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## *Adolescent Girl Writers: “I can be good at it, if I like it”*

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### *Abstract*

*A common perception that girls are good at writing may lead educators to overlook girls. This study examined the writing engagement of three sixth grade girls and how their writing self-perception affected their attitudes in a writing classroom. Using a qualitative case study methodology, three themes emerged: the importance of writing tasks, the influence of reading interests on writing, and time as an external factor. Although these themes are important, the participants of this study alluded to a greater underlying factor; that of writing volition, i.e., desire to write. Volition was the key in engaging the girls as writers.*

### Introduction

If girls are perceived to be good writers, does this indeed make them good writers? There have been numerous research on gender differences in self-perception and self-efficacy (Meece & Painter, 2008; Pajares, Miller, & Johnson, 1999; Pajares & Valiante, 1999; 2001; 2006). These studies show that there is a difference in the writing achievement of boys versus girls. However, these studies are quantitatively driven, relying solely on self-reported questionnaires. There is a void in the voices of the participants—their actual behaviors in comparison to their self-reported beliefs. The purpose of this study was to give voice to three adolescent girl writers through interviews and classroom observations. In this way their attitudes and engagement could be examined in comparison to their perceived beliefs as writers.

Having time to write and the overemphasis on the mechanics of writing can be major roadblocks in a student's journey to becoming a writer. These hindrances can influence a student's engagement and willing participation in the writing classroom. Lorty (1992) asserts that learning to write is an issue of time: time to process and brainstorm, time to write and rewrite, time to read and think. All too often, writing centers upon an end product and writing, as a process, is forgotten (Murray, 2001). There is also an overemphasis on the mechanics of writing—grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc. (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). Although lessons targeting specific aspects of grammar and spelling are important, these elements alone do not constitute the writing process. Graham, MacArthur, and Schwartz (1995) assert that superficial revisions have little to no impact on improving the quality of children's writing. Students rewrite final copies simply for the purpose of fixing various mechanical errors; “Writing, for too many students, is not a critical exploration but a hollow, pointless chore” (Owens, 1994, p. 25). In essence, writing that does not hold personal meaning may lead to disengagement (Ivy, 1999). Students need a real purpose (Fletcher, 2006);

an authentic reason (Lensmire, 1994); a personal investment (Allen, 2006) in becoming successful writers.

### Literature Review

Writing is more than the act of putting thoughts and words down on paper. According to the National Commission on Writing (NCW, 2003), writing also functions as a *threshold skill* that allows access to higher academics and employment success. Writing has become a tool for assessment (NCW, 2003). Standardized tests now include a written response item on every test for all content areas (NCW, 2003; National Writing Project (NWP) & Nagin, 2006). The writing required on standardized tests is often a complex and detailed synthesis of the content being tested. Students, who know the subject and content materials but do not write well, may have difficulty being academically successful. Cole (2007) ponders, “Might we conceivably predict, then, that students who have trouble with writing will have difficulty in every subject that is tested through writing?” (p. 2). Writing has become elevated to the status of an academic gatekeeper. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2002) revealed that on the national writing examination, more than two out of every three fourth graders scored below the proficient level. For eighth graders, nearly two out of every three scored below the proficient level. This is disconcerting as writing is “taught” at every grade level beginning in first grade and is utilized in all content areas. Whether students are prepared to write and write well for their futures is repeatedly called into question.

### *Writing in Schools*

The importance of writing can be felt in all content areas across all grade levels because writing is used as the primary tool for assessment purposes (NCW, 2003, NWP & Nagin, 2006, p. 15). Writing instruction is heavily concentrated on the development of writing skills, the mechanics and

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grammar usage, and the basic conventions of writing: i.e., spelling, sentence structure, organization, form, etc. (Wang & Odell, 2003). Traditionally, writing in schools is taught by the Language Arts teacher. The Language Arts teacher's focus is predominantly centered on expressive forms of writing (Dornan, Rosen, & Wilson, 1997).

### *Obstacles in Learning to Write*

There are several factors that hinder students from learning how to write: time, emphasis on mechanics, and an issue of identity. These obstacles greatly influence students' growth as writers, their willingness to successfully complete writing tasks, and fully engage and participate in the writing process. Many teachers require students to complete weekly writing prompts. Although the writings may coincide with readings, activities, and/or holidays, the writing is often a stand alone assignment (Lensmire, 1994). Teachers may model the structure of the writing that is desired and may have students brainstorm together, however once the writing time begins, students are on their own with the deadline looming. As a result, students are under great pressures to produce a finished writing product that meets the specifications set by the teacher. Time is of the essence and, simply put, teaching writing as a process is just too time consuming.

Teachers emphasize the mechanics of writing—grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc. (Gottschalk & Hjortshoj, 2004). Many students struggle with writing because of a common misconception that writing *is* grammar and spelling (Emig, 1997; Graham & Harris, 2005). There is a lack of understanding the subtle nuances of the writing process—word choice, phrasing, language subtleties and such (Graham & Harris, 2005). The emphasis on mechanical and surface error corrections does not enable students to understanding how to write, let alone improve their writing.

### *Gendered Research on Writing*

If girls are more linguistically inclined, does this make them more confident writers? Numerous studies identify differences between the achievement of boys and girls in gendered research on writing (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Connell, 1996; Junge & Dretzke, 1995; Meece & Painter, 2008; Pajares, Miller, & Johnson, 1999; Pajares & Valiante, 1999; 2001; Wigfield, Eccles, & Pintrich, 1996). In a 1999 study of students in upper elementary grades, Pajares, Miller, and Johnson found that gender differences affected students' confidence, writing apprehension, and feelings of self-worth associated with writing. The study found that in general, girls had lower writing self-confidence than their male peers. The researchers further state that although there was a lower level of writing confidence by girls, elementary school teachers generally rated the girls as better writers than boys.

Pajares and Valiante (1999), in a follow up study, sought to find the gender differences in writing confidence beliefs and ability for middle school students. Their findings show

a significant rise in the writing self-perception of middle school girls versus boys. The perceived writing competence of girls was not only significantly stronger than their male counterparts, this was dramatically higher than compared to the prior findings of elementary girls and their writing self-confidence. Perhaps the significance of the findings can be attested to the continual positive feedback they received from teachers in their elementary school years, but it is unclear from the study.

Lastly, Meece and Painter (2008) assert that stereotypes greatly impact student's self-conception of feminine and masculine tasks in school. The stereotypical conceptions drive children to embrace and conform to gender role expectations (i.e., writing is girly). This perception of feminine/masculine influences academic achievement and drives active participation or passive withdrawal (Meece & Painter, 2008). Rather than debunk misconceptions, many teachers reinforce stereotypic standards. They perpetuate the gendered notion that girls are more linguistically inclined, therefore are better writers than boys.

## Theoretical Perspective

It is known that self-perception, self-regulation, and motivation are interconnected (Bandura, 1977; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008). Social learning theory attests to this correlation. A positive self-perception leads to a more controlled self-regulatory behavior and practice (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2008). Positive self-perception aids in establishing high motivation through positive attitude and effort (Winne & Hadwin, 2008). Positive self-perception can lead to the successful completion of tasks whereas low self-perception often results in low motivation and a negative attitude towards tasks (Eccles, 2004). In addition, self-perception beliefs affect volition, or one's will to persevere (Ach, 2006). A writing classroom is one particular place where the self-perception of adolescent girls as writers can be greatly tested. Statements by students such as: "I am a good writer" or "I am a bad writer" determine the amount of effort a student is willing to put forth. Positive writing self-perception allows a student to view a writing task as an accomplishable goal, thus leading to an increase in effort and a more positive attitude towards the writing task (Pajares & Valiante, 1999; Shell, Colvin, & Bruning, 1995). When encountering a writing problem, students with positive self-perception are more apt to put in more effort because they view themselves as writers and obstacles as mere bumps in the road. Struggling adolescent writers with low self-perception often display a negative attitude towards writing. When struggling students encounter the same obstacle, they see it as an enormous wall and easily become disengaged and resistant (Jones, 2006; Olafson, 2006).

Volition is synonymous with one's will or desire in participating in a specific task or activity (Audi, 1993). It can affect motivation, attitudes, and self-perception by directly

influencing an individual's course of action. If I have the volition to write, I will do so regardless of how I feel as a writer, my positive/negative attitude towards writing, or if I am motivated or lack motivation to write; my volition brings forth action. The impact of volition on students' attitudes, interests, and self-perception beliefs can alter the will of the student (Audi, 1993) and may lead to the successful completion of tasks and assignments. The impact that volition has enables a student to persevere through hardships and remain motivated in accomplishing goals that are set forth. Volition is a conscientious choice that can be instilled as a habit over time (Ach, 2006).

## Methodology

Qualitative research provides a way to "understand situations in their uniqueness as a part of a particular context and the interactions" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). The contextual framework of this study gives insight into the attitudes and engagement towards writing by three adolescent girls in Mrs. Lund's sixth grade writing class: Laura, Hallie, and Mina (pseudonyms). Merriam (1998) states that meaning is embedded in the experiences of people, thus in understanding writing self-perception, case study methodology enables a holistic picture to be painted. Understanding the process through monitoring via observation allowed me to gain insight into the self-perception of the three girl writers. This study presents the writing self-perception beliefs through their stories and their voices.

Social learning theory asserts that students' self-perception aligns with their beliefs and affects their learning outcomes (Bandura, 1977). Self-perception impacts how individuals think, feel, and ultimately what they believe to be their potential (Bandura, 1986). The Writer's Self-Perception Questionnaire (WSPQ) (Bottomley & Henk, 1997/1998) was utilized as a tool in aiding in the selection of focal students from all the participants in Mrs. Lund's class. The WSPQ is based on Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy framework. The five point Likert scale gauged the four points of self-perception: mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal and social persuasion, emotional and mental state (Bandura, 1977). The questions were grouped into five categories: general progress, specific progress, observational comparison, social feedback, and physiological state.

Table 1  
*Writer's Self-Perception Questionnaire (WSPQ) Categories*

WSPQ 5 Domains	Example Question
General Progress	"Writing is easier for me than it used to be"
Specific Progress	"My sentences stick to my topic."
Observational Comparison	"I write better than the other kids in my class."
Social Feedback	"My teacher thinks my writing is good."
Physiological State	"When I write, I feel good about myself."

## Participants

The three case studies arise from the twenty-eight students in Mrs. Lund's sixth grade writing classroom. Based on the results from the WSPQ, students were placed into five categories: high writing self-perception, average high writing self-perception, average writing self-perception, average low writing self-perception, and low writing self-perception. The three focal students represent the high (Hallie), middle (Mina), and low (Laura) writing self-perception beliefs. Hallie possessed the strongest writing self-perception among all the students in the classroom. Laura rated herself as the lowest female student and second lowest when compared to all her classmates. Mina's score floated in the middle average range. Table 2 displays the breakdown from the self-reported questionnaire.

Table 2  
*Class results from the WSPQ*

Mrs. Lund's 6 <sup>th</sup> Grade Students WSPQ Results	
High writing self-perception	2 students (1 girl, 1 boy)
Average/high writing self-perception	4 students (2 girls, 2 boys)
Average writing self-perception	8 students (4 girls, 4 boys)
Average/low writing self-perception	5 students (2 girls, 3 boys)
Low writing self-perception	8 students (2 girls, 6 boys)

Bottomley and Henk (1997/1998), the designers of the WSPQ, utilize a Likert scale of one to five: one = strongly disagree, two = disagree, three = undecided, four = agree, and five = strongly agree. Based on the raw score, the totals for each category were then compared to a score interpretation guide that identified the classification for each category. Scores were identified as high, average-high, average, average-low, and low writing self-perception. Table 3 below displays the scores of each of the three girls.

For example, in observational comparison, the maximum raw score was 45, consisting of nine questions each worth five points. As the students answered questions regarding how they felt about themselves as writers as compared to their peers, the score interpretation guide identified 37 and above as high, 30 as the average middle score, and 23 and below as being the low range. Within this category, Hallie identifies that she is a better writer as compared to her peers based on her self-reported scores of threes, fours, and fives, equaling 33. Mina, with the mid-score of 26, consistently gives herself threes which identifies her as predominantly undecided in regards to how she rates herself as compared to her peers. Giving herself ones and twos, Laura self-reported that indeed her observational comparison was extremely low as compared to others in her class. Her score reveals that she identifies others as being better writers than herself. With the lowest possible score for this section being nine—one point per question—Laura self-reports her observational comparison score at 14 points for this section, well below the low self-perception range.

Table 3  
Focal student's WSPQ results

	General Progress	Specific Progress	Observational Comparison	Social Feedback	Physiological State
Hallie	44	34	33	34	29
Mina	40	24	26	22	25
Laura	24	24	14	16	19
Raw Score (maximum raw score)	45	35	45	35	30

### Data Collection

After utilizing the WSPQ to select the three focal students, data was collected in three different ways. Field notes were taken during Mrs. Lund's writing class. Notes on student engagement and attitudes, interactions between student and teacher, student and student, and student and researcher were noted. Interviews were conducted with individual students and in small focal group setting. The focal groups contained three students of which one of the students was a focal student. Last, the collection of student artifacts consisting of student journal entries, rough drafts and final copies.

I utilized open coding to break the data apart to "see what's there" (Merriam, 1998, p. 148). Coding for themes through convergence of the different data sources allowed me to find recurring regularities that became patterns and commonalities between Hallie, Mina, and Laura. Constant comparative analysis allowed me to identify and categorize similarities and differences between the three girls. These patterns resulted in categories that I utilized for sorting and organizing my field notes and interviews.

There is a certain issue of transferability, considering that this is a case study of only three sixth grade girl writers. I strove to represent the wide range of girl writers by selecting students who represent this spectrum of very high writing self-perception to very low writing self-perception as well as a student in the middle. The second issue of transferability lies in making the case studies visually rich and descriptive. Although these are three specific individual cases, the characteristics, actions, and words of the three girls are not uncommon in many classrooms across America.

### Three Case Studies

Case studies allow for an opening into the lives of people and situations, since they are grounded in the understanding "that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 3). In seeking how writing self-perception impacts engagement and attitudes in a writing classroom, I share three case studies that reveal the writing self-perception of sixth grade adolescent girl writers. I begin with Laura, a student with low writing self-perception. She reveals herself as a struggling writer and classroom observations reveal that indeed she is a disengaged student. On the other extreme, Hallie maintains a high self-perception as a writer. Hallie is supported by her peers, family, and teacher who help to maintain her high writ-

ing self-perception. Last is Mina, who at times may struggle with writing, but regards herself as an "average" student.

#### *A Case Study of Hallie*

Small with a slender frame, Hallie is nearly four feet eight inches in height. She loves her family, school, and books. Hallie loves to read. Her long brown hair falls forward as she encompasses the book she is reading with her arms. She can be seen throughout the day with a novel in her hand or on a desk. Her love of reading greatly influences her writing. She states, "I always liked to write. I get a lot of ideas from when I would read. I guess when I was littler, I loved reading and I wanted to be a writer. I wanted to write stories that people would want to read, so I started writing stories" (Interview 5/14/08). Her writing volition stems from her experiences with good writing models, specifically, the books and novels she reads. There is a connection between strong readers being strong writers (Ackerman, 1989). Hallie's self-perception as a writer stems from her connection to books and her love of reading. As she states above, she perceives herself to be a good writer because she is a good reader.

#### *Hallie's self-perception as a writer:*

Hallie's WSPQ results show that she has a positive self-perception as a writer. In fact, Hallie's self-reported questionnaire score presents the highest self-perception rating as compared to her classmates. Observations further reveal that Hallie's positive writing self-perception is apparent through her engagement in the writing classroom. Always smiling and involved, Hallie is an engaged writer. She makes eye contact with the teacher and displays excitement during the writing class regardless of the writing prompt. Always helpful to her peers, other students identify Hallie as being one of the best writers in the class. Throughout the study, her classmates made such comments as: she always has great ideas, her format's good, she has a good imagination, and she just has everything right. These positive comments build on her self-perception as a writer via positive social feedback. Social learning theory states that self-perception is in part created and established by the social feedback received from others (Bandura, 1977). Not only does Hallie receive positive social feedback from her peers at school, it is reinforced by her family and home social network.

Hannah: Do you think you're a good writer?

Hallie: Yeah. Um I guess it's cuz my dad and his friends say that I'm a good writer. (Interview 5/14/08)

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Interactions and positive feedback from others is an interlocking determinant of one's beliefs (Bandura, 1977). Hallie's belief that she is a good writer is reinforced by the support she receives from the people around her. Belief in herself as a writer helps to establish her engagement and motivation in the writing classroom and is the basis of her strong volition to succeed as a writer.

#### *Hallie's writing engagement.*

Hallie is an engaged writer. She self-regulates and works towards continual improvement on her writing. She can be seen at times carrying a notebook in which she jots down ideas as it comes to her. She says she uses these ideas for future writing. Hallie is not only conscientious of external expectations (i.e., teacher and peers), she works hard on self-regulating her learning. Hallie's writing engagement goes beyond school writing. She comments that she used to create newsletters for her family. She states that she began doing this because it was just fun. She and her five year old sister play school where she is working on teaching her little sister how to write. Hallie states that when they play school, she assigns writing for her sister and then grades the writing. She tells her what to fix and work on. These examples reveal that Hallie is an intrinsically motivated and engaged in the writing process.

Hallie identifies that the biggest challenge she faces as a writer is enlarging and expanding her vocabulary. She states that she wants to use different and bigger words. She sees vocabulary as inextricably linked to becoming a good writer. When asked why this was important, she states so that she can become a better writer. Hallie recognizes that mastery of words and language is an important skill in becoming a fluent writer (White & Bruning, 2005).

#### *Hallie's attitude towards writing.*

"I like to write about things that pretty much don't exist. Because I like to think of the world as somewhere else and sometimes, sometimes the world isn't that great and I want it to be. So writing, it's like a way to make it like that. It's like kind of like your escape from the world. Like if you're having a bad day or something. It's like hmmm, what can I do to make it more interesting?" (Focus group interview, 7/7/08)

The statement above displays Hallie's attitude towards writing. Hallie uses writing to create her own perfect world. Not only does writing serve as a mode of communication but writing is fundamental in Hallie's self-expression and creation of her ideal world. She states that writing is an outlet that gives her voice. "Like if I'm having a bad day at school or like I'm mad at someone, I just write it down. I can't really say it to anybody, but like if I write it down, it's like I'm talking to myself and telling myself about it. Writing makes me feel better" (Focus group interview, 7/7/08). Writing serves as a mental release in which Hallie can express her full emotions

to herself. Hallie is a writer who writes, not only in school but also at home. Writing serves as a mode of self-expression that gives her voice and soothes her mind and soul.

#### *A Case Study of Mina*

Mina is a shy adolescent with long wavy brown hair. At approximately four feet, eight inches in height, Mina is soft spoken and timid. Although Mina is shy to speak out in the classroom, she becomes more vocal when in a small group setting or one-on-one situations. Mina states that when she is interested in what she is writing about, she can be a good writer. Daniels (2007) identifies authenticity and personal interest as being an important motivating factor in getting kids to write; "Students are motivated to write when they believe their writing has an authentic purpose or if they have a compelling need" (p. 17). Mina states, "Like if I have a topic on the top of my head that I want to write about, giving me a chance to write about it" would enable me to write better (Focus group interview, 3/7/08). Mina's self-perception in many ways is strongly correlated to how engaging the writing task is and her understanding of the prompt.

#### *Mina's self-perception as a writer.*

Mina perceives herself as an average writer; "I'm okay. I'm not the best in the class and I'm not the worst in the class. I'm middle" (Interview, 5/14/08). WSPQ results show that in fact, Mina is in the middle as compared to her classmates. She perceives others as being better writers and is quickly able to identify several students who she feels are good writers as well as several students who are not good writers. In comparison to the students in her class, Mina perceives herself as an average writer.

#### *Mina's engagement in a writing classroom.*

In her writing class, Mina is an engaged student. She may struggle with certain writing that she "doesn't really get" (Focus group interview, 3/7/08); however, she does her best to do what Mrs. Lund asks of her. "Like when it's like a topic that we just don't know what to write about. Like you just can't think of anything. Or like you can think of only a few things and you can't write a story that's so short" (Focus group interview, 3/7/08). For Mina, engagement and involvement in writing is directly dependent upon "getting" the prompt.

Another factor that impacts Mina's writing engagement is the issue of choice. Mina repeatedly comments that students should be given the freedom to choose their own topic for writing.

Hannah: So when your teacher gives you topic to write about, does that make it easier or harder to write?

Mina: It depends. I like it when she gives us choices and then she lets us pick. That's better than writing about something that I don't have a clue what to write about. If I get to pick, I can have an idea. (Focus group interview, 3/7/08)

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This example shows that she is often at a loss of what to do when she is given a prompt rather than being given choices from which to write. Although Mina is generally an engaged writer, providing choices that are meaningful and authentic would enable her to be more invested and engaged as a writer.

#### *Mina's attitude: An issue of time*

Mina identifies time as an important factor that impacts her attitude towards writing. She desires more time to think and practice. "Maybe if we could work on a piece of writing for like one or two months..." she quietly comments. Mina reveals that in extending writing prompts to a longer time frame, she could improve her writing. She sees time as being a solution for improving her writing. Not only for the purpose of writing better stories, Mina views time as a general solution that can change her attitude and feelings toward writing. She states that good writers "write stuff that other people like. You're a good writer if you take your time and everything... Like you take your time and you plan everything out real good" (Focus group interview, 3/7/08). Lorty (1992) states, "If we pause to examine the qualities of time that shape our work in school, then we notice that this clock-driven experience of time controls virtually all aspects of our daily life" (p. 4). In schools, time is of the essence and writing, being a complicated and recursive process (Murray, 2001), does not fit neatly into the small chunks of time set aside for writing. Mina identifies good writers being good because they can control the amount of time they have to work on their writing. "Like if Mrs. Lund asks for 2 pages, and you get to the end of the 2 pages, and instead of writing more, I just like wrap up the end. I don't want to go beyond. Sometimes it's like a short time and I don't have time to finish it" (Focus group interview, 3/7/08). Unfortunately, she has no control over the use of her writing time thus does not think positively of writing nor herself as a writer.

#### *A Case of Laura*

Laura is a sixth grader who loves sports, particularly basketball. Although she remains a tomboy in many ways, she is well aware of the budding feminine beauty of her close friends. At nearly five foot two inches in height, she is semi-slender with an athletic build. When asked what she likes about school, she is quick to respond with "hanging out with my friends and P.E." When asked if she is a writer, she states with much force "No!" Laura is quick to state that she does not like writing because it hurts her hand. Laura is a student with low writing self-perception. "I don't like to write" basically sums up how Laura feels about writing.

#### *Laura's self-perception as a writer.*

Laura does not identify herself as a writer. Her disengagement and dislike towards writing is apparent in her posture and silence during the writing class time. Not for a lack of ability nor intelligence, Laura most often completes her assignments with the bare minimum requirements set forth by

her teacher. On those rare occasions when the writing topic is of interest to her, it is then and only then that she completes more than the minimum required. For example, in a journal entry about Earth Day, Mrs. Lund asked the students to write more than a couple of sentences. Laura wrote exactly three sentences. Laura is quick to state that if it's a good prompt, she will write, but "if I don't like it and don't get into it, then I just quit" (Interview 5/14/08).

#### *Laura's engagement in a writing classroom.*

With her medium brown hair pulled back into a pony tail, she scowls at her paper and works quietly on the task of writing the list of ten places her story might take place. After five minutes, Laura has her list of ten places. Mrs. Lund then asks the students to share their most creative place from their list. Laura never makes eye contact and situates herself diagonally away from the teacher and the task at hand. With her face and body turned so that she is awkwardly facing the door that leads outside to the freedom of the hallway. She does not participate in the conversation. During the several months of observation, Laura never raised her hand in participation; only when called upon does she speak.

#### *Laura's attitude towards writing.*

Although Laura completes the minimum writing, she consistently displays a negative attitude toward writing both in her words and action. What follows is a typical interaction between Laura and her teacher.

With 20 minutes left of the writing time, Laura raises her hand and Mrs. Lund walks over.

Laura: What do I do when I'm done?

Mrs. Lund: Are you sure you're really done?

L: Well, I finished the ending (shows her the last page of the story).

Mrs. L: Are you sure you don't want to go back and add anything?

L: But I'm done (pointing to the ending with the words "The End" written in large letters). Mrs. L shrugs her shoulders and gives her a questioning look.

Laura promptly asks to go to the bathroom and gets a nod from Mrs. Lund. She exits the classroom taking the hall pass as she leaves. When she returns approximately 8 minutes later, she shuffles the pages of her story, gets up and staples it. Another two minutes go by as she sits there with a blank expression on her face. She then puts the story into her folder, gets out her planbook and proceeds to fill it out. She quietly sits for a minute when done, then gets out a worksheet from another class and works on it for the remaining time. (Field Notes, 3/11/08)

This example shows that Laura has completed her story but will not review, revise, or revisit. Laura simply removes herself from the writing situation. During a follow-up interview I asked Laura how she knows when she was done with a piece

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of writing. She replies, “when I have nothing else to say, I’m done” (Focal group, 1/1/08). When Laura is done, she is done.

Hannah: Do you like to write?

Laura: No!

H: Why not?

L: Because I’m not a good writer.

H: How come? Why do you think that? (Laura shrugs her shoulders) You write all the time in class.

L: But that’s because I HAVE to.

H: What do you want to do?

L: Play volleyball. That’s it.

H: So what if your teacher said you could write a story about volleyball, or any sport, would that get you interested in writing?

L: No. (shakes her head resolutely) It’s not the subject, it’s just doing it. (Focus group interview, 3/12/08)

Laura’s attitude shows that she has an issue with doing writing. Rather than increase her effort and self-regulation, she opts to do only as much as will get her by. Laura has a low self-perception of herself as a writer and her engagement in Mrs. Lund’s writing class reveal that she is uninterested and disengaged. She does not see the purpose or importance of school writing. Cole (2007) asserts that writing is an unexamined gatekeeper in educational practices. Writing remains a primary tool for assessing knowledge in all content areas and is the primary determinate of the academic success or failure of students (NAEP, 2000). How students feel about writing and themselves as writers greatly impacts their academic futures. For Laura, her negative self-perception and attitudes toward writing presents a highly problematic situation for her academic future.

### Cross Case Analysis

Hallie, Mina, and Laura present very different pictures of engagement in the writing classroom. Each girl’s engagement closely reflects their attitude towards writing and their self-perception as writers. Hallie, the engaged writer with high writing self-perception, has a positive attitude towards writing and appears to enjoy all writing activities. Laura, the writer with low self-perception, sums it up by stating that she does not like to write. Mina is the student in the middle, who, depending on context and situation, can be an engaged writer if she so chooses.

#### *Engagement in a Writing Classroom*

“I think that like if the writing doesn’t make any sense then it’s not going to be a good writing” (Mina, focus group interview, 3/12/08).

“Like if I don’t like it and don’t get into it, then I just quit” (Laura, interview, 5/14/08).

#### *Engagement issues in a writing classroom: The writing task.*

For Laura and Mina, their engagement in writing was directly linked to the writing tasks assigned by the teacher. Their volition was determined by their feelings towards a particular writing task; if the writing was meaningful, they were willing to put forth more effort. What they deemed as “a good prompt” impacted their volition and resulted in more positive attitude and stronger engagement.

Hallie states that she is an engaged writer because the writing she does is personal and meaningful to her. She states, “sometimes you write things just because it makes you feel better. Like if I’m having a bad day at school or like I’m mad at someone, I just write it down. I can’t really say it to anybody, but like if I write it down, it’s like I’m talking to myself and telling myself... Writing to me is an outlet” (Focus group interview, 5/7/08). This passage expresses the importance of writing in Hallie’s life. The type of writing Hallie participates in is personal and meaningful; an outlet for her self-expression.

It is important that writing tasks are meaningful; however, what is meaningful varies from student to student. Laura and Mina have the potential to grow as writers and they repeatedly state that when they like the writing and when they “get it,” they can be successful writers. When writing is meaningful, their volition to write positively increases. Hallie similarly shows that when writing is meaningful, an outlet for her self-expression, she enjoys writing and is further motivated to continue her writing events. Defining and framing what is meaningful presents a challenge for classroom teachers.

#### *Engagement issues in a writing classroom: The connection between reading and writing.*

“I guess when I was littler I loved reading and I wanted to be a writer. I wanted to write stories people would want to read, so I started writing stories” (Hallie, interview, 5/14/08).

“I think I’m okay. Like, when I start writing and I get into it... I liked the poetry ones (poetry unit) because I like reading poetry books” (Laura, interview, 5/14/08).

Writing engagement and writing self-perception is in part fueled by reading interest and reading engagement. Smith and Wilhelm (2006) assert that students who love to read are more likely to be better writers. Hallie’s writing has been greatly impacted by her love of reading and books. She epitomizes the strong connection between reading and writing (Ackerman, 1989). Just as Hallie has a wide array of books she enjoys reading, so her writing interests are vast and expansive. She is willing to try all different types of prompts because her strong volition and positive self-perception has prepared to be motivated and engaged. She is simply willing to try because she is supported by past successes.



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When it comes to reading, Laura enjoys only the books she gets to select. Similarly, she states that she likes to write about topics and things that she gets to choose. In order to engage students in literacy events, students must be provided with meaningful choices and literacy experiences that connect to their lives; again the importance of meaningfulness arises (Smith and Wilhelm, 2006). Laura points out that what she is interested in reading directly relates to what she is interested in writing about because it is meaningful to her. This reinforces the interconnectedness between reading and writing (Ackerman, 1989).

*Engagement issues in a writing classroom: An issue of choice.*

“It’s pretty fun when you get to do what you want to do and not get told what you have to do.” (Mina, interview, 5/14/08).

“Like if I have a topic on the top of my head that I want to write about, give me a chance to write about it.” (Mina, interview, 5/7/08).

Laura is working on her pen pal letter. She is coloring and decorating. When done, she asks if she can get a piece of construction paper to make a birthday card for a friend. She proceeds in writing a birthday poem in the card. (Field notes, 4/16/08).

Choice appears to be an important issue for Mina and Laura. While Mina verbalizes the importance of choice, Laura shows during an observation period that when given freedom and choice, she is an engaged and self-motivated writer. Giving students a choice in self-selecting independent reading materials may be easy enough for a classroom teacher, however, the way in which teachers can provide a similar type of freedom and flexibility in the writing classroom is difficult. In many ways writer’s workshop provides a path in which students can be provided choice and flexibility. Just as all students do not have the same set of experiences, knowledge, and interests, they cannot be engaged in the same writing task, in the same way. Graves (1983) states “Children want to write... We ignore the child... We underestimate them... Instead, we take the control away from children and place unnecessary road blocks in the way of their intentions.” (p. 3). Just as writing choice and control over writing are important to Mina and Laura, so it may be an important issue to many adolescent girl writers.

It can be heard in many teacher’s lounges that girls are not difficult to engage and their best writers are girls. Past studies present numerous examples of the difficulties in engaging boys as writers (Dutro, Kazemi, & Balf, 2006; Fletcher, 2006; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). They re-affirm the notion that girls are more linguistically inclined, thus they are successful writers. It is important to recognize that not all girls are linguistically inclined, nor view themselves as successful writers. Engaging girls as writers may be less of a challenge than boys in some ways, but this assumption should not be used to categorize all girls.

*Attitude towards writing*

Social learning theory identifies perception as directly correlated to attitudes. Bandura (1977) identifies this interrelationship as bidirectional. Hallie has a positive attitude towards writing because she has positive writing self-perception. Laura has a negative attitude towards writing because of her negative writing self-perception. This relationship between attitude and self-perception is further driven by external factors, namely social feedback that reinforces positive or negative self-perception and attitudes. Hallie receives positive reinforcement from her friends, classmates, family, and teacher; Hallie perceives herself as a good writer. Social learning views interactions between external and internal influences as interlocking determinants (Bandura, 1977). The notion that each part influences and is influenced by one another. The external influences of social feedback on writing self-perception became a prominent theme that positively or negatively established attitudes towards writing.

*Attitude towards writing: Influence of social feedback.*

Bandura (1977) asserts that social feedback serves as a reinforcement to motivate and alter attitudes towards a specific task, acts, or events. Students need critical but supportive reinforcements that support their learning and strengthen their volition. Specific comments and feedback can positively reinforce students’ growth as writers, however, writing is a subject in which students often receive vague or non-specific comments that don’t help them improve their writing (Graham, MacArthur, & Schwartz, 1995). Hallie embodies the student whose positive self-perception and attitude is largely influenced by the support from her peers and family. Many students in Mrs. Lund’s class state that Hallie is one of the best writers, if not *the* best writer in the class. Hallie reveals that not only does her dad comment positively on her writing, “then my dad will go and read things to his friends at the firehouse and they’ll say it’s good so umm, I thought I was a good writer.” (Interview, 5/14/08). Hallie positive self-perception as a writer is greatly impacted by the social reinforcements she receives. This positive impact strengthens her writing volition.

Laura and Mina were not identified by their peers as being good writers, nor did the girls identify themselves as being good writers. Both girls have the potential to become good writers, but their lack of writing volition prevents them from being highly motivated and engaged like Hallie. Although there is insufficient evidence from this study, the lack of positive reinforcement can be a factor in their less positive attitudes and lower self-perception as writers. Both girls attest that when the writing prompt was good, they could be good writers. Rather than attributing their writing ability to themselves, they referred back to the quality of the writing prompt as the primary factor in enabling them to be good writers. This was problematic in that neither Mina nor Laura were able to define what a good prompt was or how

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a good prompt enabled them to be good writers. Both girls asserted that they simply know it when they see it, and when they see it, they will be good at writing.

#### *Attitude towards writing: Issue of time.*

Time is an issue that people, adults and children alike, often struggle with. The time crunch can influence and affect student's attitude towards a task or activity (Lorty, 1992). In situations where blocks of time are dedicated to a single content subject, writing does not fit neatly into the structure of the school day. Mina comments "I don't have time... to be good (at writing);" Hallie comments that she stopped writing her family newsletter because it became too time consuming; Laura comments that she often rushes through assignments because she doesn't have time for sports and other things. All three girls allude to a certain lack of time in their writing efforts, however when further analyzed, the statements reveal a lack of volition; the desire to invest the time and energy into writing. For instance, Hallie had created a weekly family newsletter, yet when her volition to continue the weekly process diminished, she referred back to a lack of time thereby releasing her from the obligation of continuing on with the family newsletter. Laura is willing to make time for her sports, her writing however, she does not have time for. It may seem like time is a major factor on writing, but the issue of time is not simple. Students are able to make time to complete the things that they deem as important even when there is insufficient time. Laura rushes to complete her homework assignments before she leaves school because she knows she has a basketball practice later that day and won't have time for her homework. Positively or negatively, time is influenced by the desire that students have towards the specific task. Lorty (1992) identifies that in modern society, time is a critical factor in all activities both in and out of school. I add that volition causes students to create the time to write and produce. Rather than being pushed by the clock, volition allows students to push the clock and dedicate their time and effort to their writing. As writers, we shape and re-create reality with our words (Burnham, 2001); similarly we create the time we need to create the writings we deem as important.

### Discussion

In my initial analysis of the data, I identified three major themes: writing task, reading interests as an influence on writing, and time. Upon a closer examination, I discovered that although the three girls continually referred to their likes/dislikes regarding the writing task, e.g., how the things they liked to read influenced what they wanted to write about. This is the underlying issue of volition that permeated the main themes. Whether the task was meaningful, the successful completion of the writing depended upon their desire to do the writing. Even when given the choice to write on any topic of their choice, their volition controlled whether they successfully completed the writing task. Regardless of how

much time was given, if they had desire to do the writing, they found ways to make time to successfully complete the writing task. Volition permeated all three case studies and became the overriding theme that moved motivation and engagement.

#### *Volition Impacts the Writing Task*

Engagement and motivation towards the successful completion of a writing task is framed by the volition that students have towards the writing task. Whether the writing assignment was engaging or students were given a choice, if they so desired, they could indeed be successful writers. Hallie identified that reading greatly influenced her writing, however when she stopped desiring to write the newsletter, her motivation waned and she ceased immersing herself in similar reading materials, e.g., reading Reader's Digest and local newspaper. In this case, her volition negatively impacted the reading of news sources and the writing the family newsletter.

Graham and Harris (1997) identify meaningful tasks as a major factor on the development of writing motivation and self-regulation. They state that when tasks are meaningful, students can be highly motivated. When tasks were meaningful, students may be motivated and engaged, however, this study found that whether meaningful or not, students' desire to do or not do the writing was the ultimate factor. If the student did not have high volition, the meaningfulness of the writing did little to impact motivation or influence students towards a positive writing self-perception.

Graves (1991) asserts that teachers can make writing more engaging by tapping into the interests of the students. The three girls in this study demonstrate that their desire trumped their engagement regardless of how interesting or engaging the writing task. When Laura was asked if she could be a better writer if the teacher allowed her to write about sports, Laura quickly stated, "It's not the topic, it's just doing it." Laura demonstrates that her interest in sports and the possibility of writing about sports was trumped by her lack of desire to do the task of writing. Hallie ceased publishing a family newsletter not because she stopped being interested or invested in her family, rather, because she simply lost the desire to do so. This concept of volition, i.e., "if I want to, then I can," was the underlying factor that guided motivation, engagement, and ultimately impacted the writing self-perception of the three adolescent girls.

#### *Volition Impacts Time*

The girls bring up the issue of time as a major factor in writing success. All three girls attest that time directly influenced their ability to be successful writers, yet when they desired to do the writing, i.e., when their will superseded their lack of classroom writing time, they found or made time to successfully complete the writing at home. Bomer (1995) states "*More time* is a meaningless idea... time just is. What we are really complaining about is our difficulty in

both controlling and choosing what to do with the time we have.” (p. 2). Laura identified that although she made time to play basketball, there was no time to be had for writing. When Mina stopped desiring to write, she states, “I just ran out of time”. Hallie states that she was going to put more details in her shrinking story, but chose to stop after page 4 because she simply ran out of time. The three girls display how the amount of time they spent was influenced by their volition. How we allocate our time, the purpose for our time determines our time as meaningfully spent. Things that are a priority, we allocate more time; this is driven by our desire to participate in the particular activity because it is important to us. In essence, our volition drives how we allocate our time and results in our engagement and motivation with specific tasks.

Social learning theory identifies that the locus of control for an individual’s attitude is in part determined by the continuous reciprocal interactions between the external and internal influences on the self (Bandura, 1977). In this case, desire or will to write, i.e., writing volition, influenced the locus of control and guided external motivation. The attitudes that students have towards writing was shaped by both external and internal influences as social learning theory asserts, however this study found that successful completion of a writing task was under girded by a writer’s volition.

The findings of this study present three influences on writing: the writing task, interest in the task, and time. All three factors were extrinsically motivated, yet the underlying key issue that under girded the study was that of volition, i.e., desire to do the writing. Volition, an intrinsic motivator, superseded the external factors and ultimately drove the engagement and motivation of the three adolescent girl writers positively or negatively.

## Conclusion

If volition is the key that guides student writing motivation, engagement, and self-perception, then is desire to write intrinsic or extrinsic? Furthermore, can desire be measured quantitatively or examined qualitatively? These are questions that need to be further explored in a future study. Teachers need to address the misconception that all girls are strong writers. The need for future studies on struggling girl writers is clear; the issues that many girls face as writers and how their volition impacts their writing motivation and writing engagement in a writing classroom. This study provided a window into the writing engagement of three adolescent girls; Hallie, the student with high writing self-perception, struggling Laura with the low writing self-perception, and Mina, the student with the average self-perception. The story of the three girls and their writing engagement is not atypical. The girls point educators to the fact that there is a need to engage and motivate adolescent girls as writers. The assumption that girls are more linguistically inclined; as such, all girls are good at writing. Hallie is the model student that is the basis of this assumption. Of the 11 female students in Mrs.

Lund’s classroom, there was just one Hallie. The assumption that the other ten female students were like Hallie is a misconception indeed. The voices of Mina and Laura reveal that there are many girls who struggle with writing. Not for lack of mental ability, but for a lack of the desire to write. The question of how teachers can engage struggling girl writers and raise their volition can be in part addressed by turning to the writer’s workshop model. Through conferencing, teachers can provide individualized attention and support the girls in their writing endeavors. By providing individualized attention and external reinforcements, students can receive direct comments that can guide their writing and can help strengthen their understanding of the writing process; thereby increasing writing self-perception and motivation. Volition guided the girls to produce writing that they deemed as worthy and good. It is imperative that teachers provide a supportive classroom environment in which to think and write. “Writing is primarily not a matter of talent, of dedication, of vision, of vocabulary, of style, but simply a matter of sitting. The writer is the person who writes” (Murray, 1996, p. 5).

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