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# Perceptions of Teacher-Writers: Initial Influences to Write

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*This qualitative case study explores perceptions of teacher-writers' early writing histories and examines their initial influences to write. Interviews and writing artifacts of ten K-12 teacher-writers serve as the primary data source. Findings indicate that teachers with strong identities as readers and/or writers in their K-12 experiences often received positive feedback which encouraged them to develop as writers, while teachers challenged with mechanics often received negative feedback which discouraged them from writing. Revisiting negative writing histories reshaped writing beliefs to influence a positive writing identities. The authors suggest practices for pre-service literacy courses to examine writing histories and to develop and nurture writing identities.*

*Keywords:* Writing teachers, teacher-writer identity, initial influences to write, writing histories

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*Our beliefs can be altered by the power and immediacy of personal experience. You can begin to understand something when you experience its essence. It becomes a knowing.*

~Brian Weiss (2001)

## **Introduction**

The implication that teachers should write has become foundational in teacher effectiveness in the area of teaching writing. This insight has been echoed by numerous scholars, researchers and writers (Emig, 1971; Geekie, Cambourne & Fitzsimmons, 1999; Graves, 1983; Hairston, 1986; Murray, 1982). Teachers of writing are urged to take off the teacher hat and surrender to the challenging work of writing themselves (Arana, 2003; Graves, 1983; Hairston, 1986; Murray, 1982). Arana (2003), book editor and writer, claims teacher-writers must be able to function in both worlds – one as writer and one as a teacher of writers. Arana empathizes,

It is not easy to go about the business of stringing words together, one by one, until something emerges. We must always keep a foot on the other side of the fence, to remind ourselves as often as possible that writing is an excruciatingly difficult enterprise (p. xiv).

As a teacher-writer, one can understand the emotional stages students go through, while empathy and compassion are given to those who struggle.

Graves recommends that teachers live a “literate life” as writers and readers (Graves 1983, 1990). This goes beyond solely writing alongside the students in the classroom during classroom time. It means writing purposefully outside the context of the classroom and sharing writing with others. Living literate lives enables teachers to show students what they have been writing in the real world of writers and to model “what they do” rather than just “what writers do.” Teachers redefine their role from giver of information to writer, reader, and learner

(Kaufman, 2009; Murray, 2003). Cremin and Locke (2017), define teachers who live a literate life through writing as “teacher-writers”. This term will be used throughout this article when speaking of teachers who write.

Regardless of the literature supporting the necessity for teachers to live writers’ lives, pre-service teachers typically receive scant instruction related to teaching writing. The National Commission on Writing (2003) urges more writing preparation, however, few university teacher education programs offer stand-alone writing courses (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). Instead, writing instruction is frequently integrated into foundational reading courses (Morgan, 2010).

Beyond pre-service training, outside experiences encourage teachers to write. Examples include the National Writing Project (2017); writer-teacher groups, both face to face (Grainger, 2005; Kendrick & Forler, 1997; Pajares, 2003; Robbins, Seaman, Blake-Yancey & Yow, 2006) and online (Whitney, 2003); writing conferences; and dozens of books for self-study. Yet, most teachers must take personal initiative to seek these experiences.

There seems to be conflict between the research that urges teachers to write, and the lack of support in universities and lack of professional development in K-12 contexts provided by public school districts. Questions arise in how teachers are then influenced to write. Much has been written on the initial writing influences of *professional* writers. Arana (2003) has authored such a book that includes interviews with authors asking them how they came to be a writer. Mary Higgins Clark believes she was given the gift of story-telling at birth (p. 35). Muriel Spark is quoted as saying she “could write before she could speak” (Arana, 2003, p. 52). It is a common theme for writers in the book that writing is a gift they were born with. This perspective does not help teachers.

For others, such as Joyce Carol Oates, writing grew out of a love of reading (Arana, 2003, p. 12). David McCullough’s life as a biographer grew from his work as a journalist and his insatiable need to find things out (Arana, 2003, p. 164). Arana quotes McCullough in an interview, “There isn’t anything in the world that isn’t inherently interesting – if only someone will frame it in a story,” (p. 163). Murray (1990) organized his book, *Shoptalk*, by practicing authors and quotes their initial influences as well. Cremin & Locke (2017) have also done extensive research on teacher-writers and, in their recent book on writer’s identity, include a chapter on the perceived influences of formal education and early reading on professional writers’ identities. All of this research on writers can give us a peek into a path to the writer’s life.

And yet, teachers are not professional writers, nor are they academics that reside in higher education institutions with expectations for publishing research. Professional writers, although also busy, can craft their working schedules to allow for writing to happen. Classroom teachers have students all day, with additional commitments or duties that go along with the profession (Jost, 1990). A research study by the University of Wisconsin found that teachers already work, on average, an additional two hours a day beyond their contractual hours (Drago et al., 1999). And, focusing on elementary teachers alone, these teachers need expertise in *many* subject areas and not just writing (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2017). Yet, while motives and obstacles can be hurdles that keep teachers from writing, there still *are* teachers who write.

What seems to be missing is more pragmatic than theoretical. While it is clear that teachers need support to explore their own writing histories and beliefs, to experience writing, and to develop a purpose for writing, there is less professional literature that shows teachers how to go about beginning this writing life (Collier, Scheld, Barnard & Stallcup, 2015). If pre-service programs do not provide opportunities for candidates to practice literate lives and to live the lives

of writers, what influences teachers to write in the first place? Teachers need a sense of agency and a desire to improve their practice for professional development to be effective (Elmore, 2004).

This qualitative case study explores the perceptions of teacher-writers who write both professionally alongside their students and personally outside of the classroom. Explorations include: (a) teacher-writers' early writing histories, (b) teacher-writers' first influences in the development of their writing identity and (c) continued influences in developing their writing identities.

## **Literature Review**

### **Self-Efficacy Theory and Emotions**

Social cognitive theory focuses on individual agency (Bandura, 2002). Teacher candidates have been exposed to many pedagogical methods in the teaching of writing upon entering their pre-service program. Their understandings about what defines a writer is one that includes publishing, rather than one who generates text and seeks to communicate meaning with words. These experiences have shaped their attitudes, skills, beliefs and values about writing, writing development and writing instruction (Norman & Spencer, 2005) and this can determine a person's self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as a person's belief in their ability to accomplish a particular task (Bandura, 1977, 1995), and it can affect how people feel, think and behave (Bandura, 1995).

Emotions, both positive and negative, can have a strong impact on self-efficacy. In the process of learning to write, sharing one's writing can provoke a range of emotions from elation and joy to frustration, embarrassment and fear. In his most recent book, *Embarrassment*, Newkirk devotes a chapter to the close association of writing and shame (2017). He shares painful stories that emphasize the exposing and embarrassing potential we risk experiencing in the act of writing, including, "Plato in his dialogue *The Phaedrus* (1990) compares writing to sending out your child into the world, unprotected from misunderstanding and criticism" (p. 136). Fox (1993), in *Radical Reflections*, writes "Many of my teacher education students, after twelve years at school, come to me helpless and fearful as writers, detesting it in the main, believing that they can't write" (p. 21). The traditional culture of teachers pointing out errors produces feelings of anxiety and inadequacy imparted on the student and can disable them for future acts of writing.

There are other teachers who have a positive writing identity, yet find themselves in the classroom unsure of how to teach writers. According to Troia & Maddox (2004), a large number of teachers are conscious of their lack of knowledge in the ability to teach writers. Awareness contributes to a lack of self-confidence and greatly impacts teachers' self-efficacy in the teaching of writing (Pajares, 2003). Self-efficacy influences the decisions a teacher makes in the methods of teaching writing, or whether teaching writing is avoided altogether. However, when teachers revisit existing writing beliefs and past experiences, it is possible to reshape the narratives they carry in their capabilities as writers and of teaching writing (Burke, 2006; Cremin & Oliver, 2016; Cremin & Locke, 2017).

### **Identity (Innate and Outside Influences)**

It is important to draw from an identity perspective to illustrate how "people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being" (Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner & Cain, 2003, p. 5). Four key components contribute to the development of teacher identity: Role models,

previous teaching and learning experiences, childhood experiences and family activities (Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991). “An identity framework recognizes that learning is not only about understanding a set of skills and strategies but is also a process in which people construct and negotiate identities in order to become members of particular communities,” (Zoch, Myers, Lambert, Vetter & Fairbanks, 2016, p. 2).

In his book, *Artistry in Teaching*, Rubin (1985), describes how the development of our identity as teachers creates an intangible artistry. This artistry involves attitudes, intentions, knowledge, intuition, perceptivity, shrewd judgment regarding educational goals, spontaneity, and improvisation. “Inspired teaching cannot be fabricated” (Rubin, 1985, p. 47-48). Palmer emphasizes the importance of developing a sense of personal identity “as we learn more about who we are, we can learn techniques that reveal rather than conceal the personhood from which good teaching comes” (1998, p. 25).

In their book *Wired to Create*, Kaufman and Gregoire (2016) suggest there are innate identity traits that feed the soul of writers and other creative professions. They describe a University of California study in which high-profile creators were observed and common traits became evident:

“The common strands that seemed to transcend all creative fields was an openness to one’s inner life, a preference for complexity and ambiguity, an unusually high tolerance for disorder and disarray, the ability to extract order from chaos, independence, unconventionality, and a willing to take risks” (p. xxiii).

Given the complexities of writing, it seems to align that this wide array of characteristics would be beneficial to those that embrace writing in their lives. Kaufman & Gregoire also found that creative people “flourish by making the best of the wide range of traits and skills they possess” (2016, p. xxv). People with these traits seek personal meaning making, mental stimulation and are epistemically curious.

In the book, *Curious*, Leslie describes intellectual curiosity characteristics as a NFC or a “need for cognition” (2015, p. xvi). Leslie contends that people with high NFC have “restless inquiring minds and are constantly on the lookout for new intellectual journeys” (p. xviii). For the creative and the curious, these traits can lead to experiences that “delight and provide sustenance for the soul” (p. xxi). Additionally, internal traits of curiosity, creativity and seeking intellectual challenges are a seedbed for the development of a writer.

Frank Smith (1987) refers to the communities with which we identify as “clubs” and this can become the core of who we are. He suggests that people go out of their way to demonstrate they are not members of a club if they experience discomfort. Opportunities for teachers to observe, think and talk about their writing with other teachers can help them redefine what it means to be a writer (Burke, 2006). They can then be awakened to the realization that prior beliefs about what constitutes being a writer is a narrow definition and through their revisions of this definition, their own sense of agency increases. The new definition encompasses much more: journal writing, writing letters, notes, documenting, writing to think and learn, story-telling, poetry and the simple act of generating text on paper. When teachers realize they are writers already, they begin to write and can then identify themselves as such.

## Methodology

### Study Design

The methodology of this study lends to the construct of a qualitative collective case study. Collective case studies involve multiple cases in an effort to examine data results for likeness to offer understanding into a matter and enable exploration of a phenomenon, population, or general condition (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2005). The gathering of data from interviews allows for similarities and themes to be examined to gain insight into the influences of teacher-writers in their development of writing identities.

### Participants

Ten K-12 teacher-writers, each with their own writing history, agreed to take part in this case study. Three participants identified as male and seven identified as female. All participants had additional schooling or training beyond their undergraduate degree and came from diverse teaching experiences. All teachers teach or have taught in Midwest elementary or high schools and represent a broader population of the overall teacher-writers at Midwestern K-12 schools in which the research was conducted. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality (See Table 1).

Table 1

#### *Teacher-Writers Participant Synopsis/Key Influences*

Teacher	Innate-Identity Traits	Teaching Experience	Education	*Key Influences to Write Types of Writing produced
Melissa	wrote as a child avid reader “creative DNA”	Elementary teacher grades 4/5 9 years Present: Creator of a site/blog for teachers to write as a community	BS in English and Elem. Education Masters Children’s Writing Institute	*National Writing Project *awareness of not knowing how to teach writing  leads Twitter chats, social media
Patty	Avid reader Enjoyed writing as a child Enjoys challenge in writing	Spanish/Russian Language Teacher High School 27 years	BA in Languages and Science Masters	*National Writing Project Published poems NWP leader/participant
Nicole	Wrote as a child, was restless Reads to figure things out, mostly NF	ELA Teacher High School 31 years	BS in Journalism Teaching Masters	*always a writer – led to journalism degree, had a desire to say something NWP co-director and writer in resident (teacher affect)
Erin	Avid reader Wrote as a child Large vocabulary creative	ELA Teacher 9 years Coaches speech	BA in. Education Eng Masters	*National Writing Project *Mom influential
Jackie	Avoided writing as a child from negative experiences Avid reader as adult	Elementary Teacher 4 <sup>th</sup> grade 5 years	BS in Comm. Went back to school for Elem. Ed.	*Literacy Training *Reflection on Writing history and coaching
Larry	Avid reader Wrote as a child	ELA teacher High school and College in the HS	BS in Eng. Education	*elementary teacher *graduate school professors

	Enjoys the puzzle side of writing	Speech coach 10 years	Masters in English	National Writing Project influential as a teacher
Dennis	Avid reader Wrote as a child introspective Negative experiences in HS	Teaching in Japan 4 years ELA teacher High school 8 years	BS in Elementary Education & MS- ELA	*undergraduate adviser *National Writing project Journal *reading an influence
Rick	Avid reader Wrote as child Storyteller	ELA teacher High school and College Comp in HS 15 years	BS in ELA Masters	*ninth grade teacher *teachers in college *National Writing Project Journals *family
Joline	Avid reader Wrote as a child Introspective Creative	Elementary Teacher Literacy Coach 5+ years	BA in Psych BA in Elem.ED Masters ECE	*personal traits influenced writing identity
Cari	Negative experiences in elem. altered self-confidence as a writer	Math Teacher 3 years Elementary teacher 4 <sup>th</sup> grade 8 years	BS Elem.ED & MS-math Masters	*7 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher – poetry displaced after flood *literacy training in new school Journals

### Data Sources and Analysis

For each participant, a series of three interviews was the main source of data for this study. The first interview utilized a semi-structured interview guide, while the second interview was developed from the transcripts of the first interview to probe for more elaboration and clarification. The third interview contained two questions to which participants responded in writing. After the interviews were conducted, memos and session summary sheets were prepared to document specific answers that may have been generated to the focus questions. These summaries included who was involved, issues that were covered, new questions for follow up interviews, and implications for subsequent data collection (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Artifacts were also requested for analysis in an effort to support or disconfirm interview statements (Robson & McCartan, 2016). These artifacts included notebook writing samples from writer-teacher participants and published or completed works of teacher-writers.

The interviews were transcribed by the principal investigator in an effort to generate a deeper relationship within and between the collected data and in the process of analysis. Repeated readings of each interview transcript were conducted, led by intuitive and reflective introspection (Moustakas, 1994). Following open coding, categories with similar themes emerged and each theme was labeled to represent the common characteristics of the units of meaning within the group. Data analysis included peer debriefs and member checks.

### Findings

#### ELA Teachers and Elementary Teachers Discrepancy

An overall finding surfaced upon the first few rounds of analyzing data: experiences of English Language Arts (ELA) teachers of grades 7-12 showed similarities that differed from elementary teachers. Most of the ELA teachers shared the perception that their childhood, early experiences in school, and/or their own personality traits shaped their identity as writers positively. Elementary teachers shared common experiences of ELA teachers, however, they also

recalled more vivid memories of negative experiences as young writers and this shaped their beliefs about themselves as writers – which was negative. Later, as a teacher, these writing histories were revisited and reshaped to form more positive identities.

### **Main Themes of Initial Influence**

Through data analysis, five main themes were identified regarding factors of initial influences in identifying the self as a writer:

- 1) Family members or a teacher who affirmed their writing abilities early in life;
- 2) Personality characteristics of curiosity, creativity, or imagination;
- 3) A love of books and language;
- 4) Experiences such as the National Writing Project where participants were immersed in experiencing writing themselves;
- 5) Revisiting personal writing histories for those who experienced negative experiences throughout their K-12 years as a student.

The five themes intersect and overlap. For example, it may have been a family member who encouraged a love of reading as well as who instilled a sense of curiosity, or it may have been at the National Writing Project that writing histories were examined, therefore reshaping writing beliefs. A combination of role models, family activities, and examination of previous learning experiences echo Knowles and Holt-Reynolds (1991) argument that four key components contribute to the development of teacher identity. While several participants experienced multiple factors in the initial development of their writing identity, in this study each finding is examined separately.

### **Nurturing Family Members or Teachers**

Several teachers had family members and/or teachers who were influential in shaping their initial early identities as writers. Participants reported these family members were educators themselves, avid readers, or storytellers. Rick, a high school ELA teacher, revisited his memories of his family upbringing in his essay from his master's thesis:

I have always lived creative nonfiction. Coming from a family of storytellers, narratives defined us. At our evening dinners, Mom, Dad, and I gathered our stories - new and old. Meals were heaped full of stories more than casseroles and hot dishes. Suppers were so alive with stories that we doled them out between bites, adding our own revisions between helpings. Finally, the average meal would end with Dad telling another tale between sips of Folgers while I would bring up new stories between glances at my homework stacked on top of the refrigerator and Mom chiming in commentary between dishes at the sink.

Rick had a combination of influences as a younger self. Not only did he come from a long line of storytellers, he was an avid reader, and had influential teachers and mentors, primarily in college where professors invited him to writing groups or mentored him on writing projects. However, in his interview, he describes his most influential teacher from ninth-grade English class:

In my 9th grade year of English, we had a young teacher . . . and she was really unorthodox in her assignments. I remember, we read a horror story and she had us rewrite the ending or write a conclusion to it. She really liked mine and she scrawled comments



all over it that weren't just run on, capitalization errors. And that just kind of filled me with confidence.

Another time, this same teacher chose Rick's essay as her favorite essay and she read it aloud in front of the class. He described his apprehension as she read the words he had written:

She started to read my words, and I just about fainted. And, you know, it was a lot of fun to see, to get the recognition in a subject that I'd never really had before, and she placed the essay on my desk. And, I still have it in a drawer here. And, people just looked at me differently and I had felt like I had done something worthy and worthwhile. I think that was a key moment - it was kind of an epiphany for me.

While having your own writing chosen as the teacher's favorite and read aloud to the class would be memorable, it was the words of affirmation from this teacher that proved to be a pivotal moment in defining Rick as a writer:

My pivotal moment in getting me thinking about writing was when [sic] she had one comment on an essay where she wrote, "You know, if you keep practicing, in 20 years I'll look for your name in bookstores." And at that time I thought 20 years! I'll be dead by then!

Even though this teacher was not specific in her appraisal of Rick's early writing, his perception was that his writing made an impression on her. The teacher recognized Rick's writing abilities, made him aware of his capabilities, and nurtured his development of growing a writing identity. She also made him feel like he was part of a writing community, and her words gave him a motivation to want to keep writing and to make being a writer a goal, a dream.

Larry, also an ELA high school teacher, attended an elementary school in which his a four-room schoolhouse for grades kindergarten through grade seven. He only had four people in his grade, so one teacher taught multiple grades in one classroom. He described his experience in elementary school as influential to his writing identity due to the amount of one-on-one instruction he received and three consecutive years with one teacher. In his interview, he recalled a key moment in his one of his initial experiences as a writer:

One of the first things that got me going as a writer was with [sic] this one teacher. I remember the assignment. She had us [sic] do a geography lesson on Canada, and we had to write like we were doing a trip. I did this journal narrative through Canada doing all the steps and she got done reading it and she said, "For your level this is really, really good."

Like Rick, Larry was able to share these stories, remembering many of the details clearly. Their voices were excited in the sharing of these memories. Early on, they developed strong self-efficacy beliefs about themselves as writers due to the positive emotions connected with writing.

Cari, a fourth grade teacher, shared that writing was not a positive experience for her during her early education. She described her beliefs about her abilities as a writer and felt that during these years, if you were not good at the mechanics of writing, you were not a good writer.

Her first positive experience as a writer was in seventh grade when her family had endured a flood. She had to leave her home and attend school in a neighboring town. She recalls:

I never felt like I was a good writer. I always struggled with it. I really liked writing personal stories, that was my love. When I was a 7th grader, we went through the flood and I had to go to a different school for three weeks because we closed our school. They [sic] were working on poetry at that time and this was very helpful for me and powerful because I was going through all the emotional hardships with our family and losing our house so I started to write poems [sic] and I still have them. All my poems about the flood and my feelings at the time and it was a really neat [sic] for me to kind of jump into. That was a very positive experience. I still don't think I was very good at it, but I really enjoyed it. After that, [sic] I was always a kid that had a diary or a journal by my bed, and before I went to bed, I'd always write.

While Cari did not recall if the teacher gave her positive feedback on her poetry, or even specific lessons her teacher taught her about poetry, she remembered the emotional connection in the act of writing poetry. The feelings she wrestled with due to the flood and the uncertainties of what would be left of her house when they returned came out in her poems. Although her self-efficacy beliefs were not strong as a result of prior experiences, the lack of focus on mechanics allowed her to freely express her thoughts and emotions without fear.

These participants were respected by their teachers, not only as writers, but as human beings. When writers are accepted for who they are and what they write, they are more apt to take risks and continue to write. Freedom to take risks without fear of critical feedback allowed them to be creative and, in turn, develop positive attitudes and beliefs about themselves as writers.

### **Personality Characteristics: Curiosity, Creativity and Imagination**

Many participants described their personalities as curious and creative, and that they also enjoyed spending time using their imagination to write stories. Creative imagination—typically viewed as positive traits—played a critical role in their identity as writers. While some participants received negative responses for creative imaginative behavior, it did not dampen their passion for creating, wondering, and imagining. Jolene, an elementary teacher for several years and now a Literacy Coach, described her personality:

I think that is personality driven. I've always had a very imaginative mental life. My mother used to kind of scold me for daydreaming. But, I had all this stuff going on up here. So, I think I was just drawn to writing [sic]. I felt like imagining and creating [sic] was discouraged in my home as a child because it was not productive. So, I felt almost shamed for being creative and imaginative. As a child [sic], I remember stepping on an anthill and having this whole story play out in my head, "What if ants have evening news like people do, and that night on the news they're going to talk about how this whole village that was wiped out by this human!" I had this whole thing play out in my head. I mean who does that? That's the kind of kid I was.

Nicole, an ELA high school teacher, described herself as someone who needs to try to figure things out. In other words, a strong sense of curiosity drives her identity. In one of her interviews, she described what she was like as a child when asked if she was an avid reader.

I was restless. My parents tried to get me to read. They bought me *Childcraft* when I was little but I was too restless to read. So, I was not an avid reader [sic]. And, even now I don't read novels, I read almost exclusively nonfiction, lots of instructional things because I'm trying to figure something out. I read poems . . . but mostly instructional stuff.

When asked if she considered herself a learner, she replied that fundamentally, this was her identity. She went on to share that she is always creating or in the process of figuring out something, so if she was not writing she was gardening, making new recipes, or reading in response to solving a problem.

Melissa was a blended fourth- and fifth-grade elementary teacher for nine years and is now creator and facilitator of a teacher-writer social media company that supports and encourages teachers as writers. She believes her identity as a writer was something she was born with. However, it was not nurtured in her family. She described herself as a very creative person who also loved to crochet and quilt. She recalled memories of making books as a child as she dreamed of being an author:

I remember taking notebook paper and strings of yarn and tying together books and trying to sell them at garage sales. It's just something that's always been - it's in my DNA I think.

As Melissa shared these experiences, there was a sense of delight in her voice. She smiled and laughed throughout the narration of her story as a child creating books. Her love of authors was apparent.

Jolene recalled a similar story from her childhood in which she created a special place to do her writing:

You know, as far back as I can remember, I had been intrigued with writing. I mean I remember as a seven-year old, going down to the basement in my mother's fruit cellar [sic]. I remember going down there and pushing the jars aside. I took a lamp down there as it was dark, and a chair and a notebook and I would write! I just enjoyed conveying my thoughts. I always had a diary. I just liked to write.

The passion for creating books and stories, along with the immense drive to transfer thoughts onto paper was intrinsically driven for Melissa and Jolene. Neither appeared to have creative mentors, yet both found ways to satisfy this inner urge to write. In addition, participants shared other personality traits that they felt contributed to their writing identity. Patty and Larry both talked about how they enjoyed problem solving and trying to figure things out. Patty described how writing challenges her:

I really like what a challenge it is to try to approximate how to describe people when I'm [sic] writing really great poetry. And, to find the exact right word with its meaning, its

meter, its sound and quality. It's really a big puzzle to put that together and that's challenging. Hours go by because I'm trying to think – that's really engaging for me.

Larry confessed that he loved math as much as he enjoyed writing because of the challenge in working out a puzzle. He compared this to the puzzle side of writing to find new ways to incorporate craft into his writing. He talked about this challenge:

It's finding a way to introduce a character and as bad as it sounds, to kill off a character – or if I should say this here or there, or if this concept needs to be brought over here. How do you put the dialogue in to get to this point without making it feel forced? That's where I find it fun because books for me come alive with dialogue rather than bouts of description.

Patty and Larry seemed to have epistemic curiosity that infected their drive to write. While some participants did not share how the revising stage of writing contributed to the pleasure they derived, a few found this stage to be highly rewarding. The intellectual challenge of puzzling through a piece of writing to find a precise combination of words to communicate ideas to the reader was emotionally fulfilling.

Creativity, curiosity, engaging in problem solving, puzzling, and harboring an imagination all are common personality traits that contribute to the characteristics that writers embrace. Evidence of these traits was present in the language, story-telling, writing, and descriptions of participants' lived experiences. For these participants, a need for cognition and creativity is a "way of life, and a style of engaging with the world" (Kaufman & Gregoire, 2016, p. xxix).

Based on these narratives, we can see how personality traits play a part in the development of a writing identity. Participants enjoyed the creative process of making books and became engrossed in the mechanical aspect of writing. This creative self-realization contributed to their identity and well-being. Curiosity also feeds a writing identity as it encourages a need to put aside perfection in order to experiment. Feelings of satisfaction resulting from trial and error to finally solve "the puzzle" of a language task can be the epitome of writing.

### **Passion for Books and Reading**

All of the participants currently have a passion for reading and, for most, this began in childhood. Many of them perceived that books were a key influence in developing their imagination and in increasing their vocabulary. This fed into the ability to write with more ease than other students. Rick describes this well:

I was really attracted to reading and I fell in love with *The Sword and Sorcerer* type books. Louis Lamour, I would devour those. Really in terms of writing, that started with 9th grade. But, I think early on, because I had been a strong reader in elementary school and in 7th and 8th grade, that once I finally sat down and had some motivation to write, I found I have a much larger vocabulary than my friends because of all my reading. I remember using a lot of interior dialogue with my characters because I'd read a lot of Stephen King and he's kind of famous for that - interior dialogue going in his characters. So, I think all of that kind of bled through at the right time for me.

Jolene became an avid reader at a young age because her father was an educator and he paid her \$10.00 to read 100 books the summer she finished first grade, a lot of money in 1968. She was not sure if he did this to encourage her to read or to keep her out of her mother's hair. However, she did it and has been a reader ever since. She says:

To be honest, my mother had a lot on her plate, so she was often impatient and wanted me out of the way. So, books became my refuge. I kind of turned to books as something to do, but then I fell in love with them. So, yes, I absolutely think that being a reader fostered that innate imagination. Absolutely. And, I connected with it. . . My reading territories were very descriptive with imaginative language [sic]. Never got into Dr. Seuss. It was just silly to me. Tell me a story!

Jolene's father attempted to teach Jolene to read at an early age with flashcards and such, but it was the actual book that enticed her to learn how to read. She found a hunger for books that fed her imagination. In times of solitude, this love of reading and writing intertwined and became a part of who she was.

Patty, a high school Spanish teacher, admitted that she preferred reading over writing when she was young, and she believed that eventually her writing was an outgrowth from her reading life.

I just loved to read a lot, and I think as an outgrowth of that, I just started doing some writing. When I was young, there wasn't quality literature for kids and even young adult literature, and the books we had in school for skits and plays were just boring, so I actually started writing skits and plays so we could do those instead of what was [sic] available.

These recollections recall how emotions play a factor in writing attitudes. An early love of books grew into a desire to play with language and create stories. Participants valued writing because they valued the books they read. All participants remain avid readers and insist that reading plays a factor in their writing identities.

### **Immersion Experiences such as National Writing Project (NWP)**

Although several teachers recalled an early love of writing as young students, when they began teaching many of them realized they struggled in how to teach writing. Melissa, teacher-writer and social media creator, described this realization:

I've always loved to write and when I was a little girl I wanted to be a writer and an author as many little girls do. And when I started teaching in the classroom, I was shocked because I was not prepared for teaching in the classroom. We did not have a curriculum, we did not have PD and thought [sic] how do I teach my students to fall in love with what I fell in love with when I was their age? My very first year of teaching, because we didn't have any kind of PD support, my students only wrote one writing assignment the whole year. We wrote a poem for mother's day because I thought we cannot end the year and I not teach these kids anything about writing. So after that point, I made it my goal to learn as much as I could about teaching writing because I felt horrible that year that I had done such a terrible job.

This cognitive dissonance prompted a search for opportunities to learn how to be more effective writing teachers, evidenced through a commitment to learning and a needing to know more for the benefit of their students. The National Writing Project (NWP) summer institutes heightened their awareness of how their own writing practice plays a primary role in their confidence in teaching writing. To be more effective writing teachers, they began to revisit their own writing practices for new purposes.

While teachers pursued the NWP to gain understandings in teaching writing, what happened within the three-week retreat-like institute was a transformation for the teachers as writers themselves. One of the key features of the NWP includes the act of writing. Teachers write every day in free writes, explorations, and on meaningful topics. They are involved in hands-on implementation of writing mini-lessons and participants learn from one another through feedback. A second key feature includes the social aspect of the writing community. Safe and supportive relationships are developed which encourages sharing writing publicly. Teachers grow in self-efficacy, confidence and expertise as they shape their own writing identities (Nagin, 2006). Patty, high school Spanish teacher and participant in several NWPs, described her transformation at the NWP she attended:

We really dug in to why people write, and what writing can do for people beyond what we think of as publishing, or writing to pass classes or as requirement for classes. So, when we started digging into those different aspects of writing, it changed some of the things that I thought I could do. I discovered the generative side of myself as a writer. I also discovered things through writing. And when I started to think about topics more deeply, I came to some truths that I hadn't realized before and that was really interesting. I had [sic] ah-ha epiphanies are still with me today.

Patty's statement supports the ideas of Burke (2006); teachers need opportunities to spend time thinking and talking about writing through reflective practices. Through writing and dialogue with others, she redefined what writing meant for her, personally and as a teacher.

When asked why participants felt the National Writing Project was such a transformational experience in developing their own writing identity, various responses were shared. Patty believed it was the length of time and being fully immersed in the experience:

I don't know if there could be a better model than the writing project. The thing about the project is it took place in the summer when people were more free [sic] to concentrate just on that. It was so intense and we got so involved in that environment. There was a lot of buy in and people just became immersed in that. I think that's probably my cue right there - immersion.

The immersion and intensity of writing for such a length of time supported writers to develop new habits of mind that were necessary for sustaining writing. Without outside factors, such as the daily responsibilities of teaching during the school year, teachers were able to focus their time, thoughts, and energy to the task of writing.

Erin, an ELA high school teacher who also attended a NWP institute, attributed the emotional aspect of the writing project as a primary factor in the transformational experience for

her. She described the friendships made, the vulnerabilities that were exposed, and the mentorship of the facilitators and experienced writers who supported them:

The first couple times we all wrote together, there were tears. We wrote and then we cried. So, we then decided, we couldn't start each day off like that, so we put this ban [sic] on emotional writing (laugh). I think the group that we were together - we were just very welcoming of what each other had to offer. One of the ladies who was with us [sic] was doing it for her last set of professional credits she had to take before she retired and she was just a phenomenal writer and poet! She was just this master teacher and she was just really affirming of the younger teachers. There was just a lot of friendship that happened.

Erin's story shows the importance of developing a safe community in order to forge emotional connections with fellow writers. Deep and meaningful learning takes place when emotions play a role in the context. Writing deepens their relationship with their self along with others involved in the act of learning. Receiving positive feedback on early writing also contributes to self-efficacy to keep writing. Risk-taking is encouraged and the need for perfection subsides.

Rick, Larry, and Nicole developed writing identities early in their lives and chose their path as English teachers because of their interests in literature and writing. However, it was the National Writing Project that influenced their work as teachers. Their development as teacher-writers grew when they began to share their own writing lives with their students.

### **Revisiting Writing Histories and Beliefs about Writing**

About half of the teachers recalled negative experiences in writing early on in their education. Some of these histories were revisited during their participation in National Writing Project institutes, while others experienced it with an instructor at graduate school or a Literacy Coach during literacy trainings. Jackie, a fourth grade teacher, remembered her writing experiences in her elementary years:

It was very much a teacher driven "write this" or "complete this" [sic] product driven kind of assignments in writing. It was very prompted. I felt like the only thing that involved writing was making sure my spelling words were spelled correctly and making sure my sentences were cohesive. So, I didn't like it at all. The only things I remember from writing in my childhood were lots of red marks.

Revisiting these past histories for Jackie brought to the surface the dark emotions she associated with writing. These were new realizations about her emotions, feelings, and beliefs about herself as a writer. Jackie continued to describe the experience when this happened:

It was my first course on teaching literacy (with my literacy coach) and she had asked us to write about our early experiences in writing. And, until that moment, I had never really reflected on how any of my past experiences molded my attitude toward writing. So, it was really through the act of writing about what my past experiences were and allowing me that time to reflect that was eye opening for me. I just kind of gasped, and thought, "Oh my gosh, that is why I fear teaching writing, and why I myself don't like writing. But, it wasn't until I wrote about it that I confirmed all of those things."

Revisiting these past histories and old perspectives can be transformative. The initial realization that our histories shape our beliefs triggers the process of analyzing, questioning and reshaping the stories. New narratives are written that support a broader context. Dirkx (2012) suggests this transformation is grounded in the emotional subconscious and sees this as ‘soul work’. Once this transformation is experienced, writers are awakened to how past histories play a role in other areas of life and becomes a purpose for writing and a need for continued self-discovery.

Patty recalled similar experiences in revisiting her own writing history from in high school that focused more on her understanding of the writing process:

Once the actual sentence was written down on a piece of paper, I don't think there was a lot of, “I'm going to move this paragraph or move this sentence.” So, it's has to be pretty good the first time. You turned it in and got it back and there was no fixing it and if you got a bad grade there was no fixing it. We didn't engage in a revision process.

Some participants enjoyed writing early on in their childhoods, but later, in their high school years, beliefs about their writing abilities changed when confronted with their capabilities to complete assignments. Dennis spoke of this when asked to elaborate experiences that made him question his writing abilities. His examples included learning how to identifying parts of sentences:

I just remember suddenly feeling frozen in the idea of writing at that point. It became all about being right or wrong and it was. And, I remember thinking, I just can't do this. This just isn't something that I'm good at. And, I don't want to sound negative, but the experience shut down almost all of my desire to write.

Like Dennis, Rick shared a similar story. Although he had highly influential mentors and teachers in his high school and college experiences, once he began teaching as an ELA instructor, he stopped writing. He explained:

When I first started teaching, we were big on the five-paragraph theme, you have a topic sentence, three supporting sentences, a concluding sentence and then you expand that out to the essay. And, something odd happened during those first few years of teaching. I'd stopped writing. I'd written before, but something about that formulaic approach just really squashed my love for writing.

These negative experiences impacted self-efficacy, motivation, and attitudes towards writing in powerful ways. For Rick, it was not until he began graduate school that his love of writing was rekindled. Teachers, mentors, and the research of Peter Elbow (1998), Donald Murray (1982) and Tom Romano (2000) shed light on the fact that there were many ways to write. Following graduate school, he attended a National Writing Project and his new understandings were solidified even more.



## Discussion

Findings from this research illustrate the complexities of each teacher-writer's influences in their early identification of being a writer. As participants shared their emotional stories of early writing histories and first influences in feeling empowered as a writer, some commonalities began to emerge among these ten teachers. These include three main concepts: 1) emotions; 2) teachers/mentors at key moments; 3) and a reshaping of beliefs about what it meant to be a writer and how to teach writing for teachers whose early experiences were negative. Recalling Bandura's work (1977, 1995, 2002), teachers and mentors enabled participants to gain a sense of self-efficacy through their positive feedback, guidance, and instruction and by reshaping their association with writing from a negative view of anxiety and avoidance to one of possibility. When participants realized their own potential in accomplishing writing, they felt capable of writing and learned more about themselves through the act of writing. All three of these concepts interweave in a tapestry that makes up the complex identity of each teacher-writer. Each thread will be examined as to how they impact the writing identity formation of writers.

### Emotions in Writing

The participants in this study all shared a variety of emotions, implicitly and explicitly, in their early identification of themselves as writers. Several of the study participants reported pleasure in writing stories from their imaginations and "making books" in their childhood years. Because of their avid reading lives, their vocabulary was large and mechanics were not a struggle, at least in their perceptions. Jolene described her experiences in the cellar writing stories as joyful and intriguing, while Melissa's stringing yarn to bind her books and sell at garage sales brought feelings of pride. These early joyful emotions contributed to their feelings of self-worth and confidence in the context of writing. Repeated experiences strengthened these attributes of their writing identity (Cremin & Locke, 2017). Other participants described their emotions when their writing was recognized as exemplary by teachers, especially in the presence of their peers. These emotions were not only related to their achievement in writing, but also in the social context in the relationship with their teacher and their peers. Pride, self-worth, and confidence were all evident in these stories.

Most of these teacher-writers had a love of reading early on in their lives. Jolene described how books became her refuge, just as Rosenthal (1995) reminds us that books can enable us to escape the family stresses and "frees its readers from their own lives by propelling them into distant worlds peopled with characters they would not otherwise met" (p. 1). Rick fell in love with books such as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1998) and read throughout the summer months. Participants spoke of these books as treasures in their lives.

For participants whose writing lives began or were rediscovered with experiences in the context of the National Writing Project, a transformational experience was evident while in the company of other writers. Erin described the strong emotions of writing together with a group of women that she became very connected with. Over the course of the project, while immersed in writing together, she felt safe and respected enough to be vulnerable in her writing. In addition, writers in her community supported her learning about herself through writing. A goal of the National Writing Project is to provide opportunities to "consider the teacher as a whole person who has valuable insight about herself and her practice" (Collier, Scheld, Barnard & Stallcup, 2015, p. 131). Emotions, context, and relationships play a role in the learning process (Mezirow, 1991).

Three of the participants in this study experienced negative emotions in their early K-12 experiences and developed fear and anxiety toward writing. Jackie and Cari both felt that mechanics were not strengths for them as writers and recalled the scarring of “the red pen” on their papers. Jackie recalled not being able to remember being taught how to write effectively which brought feeling of uncertainty along with her anxiety. Dennis remembered struggling with grammar lessons in which he had to identify parts of sentences. His feelings of frustration forced him to believe that writing was just something he was not good at. For these participants, it took a teacher or mentor to help them examine these past experiences and recreate a new relationship with writing. When teachers examine their writing histories, they can teach from a place of empathy for their students since they understand how difficult writing can be. Sharing stories of challenge with students can create a culture of trust and safety and create conditions for risk taking in a writing community.

### **Responsive Teachers and Mentors**

The majority of study participants had a teacher or mentor who knew who they were as writers and offered appropriate feedback, teaching, or were able to provide an experience that transformed their beliefs about themselves as writers. Rick and Larry had teachers who recognized their abilities as writers at moments in their lives when they were forming attitudes about their writing identity. Cari had a seventh grade teacher who offered the landscape of poetry in a non-restrictive way at a time when Cari needed an emotional outlet for her uncertainty and worries. Jackie’s Literacy Coach invited her to explore her own writing history to help her become conscious of the way her past experiences created her own reality about herself. Dennis’s advisor saw the apprehension and anxieties about making decisions in college and suggested he begin to journal these thoughts and feelings and other areas of interest to learn more about who he was. Each participant, somewhere along their journey of development as a writer, had an influential person who played a role at a time in their lives when they were vulnerable. Bandura (1997) reminds us of the influence of emotion and social persuasion in self-efficacy. When participants recognized writing could be a tool for discovery, their sense of agency increased and they became more motivated to continue to write.

The importance in a teacher knowing who their students are as writers and having an understanding of writing tools, strategies, and processes cannot be understated. In his book, *Joy Write*, Fletcher describes the work of skilled writing teachers who have the capabilities of reading and rereading their students’ behaviors (2017). Skilled teachers:

. . . slowly and carefully build understanding of (their students) favorite genres, struggles, handwriting woes, breakthroughs and triumphs. They make careful note of when the energy goes up and when it goes down. This knowledge informs their teaching. The best teachers ‘teach at the point of their learning’. This careful observation informs their instruction and reveals what students are ready to learn next (p. 9).

When teachers are writers themselves, they can recognize the emotions and the phases students encounter during writing. They look for phases as evidence of what a student feels and can do as a writer. A deep understanding contributes to the development of teacher-student connections and can form relationships where risk taking is safe and students feel free to explore who they are as a writers.

Donald Graves teaches us that writing, more than any other subject, can be transformational for students. In Grave's research, he shares the words of a student he observed to emphasize this shift in belief about one's identity. "When the teacher read one of my paragraphs in class, until then I had no idea I could write . . . and I began to think I could do something right for a change" (Newkirk, 2013, p. 22). Rick, a participant in this study, had a similar response to his teacher reading his work when he noticed people looked at him different and he had felt like he had done something worthy and worthwhile. The realization of newly found abilities in writing lifted the confidence of these participants in many ways and offered a springboard for continued writing development. Meaningful learning is grounded in emotional connections with ourselves and our social context (Dirkx, 2012). Each teacher took time to know their students well and recognized the quality writing beyond mechanics.

### **Reshaping Writing Beliefs**

Many teachers are unconscious of how their negative writing histories play a role in their beliefs about themselves as writers and in their pedagogies of teaching writing (Yeo, 2007). In fact, until teachers are provided an opportunity to explore these histories in the context of writing, teachers may have unconsciously forgotten these negative experiences altogether or even considered the experiences as negative. For the participants in this study, the teachers who had difficulties with mechanics in their early years of writing felt discomfort and anxiety in writing and labeled themselves as ones who "are not good with mechanics" or "struggle with grammar". As participants entered new ways to think about writing, they began to identify themselves in ways that are realized in their writing (Carbone & Orellana, 2010). Writers begin to see themselves as members of the writing community and move from recipients of writing to agents of the written word. It is at this point that teachers realize their agency and power in writing (Moje & Luke, 2009).

As young children enter school, most believe they can write (Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1986). Many elementary teachers have had years of "schooling" and episodes with the red pen that have damaged this self-belief and so they shift to the belief that writing is not something just anyone can engage in (Cremin & Oliver, 2016; Zoch, Myers, Lambert, Vetter & Fairbanks, 2016). Teachers in this study had opportunities to reflect on their writing histories and new narratives were created. They recognized their understanding of writing was limited and how this effected their teaching of writing. "The beginning point for building student writing motivation rests in his/her teacher beliefs about writing" (Bruning & Horn, 2000, p. 30). If a teacher lacks self-efficacy in writing and adopts a negative writing identity in herself, writing becomes an act of compliance rather than one of meaning.

### **Implications**

Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2017) argue that students deserve an expert teacher on year one of a teacher's career. They contend that "these students are entitled to sound instruction and cannot afford to lose a year of schooling to a teacher who is ineffective or learning by trial and error on the job" (p. 3). With this premise in mind, we propose the implications for practice focus on preparation of pre-service teachers in the area of writing during their pre-service teacher education programs. Universities need to examine the gap between what pre-service teachers believe about themselves as writers and their abilities as teachers of writers, and the expectations of what the students they will teach are expected to do. From the research and the findings in this

study, immersion opportunities, such as the National Writing Project, over an extended period of time is effective in developing writing self-efficacy and reshaping writing identities. These kinds of experiences are difficult to make possible for in-service teachers due to the demands of job duties and time constraints during the school year. However, because of semester long courses, pre-service teachers could meet these expectations within the coursework of pre-service teacher education programs.

Despite the need for more teacher preparation in writing instruction, current pre-service teacher literacy courses emphasize reading methods and embed writing methods into reading courses (Morgan, 2010). There is a greater need to expand beyond the teaching of reading and writing methods altogether. Courses must first create conditions for pre-service teachers to be readers and writers themselves in order to develop their own reading and writing identities (Miller, 2009; Morgan & Pytash, 2014). Dewey (1933) reminds us, “We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment; whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference” (p. 22). It is necessary for teachers to experience writing that meets a wide range of authentic purposes and introduces effective methods and tools for modeling, teaching and creating conditions for students to be motivated to write (Pressley et al., 2007).

A teacher’s practices are a result of the beliefs which she holds about herself and about how students learn (Cremlin & Baker, 2010; Palmer, 1998). Several of the participants in this study originally held negative beliefs about their identity as writers, and thus avoided writing themselves and did not have the confidence to teach writing. In an effort to reshape these beliefs, intentionality about our goals in pre-service literacy courses is essential. Restructuring literacy courses for pre-service teachers should include opportunities to:

1. Feel safe within a writing community in order to share vulnerable writing. This creates an atmosphere of trust and emotional safety. Writing identities and beliefs about themselves as writers can change in response to the low-stakes, safe environment in which they can share their work and freely express their anxieties about themselves as writers and as teachers of writing (Zoch, Myers, Lambert, Vetter & Fairbanks, 2016).
2. Examine past writing histories, or writing literacy autobiographies, to explore past experiences as a writer, and reflect on the emotions attached to writing and why they exist. As young children enter school, most believe they can write (Graves, 1986; Calkins, 1983). Years of “schooling” and episodes with the red pen can damage these beliefs to ones that suggest writing is not everyone (Zoch, Myers, Lambert, Vetter & Fairbanks, 2016; Cremin & Oliver, 2016). The teachers of these scarred histories must first engage in experiences that can transforming these beliefs and mindsets about writing through the exploration of their writing histories (Norman & Spencer, 2005).
3. Model and teach what it means to be creative, curious and how to embrace problem solving in the act of writing. Ralph Fletcher, in his book, *Joy Write* (2017), argues that our education systems do not offer enough opportunities for low stakes writing where the sole purpose is to generate writing in order to discover the meaning or significance of an image, thought or question. Pre-service teachers need to see value and purpose in the act of writing for their eyes only rather than to view it always as an assignment to turn in.

4. Model and advocate a reading life. Book talks using children's books or novels, young adult literature, adult books or books to influence writing can all ignite a dormant pre-service teacher to begin reading again. Reading feeds writing and writing feeds reading.
5. Utilize strategies to know students as writers to identify their strengths and areas to grow. This may require separate courses for writing, mandatory smaller class sizes in literacy courses, writing conferences and writing based assignments. As a program, teacher education faculty can discuss ways to model, teach, and nurture pre-service teachers in living a writers' life in all their courses.

Each of these practices help pre-service teachers to develop a sense of writing identity, self-efficacy, and confidence as writers. They also create conditions that foster habits of mind that can shift one into a present state of being, heightened awareness and personal joy (Fletcher, 2017; Calkins, 1994). The goal is to inspire pre-service teachers to not only love writing themselves, but to create conditions that inspire their students to love writing. These goals are well worth our energy and time.

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