Post-it signets proved to be very helpful for coding and analysis for several reasons. For one, they enable me to very quickly identify on what page of data I could locate examples of a particular code. If I was writing about students' anxiety, I could find examples at a glance; likewise, if I was writing about the role of talk, the signet made it easy to locate. Another reason I continue to use these signets is so that I can easily place like codes near one another as I draw connections. For example, I put *Positive Experience* and *Creativity* near one another in my field notebook and *Negative Experience* and *Agency/lack* of near one another; and I can then "physically move my data around" (MacLean & Mohr, 1999, p. 61) as I notice their connections to other codes or label a new Post-it with the same code and place it nearer to the complementary code. Soon, patterns emerge, and the patterns indicate whether I should read for another iteration or move on.

Herein, we see the recursive nature of qualitative research analysis. Yin (2016) speaks of recursivity in several phases, from compiling data to disassembling and reassembling data, interpreting data, and finally, drawing conclusions (p. 220). Although I did not necessarily follow Yin's design, I did, however, reread, code, and lift data in several iterations as I noticed the development of new meaning units to code. I continued this method of reading, highlighting and developing a code for information salient to my research questions for the rest of Rylan's interview as noted above, and then applied the same codes to the other students' interviews, adding new codes if something in another student's interview grabbed my attention,

and then returning to Rylan’s interview to see if she, too, indicated something pertaining to the new code. Figure 3 provides a brief look at my data coding method. (NOTE: All information blacked-out in the figure provided identifiability; therefore, the true name of the student and the transcription file number have been blacked out to protect the identity of the student, as per IRB mandate.)

As mentioned previously, *Positive Experiences* and mentions of creativity were initially highlighted in yellow in my first study, but in the current study I came to separate them with *Creativity* bearing its own category, as indicated by the lighter yellow markings in the right margins of Figure 3. Also, in my initial coding, I simply underlined *Negative Experiences* in blue ink and wrote *NEG* in the left margin; but upon several rereadings, I marked chunks of experiences I interpreted as negative in orange. Upon subsequent readings, however, I chose to further expand my coding of negative experiences into indicators of something - a word or phrase - I deemed negative. So salient uses of words such as “unless” or “but” I highlighted in purple, and since this was a new code for me (I had initially used a different color and darker marker), I wrote *SHIFT* in purple over my first use of this new code and color.

Also, in Figure 3, the signets on the left represent the different codes I used on that page of written text. Over time, I developed the following codes and colors for coding, interpreting and analyzing student data:

- AGENCY (lack of)
- CREATIVITY
- FEAR/ ANXIETY
- METAPHOR
- NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE
- PRGs
- POSITIVE EXPERIENCE
- ROLE OF TALK
- ROLE OF TEACHER
- SELF-PERCEPTION/ METACOGNITION/ SELF-ASSESSMENT

- SHIFT
- TIME (lack of)

Once the interview data was coded, I continued the same method coding not only the interviews of the focus group, but all the data I collected from my student- participants: responses to their Day 2 writing prompt on their writing histories, responses to the open-ended questions on the surveys, responses to the Reflection on Research Paper Writing prompt, and their writing history autobiographies. As I read and coded this data, I was mindful of “the tyranny of the single story,” (Bruner, 2002, p. 103), so I was particularly vigilant to see if my students’ stories aligned each time they wrote about specific events and experiences. Realizing that sometimes our perception of events becomes rote, I considered that “...every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes... For it is a somewhat different person who enters into them” (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). In this portion of my data analysis I was aware that each time my students reiterated their stories, they, too, were “somewhat different person[s],” so I was on the lookout for consistencies or inconsistencies in what they said.

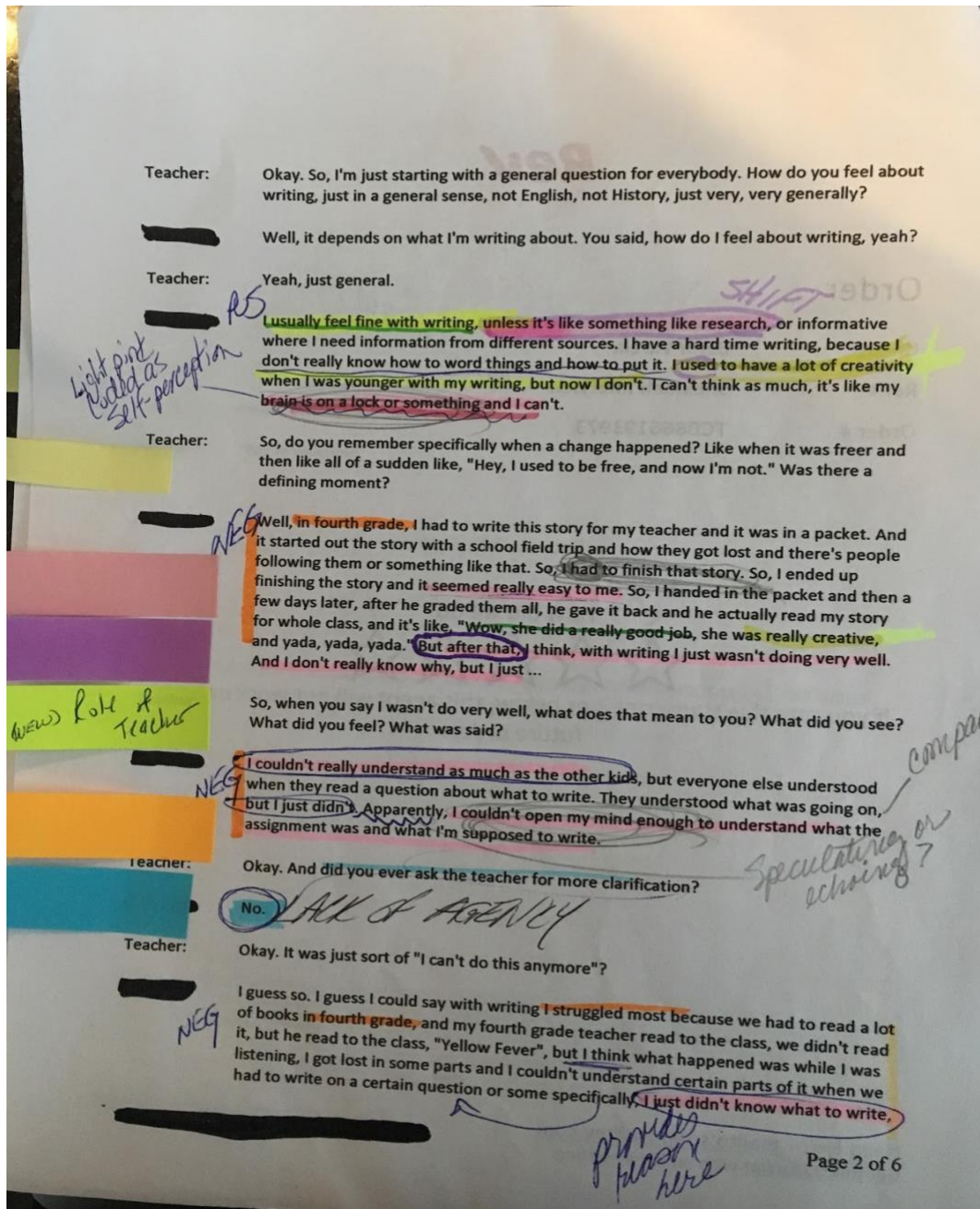
As I continued reading Rylan’s interview, I became painfully aware that one can never analyze and code too much! As we teacher-researchers read, we continue to notice, to abstract, to connect and assign meaning(s). Ely, et al. (1997) maintain that

There is no way that as thinking human beings we can *not* analyze. The same narrative also work with a different and sometimes contrary motion to classify and abstract. We do it as we categorize, tally, label, and make sense of perceptions (p. 161, original emphasis)

These researchers remind us that analysis is part of the process of making meaning; that as our minds work, they are prone to think critically, to sort and classify, to make connections, to

examine those connections to determine their credibility. In the case of the project at hand, each time I read and reread Rylan's story -- or anyone's -- or other data I collected -- I noticed something else, even within something I had previously coded. For example, after reading Rylan's initial interview four or five times, upon the next read, I still discovered something I

FIGURE 3. Coding Example



hadn't noticed before. Perhaps this is because over time, I began to read and code different pieces of data per *student* instead of per *data method*. In other words, at one point, I organized all the data per *method*: I piled all interviews, all Writing Histories, all covers, all survey data, all Reflection data, and reviewed the data per that method to look for similarities or differences as well as whether or not they were answering my research questions. Then, I decided that it might be more beneficial to study the data per *student* -- what did each student say, were their responses consistent over the course of the study, how did what they say compare with what their peers said, how did their perception of their experiences compare with the experiences of their peers, etc. in order to, perhaps, gain a new insight on the student as an individual.

It was during such a rendering of Rylan's interview that I noticed her lack of agency and thus, attributed another code, *Agency/ lack of*. When I asked her if she ever asked the teacher for more clarification on an assignment she "couldn't understand," she replied, "No" point blank (See Figure 3). Over the course of the two interviews I conducted with her, she mentioned several times that she never asked for help. At one point during our second interview, when I questioned her about why, she responded, "I guess I get really scared that the question I have is just really... that it's not gonna make sense, that it just sounds really dumb..." This statement I coded as *Fear/ Anxiety*, a code that I had used in the previous study, but that here, I interpreted differently. In this study, in Rylan's case, I interpreted "fear" not as fear of writing, but fear of others' opinions. This code was one of the easiest to assign, because Rylan offered the word "scared," a clear indicator of her fear. In the same interview segment, she also mentioned feeling "overwhelmed" twice, and shortly thereafter mentioned that she gets "really scared" of asking the teacher for help, even privately. On this brief piece of data, I assigned three (3) codes: *Fear/ Anxiety*, *Agency/ lack of*, and *Self- perception/ Metacognition*

because I interpreted a relationship between these meaning units. Rylan was aware (*Self-perception*) of her fear (*Fear/ Anxiety*) of asking the teacher for help (*Agency/ lack of*). Moving forward, then, I made an effort to look for any codes that overlapped, however tangentially they might have done so. Through the codes themselves I became aware of themes arising, especially themes that led me to my interpretations of positive or negative writing dispositions, but from different vantage points.

After coding meaning units I thought would be salient, I again re-read all the data looking for the events leading to the student's positive or negative dispositions. In this iteration, I lifted all mentionings of *where* the events took place and notated that information. In other words, did the event happen in school or out of school? I distinguished between all the mentionings of school either by the actual grade specified (e.g. 1st grade, 3rd grade, etc.); the general timeframe if the student did not specify a grade (e.g. early elementary, middle school, etc.); and the mentioning of a specific class (e.g. 5th grade writing class, 9th grade English, etc.) or assignment (e.g. 1st grade how-to, 9th grade story, etc.). Anything students mentioned as out-of-school writing, I also notated; however, as I sorted all that data, I noticed that all the mentionings of out-of- school writing occurred at home, so I simply designated the entire category "Home or School." I put all this information into an Excel spreadsheet so that I could sort my data by the different categories for cross-referencing (see Figure 4 for an example).

As I coded the events, I also categorized for outcomes -- literally what came out of the data -- which I entitled "Evaluation" for how students evaluated or spoke of the "outcome" of the event. For example, in Figure 4 Andre's evaluation of his 5th grade writing class (event) was that his writing was "not the best" due to his trouble with introductions and conclusions.

I then categorized his evaluation as causing or resulting in a negative (NEG) disposition toward writing. As I continued in this vein, coding outcomes and dispositions, I noticed that there were outside/external conditions as well as internal conditions that contributed to my students’

FIGURE 4 - EVENTS DATA

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	STUDENT NAME	WRITING EVENT	HOME or SCHOOL	INTERNAL or EXTERNAL CONDITIONS	EVALUATION	DISPOSITION
2	Andre	5th gr English class	school	external	writing "not the best" (trouble w/ intro & concl)	NEG
3	Andre	5th gr English class	school	external	won writing contest on hero	POS
4	Andre	7th gr writing class (not English)	school	external	wrote 17 pg story	POS -- enjoyed writing it
5	Andre	7th gr writing class (not English)	school	internal	wrote 17 pg story (only needed to be few pgs)	POS -- enjoyed writing it
6	Andre	9th gr research paper	school	external	"didn't necessarily do well"	NEG
7	Andre	9th gr research paper	school	external	learned new genre	POS
8	Andre	PRGs	school	external	peer input helped	POS
9	Bartholomew	early years	home	internal	loved creative aspect - wrote many stories	POS
10	Bartholomew	1st gr writing	school *	unspecified / external	"difficult task"	either
11	Bartholomew	5th gr writing class	school	external	made him HATE writing - no creativity	NEG
12	Bartholomew	5th gr PSSA	school	external	1 prompt was creative	POS
13	Bartholomew	9th gr story	school	external	collaboration led to success and fun	POS
14	Bartholomew	10th gr research paper	school	external	PRGs/ plan/ "less stress"	POS
15	Bartholomew	10th gr research paper	school	internal	PRGs/ plan/ "less stress"	POS
16	Bartholomew	PRGs	school	external	peer input helped	POS
17	Beth	age 4-5 mom suggested wr story	home	external	"came naturally" - still remembers	POS
18	Beth	5th gr	school	internal	fear of failing / but hard work paid off	POS
19	Beth	7th gr writing class	school	external	sub made it fun	POS
20	Beth	10th gr research paper	school	internal	stressful but successful	POS
21	Beth	PRGs	school	external	peers not very helpful	NEG
22	Beth	Musical Theater piece	home	internal	collab w/ friend on a Saturday	POS
23	Crystal	Early el home story writing	home	internal	interviewed family - wrote stories w/ pic	POS
24	Crystal	Middle years (?) - journaling	home	internal	learned how fun writing is	POS

evaluations of their writing events. “Outside /external” conditions were those imposed by outside sources, such as teachers or standardized tests, both of which occur at school; internal

conditions were those that arose from the students' perception of the event. For example, in Figure 4, line 9, Bartholomew's evaluation of writing events in his early years (i.e. elementary school years) was that they made him "love the creative aspect" of writing, and therefore wrote many stories. Since he spoke of "loving to write," I categorized that as an "internal" condition, one stemming intrinsically, from a natural inclination. This realization caused me to further study Dewey's (1938) terminology in the *Continuity of Experience*, and although Dewey calls for "internal" and "objective" conditions, I kept the term "external" as a clearer juxtaposition from the term "internal."

The discussion above outlined my coding methods for student interview data. I approached coding teacher interview data in much the same fashion, even retaining some of the same coding colors for the sake of consistency: *Shifts* remained highlighted and signeted in purple; *Time* remained hot pink. The other codes and colors I assigned occurred as I encountered them in my rendering of their respective texts. For the teacher data, however, I coded specifically what teachers said about their teaching methods prior to the implementation of the CCSS and since their implementation, along with indicators of how teachers felt about these instructional practices and how they perceived the students' feelings and learning outcomes. Coding the teacher data proved to be more complex, since not every teacher spoke of specific writing events, so I coded more specifically for past methods, past dispositions, present methods, present dispositions, and perceptions of effects on students. In subsequent iterations, I added discussions of agency for students and teachers, and the mentionings of "time," as these proved to be emerging themes.

Chapter 4: Findings

Note by Note: Introducing the Players

Concertino

Often when I sit at the piano, I reimagine the songs I've sung and played for years. I add an interesting riff that pops into my head, I begin with the chorus instead of the verse, I switch up the bass line, I slow down the tempo -- just to put my fingerprints on the song -- just to add my interpretation while staying true to the original melody. What follows is my interpretation of the perceptions of their writing histories as told or written by my students. I begin with my focus group. Following Yin's (2016) suggestion, I "...gathered individuals who previously have had some common experience or presumably share[d] some common views" (p. 148-149). For this reason, I chose Rylan, Rose, Beth, and Bartholomew. Rylan and Rose both had very negative dispositions toward writing, while Beth and Bartholomew shared more positive dispositions. I hoped these students would be adequate representatives of the class as a whole, thus also following the advice of MacLean and Mohr (1999), to "use a smaller group from the class to respond to a tightly focused issue that has come from your broader baseline data" (p. 53). Since through class discussions I already had an idea of which students had which dispositions, the choices of these four students also enabled me to diversify the group by ethnicity, gender, and ability level. Rylan identifies as Black while the rest are White; Bartholomew is the only male in the group; Rose has an IEP; and both Rose and Rylan have had limited time in an Honors level English class, with one and two years, respectively.

Also, being fully aware of the "crisis of representation," I acknowledge that "...there are no easy separations between 'researcher' and 'researched' ... [and] that fieldwork experiences

often disrupt and transform identities of both researcher and research participants even as they are paradoxically engaged in the practice of consolidating them” (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 88- 89). For this reason, as I mentioned before, I had all my student-participants read my interpretation of their stories and provide me with feedback regarding the accuracy of my interpretation, and I sought input from my two critical friends, who read all the data and my renderings. The only exception occurred with my student-participants: Rylan did not respond to an email asking for her input. Being a veteran teacher with nearing 20 years of classroom experience, I was fairly sure that my interpretations were correct, but my earnest wish is to be able to understand and use my position as researcher to productive ends, as per Luttrell (2010), and my goal in all this was to ensure that my students’ voices rang true and were not misinterpreted in any way. Their stories follow.

Rylan and Beethoven’s 5th

The opening notes of Beethoven’s 5th Symphony in C Minor create a tension that continues through much of the piece. The tension of the accented opening minor third is sometimes alleviated with legato sections, but the repetition and heavy accents bring back the tension to much of the symphony, and this tension adds to the piece’s intrigue. The same is true for Rylan. Much of her writing history is riddled with tension, however it is often mixed with smooth running, with wild energy from mental activity mixed with periods of tranquility - - and a respite from that tension.

Rylan has had a rather stormy history with writing. In our first interview, as mentioned before, she had said that she felt fine about writing unless it was something like research or informational pieces because she struggles with “how to word things.” She feels that although she was more creative when she was younger, she now “can’t think as much [and] it’s like my

brain is on a lock or something.” When I asked her if she remembered any specific incident or defining moment when this change occurred, she responded:

Well in fourth grade, I had to write this story for my teacher and it was in a packet. And it started out the story with a school field trip and how they got lost and there’s people following them or something like that.... So, I ended up finishing the story and it seemed really easy to me. So, I handed in the packet and then a few days later, after he graded them all, he gave it back and he actually read my story for the whole class, and it’s like “Wow, Rylan really did a good job, she was really creative,” and yada, yada, yada. But after that, I think, with writing I just wasn’t doing very well. And I don’t really know why...

Interestingly, although she mentioned this during our first interview, it was, in fact, the second of three times Rylan mentioned this specific event. The first time she mentioned this was in response to the writing history prompt I gave the class on the second day of school, where she simply wrote,

“In 4th grade, writing didn’t seem difficult, because my teacher read one of the stories I wrote to the whole class once.”

This particular sentence was embedded in a paragraph that began with writing a card for a second-grade teacher, segued to having nice handwriting when she was young, and then ended with stating that by fifth grade writing had become a “weak point” for her. Then later, in the first chapter of her writing history autobiography project, she wrote of the experience again:

The first [writing assignment] wasn’t too bad... I guess I did better than I thought because, a few days after it was due, my wonderful teacher read the story I made up, for one of the assignments OUT LOUD!! In front of the entire class (since it was THAT good). Knowing this I crawled underneath my desk, out of fear. Of course, you must be reading this and thinking in your head and saying, “oh it couldn’t have been that bad. No one must’ve known it was your story.” Well, newsflash, he mentioned who it was from beforehand, and for someone like me at the time, I felt like I was dying for the two minutes Mr. E was reading aloud! On the bright side, I told my mom about what happened and she was very proud of me.

The fact that Rylan wrote or spoke of the same incident on three separate occasions clearly indicates that it must have been, in fact, a defining moment for her. And there is much to consider here.

The very first time Rylan mentioned the event, as I stated before, she embedded it into a very brief discussion of her writing history. She mentioned the event as, arguably, a very positive experience: writing seemed easy, and to prove that, she indicated that at least one of her stories was so good, a teacher deemed its merits so high that it was worthy of sharing with the class, as teachers often do with exemplary models.

The next time she mentioned this incident, in response to my interview question asking about when the change in her feelings towards writing may have occurred, she painted the same experience as less positive than she had originally. During the interview, there were several indicators of her jadedness. First, she says that the teacher “actually” read her story to the class. Her use of the word “actually” may indicate her surprise that her writing was good enough to be exemplary -- as if she didn’t believe (or perhaps still doesn’t) that her story was worthy of such an honor. The word “actually” itself often indicates a re- thinking or an awakening of a new idea, so for Rylan, the awakening may be interpreted as a new thought -- one where her writing is strong and worth sharing with other young writers, but still an idea she is not quite willing to fully accept as true.

Also, Rylan, immediately after quoting her teacher’s lauding of her efforts on the piece, says, “...yada, yada, yada...” This interjection is quite interesting. One of the first times the phrase appeared in pop culture was in an episode of *Seinfeld*, where the characters used the phrase to skip over things they didn’t want to explain in detail, in essence, an avoidance of explicating details that might portray you as you wouldn’t want to be portrayed. It was a “use

your imagination” phrase that ended with a brief conclusion of how the event turned out at the end. Rylan’s use of the phrase, then, may indicate her avoidance of continuing to sing her own praises -- whether or not her teacher continued in that vein -- which is befitting, because she is somewhat reserved and shy by nature (which will be discussed later). Therefore, her inclination to move from that topic may indicate her discomfort with the attention brought to her piece, her creativity on it, etc. Another possibility, however, is that she used the phrase because she didn’t fully believe what the teacher was saying -- as if the “yada, yada, yada” could have been replaced with “whatever,” a phrase many people, especially teens, use when they don’t agree with a previous comment or simply want a change of subject. In Rylan’s case, then, both possibilities still indicate that she did not want to dwell on the positive aspects of this experience. This interpretation may be the most accurate, for she immediately follows “yada, yada, yada,” with the word “but”: “But after that... with writing I just wasn’t doing very well.” Here again, the juxtaposition of Rylan’s words seems to indicate that she is, and has been, unwilling to accept the truth of any positive feedback: She jumps immediately from what could be viewed a positive moment in her writing history to disclose that this was the last time a writing activity went well for her. Her pessimism - and tension - regarding her own abilities begins to surface here.

Rylan continues this pessimism in her last mention of the event. When she writes about the incident in the first chapter of her autobiography, she clearly indicates that she perceived the experience negatively. Firstly, she calls her teacher “wonderful,” which initially sounds like a compliment... until you read on. She continues the story of having her work read aloud, acknowledging that it was, in fact, “THAT good,” but she immediately adds, “Knowing this I crawled underneath my desk, out of fear,” which gives us a snapshot of what she was feeling:

this was not a positive experience, but one riddled with tension or anxiety. She even points out her discomfort by saying, "...and for someone like me at the time, I felt like I was dying for the two minutes Mr. E. was reading aloud!" (original emphasis). So then the adjective "wonderful" describing her teacher may be a hint of sarcasm: this teacher was not so wonderful because he drew attention to a child, who, at the time, must have been quite shy, as indicated by her feeling like "dying" as a result of hearing the teacher read her work aloud.

For some reason, this experience caused Rylan extreme anxiety -- an anxiety that even made her want to hide or fade out of sight... and feel like "dying!" The exclamation point placed after the word "dying" may allude to her strong emotions regarding this event, for the following sentence, when she tells us "On the bright side," that her mother was "very proud of [her]," she ends with a mere period. She adds no emphasis here; she simply uses a brief declarative sentence. It seems as if Rylan might not have actually viewed her mother's approval as very affirming at all if we consider the ordinary punctuation. Whereas she tells us emphatically that she felt like dying, perhaps due to embarrassment upon having the teacher read the story aloud, she mentions Mom's approval with only stock punctuation; Mom's approval appears to be overshadowed by Rylan's own angst regarding the situation.

A second indicator that Rylan perceived this particular experience negatively is that she wrote the words "out loud" all in capital letters, followed by not one, but two exclamation points ("OUT LOUD!!"). Although most people may interpret this as a very positive experience, Rylan does not, for she follows her parenthetical comment "since it was THAT good" with "Knowing this, I crawled underneath my desk, out of fear." She begins with the emphatic "OUT LOUD!!" perhaps to show excitement, as many children would when a teacher uses their work as a positive model, and she even adds "since it was THAT good," also emphatically,

almost to ensure that the reader doesn't miss the point -- her story wasn't only good; it was "THAT" good. But then she immediately moves to a negative statement. She appears to perceive what most people would deem an experience of honor as an experience causing her extreme fear or anxiety, so much so that she wanted to crawl under her desk. (Here I am interpreting the crawling as metaphoric, assuming that she did not literally crawl under her desk, which would draw even more unwanted attention to her.) Her emphatic punctuation and capitalization in writing "out loud" with two exclamation points, then, could be a foreshadowing of her perception of the fear-inducing nature of this event.

There is an obvious progression in Rylan's feelings about this event. Her first mention of it was almost a mentioning-in-passing, as if she were saying, "Oh, and by the way, there was this time my teacher read something I wrote to the whole class..." She brushes over this event as if it were no big deal at all, as if, in all her writing history, this brief flash of brilliance faded into a future of less stellar work. As she often does, she followed this telling of a very positive experience with a negative qualifier "unfortunately." She wrote, "Unfortunately, by fifth grade and up, writing started to become one of my weak points." Though this might simply be a very brief chronology of events, it is noteworthy that she moves from positive to negative quickly. In her second rendering of the event, she added the "...yada, yada, yada. But..." segment. Here, again, she seems to mention the event as something positive and then quickly adds the "but" and continues with a less optimistic outlook. Her third account of the incident was much longer, much more detailed and elaborate, and much more emphatic, as she used capital letters and more dramatic punctuation, exclamation points, to accentuate parts of this story. I must mention, too, that she did make a conscious choice to write about this event in her writing history autobiography. The assignment allowed the students to choose any events from their past

writing experiences. The only stipulations were that they needed to include some event from their elementary school years. Although my hope is that she had other positive experiences of writing during those formative years, this particular incident is one that has obviously impacted Rylan dramatically since its occurrence.

Several ironies exist in Rylan and her perception of her past writing experiences. For one, Rylan is a much better writer than she thinks she is. She has a very strong writer's voice:

“I thought it would be easy. I thought I would run right through it. I thought that everything would be alright. I really *thought* that this time I would understand! ... I guess I was wrong” (original emphasis).

This was the beginning of Chapter Two of her writing history autobiography. She sets the stage for the rest of the chapter beautifully with anaphoric stresses and emphasis, which also demonstrate a skill she doesn't realize she possesses. Not many tenth-grade students master the complexity of well-placed anaphoric structures, nor do they always realize the impact of strategic qualifiers and italics as Rylan does in this example. And through these structures, Rylan creates an exemplary hook to boot.

In the same chapter, she continues the story of her misguided thoughts, explaining the task that had been set before her:

Basically, you had to read a type of novel, pick a literary element (setting, irony, theme, etc.) found in the book to analyze, do a little research, find sources for support, use your opinion and what was found in the novel, and **bada-bing bada-boom!** You got yourself a research paper...well I guess that's what *I* thought (all original emphases).

Here again we see Rylan's strong writer's voice. The phrase “Bada-bing bada- boom” not only lends a bit of humor, as mentioned before, but it also adds a dimension of whimsy to her discussion of the introduction of the research paper, which could allude to her initial ease with the assignment. Even the next statement -- “You got yourself a research paper” -- shows her

relaxed approach. Rylan appears to be thinking that without too much frustration, she should be able to write this paper.

Her choice to bolden “bada-bing bada-boom” and use an exclamation point, again, demonstrate a sophistication she may not realize she has -- one that understands the visual component of writing. She emboldens “bada-bing bada- boom,” in a sense punctuating the phrase while at the same time drawing the reader’s attention directly to it-- there’s no missing it in the paragraph. And her use of ellipses points to continue the thought, even though the thought heads in a different direction, also demonstrates her ability to convey meaning visually, as well as to create a mood. The dots signal to the reader that something may be changing - a textual staring off into space and reflecting, or a melancholy pondering or pensiveness -- which she immediately follows with the sentence, “well I guess that’s what *I* thought.” The pensiveness immediately returns to the present reality: no more dreaming of the magical appearance of a research paper; the reality turns out quite differently.

Rylan’s italicizing the “*I*” here serves as another visual cue to the reader: another shift in her thinking. With the emphasis on the word “*I*,” Rylan seems to indicate that only she believed the research paper would not be too difficult, as if the other students believed all along that the paper would involve a good deal of hard work, and she stood alone in opposition to that thought. Had she emphasized the word “thought,” she would have indicated a different meaning -- one where the meaning focused on the change between her initial belief and the reality of the assignment; but placing the emphasis on “*I*” clues the reader in to Rylan’s perception of herself as being set apart from the others: “*I* alone thought it would be no big deal.” And it lets the reader assume she was wrong.

Rylan's play with phrases and emphases also demonstrate her understanding of the "storying" part of writing. A good story-teller knows how to grip an audience at the onset and keep intrigue, and Rylan does so in this excerpt. She makes the researched literary analysis she did in my class appear to be a simple how-to: do this, find this, use this. She presents it matter-of-factly: Just follow this simple formula and "bada-bing bada-boom!" a research paper will pop out -- or fall together -- as if by some element outside of one's control. The fact that she writes of the process with such over-simplification (and humor) lends credence to an earlier comment in the same chapter: "First given the brightly colored packet, I wasn't overwhelmed at all. I thought that this 'literary analysis'... would be enjoyable, and exciting." She appears to initially believe that the assignment would not cause tension or anxiety: she says she "wasn't overwhelmed at all." Perhaps, though, the fact that she mentions *not* being overwhelmed may actually indicate that she *expected* to be overwhelmed... at least a little, as can be seen by her addition of the words "at all." The "at all," again, may indicate more her own surprise of not feeling stressed over the assignment -- at least initially.

In addition to her strong writer's voice and ability to convey a story with visual cues, Rylan has a remarkable sense of how to close, conclude, or end a chapter. For example, she ended her first chapter with:

After a while, my teacher started to notice all of these problems, and he pulled me over one day and told me with concern on his face, "Rylan, you're going downhill." It was the first time I had ever heard something so disappointing. This would be the statement that I would remember for the rest of my life and would affect me to this day.

The lasting impression of doom that this chapter ending clearly conveys allows a reader to truly sympathize with a struggling student. Her word choice and the juxtaposition of past to present pull at the heart of the reader, who feels for the child weighed down by these words -- the tender spirit of a young child stymied by an adult's bluntness. However, Rylan's ability to

manipulate the reader by practically demonizing this arguably well-meaning teacher demonstrates her audience awareness: she saves the clincher for the final sentence in the paragraph.

Rylan continued to end the rest of her writing history biography chapters just as strongly as she did the first. In her final chapter, for instance, she writes about her experience with Document Based Questions (DBQs) in her ninth grade American History class the previous year:

This is why DBQs were my worst writing experiences. I was fully capable of doing them, but I underestimated myself and didn't ask for help. Therefore, I get what I get, and I don't get upset.

In this particular ending, we again see that Rylan knows how to conclude and how to work her audience. Her use of sound devices is clear -- her repetition of the word "get," the assonance in the repeated short "e" sound, the rhyming of "get" and "upset" all add to the effect she seems to try to achieve: pithiness. A reader can hardly help but smile at her rhetorical strategy in the last line and give her kudos for such a mature outlook as well.

Another irony that exists in Rylan is her failure to seek support, despite realizing that she needs it. By her own admission, Rylan does not advocate for herself. In the example pertaining to DBQs above, she acknowledges that she "didn't ask for help." Elsewhere, in our first interview, when I asked Rylan if she ever asked for clarification when she didn't understand an assignment, she simply stated, "No." As we spoke more in the same interview, she said,

I think what my problem is, is I never asked my teachers for help, and that's why I'm still in this position today, where I don't understand what I'm supposed to be doing because I never ask for help.

In our second interview, I followed up on this issue with Rylan:

Berni:

Another thing that came up in our previous chats was that you don't always ask for help, and I'm curious as to why that is.

Rylan:

I guess I get really scared that the question I have is just really... That it's not gonna make sense, that it just sounds really dumb, so I guess I get really overwhelmed, like should I ask this question, should I not. I know this may be a little off topic, but it's sort of like last year in science. Everybody in my class, I'm like, oh my goodness, they're like these people that I know are always getting good grades in everything, and when it came to me asking questions, because that entire semester I was confused with everything, I almost failed that class because I never asked a single question, and I was overwhelmed of asking my teacher a question because I'm like, my question's probably dumb compared to all the other questions that all the other students ask.

Berni:

Even if you ask privately? Even if you stayed after?

Rylan:

Yeah.

Berni:

Because you did actually, in the beginning of the semester, you were much more hanging out and asking for clarification, which is fine. It's great, actually. I don't think any teacher would deny you that, so I'm wondering why you wouldn't even ask personally, like privately.

Rylan:

Yeah. I don't know. I guess I get really scared, so...

Berni:

And I think there's a little shyness in you as well...

Rylan:

Yeah.

At this point, Rylan became very quiet, and I could see that she was uncomfortable with this line of questioning, so I ended the conversation quickly.

From this excerpt we can again see Rylan's fear, perhaps the same fear she felt in fourth grade with the teacher reading her story aloud to the class. There is a fear of being exposed, of appearing to be over-placed academically, as Rylan indicated by voicing that she didn't want to "sound really dumb" by asking the questions she had. She also tags on that this fear of sounding less knowledgeable causes her to become overwhelmed, as if the fear overtakes her and she questions herself even about whether or not to ask the question:

“...should I ask this question, should I not.” She had indicated feeling overwhelmed several times in this interview, mostly in discussing her writing experiences. In discussing the writing she did for my class, she said,

I guess anything that stresses me out just gets me confused and my brain is just immediately getting confused, and it’s really weird too because when we had the first writing assignment, the Second Favorite Teacher, I was starting to do that, and to be honest, it was really simple once I finished it all, but in the beginning, for some reason I got confused, and I understood when I read it. I’m like, okay, this is simple, and then you put the pencil to the paper and I just immediately, just... My head was blank, and I just got confused. I guess I just get overwhelmed with just writing itself, and like, oh no, I have to do this and then again, everything starts swirling in my head...

Through this excerpt, it becomes apparent that Rylan believes that when she becomes stressed, she also becomes confused and her thinking becomes less clear to the point where her mind “blank[s],” or, in other words, she can’t focus because “everything starts swirling in [her] head.”

This, however, is not always her initial response. In discussing our research paper, Rylan stated that at first she thought the researched literary analysis would be “fun,” which she mentioned twice. It wasn’t until we moved deeper into the research process -- time in the library, looking for sources, creating notes, etc. -- that she began to “get stressed out,” “confused” and “blank[ed].” She attributes this lack of focus and “blinking” to “overthinking,” which she also mentioned in our interviews. When I asked her what overthinking meant to her, she replied,

Overthinking is just, I guess, where you’re thinking of way too many things at the same time. Like, okay, maybe I should do this first. Maybe I should organize this. Oh, wait, but I have to think of this first, and then all of these different things are going in your head and you’re just... Your head just feels like it’s spinning and spinning, and then until you have to drop, and you just don’t want to do it anymore. You just get fed up.

For Rylan, it appears that too much stimulus in the form of ideas becomes too much for her to process cognitively. She knows that writing takes organization, but she seems to become lost when trying to find a starting point. She mentions things to do “first” twice in the excerpt

above, which already poses a problem -- she realizes she cannot have two “firsts,” so trying to decide between them, along with all the other considerations of writing, leave her head “spinning and spinning,” and from this point, she feels that the next step is to “drop.” By juxtaposing “spinning” and “dropping,” Rylan seems to be saying that the thoughts in her head prior to putting pencil to paper leave her dizzy. And just as when a child spins and spins and becomes dizzy, the next step is to “drop” or fall from the inability to regain equilibrium. Her metaphoric “dropping” may be interpreted as not being able to continue on a straight or focused path, ie, not having a focus for her writing, which leaves her not wanting to move forward: “...you just don’t want to do it anymore.”

Also, the reader can almost feel her tension and anxiety in this excerpt. The words themselves seem to gain momentum as she shares. The hesitation in “...and then all of these different things are going in your head and you’re just... Your head just feels like it’s spinning and spinning” may indicate that she hesitated because she was trying to gain control -- to, even as she spoke of the experience, slow down before her head spin made her dizzy. Britton, et al. (1975) speak of something similar in their explanation of the conception stage of writing:

Whatever it is that provokes the decision to write... soon comes to be seen in relation to all the writer’s relevant previous experience. His conception, the way he explains to himself what he must do, is influenced by his involvement or lack of it... He summons up all his powers, his knowledge, his feelings and attitudes, and he may have to struggle to fit his idea of this current task into what he knows he must do... Even if the task is something he doesn’t care about, but must do, he must begin by trying to understand what to do... His experience, particularly his up-to-that- moment experience of writing in school, will strongly influence his construing of his present task. (p. 23-24)

According to Britton, et al. then, Rylan’s confusion might actually be the result of *not* knowing exactly what to do, as she has admitted in the past; but instead of seeking help, she may be plagued with the past experiences of receiving poor grades, or of the confusion that led her to not complete assignments -- these being her “up-to-that-moment” experiences -- that even cause

her to “imagine difficulties that aren’t there” (Britton, et al., 1975, p. 25). So it may actually be in the conception stage of writing that Rylan’s problems begin. Although she initially sees the assignment as not very difficult, the actual beginning of the writing process, conception (or ideation), causes her difficulties because she understands the process but is unable to follow through and actually fill “the blank page.” As she tries to “conceive” thoughts, it may be recollection of past experiences that arise; and if the experiences are ones that she perceives negatively, the memory of them may further influence her by causing more confusion and anxiety.

Sadly, for Rylan, as for many students, the tension and anxiety writing causes for her feed the confusion, so she ends up not completing many of her writing assignments, an Achilles’ heel that has plagued her since her elementary school days. And even more sad is the fact that, if she could only let go of the tension and allow herself to be the writer that she is, she would most likely find a great deal of success.

* * * * *

Perhaps an important lesson to learn from Rylan is that the tension and anxiety students experience upon hearing “essay” or writing assignments is very real for them. And these feelings of apprehension are not easily allayed. Perhaps with a student like Rylan, a teacher should come along side of her and “write beside her” (Kittle, 2008); in other words, literally sit and write with her, even acting the scribe, until she feels confident enough to continue with an assignment independently. Perhaps this will help her gain the necessary confidence for the next time.

* * * * *

Simon and Garfunkel's "The Boxer" contains the following lyrics:
*In the clearing stands a boxer and a fighter by his trade
And he carries the reminders of every glove that laid him out
Or cut him 'til he cried out in his anger and his shame
"I am leaving, I am leaving,"
But the fighter still remains.*

This is Rose.

On the second day of class, as I mentioned previously, I had my students respond to a prompt about their writing histories. Rose's response tells her story in a nutshell:

When I was younger in about second grade I was taught to write. Before second grade I knew generally how to write but couldn't. I didn't know how to read, write, or spell at all in second grade. Then in third grade I was put on medication to help me learn better because I have/had a learning disability. Once I was put on the meds I began to learn to read and write. I still can't spell and writing is still really hard for me.

Over the course of the semester, Rose expounded on this several times between our interviews and her writing autobiography. As the Boxer in Simon and Garfunkel's song carries the reminders of hits and cuts, so, too, does Rose.

My class was Rose's first honors-level English class. She had been moved to honors because in ninth grade she earned an average of "a 99 or something" in her College Preparatory (CP) English class, but by her own admission, she said, "I was not prepared for this." "This" referred to the amount of work she needed to complete in the beginning of the semester. Students entering 10th grade Honors American Lit. and Comp. were to have completed a summer assignment, which was due the Tuesday after the Labor Day long weekend. The assignment had been disseminated to the students in mid-May of their Freshman year, so they had all summer to complete it. In my class, however, students are also required to complete an essay of roughly five paragraphs due at the end of the first week of

school, in order for me to obtain an early assessment of their writing abilities so I could plan where and how to focus my writing instruction. This essay is usually assigned on the first day of class and due at the end of the week. For Rose, this seemed like a great deal of writing work, since she later told me that she had been assigned very little writing in her ninth grade CP class.

As we spoke more about her writing experiences during our interviews, Rose further elaborated on her struggles with writing. In response to my very first question, “How do you feel about writing in general?” she responded shaking her head and scrunching her nose,

I’m not that good about writing. I mean, if I grew up and had like a good writing experience when I was younger I’d probably like writing because I do. At home I have this journal -- I call it my ‘dream journal’ because I have a very, very creative imagination. So I dream about all these different stories and I write them down, so I have stories upon stories. Like I could write books and probably direct movies because they’re so detailed.

In this excerpt, Rose seems to be contradicting herself. She says she doesn’t feel good about her writing, yet she writes quite a bit at home, but there’s a clear distinction, and a condition. She says “if...” Had she had “good” or positive writing experiences “when [she] was younger...,” most likely indicating that her experiences in school were not good, she might like writing today, and she adds that she actually does like to write. Presumably she means that it is the “not...good” writing experiences she’s had in her past school years that have sullied the way she feels about writing now, despite the fact that she does, indeed, do a great deal of writing at home. But the writing she does at home is creative -- her own writing on her own terms, detailed to the point of being able to be filmed. Curious about this, I pursued the conversation:

Berni:

When you say “dream,” do you mean night-time dreaming or daydreaming, or “I’m dreaming to be a...” this?

Rose:

No, like night-time dream or daydreaming... I'll create stories in my head then write them down so I don't forget them. They're all these elaborate stories, but growing up and stuff, they would be like "Research this, research that" -- not creative. "You have to do it this way. You have to do it that way." So I never really got to write creative, like, just my own stories about whatever I wanted. So it's not been very fun for me growing up writing.

Berni:

Ok. So, you do a lot of writing at home Okay, do you remember when or what made you turn it off? Is it writing in school? What made you turn off to writing and do you remember when in your life that happened?

Rose:

School writing.

Berni:

OK, so tell me more about this.

Rose:

So I didn't really start writing essays, paragraphs or anything like that until around third grade because in second grade I was still learning to function, kind of...? And like just trying to get it together in my mind and keep up with the other kids, sort of. And then third grade I got put on my meds, so I was able to start kinda catching up with the other kids on where they were. Like, all of them were already writing, like, paragraphs and stuff, and I (pauses) just learned to spell "the."

Here, it appears that Rose was robbed of the joy of what other young writers often experience in school -- the creation of and recitation of their own stories. Because her learning disabilities were not diagnosed prior to third grade, when much of the "fun" writing is being done, it seems that she was thrown into higher levels of writing -- "Research this, research that... Do it this way, do it that way" -- before she gained enough confidence to put her own ideas down on paper, before she gained the experience of exploring different ways to use words, before she could figure out her own voice in writing. Her disability had hindered all these very positive experiences for her. For the first seven or eight years of her life, Rose suffered from undiagnosed ADD, ADHD and a learning disability. When I asked her the area of her learning disability she responded:

Well, the learning disability branches off from ADHD and ADD because, well, ADD, I can't focus; ADHD, I'm always moving. So add that to not focusing, I'm just kinda... wired all the time. I just kinda don't sit down. I'm always looking around. I'm like, "Oh

look, a squirrel!” So the learning disability branched off that by I never picked up on anything that the other kids were learning because I didn’t hear the teacher. I didn’t focus on anything, so then I was considered slow. I got tested for learning disabilities when I was younger and I passed and like, I just wasn’t able to catch up with all the other kids. So then going to third grade, once I got put on my meds, everything hit me so fast. I was like, “Whoa! What is happening!” I could then focus. I could then do my work, and it all hit me so fast, and they were like “Write this, write that; read this, read that,” and I just broke. Like, it... (pauses). So I just never liked it from then because I ...(pauses). Whenever I think about writing or anything, it’d just, like, go back to second grade and third grade where I’m just like, “Well, I’m screwed.”

There is much to consider in Rose’s perception of these experiences. The triple- threat of the ADD, ADHD and a learning disability kept Rose from learning at the same pace as her non-disabled peers, and the lag put her several steps behind. Due to her inability to focus, she couldn’t even hear or concentrate on the teacher’s instruction, which would obviously set her back. In the first chapter of her writing history autobiography, she refers to her early elementary years as “a thick white fog,” most likely because she couldn’t hear or understand clearly. The white fog may indicate that she felt enveloped in a murkiness that interfered with her learning. She later writes of the difficulties of second grade writing experiences: “That whole year made me not like writing the most in my life.” This was because she would often be denied recess in order to catch up on work. She was assigned a paraprofessional -- whom she referred to as her “teacher-helper” -- to work with her and make certain she completed all her reading and writing work, but this, too, separated her from her peers -- not only on an academic level, but on a social one as well.

In this same excerpt, Rose speaks of her teachers’ handling of her new ability to focus, although for her, their excitement seems to have backfired. When she says, “Everything hit me so fast,” which she mentions twice, she is referring to the amount of work that was given to her now that she was at an ability level more like that of most of her peers. The pronoun “they” she uses in the same sentence refers to her teachers, who instructed her to read and write

assignments her peers had already completed. Rose realized this, for she wrote more about the incident in the second chapter of her writing autobiography, which she entitled, “A turning point in my writing” [sic]. After describing her teachers’ reactions to her “erratic personality change” once she had been placed on medications, she wrote, “My teachers all responded happily saying, ‘I’m excited to see what the future holds [for Rose].’” Prior to a parent-teacher conference, Rose’s teachers were unaware of the cause of the change in her, but were so pleased with her new ability to “excel and keep up with the other kids” that they may have inadvertently given her too much too fast; in other words, in their own excitement about Rose’s progress, they may have given her an onslaught of work -- work that completely overwhelmed her. To this day, then, when Rose is given a writing assignment, the bad memories are the first to come to mind, and she feels “screwed” -- that she’ll endure another negative writing experience.

Her pauses as she spoke of these incidents are also noteworthy. The first pause occurred after she said that she “broke.” This breaking may indicate a type of breakdown, a point where she is no longer able to continue; and the pain in the memory of that breaking may be the reason she hesitated, paused, before continuing the discussion. She almost changes the subject: “...I just broke. Like it (pause)... So I just never liked it from then...” Here, she begins to describe the breaking and its effect on her, but in her hesitation, in her search for words to describe the painful experience -- “Like it...” -- she abandons that particular topic -- the breaking -- and moves on to mention her dislike for reading and writing from the past to the present -- “So I just never liked it from then.”

Her second pause followed immediately: “So I just never liked it from then because I... (pause). Whenever I think about writing or anything it’d just, like, go back to second grade and third grade where I’m just like, ‘Well, I’m screwed.’” She again fishes for words to describe the

memories and then changes the direction of the thought. In this part of the sentence, however, she pauses just before she provides an explanation, or answers an invisible “why.” Why didn’t she like writing from then? “...Because I... (pause).” Even that she pauses after the pronoun “I” may indicate that she does not want to mention *exactly* why; the answer could be “because I can’t do it,” or “because I’m not good at it” or “because I (fill in the blank with some other painful evaluation of your own abilities... or limitations.)” It could be that in order to sidestep or avoid the pain in her assessment of herself, she moves the thought to a different, albeit equally painful reality: “Whenever I think about writing... it’d just, like, go back” to the painful memories of second and third grades, when she felt “screwed,” or perhaps doomed to fail, or at least not continue with the progress she hopes for.

Rose also spoke of hitting “walls” in both interviews and in her writing autobio. The first time she mentioned it was during our first interview. In her discussion of the anxiety and panic attacks writing causes her, she went on to say:

My mom and I call it a ‘brain block,’ where I know what I want to write, and I know exactly how I want to write it, I know everything about what I want to do and it’s in my brain, and then I go to get my pencil and paper and it doesn’t come out. I just can’t then write it. It’s like a wall. Like, behind the wall it’s good. I know what to do, I know everything. But then I can’t get it down.

In our second interview, when she brought up these “walls” again, I asked Rose to elaborate on what, exactly, she meant when she said “hitting walls.” She responded,

I’m just staring at words. I’ll just be sitting there staring at words. I’m like, I don’t know what any of these say; I can’t even process anything. I’m just sitting there.

What Rose describes is what many writers would call “writer’s block,” arriving at a point where the ideas no longer flow and the writer feels like his/her words are gone, or perhaps the words or ideas do not make sense. However, for a young, struggling writer like Rose, the “brain block” puts her in a state of panic. She says, “... I just break; then I usually have panic attacks for a

while.” She apparently moves from being stuck behind the wall to panicking about being stuck behind the wall. Part of this, for her, is due to having deadlines. In her writing autobio, she explains:

Even up until high school, I still get anxiety attacks and panic attacks every time I go to write a simple five paragraph essay. The anxiety comes hand-in-hand with my learning disability of a sort. They come hand-in-hand because since I can't learn as fast as others, I can't write as fast as others. This causes me a lot of the anxiety because I *want* to finish my projects on time. I *want* to hand in everything on time (pauses), but it's very hard for me and it stresses me out. (verbal emphasis)

In her desire to get her work in on time -- as her peers do (she mentions “others” twice) -- she is not able to write, to get her ideas out onto paper, as quickly as her peers. Most likely what Rose means is that she is not able to complete the writing process as quickly as her non-disabled peers, and for her, deadlines clearly portray that truth: although she “wants” to complete assignments “on time,” the clock works against her, and it is the ticking clock that hinders her from scaling the “wall” and puts her in a state of panic instead. She speaks of this directly, talking through her thought process during these periods:

“Like, there is a deadline. I have to do it by this deadline. Oh, wait! I forgot to do it! I have to do it now. I don't have enough time. I have to get it by like 10:59. It's 9:00. I have one hour...” Like, I don't have one hour, but I *think* I have one hour, and then I just break. Then I usually have panic attacks for a while.

In disclosing this process, one can almost hear the anxiety building in her head. She moves from having forgotten, to realizing time would be an issue, to even shorting herself time. In all this, she works herself into a state of panic, even though, by her own admission, the rational part of her knows she has more than an hour, but the panicked part of her appears to lose control, even of time. Such is the result of panic in most people who experience severe anxiety; the fear of losing control of the situation hinders us from moving forward or even thinking rationally enough to try to regain control and move forward. And the final result, as is often the case for

Rose, leaves us feeling overwhelmed. But, as she says, too, “I’m like a train that will go off track, and I’ve got to get myself back on.”

As Rose continued disclosing her elementary and middle school writing experiences, she mentions our state tests, the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), which begin in third grade. Again, in her first writing autobiography chapter, she writes, “During the PSSAs we had to write short little prompts for the test, but I never liked those because of my past experience in second grade, not being able to have fun because I was forced to stay inside and finish up writing.” Here, again, she recalls bad memories in the face of new experiences. John Dewey (1938) speaks of this phenomenon. He writes: “...in unfamiliar cases, we cannot tell just what the consequences of observed conditions will be unless we go over past experiences in our mind, unless we reflect upon them and by seeing what is similar in them to those now present, go on to form a judgment of what may be expected in the present situation” (68). Dewey believes that people view every new experience in light of past experiences. When we are faced with something new, something “unfamiliar,” we attempt to predict the outcome of the experience based on outcomes of similar past experiences. This is exactly what Rose indicates: she attributes her negative disposition toward the writing prompts on the PSSA -- a writing situation she’s never dealt with before -- with her past “not fun” experiences of having to stay in the classroom to complete writing assignments. The past still haunts her.

But for Rose, the trend continued. In the same chapter of her writing autobiography, she writes:

In middle school we had benchmark tests and other tests that are state- required that were giving [sic] out to all students no matter what academic level they are at. This really made me mad in middle school because I was friends with all the super advanced kids and they were getting high grades and they were saying that it was easy, but it was really

hard for me and I wasn't getting good grades on the tests. This made me just hate writing even more because of the thought that everyone else can do it and I can't.

In this excerpt, several ideas surface. For one, what Rose says aligns with Dewey's (1938)

further discussion of the meaning of purpose in educative experiences:

The formation of purposes is, then, a rather complex intellectual operation. It involves (1) observation of surrounding conditions; (2) knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past, a knowledge obtained partly by recollection and partly from the information, advice, and warning of those who have had a wider experience; and (3) judgment which puts together what is observed and what is recalled to see what they signify (69).

This parallels Rose's interpretation of her experience with the middle school benchmark tests to a tee. First, Rose's observation of surrounding conditions: standardized testing, along with the writing that accompanies it, for her, has not been pleasant, nor the results favorable. Second, her knowledge of what has happened in past similar experiences and the information, etc. of those who have had wider experience: her past experiences with testing and writing have been difficult, although the experiences of her peers, specifically, and other students, generally, have not. Her peers and others taking the tests were outside playing during recess, whereas she was still inside writing to complete them. And third, Rose's judgment of what she observed -- peers completing the tests much before she did -- and what she recalled -- the tests being a struggle for her -- all work together in her mind to make her dislike, even hate, writing.

Writing in general causes Rose a great deal of anxiety -- anxiety driven by very negative associations. Yaman (2014) writes of such associations in his study of Turkish secondary students. He believes that "the roots of writing anxiety are based on students' first writing experiences" (p. 1119). Since Rose's first experiences were so negative -- not being able to focus due to her ADHD, being behind her peers because of a late diagnosis -- her disposition toward writing, at least assigned writing, may have severely soured.

Also, and less obvious in this excerpt, is Rose's acrimony regarding writing and testing. She writes that she hates writing because the tests and their writing components were not difficult at all for her friends, most of whom were "super advanced" or more academically gifted than Rose. Even the fact that she calls her friends "super advanced" indicates that she believed that they were academically superior to her, and it is easy to see that a child would be resentful of this. Rose does not resent her friends for finding testing / writing easy; she seems to resent testing / writing. In this sense, she transfers her dislike of a situation -- testing and its writing component -- to writing itself, which may be viewed as a misperception, because, as I mentioned initially, she actually does like writing when she is free to write her own stories... creatively, hence, the dream journal she keeps. It is also important to note that she does not resent her friends for *being* "super advanced"; she accepts them as they are, but resents the situation that she finds herself in *with* them. Again, it is not difficult to understand that being in a testing and/or writing environment with more able peers could be uncomfortable, at the least, and anxiety-invoking, at worst.

Despite all these experiences that I note as negative writing experiences, Rose has learned survival techniques, a means of turning negatives into positives. When she was in elementary school, her paraprofessional taught her to draw infinity signs in order to help her calm herself down. The recursive nature of the adjacent circles allowed her to focus her thoughts on only one thing until she relaxed, and she uses this technique even until this day.

We also discussed what happens once she's calmed down:

Rose:

Then I start to write, and then I can write, write, write. Once I start writing and figure out what I want to talk about, I usually don't stop writing. I just think, 'Keep going, keep going, keep going.' That's after I worked myself up to do it

Berni:

It sounds like you worked yourself up, and you sort of had a little meltdown?

Rose:

Yes.

Berni:

And then you were able to say, “Okay, I’ve melted down. Now I can move forward...”?

Rose:

Yes. Exactly.

Berni:

What about the “walls”? What do you do to get past them? Because you had mentioned that sometimes you’ve gotten to the point where you can’t...

Rose:

I can’t even process anything. Yeah. I’m just staring at words.

Berni:

Right. So what do you do then?

Rose:

I usually, then, go downstairs and make chocolate milk.

Berni:

Yeah, yeah! Well, that’s true! You get to the point where it’s, like, overload...

Rose:

So, I usually go out and do something else. My mom usually says go take a shower or something. .Put it down. Just go.

Berni:

Right! A diversion.

Rose:

Yeah, but I like to have chocolate milk, and then come back and sit down...

Berni:

And then you’re better...

Rose:

Yeah. Then I. can just write, write, write.

Rose's process seems to align with Britton et al.'s (1975) discussion of the stages of writing. After conception and incubation, and some production, she hits a wall. Perhaps the information kept in her short-term memory has been extinguished. Part of her process, then, is to "conceive and incubate" some more as she walks away, takes a chocolate milk break. Britton et al. (1975) speak of this as "pause-time," and argue that much of this time is actually spent thinking about what to write next. Thus, after a pause from writing, Rose has "integrated movement sequences [which are] the ability to write large numbers of words, or substantial sections of words, as whole units" (p.36). For her, then, these episodes are literally integrated movement sequences -- sequences of thinking, whether in conception or incubation stages, then production stages where she "write[s], write[s], write[s]." Moffett (1968) speaks of a similar process. He refers to the moments of incubation and conception as "silences" and production as "exuberances" (p. 40), both necessary for communication, whether oral or written. In either instance, Rose seems to have formed her own method of completing assignments with combinations of chocolate milk breaks and times of exuberant writing.

"...But the fighter still remains."

* * * * *

Rose's example teaches us that some students, with the strong support of parents, friends, other more skilled writers, learn how to adapt to the challenges they face during activities, specifically here, writing activities. However, this accounts for assignments or activities where she is able to write at home. These adaptations, because they are time-consuming, do not transfer well to writing for standardized tests, and this is especially problematic for students with learning disabilities, since high-stakes cause these students a great deal of anxiety and

fear of failure. The specific role of standardized testing on students with learning disabilities, however, is beyond the scope of this study.

* * * * *

Beth's Coloratura

"You're a shining star, no matter who you are, shining bright to see what you can truly be."

These lyrics from Earth, Wind & Fire's "Shining Star" sum up Beth and her perceptions of her classroom experiences since elementary school. Beth's early elementary years were filled with ups and downs. She tells stories of advocating for herself and proving her abilities to her teachers despite being moved into remediation classes, mostly for reading, throughout her early elementary years; however, through these experiences, and with the help of a few of her teachers who she said "[gave] me that chance to show my abilities," she overcame... and has been in mostly honors-level classes ever since.

Despite this yo-yo stream of experiences, Beth speaks mostly positively about her early writing experiences. In fact, she states that in or about first grade, she would write stories based on books she was reading at the time, and her family and she would create games based on these stories. In a private conversation, she mentioned that her mom had recently come across one of these stories and brought it to Beth's attention as a pleasant memory of her childhood. It appears that Beth's family helped her develop strong self-efficacy, which, in turn, helps her remain positive regarding writing activities despite assessed in-school writing activities that were less so.

Beth's confidence in her own abilities has helped her maintain a positive attitude toward writing in general. To the question "How do you feel about writing, in a general sense?" she replied,

Pretty good... until I started really looking into my past, I never really thought I had a bad experience with writing. Until I really looked at it and realized, like it wasn't all positive like I thought it was. So right now, I don't hate writing, but I do prefer one writing over the other.

The "other" Beth refers to is creative writing, which she acknowledges, "...a lot of people like that." She continues, "I don't remember fifth grade being this big scary essay year... I never had these awful experiences with writing." Beth's lack of "awful experiences with writing" may be the reason she did not initially feel intimidated by what others referred to as "the dreaded research paper." It could be that she remembers fifth grade writing as simply... writing. However, her perception, or memory of fifth grade writing, seems to have changed. In her writing history autobiography, she writes:

I entered middle school in fifth grade and what I thought of writing changed. The work became more taxing. I became overwhelmed ... Fifth grade reading class is where I remember writing more and it became more serious and lengthy. My work was critiqued to larger extents and it was nerve-wracking.... I wasn't necessarily scared about the essay, but I feared failing. My biggest fear is failing So it wasn't my fear of writing itself, it was the grade.

This is quite interesting, because in our interview, which was conducted roughly two months prior to the autobiography project submission, Beth describes an attitude vastly different from the one she writes about. Her first reflection was much more positive, indicating "never [having] had these awful experiences with writing" that many of her classmates mentioned; yet when she wrote the story of her experiences in the fifth-grade reading and/or writing class, the narrative is not very positive at all. This may be due to Beth's overall positive attitude -- she is a student who always views the glass as half-full. She often tries to look at the other perspective or give someone the benefit of the doubt -- and then she supplies her position afterwards. Or it may be to add dramatic effect to her story; she uses the words "taxing," "overwhelmed," "nerve-wracking," "scared," and even "failing," all of which have negative

connotations. However, she also mentions here that her problem wasn't actually with the activity of writing itself, but with the assessment, the grade, in which it resulted. This will be further discussed below.

Additionally, in this excerpt, Beth mentions that writing became "more serious and lengthy." By "more serious," she explains, "I feel like essays are in like you do this, and then this, and then that. It's a very strict format." So Beth seems to equivocate serious with strict format, perhaps even "formula," in that "...you have to do this... and then that." There are certain criteria that make the essay restrictive and not "creative." She expounds on her definitions of these terms in our second interview, below.

Berni:

So, creative writing versus other. I want to know, in your mind, what's the difference. What is "creative" versus "other" writing?

Beth:

Creative to me is more... not as restrictive, so we have a little bit more freedom to what we can write about, kind of like a personal journal almost. In eighth grade, my eighth grade English teacher would have us write journals sometimes, like maybe like once a week, twice a week. She would say that your creative writing needs to include a spider, or it needs to have a plot twist, or you need to create the life that you wish you were living, or a society that you would put rules on, or something like that. It wasn't very [pauses]. It's not as stressful to me, just because I feel like essays... [have] a very strict format. Creative is more loose and not as scary almost.

Berni:

Ok, no. I totally understand that. So, it's not really, the way you look at it, it's not really school writing versus other writing.

Beth:

Yeah.

Berni:

Ok, so when you hear "essay" then, what takes the idea of creativity out of an essay? Why is it that when we think "essay," we go, "Oh, that can't be creative" or "It's not creative"?

Beth:

¹⁸It's more "essay" itself is a scary word just because people always associate it
¹⁹with getting research papers, and getting information, and a very strict rubric,
²⁰and ...[pauses]

²¹Berni:
Grades?

²²Beth:
Yeah. That's a lot more, the grade is a lot more important than in creative writing
²
³where it's just more relaxed and fun. Essay is not so fun.

Berni:
Ok. The word itself.

²⁵Beth:
(nods in agreement)

²⁶Berni:
Ok, so what if I had said, "Hey, a creative research paper"? What would that
²⁷mean to you? Is there such a thing as, in your mind, or can there be such a thing
as a ²⁸creative research paper?

²⁹Beth:
Not as pure as just a creative writing. A creative research writing to me is more
³⁰you can put your own ideas in, but it's still -- take that word away and it's still
a ³¹research paper. You strip it of its name and it's still a research paper.

³²Berni:
Just take out that word "creative" is what you're saying.

³³Beth:
(nods)

³⁴Berni:
Are you thinking that you really can't have a lot of your own thoughts in a
³⁵research paper?

³⁶Beth:
Probably less of my own thoughts than in a creative piece because research is
³⁷more pulling context from other people and putting in your own thoughts here
and there ³⁸on what other people say, but it's not always say what you like about
this or that. It's ³⁹more *strict*. Research is more *strict* (original verbal emphasis).
I think that's what I'm ⁴⁰trying to get across.

⁴¹Berni:
Strict in terms of citing and using other people's ideas, and not just being able
to ⁴²put your own? You did *Fahrenheit*, right?

⁴³Beth:
Um-hmm, Um-hmm (affirmative to both questions).

⁴⁴Berni:
Ok, and I'm just trying to get to the heart of it myself. Would it have been
⁴⁵different if I said, "Just write..." Let's still call it a research paper. "Write a
research ⁴⁶paper on *Fahrenheit 451*, something that you see that you want to
prove, but you're just ⁴⁷using the text to prove your ideas on it." How would that
be different? Or wouldn't it ⁴⁸be?

⁴⁹Beth:

Honestly, how you worded that was like saying that take something and prove it, ⁵⁰that seems a lot more fun to me, just because I kind of like lawyer-ish kind of stuff, and ⁵¹that kind-

⁵²Berni:

So it did seem more fun, did you say?

⁵³

Beth:

Yeah. Yeah, just because it doesn't seem as scary, I guess. I guess with the word ⁵⁴“essay” you always think of a heavy grade.

⁵⁵Berni:

Or a research paper, then, too, right? By default?

⁵⁶Beth:

Yeah. Yeah. It's always the grade is very big, and that it's very -- The rubric ⁵⁷itself has very detailed criteria, whereas creative it's like make sure you include this ⁵⁸piece, or it's not as strict.

Several notable points arise in this excerpt of Beth's interview. For one, and perhaps most importantly in the eyes of a student, is the issue of grades or assessment, which she mentioned earlier. Every student knows that with most writing assignments, especially essays or theme papers, an assessment of the writing will be provided upon the teacher's perusal of the paper, and as Beth states, it's usually a “big” or “heavy grade.” What Beth means is that often these formal papers are worth a large number of points, perhaps even a percentage of a student's cumulative grade for the semester or year. And students often view their level of success on a given paper in terms of what grade they earn. Beth herself, in her writing history autobiography wrote that “All the stress paid off when I believe I earned a good grade...” Here she seems to be saying that upon her own assessment of the grade she received being “good,” she deemed the stress she endured as having “paid off.” In other words, the stress she experienced during this fifth-grade writing assignment was worth the trouble because she received a grade with which she was content. Even her word choice in saying “...I *believe* I earned a good grade” (emphasis added) may demonstrate that her perception of the experience of writing the essay and the stress she encountered as a result of this particular episode

generally ended positively -- a happy memory -- because her grade was "...between the high 80's and 90's," and she deemed this acceptable.

Elsewhere, in lines 18-20, Beth alludes that part of the contrast between creative writing and essay writing is that essays entail gathering information and have "a very strict rubric, and..." Here she pauses, and it is I who offer what she seems hesitant to say -- that essays entail the issuance of grades. Her pause here raises a question: Why does she pause there instead of continuing with her litany of essay requirements? It may be because she is aware of her audience, me, her English teacher, and wonders if she is safe in mentioning that essays are stressful, and not fun, for students because of the assessment that comes with them. It may be that Beth is afraid she will hurt my feelings by admitting that she dislikes essay writing because of being graded, fully realizing that part of what happens in school, in English class particularly, is the issuance of grades on writing assignments. Or it may be that Beth assumes, correctly, that I was the creator of the "...rubric [with] detailed criteria..." and this detailing is part of what made this particular essay appear to be "very strict." Once the ice was broken and the word "grades" was spoken, however, Beth seemed more relaxed in discussing that the "importance" of the grade on an essay -- as opposed to the grade on a creative writing piece -- is part of what makes essay writing less "fun."

Here another notable point from this interview excerpt arises: Beth's discussion of "fun" versus "not fun" writing. For Beth it is the ideation and being allowed creative freedom that makes writing "fun." For Beth, creative writing is "more loose and not as scary," and therefore more synonymous with "fun"; whereas the "strictness" of an essay or research paper (along with a "heavy" grade) equals "not fun." And for Beth, this isn't a matter of "school writing" versus "other writing"; for her, who does take a creative writing elective in school, it's more a matter of

the freedom involved in being allowed to write your own thoughts. This is evident in her response to my speculation on what would happen if I allowed my students a method of research paper writing akin to Rosenblatt's (1935) Reader Response or Macrorie's (1988) I-Search technique. Her response to this in lines 49-53 indicate that searching for something to prove appeals to her and "seems a lot more 'fun' to me, just because I like lawyer-ish kind of stuff..." Beth aligns this search-and-prove method with real-world activities -- something lawyers do -- and this approach seems not only "fun," but "a lot more fun." Again, although she does not say so directly, Beth alludes to the notion that in approaching a research paper as a hunting expedition focusing primarily on what the researcher sees in the text -- a writer's own insights -- is a much more enjoyable method of writing an essay than using and citing secondary sources.

The last notable point I will discuss here is the reification of the research paper, or even the essay. To clarify, I am defining "reification" as the process of making something abstract into something concrete. The original Latin root "re/res" can be defined as "thing" or in Late Latin, "real," or more loosely, a finite object; and the suffix "-fy," defined as "to make," combine to form the word "reify," which can be interpreted to mean making an abstract concept into something that is more real, more concrete. Thus, an essay or research paper -- an abstract concept -- becomes a "real thing" in the eyes of students.

As Beth stated in our discussion of the possibility of a "creative" research paper, adding or omitting the word "creative" to "research paper" does not make it any friendlier to students; it is still a "thing." She said, "...take that word away and it's still a research paper... You strip it of its name and it's still a research paper" -- a rose by any other name. As we continued the discussion, she added, "I think the word 'research paper' or 'essay' already has a negative connotation to it... so that's what makes it so bad." It appears then, that through the eyes of a

student, the words “essay” and “research paper” themselves have become reified in students’ minds; instead of being an abstract, open forum to communicate ideas, “essay” and “research paper” become ominous objects, even ones that are “bad.” From what Beth says, the terms themselves appear to affect students’ attitudes towards writing: the negative connotation associated with essay writing does not disappear by preceding it with the arguably positive term, creative. “Bad” equals “no fun”; thus “research paper” and/or “essay” become reified into a “thing” that is “bad” and “scary” -- almost monster-like. In a chapter in her writing history autobiography, she again vilifies this paper, projecting the tension it caused more vividly:

“How will I get all of this done in such a short time? I already have so much going on! I guess I can start working on it after school that way I don’t procrastinate. But wait I have band after school until 5:00 and then musical rehearsal until 7:30. I can do it after that but I have a history project to finish for tomorrow...I guess there’s always the weekend,” I thought to myself panicking... I make this paper sound like torture, and it kind of was...

Here, Beth mentions at least two factors that indicate negative reification of the research paper: lack of time (which will be discussed later) and stress, or what she refers to as “panic.”

Because of the run-ons and lack of punctuation between thoughts, the reader can sense the tension growing in this student as she anticipates the time (and effort) that the research paper will require from her. She deems the whole process “torturous.” The word “torture” alone contributes to the reification of this essay. Although the torture is mostly in her own perception of the research writing process, the word choice indicates that Beth views this paper as a “thing” that could cause her great pain, whether physical or psychological.

Elsewhere, however, Beth speaks of the same research paper in more positive terms. Even immediately after this passage in her autobiography she writes, “...but in all reality maybe I’m just being a little dramatic,” indicating that there may be a brighter side. In the same chapter, she continues, “... it shows the hard work I put in pays off. This was my first really big

paper and I was able to prove to myself I'm able to do it successfully even with all my activities and stress." The "it" Beth refers to is the grade she received on her research paper, which she says, "...turned out to be a 91%." She continues immediately with, "I am very happy with that grade." Again, as she did with a fifth-grade writing assignment, she speaks of an indicator of writing a "successful" research paper, as well as her feelings about it, in terms of the assessment she received: the score of 91% made her happy. Although the essay may not have been "fun" to write, she again admits that the effort she put into this writing assignment was worth it: "it pays off." So for Beth, as for many students, "success" on a school writing assignment equals a good grade.

Despite her disposition towards essay and research paper writing in school contexts, Beth remains positive about writing in general. She speaks of differences between school writing and writing for one's own purposes:

My friend and I are trying to help the musical program some more... We call it "Make [School Name] Musical Theater Great Again." It's like step one, do this, step two... Three hours had gone by and we didn't even realize it...

When I asked her if this also happened while writing the research paper, she replied, "Nope. Every minute felt even longer." When I inquired further she responded:

I feel like with the musical theater thing I was doing, we did it on a weekend, and it wasn't as time-constrained. I was also with a friend, so it made it more fun, but with the research paper, it was... I was mostly writing on weekdays. It was like I was coming home right after school from band and musical, and I wasn't getting home until like 7:30... I had all these other things on top, so I was very aware of the time more, whereas with the musical theater thing, it was like I'm just hanging out with a friend. We're just hanging out. It's not... I wasn't very focused on the time. There wasn't as much of a schedule for that one.

Again, several important points may be drawn from Beth's statements. For one, time, as she mentioned before. Beth speaks of school writing as something that needs to be completed at the end of a busy day. In her experience, she goes to school during the day (7:20 am-2:20 pm),

participates in extracurricular activities (band and musical rehearsals) and doesn't return home until mid-evening (7:30 pm), at which point she begins "other things," most likely completing homework for other classes, eating dinner, showering, etc. All of these things take time, so working on a research paper after such a busy school day would definitely be challenging, at the least. Also, although she mentions that she mostly wrote the research paper on weekdays, *after*, or in concert with, all the "other things," which likely made the activity appear much more arduous, in truth, she ended up writing the paper mostly on weekends, which she indicated in her writing history autobiography chapter, which was written after the research paper was completed. Clearly, a student would be tired after a day filled with so many activities, and beginning the writing process after such a day would make the activity less appealing, perhaps even dreadful, as she indicates by saying "every minute seemed even longer." However, Beth's out-of-school writing takes place on weekends, where time is less of a factor. On weekends, time is of little consequence: schedules are looser, and the passage of three hours is more surprising than problematic.

Also, Beth mentions the role of collaboration. While writing with a friend, Beth mentions that although they were writing, they were, in fact, "just hanging out," which she reiterates. By writing while "just hanging out," writing becomes more fun, less of a chore, and arguably more meaningful, since Beth and her friend have an audience in mind -- those who may be interested in musical theater. Thus they are "involved" (Britton, et al. 1975) in writing, and not writing in a perfunctory manner, and because of their deep involvement in the process, time passed quickly, but pleasantly. (More on student collaboration during the writing process will be discussed in a subsequent chapter.)

Despite the ups and downs, positives and negatives, Beth perceives writing activities in a generally positive view, but she is clear about the factors that cause her to feel otherwise. Overall, however, she writes, and continues to shine and discover “what she can truly be.”

* * * * *

For Beth, there is a clear delineation between “home” writing and “school” writing, and it appears that the confidence she has in herself boosts when she writes for purposes unrelated to school. When she writes for herself, time is irrelevant: she writes until she feels that her goal -- whatever that may be -- is accomplished and she’s happy with the outcome. For Beth, out-of-school writing is where her creativity runs. She channels her energy towards these events, which in turn, allow her to maintain at least a tepid attitude toward school writing.

* * * * *

Bartholomew -- and Hanon and Czerny

An iconic song in American musical history is “Do-Re-Mi” from *The Sound of Music*. In it, the main female character, Maria, teaches the children for whom she is governess about music and singing. She first lays out the basics, connecting learning how to read (learning the alphabet, A, B, C, etc.) with learning “sol fa,” a technique for teaching sight-singing (do, re, mi, etc.). Once the children have mastered the scale in sol fa, Maria teaches them variations (do-mi-mi, mi-so-so, etc.). In doing so, she demonstrates to them the creativity available to them once they have mastered the basics. Similarly, in discussing his writing development, Bartholomew indicates just such a process, and for him, a major key is creativity.

Bartholomew maintains a mostly positive disposition toward writing. He enjoys writing and has since he was quite young. In his response to our first prompt on writing histories he writes:

“Writing at first came to me as a difficult task. Soon I began to love writing because of the creative aspect I could bring into it. It’s hard to remember specific pieces of my writing from so early on because I would write a lot.”

Although he does not elaborate on the difficulties he experienced early on or what exactly he means by “a lot,” he does often speak of creativity in writing and what he refers to as the “creative aspect.” For Bartholomew, however, an experience in a 5th grade writing class sullied his positive attitude toward writing. In an interview, he disclosed:

I hated that class... They kind of made it a class I didn’t really want to go to because instead of being able to write creative stories, you just wrote about topics that you didn’t really care about...It was just really focused on research and pulling facts out of essays and then putting them in an essay of your own... It was a lot of topics that weren’t very interesting. If they allowed us to choose topics we liked, it would have been better.

The class Bartholomew refers to here is a class that all fifth-grade students took to assist them on writing for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) testing. Part of the inspiration for this research project was my students’ reactions to and reactions against this particular class, especially since several students had similar experiences with it. Elsewhere in his writing history autobiography, Bartholomew spoke of the same class in harsher terms:

“This class took my love for creative writing and replaced it with a hatred, a distaste for the factual. I learned to hate writing more than I learned to write properly.”

Several issues arise in these brief statements; foremost, a lack of agency occurs when students are given pre-determined topics and tasks -- there is no choice of what to write (topic) or how to write it (task). My years of experience in the classroom have shown me that students will strive to communicate their thoughts more clearly for their readers when writing about a subject or topic important to them. This lack of choice in how and what they write often cause students to adopt a “perfunctory” (Britton, et al. 1975) stance toward writing -- write just to get it done. And in Bartholomew’s case, the perfunctory stance may even have affected his desire to write “properly,” i.e. using the standard conventions of written English.

It may be that the lack of virtually any agency causes some students, even students who usually work to their fullest ability, to stifle their voices in order to simply “give the teacher what s/he wants,” which is sometimes referred to as “playing the game of school,” but not necessarily learning anything, least of all learning to write “properly.”

Also, Bartholomew mentions that his “love for creative writing ...[was] replaced with a hatred, a distaste for the factual.” In saying this, Bartholomew seems to be alluding to the writing of research-based documents. He had previously stated that part of the reason he disliked the fifth-grade writing class so much since students were required to “pull facts out of essays and put them into an essay of your own.” This, for a fifth grader who loves to express his creative prowess with words, would obviously be limiting, at best. Students often adopt an anemic voice -- one lacking the uniqueness of their personalities -- when writing essays that they consider “factual” or fact-based. Bartholomew even nods to this when he mentions that these prompts and topics “weren’t very interesting.” Every writer knows the difficulties of conveying meaning about something that isn’t very interesting to him/her, and thus the writing often becomes quite dull for the reader, to boot. Realizing this, Bartholomew goes on to suggest a conditional “if”: “*If* they allowed us to choose topics we liked, it would have been better.” His provision of the “if” may indicate that he realizes that the writing for this writing class would involve including factual information in essays, *but...* being allowed to choose topics for which they had choice(s) would have made writing “better,” perhaps more engaging, for the students.

An interesting theme that arose from my discussions with Bartholomew and what he had written in his journals and autobiography is how he juxtaposes his experiences in this writing class and his experiences in his ninth grade English class, both of which he wrote and

spoke about several times back-to-back. When asked about any changes in his feelings about writing between fifth grade and high school, he said,

Ever since fifth grade, it's never been... I mean, when I got to freshman year, we did a creative story in our class and with that we could take it and run with whatever we wanted, and the ideas the class brought up -- some were really creative. It was fun... That's the first assignment [the teacher] does. You work with a group and you write a creative story... You write it together. We all write them and share them... She went over how to formulate it and all that, but she allowed you to be creative with it, and that probably helped us work harder on it because it was our story. It wasn't taking facts about a topic we didn't care about and then having to write about it. It didn't limit us to anything.

In this excerpt, one can see a significant shift in how Bartholomew perceives his fifth grade and ninth grade experiences. Firstly, he still begins with a negative stance toward the fifth-grade experiences: "Ever since fifth grade, it's *never* been..." (emphasis added). Here, Bartholomew moves from the very negative ("never been") to much more positive terms ("fun") within two sentences. Bartholomew doesn't even complete the negative thought. When uttering the words "...it's never been...", he shook his head, but immediately changed his disposition when recalling ninth grade writing, with even a brightness in his voice. He begins by expressing that a particular assignment in ninth grade was a "creative" story, and creativity is very important to Bartholomew, since, as mentioned before, he speaks of it quite often. Even in this short excerpt, he stresses the creative aspect of the project; he actually uses the word "creative" four times. (The only omissions in this portion of an interview were my points of clarification to time - ninth grade - and a question about which teacher he had, since I wasn't aware of any such element in the ninth-grade curriculum.) The intrinsic motivation caused by being allowed creative freedom even energized his discussion of the incident. In his recap of this writing activity, he speaks in what may be considered "run-on" thoughts, with ideas quickly presented: "I mean, when I got to freshman year, we did a creative story in our

class and with that we could take it and run with whatever we wanted, and the ideas the class brought up -- some were really creative.” This meshing of short phrases and clauses, albeit piled, demonstrate the enthusiasm Bartholomew felt for this assignment and the creativity it allowed.

Bartholomew, again, also speaks in terms of agency here, another issue that he mentions often: “...we could take it and run with whatever we wanted...” The usage of the word “take” implies action by a receiver. As an agent, the receiver may *not* take whatever is being offered; but here, Bartholomew indicates that they “could take it” -- they had the choice, or agency, to accept or not and “run” with it. “Run,” too, is an active verb, one filled with energy as well. Saying that students could “run” with this story indicates an active stance on the part of the writer. He didn’t say they could take it and *do* whatever they wanted, or *write* whatever they wanted. For Bartholomew, the process was lively, committed, perhaps even zealous. He also acknowledges that the groups probably “work[ed] harder on it because it was our story.” Peter Elbow (1990) speaks of this. He believes writing allows students to be agentive because “...writing asks ‘what do *you* have to say,’” thus allowing students to express their own thoughts in their own voice. When writing works of their own creation, students *are* able to write about what they have to say, and do so in ways they choose.

As mentioned earlier, the juxtaposition of the two experiences as Bartholomew recalls them is clearly evident in this excerpt. He speaks of the fun creative writing activity in his ninth grade English class. Just after he mentions that he and his classmates probably worked harder because it was their story, he indirectly jumps back to the fifth grade class where the students were given writing tasks and topics that they did not care about: “[The ninth grade project] wasn’t taking facts about a topic we didn’t care about and then having to write about it,” and

then he immediately follows this up with “It [indicating the ninth grade project] didn’t limit us to anything.” This juxtaposition is interesting because Bartholomew brings up this negative comment right after discussing that students most likely worked harder on their creative stories. One would think that a student would talk about working harder as a negative experience, but here, Bartholomew places hard work in a positive light -- students took ownership of their stories and worked hard to make them the best they could be. Bartholomew seems to allude to the fact that the ownership students took, the agency they were given, caused them to take great pride in their creations, and then sharing their work with peers may have added a competitive edge, which again, motivated students to write the best story they could.

Bartholomew also touches upon the collaborative processes of writing here. In his ninth-grade class, students worked together to create. No doubt, concessions and negotiations must have been made during the group writing process, although Bartholomew does not speak of these specifically; but he does state that one of the first assignments for that class was a collaborative and creative piece, which appears to have set the tone for the semester, making writing in that class “fun.” I will further address collaboration in writing later.

In our discussions and in his journals, as previously stated, I saw that creativity was an important matter to Bartholomew. Following up on this line of inquiry, in an interview I asked him,

Berni:

In your mind, what’s the difference between writing that you consider to be creative and other writing?

Bartholomew:

I think I would consider more creative writing being the ability to choose what you want to write and choose how you write it instead of having a distinct kind of topic, which I understand with certain things, you need; but that was kinda what I was talking about. The whole fifth grade thing, they didn’t really allow much room for interpretation on what you could do. It was more like very linear. It wasn’t allowing you much interpretation to it.

Berni:

So are you really talking interpretation, or are you talking about writer's voice?

Bartholomew:

¹⁰The way that the questions and the way they wanted you to write it limited the
¹¹ability to use your writer's voice because it seemed more statistical and using a
¹²lot of facts that you would have to take from an essay, so it really didn't allow
¹³you to use your voice.

Berni:

¹⁴Okay. I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, so you tell me to what degree
¹⁵I'm interpreting some of what you're saying. So is there a "school writing"
¹⁶and then there's a "writing for myself"?

Bartholomew:

Kind of, yeah, that's what I'm saying. Some school assignments allow you to
¹⁸write the way you want to write, but then others which, like I said, I understand
¹⁹you have to write it a certain way, but that's what I was saying. More creative
²⁰works seem to be forgotten. I don't know... There's a lot of creative works that
²¹people do outside of school that seem to get a lot of recognition if you write it,
²²but then there's what you do at school....

Berni:

So this other way... What's the other way?

Bartholomew:

²⁴For example, the way we did our research paper allowed us to have our voice,
²⁵but we also used the quotes and all that. It was a very distinct way about doing
²⁶it. What I like to think of creative, I think of allowing the writer to be freelance
²⁷with direction. That's just what I mean. There's no right or wrong about either.
²⁸I'm just saying what I think in the fifth grade, what they kind of made us do,
²⁹instead of allowing us to start with the freelance creativity with guidance, and
³⁰slowly introducing us to certain writing topics and ideas and formulas, thinking
³¹about doing our story... they allowed us... they made us do a very linear type of
³²writing. Like it was this way and no other way and the rubrics they used were
³³restrictive for that as well... What we did in fifth grade was more like take this
³⁴fact, write it, and do this.... I'm not sure if I answered the question.

Berni:

³⁵Yeah, I'm not sure either!

Bartholomew:

³⁶If you're asking what the difference between research and school writing is and
³⁷then what writing creatively on your own is, like I said, I think it's a lot like the
³⁸freelance stuff. If you're writing a research paper at school and you want to
³⁹portray an idea, you still can, and it can still be very good and well formulated,
⁴⁰but you're following a lot of rules and... Like I was trying to say, you're still
⁴¹backing it up with other people's sources, which you have to do. You have to
⁴²validate yourself in some way. But, you can still take that idea and that theme,
⁴³but say you're writing a creative piece on your own, it seems more genuine in a
⁴⁴way.

In this excerpt, Bartholomew tries to express his ideas of school writing versus creative writing. For him, school writing lacks openness to a writer's own interpretations (lines 7 and 8); limits a writer's voice (lines 11 and 13); is statistical (line 11) and fact-laden (line 12 and 33), formulaic (line 30 and 39), linear (line 7 and 39), restrictive (line 32) as well as *prescriptive*, which I'm interpreting as having topic and mode provided; and disingenuous (line 43). All of these, for a developing writer, squelch creativity. In musical terms, it may be said that Bartholomew sees school writing as working only within one octave. There are various permutations, but there are only those eight notes with their major and minor keys. In school writing there are no elements of jazz, with its augmented 4ths and diminished 6ths, nor are there 6+ other octaves. The sol- fa rests in the seven notes with no modification(s).

Herein, again, what Bartholomew really speaks of is lack of agency. He perceives the limitations on interpretation, voice, topic, genre or mode, and structure as restrictive -- few choices allowed by the author, few opportunities to express his thoughts creatively. He appears to be alluding to the timing and method of instruction here as well:

...in the fifth grade, ... instead of allowing us to start with the freelance creativity with guidance, and slowly introducing us to certain writing topics and ideas and formulas, thinking about doing our story... they made us do a very linear type of writing.

Bartholomew seems to believe that beginning with "freelance" or perhaps *free rein* in choice of topic and/or mode and allowing students to "do [their] story" may be more beneficial to young writers than catapulting them into fact-based research writing. In his mind, beginning with "story," most likely his evaluation of narrative writing, would allow students to first explore their own knowledge-base and voice in the spirit of creativity, and *then* once they gain some confidence in the process of writing (prewriting, drafting, revising, etc.), teachers could "slowly introduc[e]" other genres or modes of writing. Hopefully, through a "slow

introduction,” students may have developed enough as novice writers to begin practicing with other modes of writing.

Interesting, too, in this excerpt is Bartholomew’s mention of “guidance.” He indicates that even with “freelance creativity” there is a need for students to be “guided” through and within the writing process. Bartholomew may be suggesting that little guidance was provided in either writing activity -- “creative” / narrative or fact-based / research writing. He touches on the role of the teacher here, but he does not elaborate. However, the role of the teacher will be discussed in a forthcoming chapter.

In all discussion of creativity, Bartholomew clearly indicates that there is a distinction between writing for academic purposes and writing for oneself. Several studies speak to this dichotomy. Britton et al. (1975) speak of writing for academic purposes as transactional, whereas writing for oneself may be expressive or poetic; Emig (1971) writes of the difference as “extensive,” where the chief audience is usually a teacher, versus “reflexive,” which focuses on a writer’s thoughts; and Elbow (1990) distinguishes between “hard and soft” writing, where “soft” writing is expressive and affective, and “hard” writing is analytic and cognitive. In his reference to creativity, however, Bartholomew focuses on only one side of this dichotomy -- writing for oneself -- the expressive, reflexive, soft. What he may be missing is that creativity rests in the *how* -- *how* can we creatively structure a research paper (or dissertation)? How can we share our rendering of factual information in an interesting (creative?) way? How can we add sources guised in creativity? It could be that Bartholomew views “school writing” simply in terms of non-fiction, hence “factual”; whereas “creative writing” for him is fiction / fictional, which by default lends itself to more creativity. In fact, he later discloses that it is through writing fiction that he is best able to express himself.

Despite this potential misperception, Bartholomew also seems to understand the process of writing in general, and of academic writing specifically. He acknowledges that in research writing there is a need to provide support for an argument or premise. In line 25 he mentions needing to “use quotes and all that.” The “all that” which he refers to is most likely parenthetical documentation for in-text citations, which he later refers to as “the rules” in line 40. Bartholomew knows that when using quotations, a writer should cite where the quote originated as well as provide information for where a reader might find that information (i.e. a Works Cited page). In lines 40-42 he states, “... you’re still backing it up with other people’s sources, which you have to do. You have to validate yourself in some way.” In these lines, we see that he clearly understands the requirements of academic writing, supporting one’s own thoughts and ideas with reliable sources, and needing to ensure for the reader that you are a reliable source (or establishing ethos). In the same interview, he also mentioned that “...at school you write your research papers to prove a point, which you need to know how to do for life...,” which indicates that he realizes the argumentative nature of academic writing and that clearly expressing one’s stance on a topic is a skill necessary for life. Additionally, Bartholomew has also learned that writing is not linear or formulaic, which may indicate his frustration with his fifth-grade writing class, where “they made us do a very linear type of writing” (line 31). He found this type of writing to be formulaic. Although he does not use the term, Bartholomew seems to understand the recursive nature of writing, or at least that there are more than one way to express ideas clearly. Whether or not he fully understands the recursivity of writing, he obviously knows that writing is not meant to be linear.

* * * * *

Eighty-eight keys, unlimited potential. Just as musicians begin playing their instruments with a basic octave, after a while they discover that creative combinations of notes are endless. Millions of words, limited modes. Just as Bartholomew desires to express himself with his own creative combinations through writing, it appears that his possibilities are finite, at least in the school setting.

* * * * *

Rubato -- Seeing the sound

William Congreve, in 1697, wrote, “Music has charms to soothe the savage breast.” So it is with art, as Eileen Miller wrote in 2008: “...art can permeate the very deepest part of us, where no words exist.” Both music and art have the ability to evoke emotions and tell stories, stories that often cannot be expressed in mere words; it is the sounds, the images, that take us to places that elude words. In like fashion, Anne Whitney, in a 1993 paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, quoted therapist and theorist Alice Miller on her reasons to delve into art, albeit, as therapy: “All I wanted was to help the truth to break through.” Whitney (1993) goes on to explain and suggest that “power [may be] unleashed when we uncover knowledge of ourselves and our unique stories” -- our truths -- through illustration -- art. Similarly, in a 1961 interview, author James Baldwin stated, “All art is a kind of confession, more or less oblique.” Truth. Confession. Power. The depth of these words permeates, as Baldwin wrote, *all* art forms, whether literary, musical, or visual art. In a musical score, the confession lies in the emotions created by juxtaposing high notes with low, perfect fourths with sevenths, melody with dissonance. As a musical composer evokes emotions with sound, a visual artist evokes emotions through shapes and colors, or even, with digital art forms today, with compilations of images to portray a truth.

It is these truths that my students also portray in the artistic renderings on the covers of their writing history autobiographies.

As part of the writing history autobiography project, I encouraged my students to create a cover for their stories, much as a writer chooses images for a book cover. This cover was meant to be a method of differentiation ala Gardner's (1993) multiple intelligences, but I also wanted my students to respond to their own stories, as a form of "transmediation" (Zoss, 2010, p. 184) by "...translating meaning from one medium or sign system (linguistic → print text) to another (pictorial → visual text)" (Zoss, 2010, p. 187). I wanted to provide those of my students who were artistically gifted with the opportunity to share part of their stories through illustration, understanding that "meaning is not limited to what words can express" (Zoss, p. 187). My hope was also to provide my students with the opportunity to play or practice with multi-literacies ala the New London Group in order to encourage them to become "creative and responsible makers of meaning" (Wysocki, 2010, p. 604). If words eluded them, I wanted to ensure they could convey their stories visually.

The following are book covers submitted by three of my student- participants, Rylan, Elizabeth, and Beth. (Since these are pseudonyms, I have deleted their names from the illustrations, as may be noticed by blanked out spaces on the illustrations.) In this section, I analyze the images each student chose in comparison with the stories the students portray in other portions of the data. I consider the images themselves by type and colors used, their placement on the page, and where students place their identification of themselves as authors on the page, all with the intent to provide a fuller construct of each student and her disposition toward writing.

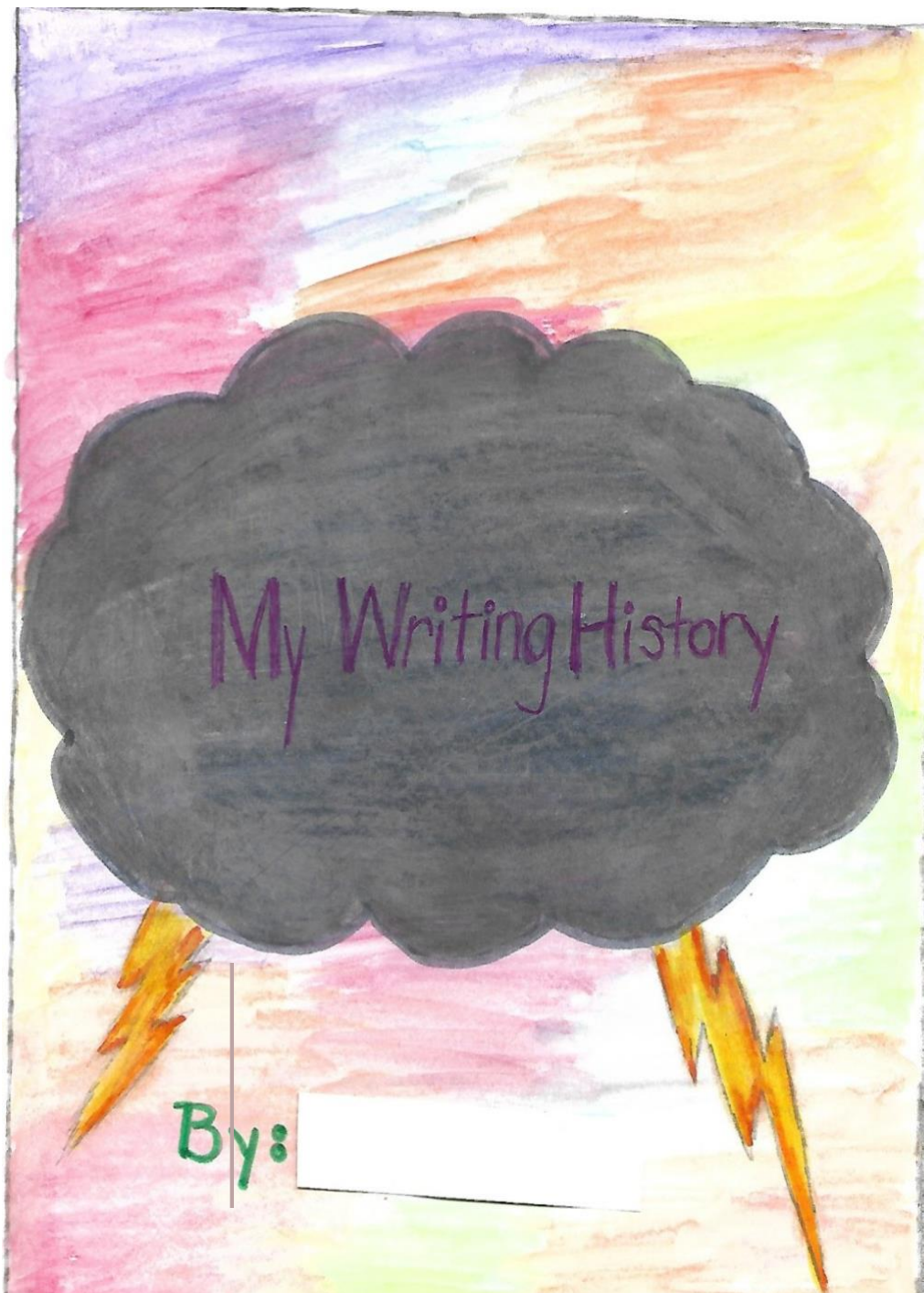
Rylan – Rumbblings three octaves below middle C

As I mentioned in her story, Rylan has had a stormy relationship with writing. The metaphor itself stems from the depiction of her writing history as she portrayed it on her autobiography cover. The classic image of troublesome events or concepts, a huge, black cloud containing the words, “My Writing History” appears as the primary focus of the piece. By its prominence at the center of the page, Rylan may be indicating that her history with writing has been very unpleasant; it is, in fact, engulfed by a dark cloud, so engulfed that the cloud is completely filled in, with the words “My Writing History” embedded in the center. The image also takes up approximately half of the space of the illustration, and if we consider the lightning bolts emanating from the black cloud, the image covers the vast majority of the page. These lightning bolts flank her name, which may also indicate her perception that she, herself, has been surrounded by an ominous storm in her writing life -- there appears to be no escape.

Also notable are the colors Rylan uses. Although it may be argued that her color choices are those readily available in a Crayola 10-pack, we must note that it is her *choice* of which colors to use and where to place them to depict her story that must be considered. The background colors on the top portion of the image show hues of purple, red, a hint of blue, orange, yellow and bits of white. Only tiny hints of very light green can be seen, and those on the outskirts of the image. It seems that Rylan uses the colors of the rainbow, almost in the usual rainbow spectrum order of purple, red, orange, yellow, blue, etc. These same colors are also those often depicted in pictures of sunrises and sunsets -- hues at times pleasant and at times threatening. But, again, the only color used sparingly is green, which is often associated with growth. The question rises: Does Rylan feel that she has had little growth in her stormy writing history? Only tiny hints of green appear in the drawing, although she does write the words

indicating authorship in green. It may be that Rylan views herself, at least one part of her identity, as covered by brighter elements and perhaps subject to growth as a result -- this is where she

Figure 5-Rylan's Book Cover



places her name, which she writes in green. However, she perceives her *writing identity* specifically as fixed within a dark cloud emitting bolts of lightning. The lightning bolts, though, which she depicts flanking her name brightly in shades of yellow and orange, may suggest that the activity of writing throughout her life history has been somehow limiting or limited for her. The colors she uses are the same colors often used to portray fire, an entity that has the capacity to burn and destroy. Thus, Rylan may be constructing her writing identity by positioning herself (Ivanic, 2006) in a dark space, with other parts of her identity, although still subject to growth, stuck under this cloud with the potential of being destroyed, and thereby conveying her negative feelings toward writing.

This visual depiction is in complete alignment with Rylan's perception of her writing history, however commonplace it may be. Images of clouds and lightning bolts are in no way novel methods of conveying negative thoughts or times, nor are lighter colors new in conveying happier or more positive thoughts or times. So here, Rylan is clearly trying to convey, dramatically, her negative disposition toward writing, especially in light of her writing history. As thunderous, lightning-producing storms can have detrimental effects on persons or objects, so does Rylan's perception of her writing history have a detrimental effect on her disposition toward writing, so much so that she cannot escape; and this inability to escape being "burned" or somehow hurt by the surrounding lightning bolts has often left Rylan failing to complete writing assignments, leading to another potential of being burned -- with a low grade. The stress, the anxiety, she wrote about, alluding to the fear of the surrounding lightning bolts, do not allow her to escape them, to come out from under the cloud producing them; thus, she may feel that she is "stuck" with this dark writing history which cannot or will not change.

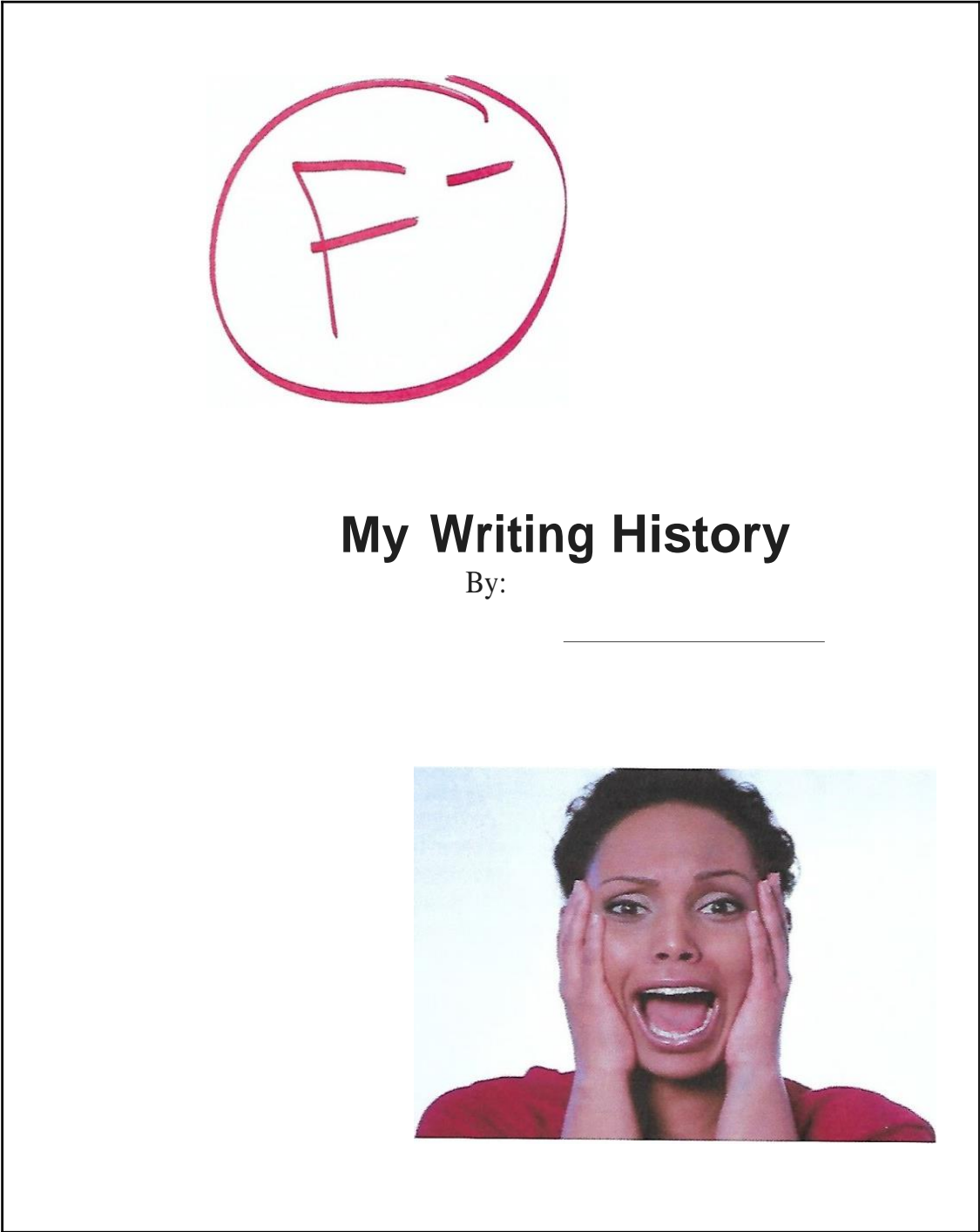
This said, it still must be noted that Rylan may perceive other parts of her life history and other identities in a more positive light: she places a “brighter” disposition, indicated by brighter hues -- those of portrayed in rainbows and sunsets -- *behind* the storm cloud. For Rylan, then, perhaps it is her writing history, or even her academic history, only that she perceives as imbedded in dark times, whereas she perceives much of the rest of her life as free from the storm and much more pleasant.

Elizabeth -- Double high C minor seventh

Although not one of the original focus group, Elizabeth’s illustrative rendering of her writing history is worth exploring and is what led me to interview her after obtaining her permission. In her book cover, she depicts a huge, circled, red F- very prominently on the top portion of the page, clearly portraying what students often see when an assessed school assignment is returned to them: a score often circled, often in red ink. But here, Elizabeth does not provide simply an F, indicating a failing grade; she provides an *F minus* -- a score that does not actually exist, yet one she includes to indicate that this particular work, whatever it was, received a score that was even *below* failing -- an arguably impossible feat.

Also, on the bottom third of the illustration, she includes a picture of distraught young woman. The woman holds her face and appears to be screaming. We can surmise by the expression on her face that the woman’s scream is not one of joyful surprise, but rather horrification. In a look of joyful or happy surprise, both eyes would most likely be wide open and the mouth turned at least slightly upward, indicating a broad smile, even through a scream. What Elizabeth portrays here, however -- eyes slightly squinted, one brow higher than the

Figure 6- Elizabeth 's Book Cover



other -- lends itself more to an expression of horror, or perhaps even of anguish, an expression of something other than happiness or joy. The woman's hands holding her face almost suggest that she is holding herself together while seeing or hearing something shocking. In this illustration, Elizabeth centers the words "My Writing History" in between the two images, perhaps providing text to make the overall illustration more appealing; in other words, to break up the visual images. But it may also be to position herself in between grades and the emotions they evoke, in this case, bad grade, bad emotion. It is also notable that the images are not stacked (i.e. in a column, one directly underneath the other). Each image is slightly to the right of the previous one, top to bottom, perhaps indicating movement, or a slight passage of time: we receive a score, we remember past experiences, we respond -- and the cycle continues. This interpretation aligns with Dewey's (1938) principle of continuity of experience: "...every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before it and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after... There is *some* continuity in every case" (p. 37). From this perspective, Elizabeth, as did Rylan, may be indicating that there has been a continuity of negative (frightful, stormy) experiences that follows her, causing her to be anguished over her perception of her writing history, and perhaps, of writing in general.

In Elizabeth's case, the cover illustration again, as did Rylan's, clearly portrays her current disposition toward writing. In an interview, Elizabeth mentioned writing for grades or being graded twelve (12) times; worrying about grades three (3) times; and she speaks of the stress and pressure of school writing six (6) times. Taking into account that Elizabeth only includes two graphic images, each one clearly aligns with what affects her when considering her writing history: grades (as depicted by the F-) and stress (as depicted by the anguished woman). She even devoted a chapter in her writing history autobiography to this; her fourth

chapter is entitled “The Anxiety in Writing.” In this chapter she writes, “Things like self-doubt throughout writing, the time and frustration the writing process seems to require, and the large grade most papers are worth all contribute to my anxiety during the writing process.”

Here, she makes clear that grades and stress are key factors to her negative writing disposition.

As she concludes this chapter, she continues the sentiment:

Throughout school so far, most writing assignments have turned out to be a large portion of our quarter grade, and without a decent grade on them, a grade could drop significantly. I care about my grades very much and knowing a writing assignment could be worth a large portion of my grade makes it difficult to begin writing without feeling some source of dread and anxiety. With writing being such a stressed part of the curriculum, it is easy to be overwhelmed by it.

This brief paragraph clarifies for the viewer exactly why Elizabeth chose the images she did for her cover. She uses the word “grade” or “grades” five (5) times in only six lines of text, hence her choice of a large F- circled in red to depict something extremely important to her -- her grades, and more specifically, not wanting to fail and have her grades drop. Although she is repetitive in the lines where she uses the words “grade(s),” it is obvious that scores on written assignments are a source of anxiety for her. She even offers that writing causes her to feel “dread,” “anxiety” and “overwhelmed.” As a result, the image of the woman screaming can easily be understood to explain Elizabeth’s feelings -- fear of an F- cause her to feel enormous stress.

Beth -- C Major

Beth’s depicts her writing history quite differently than her peers. The words “writing history” appear nowhere on the illustration. Instead, Beth chooses to portray her story as “Through the Eyes of a Young Writer,” which is how she perceives her story.

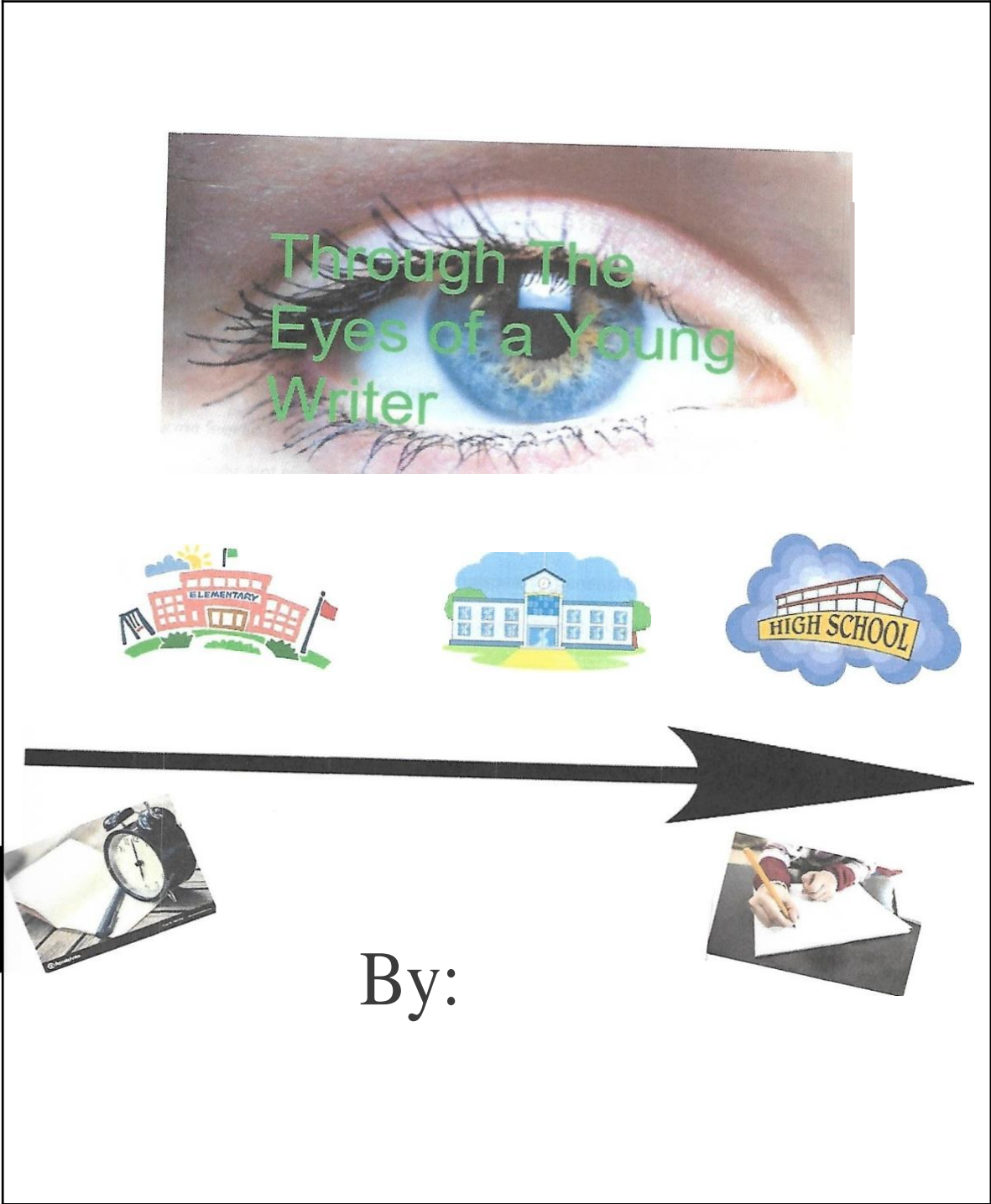
The first notable image is the depiction of an eye at the top of the page. A pretty blue eye is shown with the words of the title, “Through the Eyes of a Young Writer” written in green across the image, justified on the left. Although the words are somewhat lost in the image of the eye, the obscurity actually draws the viewer to focus on the image more closely, if for no other reason than to determine what is written -- it forces a closer look, or a closer read. This may be interpreted to suggest that Beth herself is looking closely at her early writing years, or is encouraging her viewers and/or readers to take a closer look at how young writers perceive their early experiences with writing. Either way, the fact that the eye of the “young writer” draws the eye of the reader is evident.

Also, as did Rylan, Beth chooses to portray some of the most significant words in green text; here, the title appears in green. Again, since green often depicts growth, Beth may be alluding to her own growth, perhaps her past growth from a young writer to a more mature one, or her current growth as a young writer who will become a more mature one over time. Regardless, the conscious choice of green for this conceptualization of herself as a writer may indicate that she believes in writing as a developmental process.

Another prominent image, a bold, black arrow appears in the center of the page. Over this arrow lie three clip-art renderings of school buildings: an elementary school (as noted by the word “Elementary” in the center of the building), what appears to be a middle school, and a high school, as noted on the image itself. These three images represent a few of the suggested chapters in the writing history autobiography project: I had asked students to consider writing one chapter about their elementary writing experiences, one about their middle school experiences, and at least one about their high school writing experiences, specifically, our 10th grade research paper. It is most likely for this reason that Beth includes these clip-art pictures -- to represent at least a

few of the chapters included within her “book.” Beth portrays the schools as pleasant spaces, in true clip-art style -- not ominous, not scary, but pleasant enough for students to reflect on the past

Figure 7- Beth's Book Cover



with happy memories. The image of the high school alone is the most troublesome among the school images. While the other buildings seem to be “grounded” and/or “finite” with grassy areas and walkways, the high school building seems to be floating in a cloud, not grounded at all. Perhaps Beth is hinting that her high school experiences have not yet been completed -- grounded; or perhaps she views her current and future high school experiences as of yet undefined -- they themselves may be somewhat nebulous, and the future uncertain.

These buildings, regardless of their levels of groundedness, seem to be underscored by the bold, black arrow, but the arrow also lies *above* other images, that of a clock and a student writing. Here, Beth seems to depict the passage of time, moving from elementary school at one end to high school on the other, while also indicating that all the while, a clock is ticking. In the clock image, the clock is in the foreground; in the background appears to be a writing tablet and pen. No hand is guiding this pen, so it may be that time is passing while no writing is occurring. Under the other end of the arrow we see what is, arguably, a student writing. Again, the arrow seems to suggest that time moves on whether or not students are writing or completing writing assignments. That Beth places herself, in identifying herself as the author of this short book, between the clock and the student writing may indicate that she sees herself submerged beneath the world of schools, stuck, or at least flanked, between time itself and time for writing. Time will pass, whether or not her writing is completed.

The juxtaposition of all these images is a clear representation of Beth’s disposition towards writing and her writing history. As stated in her interview, Beth is very conscious of the passing of time during her writing activities, whether time passes quickly and pleasantly as it did while she and her friend were drafting the musical theater flyer, or slowly and laboriously as it did while she was writing the research paper for my class. Also worth noting is that all of the

images are either fairly pleasant or benign; that is to say that no one image is strongly menacing or ominous. This positiveness reflects Beth's overall disposition towards writing. After reading my draft of the chapter I wrote about her, she wrote to me saying,

The only thing I'd like to clear up is that before doing the writing experience project, I really thought I had a problem-free writing experience. It wasn't until I delved a little deeper and really thought and analyzed some of my experiences that I realized maybe SOME weren't as positive as I thought. I'd like to say I still am very happy with my writing history. I think it all made me into the writer I am today and don't have any scarring moments where writing became something negative in my life. I always enjoyed writing throughout my entire life, I just have some more pleasurable memories than others.

That Beth wanted to clear up my misinterpretation speaks to the fact that she maintains a very positive disposition towards writing, as indicated by all the images she chose for her book cover, and her words in her email to me. And, as I stated before, she is simply a person who tries to look on the bright side of life. She makes a point of ensuring that her story truly represents her perception of her writing history and her perception of herself as a writer, and she does so clearly with the images she chose.

Chapter 5: Discussion of the Findings

Interpretations and Variations

A few years ago, my husband and I heard a new song on Sirius radio. Several months after hearing it, I asked him if he remembered a particular something about the song. He responded, “Oh, was that the one about X?”

“NO!!” I exclaimed, annoyed that he would get *that* out of the song. However, after thinking about his comment, I realized that he wasn’t wrong; he had simply inferred a different meaning in the song than I had. He had interpreted it differently -- not wrongly; just differently.

Interpretation...

Tap, Tap, Tap - The Maestro waves her baton

As you enter the auditorium, cacophony fills the air as the horns, strings woodwinds, percussionists and others warm up their instruments. The discordant melodies will soon transform into melodious renderings -- all at the hands of the conductor. With a few tap, tap, taps, she silences the chaos, gathers the attention of the players and audience... and the concert begins.

The concert of this paper continues as I put into agreement -- or consensus-- or discord - the stories of my students and how these stories answer my research questions based on my interpretations of their stories. At this point, I expand beyond the four cases discussed above and provide a broader data base so the “... sample size [is] sufficiently large to achieve an

acceptable probability or confidence level for making representation” (Yin, 2016, p. 95).

Although my sample is still relatively small with only nine participants, I still hope to

“maximize information” (Yin, 2016, p. 98) in order to compose a valid study.

Sonata No. 1

Question 1: *How do students’ perceptions of their writing histories affect their dispositions toward future writing assignments?*

As I analyzed the writing events, the conditions under which the writing events took place, how students evaluated them/ outcomes (literally, what came out of them), and the resulting disposition, I conducted various sortings of the data to ensure the consistency of my findings. As a musician plays various interpretations of a performance piece before s/he chooses which version to perform, I sorted once by Writing Event, once by Home or School, once by External or Internal Conditions, and once by Positive and Negative dispositions. Although there are other factors that influence and/or affect each of the categories I present, and they are not solely limited to these occurrences, spaces, conditions, or outcomes, for the purposes of this study, I maintain the binaries to illustrate the general indications.

TABLE 1. - DISPOSITION CONDITIONS and OCCURRENCES

	EXTERNAL		INTERNAL	
	SCHOOL	HOME	SCHOOL	HOME
POSITIVE	25	1	13	10
NEGATIVE	17	0	12	0

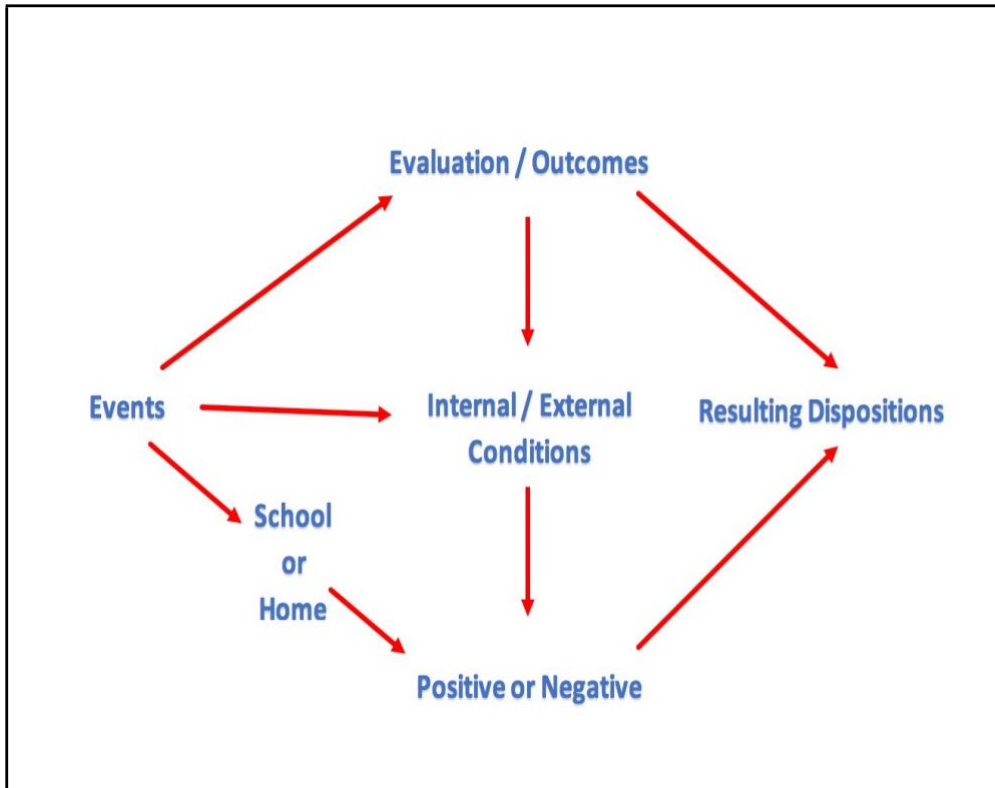
Table 1 displays internal and external conditions arising from home or school writing events and resulting in positive or negative dispositions. Pertaining to external conditions (those initiated at school or at home), students mentioned outcomes leading to positive dispositions from school writing events 25 of 26 times (96%), with only 1 (4%) mention of a home writing event as an external condition. In this case, the writing event was initiated by the student's mother. Also pertaining to external conditions, students mentioned outcomes leading to negative dispositions toward writing events initiated at school 17 of 17 times (100%), with 0 mention (0%) of negative dispositions toward writing events initiated at home. Pertaining to internal conditions, students mentioned outcomes leading to positive dispositions 13 of 23 times (57%) from school writing events, with the remaining 10 times (43%) referring to home writing events. Also pertaining to internal conditions, students mentioned outcomes leading to negative dispositions toward writing events initiated at school 12 of 12 times (100%), with 0 mention (0%) of negative dispositions toward writing events initiated at home.

Of the 25 positive external school conditions, the most common indicators leading to positive dispositions mentioned were Peer Response Groups (12/25 or 48%) and Positive Teacher Feedback (8/25 or 32%). Other indicators, each with one mention (or 4%) were winning a contest, having a creative prompt, help from classmates, learning a new genre, and the ability to be creative. And as mentioned, of the 17 negative external school conditions, the most common indicator leading to negative dispositions mentioned pertained to grades (5 of 17 or 29%). Other indicators were trouble with introductions and conclusions (2 of 17 or 12%) and lack of the ability to be creative (2 of 17 or 12%). The remaining indicators varied among eight other factors from being forced to use methods such as 4 Squares, to missing recess in order to finish assignments, to negative comments from the teacher, among others.

Of the 13 positive internal school conditions, the most common indicator leading to positive writing dispositions mentioned was achieving success (6/13 or 46%). Other indicators were improving their writing (2/13 or 15%), less stress (2/13 or 15%), ease of writing (1 or 7.5%), therapeutic value of free writing (1 or 7.5%), and creative expression (1 or 7.5%). Of the 10 positive internal home conditions, the most common indicators leading to positive writing dispositions were writing stories (4/10 or 40%) and journaling (4/10 or 40%). The remaining 2 (20%) mentioned special events, such as writing a card for the teacher and creating a flyer with a friend. Of the 12 negative internal school conditions leading to negative dispositions, there was a vast mix of indicators with only two topics recurring: both anxiety (3 of 12 or 25%) and lack of ideas (2 of 12 or 17%) arose a few times. The remaining 7 indicators, as in the negative external school conditions, were scattered under topics such as not completing assignments, not being able to write due to learning disabilities, and just plain hating a writing class. There were 0 (0%) negative internal conditions occurring at home.

These results are summed up in Figure 8. In this study, Writing Events were categorized as occurring at School or at Home and led to certain Outcomes or Evaluations by the students. These Events were also categorized as having Internal or External Conditions, ones stemming intrinsically from within the students or from an outside source, respectively. These Conditions, combined with the Writing Event itself, its place of initiation (Home or School), and the Outcome or Evaluation students specified, caused students to have Positive or Negative perceptions of the Event, resulting in a corresponding Disposition toward writing. The interaction among all these factors becomes historicized -- perhaps even reified -- and causes many students to dread writing if they perceive events as mainly negative, or continue to enjoy writing despite setbacks if they perceive the events as mainly positive.

FIGURE 8. EVENTS and DISPOSITIONS



1st Suite -- Discussion of Question 1

The most compelling finding from this data is that students' negative dispositions toward writing stem from school writing events 100% of the time and home writing events 0% of the time. This is most likely because almost all the external conditions were a result of a school writing event (96%), with only 1 (or 4%) of home writing stemming from an external condition, in this case, as previously mentioned, the external condition being a mother's suggestion. This

finding suggests that writing imposed by outside sources (or conditions) generally allows less freedom (as mentioned by Beth and Bartholomew), as it is usually assigned and will be assessed (as mentioned by Beth). We see here, at least in part, a socio-political discourse of writing, as posited by Ivanič (2004). She defines a socio-political discourse of writing as such:

‘ Writing involves drawing on socially constructed resources, both discourses’ which represent the world in particular ways, and ‘genres’ which are conventions for particular types of social interaction. These discursal and generic resources are not a rich tapestry of possibilities neutrally available for writers to choose among, but are themselves sociopolitically structured in such a way that common sense dictates the preference of one over others in a particular context, and this preference is likely to be in the interests of more powerful social groups in that context. (p. 238)

Ivanič implies here the sociopolitical discourses of teachers in schools. Certain genres are preferred in school, and it is (or should be) common sense that clues students in to which genre is appropriate at which time for which teacher. Students are not free to choose; the choice of writing genres is chosen by the teacher, who has the power in the social grouping of a classroom, as Ivanič continues:

Decisions made by those in powerful position influence or even dictate the discursal and generic resources that a writer can draw on and make use of. Hence writers are not entirely free to choose how to represent the world, how to represent themselves, what social role to take, and how to address their readers when they write, but these are to some extent determined by the sociopolitical context in which they are writing. (p. 238)

With all these limitations of what and how to write, students may find themselves at a loss for how to approach a writing activity, as they may not fully identify as members of that discourse community; therefore, they may have limited understanding of the requirements of discourse in that community, whether spoken or written. Also, it is likely that they fully understand that a misstep could result in a poor evaluation or assessment of themselves as members of that community.

A major difference with writing occurring at home, or self-initiated writing, and writing imposed in school, is, therefore, the agentive nature of self-initiated writing -- role of the *self*. Because the piece of writing is imposed *upon* the self *by* the self, the writing is "...likely to be accompanied by much greater involvement by the writer, and may have very much longer preparatory stages, and most of the processes...may be much more complex" (Britton et al., 1975, p. 23), as Beth mentioned. When she and her friend composed the musical theatre piece, they spent hours drafting, composing, revising; they were "greatly involved" -- fully engaged. Emig (1971) refers to this type of writing as "self-sponsored," and states that students take more time contemplating what they write when writing is self-sponsored. In her study of composing practices of high school seniors, Emig (1971) also found that students took more time revising when the writing activity was self-sponsored. It appears that when writing is self-initiated or self-sponsored there is a much stronger impetus, even to struggle through a piece to get it just right. Sheridan-Rabideau (2010) concurs, citing Gere's term "extracurriculum," indicating that writing that is self-sponsored and motivated by social forces, not school assignments (p. 262) is just as important as writing in a curriculum. Self-initiated writing, then, is clearly an act of agency -- motivational forces from within.

Also worth noting is the one writing event occurring from an external condition but still yielding a positive outcome. Beth mentioned that when she was a very young child, her mother once encouraged her to write a story. Although she was not yet of school age, she still vividly remembers this activity, and it was sharing this story with her family that led her to writing other stories and sharing them with her family that may be the reason she maintains a positive disposition toward writing. In a private conversation, Bartholomew, too, mentioned that it is his mother's influence on his reading and writing that drove him to write and share stories. In both

of these instances, parents' influence is clear and in support of Boscolo's (2010) research. She speaks specifically of "...maternal mediation... in the relationship between emergent and formal literacy, showing that the various ways in which an adult -- in this case, the mother -- helps a child write have positive effects in his or her future literacy learning" (p.295). This is true for both Beth and Bartholomew. Rowe (2010), too, speaks of young children writing at home. Her research found that writing at home in the preschool years even helps children make the transition to school and school activities smoother since they already have an understanding of literacy practices (p.411). And Gee (2004) stresses that literacy practices have "long roots at home" (p. 13).

The discussion in the paragraph above clearly indicates the importance of "sponsors of literacy" (Brandt, 1998). Although in both Beth and Bartholomew's cases, the sponsor was their mothers and/or families, the findings do acknowledge that the relationship between the sponsor and the sponsored is mutually beneficial. For the child, the benefit lies in continuing a positive disposition towards literacy and perhaps being less apprehensive to literacy events, specifically writing events in this case; and for the parent or family, the benefit lies in the joy of watching the child mature and grow into a confident young writer, skilled in written communication. These "delivery systems" (Brandt, p. 167) of sponsors to sponsored is similarly addressed by Mayher (1990), who concurs that "there does seem to be some help which parents, peers, and other caretakers do provide and which does seem to facilitate the [language acquisition] process" (p. 121). That said, we see that there is an important role played by parents in literacy, specifically writing, development.

While Beth and Bartholomew both directly mention the role of their parents in their early writing development and its subsequent dispositions to writing, it cannot be assumed that parents

played no role in the writing development of my other students; the others just did not mention any such occurrence. The only other mention of a parent at all was by Rylan, who simply mentioned that her mother was proud of her when she shared that her teacher read a story she had written aloud to the class. Rylan seems not to have been affected by her mother's positivity, as her disposition towards writing was not changed as a result.

Sonata No. 2

Question 2 - How do students' descriptions of their experiences in a Writer's Workshop-modeled class correlate with their current attitudes toward writing?

The data I collected to answer this question came mostly from information I gleaned from surveys, although I include data from reflections as a cross reference. I created an Excel spreadsheet where I input the data that specifically addressed this topic of Writer's Workshop (WW) and Peer Response Groups (PRGs). I created a category for "Experience Description," "How Attitude Affected," "View of Self as Writer Change," "PRG Affect Feelings About Writing and Self as Writer," and "WW Affect Feelings About Writing/ Changes" (See Figure 6). Because I realized I should also have a baseline, or what students thought about writing *before* any talk of an inquiry project, I also included data from the writing history prompt I distributed on the second day of school. As occasioned by their responses to my first question, I also included whether they spoke more of home or school in their responses to that prompt.

First, I considered students' descriptions of their writing experiences, as indicated in Figure 10. To display their exact words, I decided to create a word cloud to indicate which words occurred with the most frequency. According to Figure 10, four of nine students (Andre, Crystal, Elizabeth Vanessa) used the word "enjoy" to describe their experiences, as is noted by the size of the font; three of nine (Crystal, Rose, and Rylan) spoke of being "confident" or

“more confident”; and two (Bartholomew and Rose) spoke of being “able to share” more freely. The other indicators in the word cloud appeared only once. Of the students who enjoyed their experiences, two (Andre and Elizabeth) mentioned the helpfulness of their peers, one (Vanessa) mentioned having good social interaction, and one (Crystal) said she enjoyed it very much despite being nervous about sharing.

FIGURE 9 -- Example of WW/PRG Spreadsheet Data

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
1	STUDENT	DAY 2 WRITING HISTORY PROMPT	HOME or SCHOOL	EXPERIENCE DESCRIPTION	HOW ATTITUDE AFFECTED	VIEW OF SELF AS WRITER CHANGE (from Survey 2 - Bandura)	DATA AS PER REFLECTION ON RESEARCH PAPER: 2) How has PRG affected how you feel about writing & self as writer?	DATA AS PER REFLECTION ON RESEARCH PAPER: 4) How has being in this class (workshop model) affected...? Any changes from past perceptions?	
2	Beth	at age 4 or 5, mom suggested she write a story while she was looking at brightly colored construction paper, so she wrote a story about monster under bed - although can't really read it now, she remembers the activity -- writing the story came naturally & she's enjoyed writing since	home	not awful; not helpful	would rather have worked alone (neg)	YES - knows can write multiple pgs	2) didn't do much - would rather work alone	4) disliked working mostly w/ peers - don't hate it, just don't like it - not helpful (neg)	
3	Beth					YES - doesn't mind sharing			
4	Elizabeth	1st gr wrote how to make a PB&J, didn't like writing at all - thought it was difficult to start and end	school	enjoyed; all peers helpful	attitude not improved, but PRG helped improve essay	YES - realized writing not as "mediocre" as she thought	2) enjoyed during revision	4) still doesn't enjoy writing but WW made revision easier	
5	Elizabeth					YES - peers very supportive			
6	Ryan	wrote card for teacher in 2nd gr; 4th gr writing not difficult - teacher read story to class; 5th gr and up writing became a "weak point"; to this day "loses hope" when someone says "essay"; sometimes just doesn't do writing assignments at all & "suffers the consequences"	school	beneficial; more confident; but also "frightening"	attitude not affected	NO - no change (no additional comment)	2) stronger due to feedback ("corrections")	4) no change (still neg)	
7	Bartholomew	writing difficult in 1st gr but soon began to "love writing because of the creative aspect"; difficult to remember specifics b/c he wrote "a lot" of stories in a wide range of genres	home	free to share; form better ideas	can share more freely (pos)	YES - became a stronger writer	2) stronger due to feedback	4) no change - still positive	

FIGURE 10 -- WW/PRG Experience Description Word Cloud



For the question regarding how their attitudes were affected, I refer to the data on Table 2 below. Six students (Andre, Bartholomew, Crystal, Rose, Vanessa, and Vivian) all responded citing improved attitudes toward writing after being part of a WW and PRG. Reasons for the improved attitudes mostly include working with peers and some method of sharing: reading aloud, having “more eyes” on their work, and even just talking about the writing, as indicated by Bartholomew, Crystal, Rose, Vanessa, and Vivian. Even Elizabeth, who said her attitude did not improve,

mentioned that working with peers “improved her essay”; and Crystal, who found sharing to be “nerve-wracking,” still saw the benefit -- writing with peers, for her, was “fun.”

TABLE 2 -- Attitude Improvement as Result of WW and PRG

	IMPROVEMENT in ATTITUDE toward WRITING?		COMMENTS
	YES	NO	
Andre	X		“A little better”
Bartholomew	X		“Can share more freely”
Beth		X	“Would rather have worked alone”
Crystal	X		Made writing “more fun but also nerve-wracking” (sharing)
Elizabeth		X	“But PRG helped improve [her] essay”
Rose	X		“Good for me to get more eyes on [my] writing”
Rylan		X	
Vanessa	X		Learned to “improve writing, found weaknesses/strengths”; talking w/ peers “relieved stress”
Vivian	X		“Significantly improved writing and became comfortable reading my work out loud”

As noted, three students said their attitudes were not affected. Beth, Elizabeth, and Rylan all replied that their attitudes did not improve as a result of being in a class where they shared and responded to writing. Beth mentioned that she “would rather have worked alone”;

Elizabeth, despite stating that her attitude did not improve, did offer that her “PRG helped improve her essay”; Rylan offered no additional comment.

The question becomes, now, how do the descriptions correlate with the attitudes?

Table 3 presents the results concisely. For Andre, Bartholomew, Beth, Crystal, Rose, Vanessa, and Vivian, there were direct correlations between their descriptions of their experiences and their expressed attitudes. For all these students except Beth, the correlation was positive; they used positive terms to describe positive attitudes. Beth alone indicated a negative correlation in her description and her expressed attitude. The remaining two students indicated no / inconsistent correlations; both Elizabeth and Rylan use positive terms but express no improvement in attitude.

TABLE 3 -- Correlations Between Description of Experience and Attitude

STUDENT	DESCRIPTION of EXPERIENCE	IMPROVEMENT in ATTITUDE toward WRITING	VIEW of SELF as WRITER CHANGE?	COMMENTS
Andre	“Enjoyable”; peers gave pros/cons; each focused on different area; “helpful”	YES	NO	“View not really changed much”; although “more confident in checking papers for errors”
Bartholomew	“Free to share”; “better”	YES	YES	Became a “stronger writer”
Beth	“Not awful, just not helpful”	NO	YES	Knows she “can write several pages”; doesn’t mind
Crystal	“A more confident writer”; peers made it “fun” but “nerve- wracking”	YES	YES	“Stronger than [she] gives [herself] credit for”

Elizabeth	“Enjoyed”; “all peers were helpful”	NO	YES	Realizes her writing not as “mediocre” as she thought; peers very supportive
Rose	“Good for [me] to get more eyes on [my] writing”	YES	YES	“Changed for the better”; more confidence
Rylan	“Beneficial”; “more confident in writing”; “frightening when you think it’s not that good”	NO	NO	(no additional comment provided)
Vanessa	“Good social interaction”; “enjoyed”	YES	YES	“Significant change”; sees her “weaker areas”; understands “need for revision”
Vivian	“Glad to have groups”; “comfortable working with friends”; “made [my] grade better”	YES	YES	“More confident”; “still some self doubt, but less now”; realizes putting in “effort” will help her pass”

Table 3 also indicates that there may or may not be a correlation between students’ expressed attitude toward writing and their view of themselves as writers. For Bartholomew, Crystal, Rose, Rylan, Vanessa, and Vivian, there is a direct correlation between these factors. All these students except Rylan express positive attitudes toward writing and positive views of themselves as writers. Rylan expressed a negative attitude toward writing and a negative view of herself as a writer -- again, a direct correlation albeit negative. Only Andre, Beth, and Elizabeth express non-correlations. Beth and Elizabeth, despite expressing no improvement in their attitudes toward writing, offer that their views of themselves as writers has changed in

terms of confidence, a positive indicator: Beth states that she knows she can write longer pieces, and Elizabeth now realizes that her writing is comparable to that of her peers. Andre, who stated that his attitude toward writing did improve, also stated that his view of himself as a writer has not changed.

2nd Suite -- Discussion of Question 2

The findings above speak quite clearly about socio-cultural models of writing, as “learning to write is about social participation” (Rowe, 2010). The students who had the most positive experiences in the WW and PRGs are the ones who fully engaged in the process of talking about and sharing their writing with their peers, despite the initial awkwardness they felt in doing so (as mentioned in reflections or private conversations). Data from the word cloud indicates this engagement, as of the eighteen words and phrases on the page, ten directly state students’ peers/group/ friends as positive indicators. Statements such as “Good social interaction,” “Able to share,” and “Honest responses” point directly at the social aspect of writing. These statements specifically correspond to Elbow’s (1973) description of brainstorming: “I say something. You give a response and it constitutes some restructuring or reorienting of what I said. Then *I* say something new on the basis of our restructuring and so I, in turn, can restructure what I first said” (p. 49-50). Although Elbow describes the pre-writing strategy of brainstorming specifically here, the description also perfectly fits the process of talk in PRGs, the “give-and-take” of ideas, responses, etc. during the writing process.

Kittle (2008), too, remarks on the necessity of peer interaction during writing. She states, “Writers need lots of readers; it broadens their perspective.” (p.91). This is especially pertinent, for Elizabeth, Rose, Vanessa all commented on how working with peers benefitted them.

Elizabeth commented that after sharing with her group, she realized that her writing isn't as "mediocre" as she had initially thought (Table 3). In other words, the interaction with her peers, their feedback, perhaps even reading their work, helped her to see the strength of her work. Her "peers and near-peers" (Lave and Wenger, 1991), those who may have been more or less skilled writers than she, may not have changed her attitude about writing (Table 3), but, as she affirms, they did help her improve her essay.

Rose responded in similar fashion when she said that it was "good for [her] to get more eyes on [her] writing" (Table 2). Rose understands that multiple perspectives can help her writing in the long run. She went on to say that working with peers gave her "more confidence" in her writing (Table 3). Vanessa, too, said that working with her peers helped her to see "strengths and weaknesses" in her writing (Tables 2 and 3). Again, without peer interaction, it is possible that none of these discoveries would have been made.

Though theories of situated learning differ in details and limitations, most (Gee, 2004; Gere, 1987; Lave & Wenger, 1991) would support that the value of WW and PRGs and the premise "...that the individual writer's practices shape and are, in turn, shaped by other writers" (Beach, et al., 2016). This theory supports Vanessa's comment in Table 2. Vanessa, in a private conversation, mentioned that hearing what her peers do in their writing helped her improve her writing. She said, "Hearing some of their ideas and what they do helped me see what I could do." Bartholomew concurred. In our first interview, he stated, "Being able to come together and compare writing styles and ideas, it's very helpful to be able to bounce ideas off one another." So it may be inferred that, although the context was the same for all my students, they were still able to shape and be shaped by the other writers in the class. Myers (1996), too, speaks of learning from peers. He cites Mead's term "co-figurative relationships" as relationships where

students learn from peers, not elders (p.150) as well as “pre- figurative relationships,” where adults teach children “not what to learn, but how to learn” (p. 151). In other words, in a WW class, the teacher may set up the structure, but the students take part of the onus of learning to write upon themselves as they work with their peers. And a study by Saidy and Early (2016) found that “...the students who worked in structured peer groups providing written and oral feedback for their peers' writing not only improved their writing in the absence of teacher feedback, but also were affected by the relational nature of the writing workshop” (p. 54). Although teacher feedback is necessary for assessment, some students may learn best from one another without much teacher input. Also, as suggested by Kittle (2008), too much teacher input early in the writing process may actually be detrimental for some students.

In responding to the question of direct correlations between students’ descriptions of being in a WW class with PRGs, the data is somewhat nebulous. For some students, the direct correlation is clear: Andre, Bartholomew, Crystal, Rose, Vanessa, and Vivian all use positive terms to indicate improvements in their attitudes toward writing; and Beth uses not-so- positive terms (“Not awful, just not helpful,” Table 3) to express no improvement. Again, these correlations leave no ambiguity. However, Elizabeth and Rylan both mostly use very positive terms in the descriptions of their WW and PRG experiences, yet their attitudes toward writing did not change. Elizabeth says that she “enjoyed” the experience, and that “all peers were helpful” in response to the survey question that asked students to describe their experiences (Table 3), and she said that the “PRG helped improve [her] essay” in the comment section of the survey question that asked about improvement in attitude towards writing (Table 2). Rylan’s responses, too, provide ambiguous results. She states that WW and PRGs were “beneficial” and made her “more confident in writing” in her response to the description question (Table 3); she

provided no additional comment for the survey question that asked about attitude improvement. She simply wrote, “To be honest, I do not think that my attitude has been affected by being part of a WW and PRG.”

A question arises: why are students who have, by their own admission, mostly positive experiences in a learning situation still unaffected by these positive experiences and/or results? Both Elizabeth and Rylan mention positive outcomes, as mentioned above. Perhaps Rylan’s additional response sheds some light on the question. Although she states that the WW and PRG were beneficial and made her a more confident writer, she adds, “it’s frightening when you think it’s not that good.” As she explained during an interview, here she is referring to sharing her work with her peers. She says:

Sometimes peer edit could be a little confusing and frustrating because you think you did really good on something, and then someone says something about your writing and you think in your head, “Well, I thought I actually did pretty good on this,” and then you sort of kind of get disappointed... I don’t feel as good because I didn’t do as good as I thought.

As we continued talking and discussed the recent research paper, which I helped her outline, she said,

That [outline] did help...because I guess I had someone just tell me, “Ok, you have a good start. Let me just help you organize what you have in your brain that you don’t understand that you have it in your brain already, and let’s just organize that,” because I guess I get so overwhelmed and I’m like, I just don’t know what to do next, because in the past I haven’t really had the best writing experiences...

A closer look shows that Rylan still seems to be haunted by her past experiences. Moffett (1968) describes the situation as such:

Memory, or *recalled perception*, selects features at a higher level. What is involved is not just fading of detail; many affective and cognitive factors determine what “left an impression” and what “stands out...” One categorizes and interprets events, partly in the light of new information received in the interim. But most of all, the details of a particular scene “stick” because they become assimilated to similar details from other

scenes remote in time from that one. The linking of perceptions of different times and places may be affective or logical. Whether the link is a fear feeling or the gestalt of rectangularity or the notion of fair play, something we can call a category has been formed, and the detail in question is recallable because it is associated with analogous memories, all serving as instances of the category. (21)

What Moffett describes here is exactly what Ryan is experiencing. The memories of her past negative writing experiences have been assimilated into her subconscious and categorized as “bad” experiences, so that any subsequent writing event recalls the perceptions of earlier experiences and leave her insecure, fearful, and by her own admission, overwhelmed. Even though she finds activities in the present writing situations “beneficial,” and claims they made her “more confident in writing,” her past perceptions of writing and the negative past override the positive present, leaving her still sullied and feeling “unaffected” by new circumstances. This finding also aligns with Bandura’s belief that “once entrenched, negative perceptions of one's ability are exceedingly resistant to change, and even subsequent academic success, however brought about, often fails to alter these beliefs" (as cited in Pajares, 2003). This may be why she felt “frightened” to share her work with her PRG. Although she did share, she struggled with the insecurity in thinking “it’s not that good.” For Rylan, then, the struggle with her perception of herself as a writer, despite peer help and growing confidence, remains.

For Elizabeth, the ambiguity is less clear. The only negative experience she speaks of is the fifth-grade writing class, which made her strongly dislike writing, as she wrote in her writing history autobiography: “Throughout 5th grade I began to hate writing more and more every time I walked into my writing class.” She continues her experience in that class thus:

As I sat down and watched my classmates filter through the door I noticed a familiar theme in all of their faces. They looked as if they would rather be anywhere else, and I felt the same way. As we sat down [the teacher] would tell us to “Log on to the computer” and “Get on the program.” I would see the whole class slump down with a frown on their young faces...We would do this [work on improving an essay] continuously until we got higher than the grade the teacher had told us to reach. This got

more and more frustrating as I went on, as getting that grade wasn't as easy as it may seem. As I would log into the essay writing program, I would already feel dread at writing only to fail time and time again without help or instruction on how to improve those skills.

Like Rylan, Elizabeth seems to have associated the perceptions of failing fifth grade computer-based writing assignments for a mandated writing class with writing in general, again indicating that past perceptions, once formed, are resistant to change, even in the face of subsequent academic success, as Pajares (2003) posited. Elizabeth must have had some experiences that were more positive, since she has been in an Honors track most of her academic career. But for her, the fifth-grade writing class, partially due to its primary genre, informative writing, “sucked the creativity out of writing,” and for her, as for many students, creativity was the one thing that often made writing events “fun.”

Elizabeth cites part of the problem here with lack of instruction and/or feedback from the teacher, which left her unsure of how to stop the cycle of failing to improve essays. Since “the most potent source of self-efficacy in any domain... is mastery experience, successful performance in the domain” (Bruning and Kauffman, 2016, p. 161, citing Bandura), mastery may not occur for some students without teacher input or feedback, and for some the frustration of working in isolation may be detrimental to the student's writing development altogether.

The absence of teacher feedback seems also to have negatively affected another student: Beth. Several times among our various interviews, reflections, and surveys, Beth mentioned that the WW and PRGs did not work for her, partially because she would have preferred feedback from the teacher rather than peers. In a chapter of her writing history autobiography, she wrote:

During the writing process we had our own peers edit our papers and had discussions on our papers, but as lovely as this seems, it didn't go that way. Personally, I would have rather been given time to edit it on my own. My peers seemed more focused on their own papers rather than helping out each other, and when they did give feedback, it wasn't detailed, and I had already known I needed work on those parts... Also, my peers don't know exactly what to look for, the only person who can do that is my teacher... I would have liked more time to discuss my paper with her.

Beth iterates the same sentiment in our first interview:

When I'm giving advice on writing, I try to be really specific and I'll go line by line. With other people, I kind of feel, because we're working on the same project, they're kind of more focused on their own writing. So they'll get through mine quickly to get back to their own writing, which I understand because it's your grade, it's your writing. But sometimes it would be really bland, kind of like, "Oh, I would work on this" or "I would change this," but never super-specific, which is what I try to give, specific details on what they should try to do.

For Beth, then, peer input is less valuable than teacher input. Loretto et al. (2017)

discuss a similar finding. They write: "Some studies show that students value 'expert' feedback more than peer feedback" (p. 137). This is certainly true for Beth, as she commented directly to that fact. However, as Moffett (1968) states, "Clearly, the *quality* of feedback is the key" (p. 193, original emphasis). It appears that students like Beth, who are already generally strong writers, believe that they will receive a better quality of feedback from the teacher, an expert of writing. She may not completely dismiss the feedback of her peers, but as she stated in a reflection, "I got mostly what I expected -- broad, general statements."

Another problem arose, however, in Beth's PRG: Beth was by far the strongest writer in the group. It is possible, then, that her peers did not fully understand what type of feedback she was looking for. Although Beth said that she was specific in what she asked for, as directed by me in our discussion of how to prepare to participate in PRGs, she may not have been as clear as she thought she was. Also, since Beth was the most skilled writer in her group, perhaps her peers did not know how they could provide beneficial input to a writer as skilled as Beth. I have found

myself in the same position as Beth's peers, so broad general statement may have been the best they could offer. Or interpreted differently, it could be that Beth's peers, after receiving line-by-line feedback from her, were so anxious to put those nuggets of advice into place that they seemingly glossed over her piece, not providing the input she desired. In any case, the PRG was not very effective for Beth. This speaks against Worthy, et al's (2009) discussion of ability grouping in peer groups. They believe that "students would learn better and feel better about themselves when they were grouped with students of similar achievement levels" (p. 222). In most cases this is true, as it was in Bartholomew's group; however, there are clearly drawbacks that may occur when students are *not* groups with peers of like ability.

Fermata -- Other findings

Analyzing the data and seeing the differences between home and school writing events caused me look further into the stories my students wrote for me in the first writing prompt regarding their earliest memories of writing during our second class meeting. Here I noticed that four of my students (Andre, Elizabeth, Rose, and Vivian) wrote entirely about past *school* events. In their brief histories, these four students made no mention of writing at home as young children. This is not to say that they never wrote at home; however, they did not mention home writing in this brief look into their pasts.

Only one student, Beth, focused this initial version of her writing history entirely on *home* writing events. Beth wrote about writing stories as a young child and sharing them with her family. And Vanessa included that she began journaling around the time she was in second grade. As I considered the rest of my data, this finding is in complete alignment; both of these students have positive views of themselves as writers.

The remaining students mentioned writing both at school and at home, but for several, the writing slanted in one direction. For example, although Vanessa primarily wrote about home writing events (writing stories to share with her family, journaling), she also mentioned that she always loved “free writing,” a term used in school writing events, because of the “soothing and relief it gave,” an outcome mostly associated with journaling. Also, even when writing about home writing events, she referred to school ages: “Ever since first grade...” or “By second grade...” It could be that she mentions these events by school years as a clear way to communicate her rough age; it could be that she doesn’t remember her exact age at those times; or it could be that, as is the case with many writing events, much of learning to write and the writing process is initiated at school; therefore, we attribute our developing writing skills according to school years -- in kindergarten, we learn to write letters and words; in first grade we begin to write sentences and short paragraphs or very short stories; in second grade we expand these skills; and so on. Even her mention of the term “free writing” may tell us that students sometimes use writing terms they’ve learned at school or through schooling to describe the various types of writing they do on their own.

Similarly, Crystal, too, slanted her past writing experiences toward those occurring at home. She initially began by saying that she “loved drawing and writing as a young child,” and would conduct interviews of her family when she was seven years old and draw picture and then create stories from what family members said. However, she quickly segues to “...but I hated to read and write when I got older,” most likely by the time she was in school. However, she again quickly segues to “But when I started to keep a journal I realized how much fun writing actually is.” This occurred about the time she was in seventh grade when she was “going through some stuff at home,” as she disclosed in a reflection.

This volley of experiences is noteworthy for several reasons, one of which being that Crystal's hatred of writing (and reading) occurred during her school years. She doesn't disclose her age "as a young child" when she loved writing and drawing, but she does mention interviewing her family at the age of seven, or presumably, second grade. The safe assumption is that during her early elementary years, her experiences with writing events were pleasant, as most of my students mentioned that they enjoyed writing prior to fifth grade. Although Crystal doesn't mention many grades or grade levels, we can infer that she, like the others, had mostly positive experiences until some time in later elementary/ middle school, when her dislike for literacy practices began.

Another reason Crystal's response here is noteworthy is her mention of journaling. Like Vaness, Crystal wrote about the cathartic nature of journaling. Crystal stated that she began journaling "when she was going through some stuff at home," and journaling would help her "feel better" about the events in her life. Vanessa, too, mentioned the therapeutic nature of journaling: she mentions the "soothing and relief" she felt as a result of journaling, or what she referred to as "free writing." Singer and Singer (2010), in their studies of writing with patients suffering from HIV, cancer, high blood pressure, and psychological distress, tell us that writing in general is cathartic. Although the cases of Crystal and Vanessa are not as dire, these students found the benefits of journaling effective as well.

Bartholomew also wrote of his writing history with a notable slant toward writing at home. The lone mention of school in his brief history actually only nods at school. He writes: "I began writing in first grade. Writing at first came to me as a difficult task. Soon I began to love writing because of the creative aspect." He went on to state that he wrote "a lot back then" and mentioned his love for writing stories. Here, we may infer that the "difficult task" of

writing occurred at school. The word “task” itself seems to be one used more often at school than at home. However, Bartholomew also says that “soon” he began to love writing. We may infer here that, once the basic skills of writing were in place -- skills such as paragraphing, adding and ordering details, etc. -- skills usually learned in school, as mentioned above -- Bartholomew quickly learned how to use these skills to create his own stories, which he loved doing. Again, it is a safe assumption that Bartholomew’s story writing occurred mostly at home, as he states that he wrote “a lot.” The experiences that most of us have had with school, elementary school in particular, are of busy days filled with many different activities; “a lot” of time for writing was most likely *not* built into the schedule of a first, second, or third grade curriculum in the mid-2010s.

Throughout the discussion above, the importance of writing at home with young children crystalizes. Each student who mentioned writing at home as a young child has a positive view of him/herself as a writer. Since “literacy development begins before formal schooling, ...children begin to learn about writing and reading simultaneously in their everyday experiences” (Rowe, 2010, p. 401). This implies that children are capable of learning much about what writing is and what it means to write long before they enter a classroom or receive much direct instruction. It is perhaps these early encounters with writing that “create” positive dispositions toward writing in young children. If this is so, then what Dewey (1938) proposes in saying that “the quality of any experience has two aspects...an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences” (p. 27), the initial agreeableness of early writing activities does influence subsequent writing experiences, as the cases of Bartholomew, Beth, Crystal, and Vanessa suggest. It appears that the

agreeableness of their early writing events is what keeps their dispositions toward writing positive today.

Intermezzo -- Teachers' Descant

Listening to and being mindful of the leading tone in all the discussion of students' writing histories, their stories and influences, especially influences on their school writing experiences, the question of "What happened?" re-emerges. The issue remains as yet unresolved. Clearly negative experiences during school writing events have impacted Elizabeth, Rose, and Rylan significantly, but several other students mentioned negative writing experiences at school, either directly or indirectly, as well. Even Bartholomew (who cites no creativity), Beth (who cites "strictness"), and Crystal (who cited generally hating school writing prior to discovering the joy of journaling) all carry some negative associations with school writing. And the fact that 100% of negative writing experiences occurred at school among all my students is also quite significant. So again, what may have happened between elementary school, when some of these students loved writing and middle school, when they developed a distaste for writing, at least writing at school?

The best way for me to answer this question was to ask teachers. Before doing so, I sought principal consent allowing me to reach out to elementary school teachers in my district. Once permission was obtained, I sent out an emailed letter asking for participants. The only requirements were that they had been teaching English Language Arts to students in grades 3 - 5 for at least 10-15 years and had experienced the changes in public education since the implementation of NCLB. Three teachers replied, two from one school and one from another. In order to broaden the scope of this data, I also tried to reach out to teachers in other school districts in my own or neighboring counties via their principals and/or superintendents.

Unfortunately, I was denied access to teachers in three of the other school districts I reached out to. In one district, I obtained permission, but no teachers volunteered to participate. Still hoping to have input from teachers beyond my own district, I reached out to teachers through my professional networks: the graduate school where I received my Master's Degree and my chapter of the National Writing Project (NWP). Three teachers from two neighboring districts responded. I interviewed all six participant teachers once in a face-to-face interview, and four teachers of the six teachers twice, once face-to-face, and once over the phone, due to scheduling conflicts. The second interview was simply to clarify any questions I had resulting from the first interview. I obtained follow-up information from one of the two remaining teachers via email. One teacher has not yet responded to an email follow up. And as stated, I conducted my coding of teacher data in the same fashion I did my student data with several reading iterations and noting words or phrases of saliency.

Sonata No. 3

In most musical compositions, space exists for an instrumental solo, whether by a flute or a trumpet, or a cello, etc. What follows is teacher voices -- a sextet, if you will -- as they aid me in discovering an answer to my last research question. I did not frame my query of the teachers as a question to them, however, but rather as a prompt to which they responded in light of their professional (hi)stories. My hope here was that I could "...give [my] participants a space, time - and human connection -- to reflect upon these events anew" (Charmaz, p. 80). Also, as a teacher myself, I hoped that my participants would entrust me with their stories, also understanding that, most likely, my own stories would have similar reverberations. Throughout the interview, I tried to remain as transparent as possible, honestly stating my own questions, experiences, and biases if they organically arose as we conversed; thus by being reflexive

myself, I hoped to open the door to honest conversation. Understanding, too, that “these stories provide statements from particular points of view that serve specific purposes” (Charmaz, 79), my hope is that our “specific purposes” are united, as we all share a similar point of view in trying to advocate for better educational methods for our students in this Age of Accountability.

I began each interview asking for a response to the following:

When teaching writing, before the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and changes to the PSSA, I used to [blank] but now I [blank].

Eleanor -- 1st Soprano

Eleanor has been teaching fourth grade in my district for sixteen years. Her response to my query:

“We used to focus on writing more, because we didn’t have a schedule for teaching. Now, [with the new program], the weak link in the program is really writing.”

Prior to the implementation of the CCSS, Eleanor did some sort of writing with her students every day for at least fifteen minutes.

“Now,” she says, “I’m lucky if I get fifteen minutes in a week.”

She sees several problems with the changes in the state’s standardized tests since the implementation of CCSS. She says,

“To me, the PSSA, and I know my peers will all agree with me on this, is developmentally way ahead of anything in our curriculum.”

In a follow up interview, I asked her to clarify this, and she responded,

“A lot of it is the vocabulary. The vocabulary, even in some of the stories, tends to be unrelated to them, so they really have a difficult time understanding it. And they’re higher-level, some of the words are really, I think, beyond their scope... And then the way they ask the questions, the questions are worded so difficultly...Even in the tests that come with the common core curriculum...Rarely can the kids ever understand what’s being asked of them.”

Interestingly, many of my tenth-grade students have made similar comments regarding the Constructed Response prompt on the Keystone exam. Although they never disclosed what the actual questions were, most of them did say that the questions were “worded weird,” or “confusing.” A student in my Keystone Prep class last year added, “I figured it out, but it took a while.” Many agreed, while others said, “I just skipped it.”

Fourth graders and tenth graders citing the same problem -- unclear language -- on standardized tests purchased in the same district, most likely from the same test developer, certainly points to a problem with the development of testing materials, but that is beyond the scope of this project.

Jill -- 2nd Soprano

Jill has been teaching for twenty years, also in my district. She has taught mostly third grade but has also taught first and second grade. She currently serves as a reading interventionist for instructional support. Her response:

“Writing was more of a guided experience... Now it’s more sentence writing.”

As we continued the conversation, Jill added that in her intervention materials

“...there is a short answer writing that goes with that, but not too much. The writing is really [pauses]... We have 25-minute intervention blocks, so that’s usually what falls by the wayside if we get clipped on the intervention end of it.”

What Jill means is that if teachers run behind on their instruction time in the main subjects, even the students who receive support lose time in their intervention class(es), and the main, perhaps easiest, thing to cut out of the now abridged curriculum is writing.

Kieran -- 1st Alto

Kieran has been teaching in a neighboring district for fourteen years. She has taught second and third grades, as well as seventh grade ELA. She currently functions as a reading teacher in her elementary school. Her response:

“I used to make up my own projects in writing, but ...now we’re not allowed to do that anymore.”

When I mentioned that I’d heard from several teachers that there is less writing being taught now, she responded,

“Oh, 100% there’s less writing! ...Most of the writing we’re now doing is connecting to a text or answering a question specifically. It’s not creative writing, or tell me your ideas, or let’s have a workshop and work on this writing. None of that... [She shakes her head] And the writing, it’s only like ten minutes, so what are kids thinking of in these ten minutes? There’s nothing. You can’t do it. I couldn’t even do a mini-lesson in ten minutes, let alone give them time to actually think and develop and process the writing.”

Kieran, a teacher-researcher who has presented her work domestically and internationally, investigated writing in both of her main projects: one regarding choice in 2nd grade writing; the other on authentic writing experiences with 4th graders. As a teacher with an interest in writing with students, she certainly understands the need to “ponder” before writing, as she mentions the lack of time for ideation, and she sees the lessening of instructional time in writing as a huge loss to her students.

Penelope -- 2nd Alto

Penelope has been teaching in my district for twenty-nine years. She has taught first through fifth grades, and at the middle level has taught English Language Arts (ELA) and history in team and non-team settings. Her response to the above question was:

“I used to use writing as the proponent of my teaching and curriculum... Now I feel I have to validate the extra time I spend on writing.”

In a follow-up interview, I asked her specifically to clarify why she felt she had to “validate” the time she spent on writing. Penelope explained that the reading program the district bought was a “very, very scripted by the day” program, built around 120 minutes a day of reading instruction in six-week segments, with the sixth week allowing for testing and projects. The program allowed teachers to digitally shorten the lesson, picking out core material to fit a 90-minute program, and the district conceded to this version in order to help the teachers have more time for writing instruction. But, Penelope said,

“...what we found is that people were getting so frustrated not being able to get through the five-day-a-week program, that when it came to Week 6, they were using it as a catch-up time instead of using it for the purpose of it.”

In other words, rather than using the last week for writing instruction, many teachers still ignored the writing concession and continued with the reading instruction curriculum. Thus, again, writing is eliminated from the curriculum.

Sam -- Tenor

Sam has been teaching for twenty years in the same district as Kieran, although not in the same building. He taught middle school grades six, seven, and eight for the first ten years of his career, and then mainly fifth grade, with a few years teaching fourth in the latter decade. He currently teaches fifth grade ELA. His response to my initial question:

“I used to have more time to focus, and conference, and change the genres of writing. Now I have less time to conference, and genre seems more limited, and it’s more centered on more technical things.”

Sam explained “technical things” as providing textual evidence, making text-to-text connections, and other skills more often associated with argument or informational writing. He juxtaposed teaching technical things with the teaching of craft:

“With the less teaching of craft, you can’t find a voice, and if you don’t have a voice, would you enjoy writing? You know what I mean? If you don’t know how to express your voice, and you haven’t been taught that, then will you find any, will you find any enjoyment out of it? I don’t think you can, and so I think the less exposure you have to it, the more unwilling you are to do something, because you’re kind of like ‘Eeew. Everything that I’ve experienced with it hasn’t been a positive experience. I don’t have any positive experiences to go fall back on to say, I can find some good in this.’”

Taking on the student’s perspective here, Sam clarifies how students may feel about writing if they haven’t been taught about voice and craft, those things that allow a young writer to express himself and be himself in writing. Surely being taught only citation methods and the specifics of quoting could take joy out of writing for developing writers.

Tom -- Basso

Tom has been teaching in another neighboring district for fifteen years. He taught seventh grade ELA for the first eight years of his career, and the following six years he taught all subject levels in fourth grade. He currently serves as a math coach at his middle school. His response to my initial query:

“The biggest switch was before it was more, I would say more open... When the Common Core came around, my school implemented the five-paragraph essay... Now, we have this [new] series, and it is to what we used to originally teach.”

Tom’s story is different from those of the other teacher-participants. He explains:

“When the Common Core came, that’s when my school implemented the 5-paragraph essay, which in my opinion is atrocious, and we were doing five of them in every subject area...and the kids absolutely hated that. They were thrown down their throat, and they had to constantly do them each class. They had to do a 5-paragraph essay in math. They had to do one in science, so they’re doing all these five-paragraph essays, but they weren’t going anywhere with them, and it was really deterring their growth as a writer in writing class because they didn’t like them, and it turned them off. And as soon as we had to say five-paragraph essay, they were done... Now [since his school purchased a program closer to what they did prior to the CCSS implementation], they love writing because the five-paragraph essay went away!”

He smiles.

Tom's story provides a different perspective -- one where under the guise of test-prep, a particular writing structure - the five-paragraph essay -- was forced upon students in every tested discipline: ELA, science, and math. Notable here is that Tom doesn't mention an as-of-yet untested discipline such as social studies; it is only in the areas that testing is rampant that students are being forced to write essay upon essay with little rationale besides that of test prep, and this to the point where their writing growth was becoming stymied.

It must be noted that Tom is the only teacher-participant whose district is not labeled by the State as a "Failing District," or under-performing, either failing to meet Annual Yearly Progress or failing to demonstrate consistent growth in a given content area. Historically, schools that are not under-performing have less stringency in curriculum choices and methods of instruction, and therefore, often have programs that allow more flexibility and teacher autonomy. Tom's situation, then, is not as dire as it is for teachers in the under-performing districts, and the district's choice of a different ELA program -- one that encourages writing and writer development, not just test prep -- indicates this.

Third Suite -- Discussion of Question 3

Question 3 - What effect do standardized tests have on student disposition towards writing?

Just as in music, a chord progression leads to, or resolves itself on, the tonic, so do I attempt to resolve the question of how student dispositions toward writing may have been affected by standardized tests and find the tonic. In attempting to do so, I discovered that it might be important first to consider the effect of standardized tests on writing *instruction*, as indicated by my teacher- participants. Perhaps understanding the current climate of writing

instruction - as indicated by these teachers - will provide insight as to why my students feel as they do towards writing.

As I analyzed my teacher data, I noticed that each teacher provided a great deal of insight on the teaching of writing, and through what they said, I noticed two main themes: time and agency.

The Signature of Time

In every case, with every teacher except Tom, writing is the one thing slipping from the English Language Arts curriculum since the implementation of the CCSS. Although each teacher paints the story of this a bit differently, a key finding is that since the introduction of the CCSS and, in Pennsylvania, the redevelopment of the state assessments to reflect the CCSS, teachers have been stripped of time to write with or instruct their students in how to write using best practices. Penelope states this clearly: “Writing takes time, and it takes time to sit and ponder. I don’t think we give our students time to ponder anymore.” Penelope makes several points here. What Penelope refers to as “pondering” here is “think time,” the time it takes to just conceive the idea of what to say in our writing. As mentioned previously, Kieran finds the same dilemma, as she mentioned that at times students have less than ten minutes to develop an idea, and write. Hairston (1982) sees this as problematic and argues for the importance of this time. She believes that writers only have a partial notion of what they want to say when they begin. She compares the different behaviors in professional and novice writers:

Those differences involve the amount of time spent on writing, the amount of time preparing to write, the number of drafts written, the concern for audience, the number of changes made and the stages at which they are made, the frequency and length of pauses during writing, the way in which those pauses are used, the amount of time spent rereading and reformulating, and the kind and number of constraints that the writers are aware of as they work. (p. 86).

Novice writers, especially school children, may not be aware of any of these behaviors, since most of them are not practiced in school settings, with preparing to write and drafting being the first pieces of the writing process to disappear. Most school children approach writing activities as “once and done,” as opposed to rereading for revision.

Penelope also alludes here to the fact that there’s no time to *teach* students that they need think time. She recalls a time where writing was the main “proponent” of her curriculum:

“I would use [writing] for teaching reading because if the kids understood that they could write the content they were more willing to read their writing and then be interested in reading what I was giving them. But that takes time...”

In other words, Penelope allowed her students to create the content of their unit - to write the unit - and this would spark interest in writing as well as reading because students were anxious to “put it their own way.” But, as she said, it takes time to teach this way -- time that teachers no longer have. Eleanor spoke of similar past writing instruction, but she adds, shaking her head, that new teachers especially seem remiss in teaching writing, claiming that they don’t have time, so they just don’t do it. Writing, again, falls by the wayside.

Sadly, nothing has change in recent years. Applebee & Langer (2006), among others, wrote about the issue of writing being eliminated from the curriculum over a decade ago. Their research found that by 12th grade, students were reporting less frequent writing in every subject other than English. And the National Council of Teachers of English, in its “Writing Now” policy brief, published in 2008, found that in the ten years prior to 2008 (circa 1998), less time has been spent on writing and writing instruction. So ten years after the “Writing Now” publication, things have not improved, and it is possible that the state of writing instruction in American public schools has even worsened. Applebee and Langer (2006) acknowledge that this could be because of the focus on standardized testing, most likely

because test prep leaves less time for teaching of different writing skills, as do Roen, Goggin, and Clary-Lemon (2010), who claim that “external pressures, including standardized testing” may be why composing practices have become “marginalized” (p. 355). If this is in fact true and testing is to blame, it should be a wake-up call, as it is an indictment against writing instruction in our public schools.

To be fair, however, we must consider Tom’s disclosure of students writing multiple five-paragraph essays in each of the testing disciplines. Clearly, this indicates a great deal of writing, although the amount of writing *instruction* remains somewhat nebulous, as Tom only mentions *instruction* occurring in “writing *class*.” Eleanor, too, mentions that students do a great deal of writing, but she specifically mentions the PSSA test itself as the site of the writing. She states that there are generally six writing prompts on the ELA section of the PSSA in fourth grade, with writing prompts in science, as well. Again, Eleanor does not go on to discuss the quality of writing; she merely states the amount.

Tom and Eleanor’s experiences, however, echo Hillocks’ (2010) findings in a study of state writing tests on the teaching of writing. Hillocks, in his study of K-12 writing conducted in Illinois, Kentucky, New York, Oregon, and Texas found that “...students are writing far more than they were 20 years ago” (p. 316). The quality of the writing is the question, as Hillocks (2002) suggests, as “a lot of writing” does not necessarily mean “a lot of *good* writing,” and the quality question may be applicable in Pennsylvania as well.

Agency -- Making the Song Your Own

Another theme -- or refrain, if you will -- occurring in the teacher data above is agency and the result of lack of agency. Although most of the teachers do mention some choice in

projects they conducted with their students prior to the adoption of CCSS, Tom states his opinion of the matter boldly:

“I think you have to let the kids pick what they want to write about, or you might as well forget about it. Because if you’re telling them with those five-paragraph essays, here is the prompt and you have to do this, the kids just got turned off by it and they were done. When you allow those students to choose what they want to write about, it has a profound impact on their writing, and they try... That’s what’s wrong with the PSSAs. Kids are being graded on a prompt that they don’t care about, and they just want to get it over with. Let them pick a prompt. I know it would... change the game because each one would be different and would be hard to grade, but let them pick the prompt and let them write about it. You’re going to see some very passionate pieces. Grade them on that, you know?”

Here, Tom refers again to the five-paragraph essays required of students prior to his district’s adoption of a new reading/writing program. When Tom says “they were done,” he means that the students became almost completely disengaged. They had no vested interest in the prompts, no agency, no choice, so writing became a rote exercise in putting words on paper: “They just want to get it over with.” However, he believes that if students were allowed agency in choosing a topic, their writing would greatly improve because they may be “impassioned” by their interest in the prompt, and “they try” to express themselves clearly. Kittle (2008) would agree. She speaks of choice as being “...at the center of what a writer needs” (p. 151-152) not only in writing about literature but writing about life as well. Finn (1999) also concurs. He writes that “[Students] need to be introduced into and made to feel welcome in a community where... they do not feel powerless, where they have choices regarding the topics they will study and the materials they will use.” (p. 90-91). And Dixon (1967) called for student choice over 50 years ago as a method of students “...learn[ing] to take on their own tasks” (p. 96) in education in general as a powerful method toward educational reform.

Eleanor takes the lack of agency a step further. She speaks of the scripted curriculum her district utilizes, which takes away teacher agency and autonomy: “You could be a robot and

teach it.” Her use of the word “robot” here depersonalizes teachers, again stripping them of the ability to make professional choices in the best interest of their students. To depersonalize is “to deprive of the sense of personal identity; to make impersonal” (Webster’s Universal Encyclopedic Dictionary), and as Eleanor alludes, “teacher-proof” methods and “canned curriculum” certainly do leave teachers saddled with teaching in ways devoid of personal identity and individuality -- all for the sake of following a program that promises to have students achieve higher test scores. Teachers are not permitted to make lessons “their own” for fear their methods may not ensure student success on the state-mandated standardized test. Kieran also experiences this lack of agency. She relates that in her building, teachers are “micromanaged to the minute... where principals, administrators, are walking around with checklists in five-minute increments” to ensure that all teachers adhere to the program’s schedule with no deviation. Taubman (2009) expounds on the problems created by this method of accountability:

Perhaps most important of all, high stakes tests erode the autonomy of teachers, for if tests determine the curriculum, and if tests tell us what is important to know as a teacher, and if these tests are fabricated by centers of control beyond the reach of teachers, then the teachers’ passions, commitments, and wisdom count less and less. (p. 53)

Taubman here suggests that high stakes testing and test prep reduce a teacher’s ability, even his/her right, to be a professional who is dedicated to his/her students and seeks original, creative methods and strategies to educate them, to reach them in ways that make sense to him/her and in which s/he is invested. The wisdom acquired by veteran teachers does not seem to matter in a world of high stakes tests, where teacher agency has also been hushed.

Jill alludes to a similar lack of agency for teachers:

“When I first started teaching, you could kind of... you could read your class... ‘Hey, we need a break. We need to get outside for a little bit.’ And you could do

that. Now it's very [pauses]... It's very structured.”

Jill here speaks of the professional license that was once given to teachers, where they were permitted (encouraged?) to know their class -- to “read” them -- well enough to understand when the students needed a recess, a mental break from “school work,” time to run and play in fresh air. Years ago, teachers were permitted to and given the flexibility to take their classes outside after an especially difficult lesson, one where the teacher saw that the children worked diligently and needed a mental break. Today, few teachers are allowed such freedom, mostly due to scripted lessons on tight curriculum guides. On the subject of allowing teachers such freedoms, Blau (1998) writes, “No formula for teaching can be allowed to substitute for a teacher’s own professional judgement exercised in the context of a particular classroom with particular students at particular moments.” Blau understands that each classroom, each situation requires a teacher to use judgment regarding what is best for the students in that moment, in that situation, and he advocates for administrators to allow teachers to be the professionals making those decisions, as they were hired to do. Unfortunately, again, in the guise of “better” programs and accountability, teachers’ professional judgments have been rescinded.

Da Capo -- Back to Question 3

What effect do standardized tests have on students’ writing dispositions?

Let’s listen to what the students say. The following excerpts were shared with me through the student writing history autobiography project. Since not all my student-participants made mention of standardized tests in that project, here I provide the stories of those who did.

Rose: “One thing I do remember from [my elementary school and middle school years] are the PSSAs, benchmark tests/other state regulated tests, and being behind on work. Those are the only things I remember most from [those] years because those are what stressed me out the most...It was really hard for me and I wasn’t

getting good grades on the tests. This made me just hate writing even more because of the thought that everyone else can do it and I can't."

Elizabeth: "Throughout 5th grade I began to hate writing more and more every time I walked into my writing class...Throughout that class all I can say I learned was to write how I believed a writing program wanted me to, and sure when PSSAs came around it didn't take much to write a 5 paragraph essay as the final question. This was all well and good enough until I realized as I got out of that class and into higher-level English classes that anytime a teacher would talk about writing an essay, I would feel a familiar feeling of dread much like when I would walk into the doors of my 5th grade writing class."

Bartholomew: "Writing class in 5th grade started as a great experience. I was excited to write stories and come up with intricate characters and storylines. All that changed when we walked in and they started introducing formal writing and research essays... We were seemingly confined to the ideals of research and cold hard facts, creative prisoners to the idea of a standardized writing platform...It gave me a sense of fear for what was to come... This class took my love for creative writing and replaced it with a hatred, a distaste for the factual. I learned to hate writing more than I learned to write properly... Writing class changed my love for writing."

The most significant finding in these student stories is the repetition of the phrase "hate writing." Each of these students began to, or in Rose's case, continued to hate writing as a result of being placed in a mandatory writing and research class aimed at aiding them on the state assessment. For Rose, part of the problem was diminished self-efficacy: she resented that writing came easier for her friends than it did for her, as stated in a previous chapter, and not only did she "hate writing" as a result, but she also felt "stressed" at the very mention of writing, especially for testing purposes. For Elizabeth, the problem had a positive outcome -- she was able to score well on the standardized tests and benchmarks, but at the expense of actually learning to write for anything more than a standardized test, and an overall "dread" at the thought of writing. And for Bartholomew, the realization that what was being taught was devoid of creativity sullied him to writing "factual" pieces. He feels that he didn't even learn to write "properly." His use of the word "properly" here is ambiguous, but a safe assumption may be that he means that he didn't learn to write well, he didn't learn to expound on his ideas or add his

own voice to writing for standardized tests. He only learned that “factual,” perhaps argumentative or informative, writing equaled no creativity, and this type of writing spoiled his love for writing, at least in school.

Much of what we hear in listening to these students’ voices is alluded to in Hillocks’ (2010) discussion of writing processes. Hillocks writes that when writing prose that involves argument, students do not write as well or as much, perhaps due to the lack of proper schema for these types of writing (p. 327). Lack of schema may leave students feeling uncomfortable with the discourses associated with those more formal types of writing, and as a result their ideation as well as their disposition towards the task may be affected negatively. This would be especially true when writing for standardized tests, where the added stress of writing for a test, and a timed one at that, leaves many students unable and/or unwilling to struggle through the writing process despite the call to do so. And this may be one reason the NCTE’s Writing Now (2008) policy brief cites writing for standardized tests as actually harmful to students’ daily experience of learning, specifically learning to write.

The teachers, too, acknowledge the students’ disinterest and dislike for writing, and speculate on reasons for this turn. To best articulate the teachers’ perspectives, I implement the use of pastiche in the form of a poem. Ely, et al. (1997) tell us that “pastiche assumes that the pieces -- the selections -- that make up the whole communicate particular messages above and beyond the parts... direct[ing] the readers’ attention to multiple realities by combining various representations to emphasize the relation between form and meaning” (p. 97). In the following poem, I provide such “multiple realities” to communicate a “whole” regarding my teacher-participants’ views on students’ dispositions towards writing since the implementation of the CCSS. This poem is composed of the voices of teachers and administrators. As I read through

each teacher's interview, I lifted key ideas they presented -- problems they encountered, directives from administrators, their own perspectives -- and created a melody of each teacher's voice. The melody carries the song of that teacher's experience and conveys their messages as I hear them. Each word in the poem is a direct quote from interviews with only very minor poetic license taken. Any repetition of a word or phrase reflects the teacher's own repetitions. The poem is in part a "found poem," as I believe I found the teachers' hearts in these melodies.

T Teaching Time

13 years
Expectation gone up
Masters thesis on giving students choice
Before new curriculum
Empowering students with their own writing
Now we're not

Time

29 years
Bought into a writing program
Scripted
Taught that testing every other day
Added research component
Teachers felt kids really needed these things
Intention very positive
Overall effect:

Kids hated to write

Not enough time

Oh, those fun worksheets
 Served a purpose
Little repetition reinforcement things
 Served a purpose
Pick out the color
 Color that number this color
Color means play
 Doesn't mean learn
Then why color?

"Stay on the pacing guide!"

20 years
Writing is suffering
Even less instruction than before
This is the formula
Still trying to maneuver my way around
 Like a seasoned teacher can

"Follow the timeline!"

17 years
What we used to
What we used to
We don't anymore
We didn't have a schedule
Wonderful models
 Students enjoyed
But now
Dumbed down curriculum
Questions not in fourth grade standards
That little boy...
 I cried
And we wonder why kids hate school

"Everybody doing it at the same time"

20 years

Kids really struggle
Just sentences
 Answer the question
Taking writing away Little
unstructured time They
need that
They're little yet!

"Finish the unit in five days period"

15 years
Be a writer
A lot of time
A lot of time on writing
More time on revision
Tons, tons, tons of modeling
They're geniuses
Let them pick!
Keeps them interested!

Not enough time

Chapter 6: Implications

Coda

I had begun the project of studying my students' dispositions toward writing with the reverberation of "What happened?" as an earworm. What happened between third grade, when they loved to write, and fifth grade, when that love, for many, waned? I had begun the project wondering if, perhaps, some students don't like writing like some people don't like lima beans. But I think differently now. Part of my earworm stems from Dewey's (1937) statement about "miseducative" experiences, those that may "arrest or distort the growth of further experience" (p. 25); his belief that traditional schools, "...impose adult standards, subject-matter, and methods upon those who are only growing slowly toward maturity" (p. 18-19); and his question, "How shall the young become acquainted with the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?" (p. 23). His first two statements, I believe, are very true, as I've now learned through this project; his question remains rhetorical.

Our current educational system is rife with "miseducative" experiences (Dewey, 1937). One reason is that "adult standards, subject matter, and methods" (Dewey, 1937) are being imposed on children before they are ready and able to fully comprehend the expectations. Three of my teacher-participants mentioned expectations for students since the adoption of the CCSS as being high, higher, or too high for students at a particular grade level. Perhaps beginning research writing in fifth grade is too soon, leading not only to miseducative experiences, but a decline in self-efficacy. And perhaps the accumulation of miseducative experiences due to adult standards on subject matter beyond the scope of a child at a certain age will only acquaint the child with a past riddled with bad memories and poor self-efficacy, instead of a past acting as a

“potent agent in appreciation of the living present.” Perhaps it is the rhetoric itself -- research, research paper, argumentative text, text dependent analysis -- that is the problem. What happened to “reports”? And “looking things up”? Do ten-year-olds really *need* to “conduct research”? Hence my earworm.

Minor or diminished?

This project is limited in its scope. It represents only a small sample of students and teachers, and is limited to one relatively small geographical area, although several different communities are involved. My own stance as an “insider” (Goswami, et al.) may be questionable as well: how objective can I actually be, since these are my own students and I care deeply for them? How objective can I be when as a teacher myself, I may be encountering similar problems? To dispel these questions, I conducted member checks, allowing my participants to read my interpretations of their writings and comments if they chose to, as I mentioned previously, and my critical friends provided input as well to keep any of my biases in check.

Despite the limitations, there are several implications from this project. In considering many of my students’ negative dispositions toward writing, it initially appeared to me that “school writing” would be the culprit in tainting their dispositions; but that is not the case. The main culprit is lack of agency. Students and teachers alike cite lack of the ability to choose as the main reason for dissatisfaction with writing and writing instruction. For teachers, lack of choice in what and how they teach and for how long they teach it; for students, lack of choice in what and how they write, choice of mode, choice of genre. Teachers and students alike cited the ability to choose as one indicator of positive experiences. Tom, the only teacher allowed more agency by his school administrators, stated that his students loved writing classes because they

were not limited to writing five paragraph essays; and happy, engaged students make happy, fulfilled teachers. Also, both Bartholomew and Beth mentioned positive experiences with school writing-- Bartholomew in his ninth grade English class, and Beth in creative writing classes. Students who have choices in what and how they write spend more time on the craft of writing, on voice and word choice and other mechanical features of writing. Remember Beth and the musical theatre piece.

Choice. Agency. Autonomy.

Having any of the three of these missing may be why students disengage from school writing activities, and it may also be the reason for teacher attrition (Costigan, 2008). It is difficult to keep working (for a teacher or a student) in a setting with strong impositions from the outside.

Another implication for students, and perhaps for parents: there is significant evidence of the importance of early literacy practices at home, specifically with writing. Children who were encouraged to “write stories” at home as very young children tend to have strong positive dispositions to writing in general, whether at home or at school, and may be inclined to approach school writing activities with more confidence than those who did not write much at home in their early years. Even though parental suggestion to write might be considered as initiated from an external source (as in the case of Beth), it may be that writing that allows full creative expression without parameters of time and space leaves young writers free to explore the art of writing however they see fit, with the added bonus of freedom from assessment as they mature. Britton, et al. (1978) tell us that “writing that is totally self-initiated... provides an important link with mature adult writing” (p.23). Therefore, any self-initiated writing, whether at home or at school, is preferable to *assigned* writing and may cause novice writers to diligently practice their craft. Although Britton, et al. do not specify the *place* of the self-

initiated writing, my study found home writing experiences to be an important indicator of positive writing dispositions, and therefore should be encouraged.

It is important to note here, also, that students who self-initiated writing events viewed themselves as writers; in other words, their dispositions toward writing did not change as a result of a poor evaluation from a teacher. Those who enjoyed writing continued to do so. Perhaps they believed that they are members of the writing “club” (Smith, p. 11) and therefore have the confidence to keep writing, despite setbacks imposed by outside sources such as schools.

Also, the role of talk in writing cannot be ignored. Students talking to one another and sharing and exchanging ideas is imperative in their writing development. Whether through “brainstorming” (Elbow, 1973) or other forms of “exploratory talk” (Gere), students need the time and space to converse with fellow writers about their work and their processes. Romano (1987) believes that “by its very nature, conversation requires students to focus and clarify their thinking” (p. 70), and in the process of clarifying thoughts, students also engage in metacognitive reasoning and critical reflection on their writing processes: ideation, word choice, grammatical structures, voice, etc. Loretto, et al. (2017), too, suggest that talking with and working with peers leads to improvement in student writing and an increased understanding in the expectations of academic writing. This proved to be true in my study, for each of the students who struggled with writing, or deemed themselves poor writers, expressed positive outcomes after working with peers. Even students who initially commented on the “awkwardness” of sharing their writing with peers stated that over time, it became easier to do so, and the benefits outweighed the “uncomfortableness.” Even reading their work aloud -- to others or to themselves -- is a beneficial usage of talk, as I encourage (actually, strongly suggest

that) my students do. Although it may make for a noisy classroom, hearing your words aloud in your own voice not only helps a writer catch awkward spots, it also invokes another sense, hearing, so the writer has a sense of how well the piece flows. And if nothing else, reading aloud and working with peers helps novice writers learn that they are not alone if they struggle with writing. They quickly see that all writers do.

Lastly, an implication for students and teachers is the (too) large role played by writing for standardized tests. Students and teachers alike indicated that there is little instructional time for writing in general, and much of the writing done in preparation for standardized tests is either computer-generated or strictly learning how to use and cite textual evidence (sometimes called “Text Dependent Analysis”), where little time is devoted to actually learning the process of writing argumentative or informational essays. It seems counter-intuitive to have students write without practicing pre-writing, drafting, editing, revising -- nor being taught to do so -- and then expect them to earn high scores on written portions of standardized tests. These writing events -- the prompts on standardized tests -- are, in themselves, inauthentic: no real-life application exists; no room for students to draw on their own experiences is encouraged. These events are, additionally, the ones that make students dislike (or perhaps even hate) school in general. Instead of using inauthentic models, Costigan (2008) calls for “aesthetic education [where] learning takes place *through the senses*” (p. 117, original emphasis). Costigan borrows from Rosenblatt’s (1935) view of aesthetic literary experiences as emotional responses, thus engaging the senses in the literary experience. Costigan (2008) believes that “schools typically emphasize analysis without first having experience” (p. 117), or what I refer to as “anesthetic education,” where students are anesthetized, made numb, to the events taking place in classroom, and just biding time until the next class. Tom spoke of this when he said that

students were” done” -- they mentally tuned out, became anesthetized to any further discussion or invitation to write. Continuing in an anesthetic educational system will certainly not create the critical thinkers educational reformers call for, and the amount of time students take preparing for tests instead of learning also leaves students falling short of engaging in practices that encourage critical thinking.

This pattern of testing and teaching to the test, if it continues, may almost certainly be the demise of a society who lauds its creative and entrepreneurial capabilities. The indictment of our school system and its methods of instruction has already begun: our current methods of testing and testing and testing is very likely why we are slipping and slipping and slipping further behind other nations who test less. Thus, the business of school, driven by the business of the economy, and all the monies tied up in testing and test prep, although striving to prepare the next generation for competition in a global economy, may be limiting our ability to do so.

In light of this project, areas for further research include a closer look at how students talk about writing in the context of a secondary English classroom. What types of conversations do they have when working on essays in WW and PRGs? How do they perceive their experiences, their peers’ input, the teacher’s input? What would happen if they had the freedom to choose mode, genre, topic to indicate what they’ve learned? What if they had these same choices on standardized tests? Most students understand that they live in an education system rife with testing. They understand that there is no escaping that. But would they approach test prompts differently if they had some choice, some agency in what and how they wrote? Would their dispositions be affected?

These questions are particularly important in considering the instruction of younger children. For young students the need to maintain positive dispositions toward writing is

crucial in keeping Dewey's continuity of experience moving in directions that cause students to be excited about writing instead of dreading it. As mentioned before, much of this movement is influenced by home experiences, but much will also come from their experiences in their elementary classrooms, especially once they begin approaching the middle school years. Perhaps if agency was returned to teachers to allow them to be the professionals that they are and make their own choices in writing instruction, we will, as a direct result, embolden students to be the writers, the composers of melodies, songs, and in time, symphonies following the rhythms of their hearts.

After Words

Finale – Coda-ing Me

Although I presented some of my findings in terms of binaries -- home and school, positive and negative, internal and external – literacy experiences in general, and writing specifically, can be much more complicated. Perhaps these conditions and occurrences should be considered in terms of positioning and power: students may feel more empowered to write when they have more agency and are permitted the freedom to create. With creative license comes a position of authority – not initiated by a teacher or any outside source – but the authority of a true artist. Perhaps, too, we should view the events and outcomes as “both/and” instead of “either/or”: writing may lead to positive *and* negative dispositions, depending on the conditions, which I allude to in my study.

The greater problem that still remains with me is how to ameliorate students’ perceptions of their “miseducative” experiences. I am reminded of Pajares (2003) citing Bandura’s (1986) *perseverance phenomenon*: “Once acquired beliefs tend to persist even in the face of conflicting information” (p. 152). Beliefs, dispositions, writing anxieties, histories... are deeply seated and not easily altered, especially when caused by miseducative experiences. And once these beliefs take root, they do persevere – even when all results indicate otherwise. That is not to say that they are completely fixed; however, changes occur with great difficulty. The question that arises is how can teachers (and students) work in

positive ways when students have had miseducative experiences. Dewey (1938) reminds us that the teacher plays a crucial role in a child's development: "It is [the educator's] business to be on the alert to see what attitudes and habitual tendencies are being created. In this direction he must, if he is an educator, be able to judge what attitudes are actually conducive to continued growth and what are detrimental" (p. 38). The attitudes Dewey speaks of are what may become beliefs, and it is the responsibility of the teacher to develop these tendencies into areas of growth – expanding them in positive ways – to whatever degree the student is capable.

With this in mind – and in my continual attempt to ameliorate my students' negative dispositions toward writing and build their self-efficacy regarding writing – this past school year, I tried something new. I began the school year by having my college preparatory* students co-author short stories. The only criteria were that they use one line from Costigan's (2010) list of quotes; at least ten lines of dialogue; two specific descriptions of either characters, setting, or a combination; include short story elements such as character development, setting, plot development, conflict, and an interesting hook; and the stories needed to be school appropriate. Students were also permitted to choose their own groups of no more than four. I encouraged them to "story-board" their stories once they had an idea of their genre in order for them to visualize what they thought might happen from scene to scene. I gave them no page limit, nor did I give them other restrictions. "Just get the job done" was my only advice. During the unit, I incorporated mini-lessons on characterization, formatting

* My district recently de-tracked students in 9th and 10th grades. Several students in this college preparatory class would have been placed in a lower academic track if one were available.

dialogue, and other grammar and usage lessons on an as-needed basis. Besides that, my role was to provide help when called upon and to ensure that all students were engaged.

During their drafting and percolating times, I overheard conversations such as the following:

“Wait! What’s our rising action, then?” (I had not even mentioned rising action before they began.)

“Is this gonna be the climax, or when she falls?” (I had not mentioned climax.)

“I think our resolution is corny. Let’s make it like a cliffhanger.” (I had not mentioned “resolution.”)

The only help I added occurred when students asked questions such as,

“This sounds bad – ‘He said,’ ‘she said,’ ‘he said,’ ‘she said.’ What else can we do?”

The overall outcome of this project was by far better than I imagined. Middle-level students wrote short stories that were inventive, had sophisticated plot twists, complex characters at times in complex situations, and occurred in creative settings – all with minimal input from a teacher. Although they were not perfect, the vast majority of the stories were quite impressive.

I relay this story as a case in point. The implications from this activity speak directly to the role of agency, collaboration, and talk during school-initiated writing units, among other things. They speak to how critical thinking is developed, especially during the writing process. And they point at the necessity of allowing students time – time to think, time to create, time to write. Writing becomes for them much less of a task and more of an outlet for creative (poetic) expression, much like what Britton, et al. (1975) found.

Along these lines lies an implication for teacher education programs. These programs need to better equip pre-service teachers to teach writing. I personally do not recall being

“taught” how to teach writing in my teacher education classes. I found this instruction elsewhere – through the National Writing Project (NWP). As a NWP fellow, I firmly believe in process-centered writing. I also firmly believe that when students practice writing as professional writers do – in collaboration in peers, with critique, with time for revision – their writing will improve (as mentioned above) and there will be less need for developmental writing classes in colleges. Teachers should realize that writing is a highly social activity and should be allowed to be such in the classroom. Professional writers do not always write in isolation, as previously thought, so why should developing writers? Student writers especially should be allowed the time and space to brainstorm with one another, bounce ideas off of one another, provide and accept critique. This can only happen when teachers view writing as a socio-cultural practice and participate in such writing practices themselves.

In listening to the sounds of writing – my students’ as well as my own – I realize that there is little difference between skilled writers and novice writers. We all practice and hone our craft, deal with “shitty first drafts” (Lamott), and perhaps even find our loved ones pulling drafts from the trash (King). It is safe to say that every writer struggles at some point. So as educators, it is important to extend the same grace to our students that we would like extended to us – “do unto others...”. By keeping feedback constructive and critiquing rather than criticizing, less-skilled writers may feel more confident in their abilities to revise, polish, and even enjoy the art of writing.

One final implication: whether in music or writing or any other activity in which we engage, practice is key.

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Appendix A

LEARNING TO WRITE/WRITING TO LEARN QUICK WRITE



What is your “writing history”? What do you remember about your early writing experiences? (When did you first learn how to write) or about writing)? Did you find writing difficult? Do you remember specific pieces in your early writing? Provide as many details as you can to portray an accurate “history” of your writing. ☺

Appendix B

REFLECTION ON RESEARCH PAPER WRITING

WW/PRG REFLECTION #3 - ON RESEARCH PAPER WRITING: Now that you have completed the (dreaded :-)) research paper, I'd like you to reflect on your experiences. Please respond to ALL prompts!!

1. How do you feel about yourself as a writer?
2. How has being in Peer Response Groups affected how you feel about writing and yourself as a writer? Do you feel stronger? ...weaker? In what areas?
3. Looking back at your writing history, how has writing this research paper affected how you feel about writing now?
4. How has being in this workshop model class, working mostly with peers, affected how you feel about writing? Are there any changes from your past perceptions? What are they?

Appendix C

SELF-EFFICACY SURVEY (BANDURA MODEL)

How confident are you right now that you can...

- *write a paragraph using cited information (i.e. a quote from source material)*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- *write a 5 page narrative on an experience you've had*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- *write a 5-7 page research paper*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- *write an 8-10 page research paper*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- *write a short story*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- *learn about my own writing from my peers*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- *help a peer with his/her writing*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How has your attitude toward writing been affected by being part of a Writer's Workshop (WW) and Peer Response Group (PRG), where you were able to share and respond to writing? Please explain as fully as you can.

How would you describe your experiences being in a WW and PRG? Please explain as fully as you can.

How has your view of yourself as a writer changed after being working with peers in WW and PRGs? Please explain as fully as you can.

Appendix D

SELF-EFFICACY SURVEY (DALY & MILLER MODEL)

- *I avoid writing.*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please explain.

- *Writing an essay or paper is always a slow process for me.*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please explain.

- *I can apply the “rules” of writing (e.g. grammar, punctuation, spelling, usage, etc).*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Where do you see strengths/weaknesses?

- *My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on an essay.*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please comment on this. Why do you think this is so?

- *I am afraid of writing essays that will be graded.*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please explain.

- *I expect good grades on essays and papers.*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- *Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience for me.*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- *I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing.*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please explain.

- *I do well on essay tests.*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- *I can write simple, compound, and complex sentences.*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- *My writing rarely expresses what I really think.*

Strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Strongly Agree

Please explain.

- *I like to work in small groups to discuss ideas or to do revision in writing.*

Strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Strongly Agree

- *I have a hard time organizing my ideas when writing an essay.*

Strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Strongly Agree

Please explain.

- *I can easily get my thoughts down on paper.*

Strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Strongly Agree

- *Revision is difficult for me because I can't tell what I've done wrong.*

Strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Strongly Agree

Please explain.

Strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Strongly Agree

- *I can keep writing even when facing difficulty.*

Strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Strongly Agree

Please comment on this. Why do you think this is so?

- *I don't think I write as well as most of my peers.*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please explain.

- *The most important thing in writing is observing the "rules" (e.g. grammar, punctuation, spelling, usage, etc.).*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please explain.

- *I enjoy writing when I'm writing for myself (i.e. I know it won't be graded).*

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please comment on this.

Please explain.

Appendix E

PREPARED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Possible Interview Questions for Students

- How do you feel about writing?
- What do you see as the difference between “school” writing and “out of school” writing or writing you do for yourself?
- Many of my students mention the 5th grade research paper as a time where they began to dislike writing or struggle with writing. What was that like for you?
- How are the Writer’s Workshop and Peer Response Group activities going for you? (i.e. Are they working/ not working? Plusses? Minuses?)
- Follow-up questions as necessary

Possible Interview Questions for Teachers

- How has the teaching of writing changed for you since Pennsylvania adopted the Keystone Exam and/or the standardization movement?
- Many of my high school students say that they first began struggling with writing in or around 5th grade attributing most of that to writing a research paper. What are your thoughts on that?
- How is teaching narrative writing different from teaching argument or expository writing in elementary school? (i.e. What methods are used in both/either? How have the methods changed in the past 10 years?)

Appendix F

WRITING HISTORY AUTOBIOGRAPHY ASSIGNMENT SHEET

My Writing History: “Chapter“ Vignettes

We’ve been talking a lot this semester about your feelings on writing and your past writing experiences, both positive and negative. For this assignment, you will chronologize your writing history. How have you developed as a writer over the course of your life (to date!)? How do you *feel* about writing and why? You do not need to compose these in chronological order, but try to include at least some of your early writing experiences. (If you don’t remember much, ask your parents -- it’s likely that they’ve kept some of your early work. Revisit it for some ideas and memory jars!)

Choose any four (4) of the following vignettes to write about (you may already have addressed one of these, so subtract that one out!):

1. Most memorable elementary school writing experience
2. Most memorable middle school writing experience (you may blend 1 & 2)
3. What happened to / with your writing experience in 5th grade (i.e. research writing -- many of you have mentioned this already, so bring me there!!)
4. Your experience writing *this* research paper **(REQUIRED)**
5. A “critical incident” → an AHA! moment for you OR some sort of turning point in your writing (positive or negative)
6. Your worst experience writing OR when you began to dislike writing (if you do!) OR what about writing causes you anxiety

At least one of these should contain mostly dialogue as discussed in class. At least one of these should contain a “thick description” of the setting or circumstances surrounding the event as discussed in class.

At least one of these should have a really compelling hook as discussed in class.

Each entry should be no fewer than 350 words and no more than 1000 words (1 -3 pages single spaced).

You will submit each draft to me through Google Classroom. The final product should be printed (all four “chapters” and made creative (yes, creative!). Include a front cover (with illustrations?) and back cover, which should include your bio -- like a real book! You may also include pictures, drawings, artifacts, etc. to show your reader your true writing self! :-)

This project is worth 100 points.