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“USE YOUR FRUSTRATIONS IN EVERYTHING THAT YOU WRITE”:
EXAMINING PEDAGOGY OF VULNERABILITY AND THE POSITIONING ACTS
OF UNDERGRADUATE WRITERS SITUATED AS MENTORS IN AN AFTER-
SCHOOL WRITING CLUB

by

Sarah Burson Langley

A Dissertation

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Preface

The purpose of this case study is to address voids in the current body of literature related to positioning theory, pedagogies of vulnerability, university-led and community-based literacy courses, and creative writing instruction in P-20 settings. This article will be submitted to the *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*.

Abstract

Underpinned by positioning theory as both a theoretical lens and methodological tool, this paper asserts that educators can improvise asset-based discourse to create spaces for student writers to exercise agency. This single-case study, focusing on four education undergraduates situated as both writers and writing mentors in a literacy course and after-school writing club with fourth and fifth graders, examined how their identities influenced their current positioning-of-self and other in relation to vulnerability and agency. I conducted positioning analysis of their identity-based poetry, autobiographical short stories, online course discussions, and written reflections. The findings demonstrate that participants who were more comfortable being vulnerable as writers used more asset-based language in their positioning-of-self and other compared to those that were less comfortable being vulnerable as writers. Additionally, undergraduates who felt more comfortable being vulnerable reported finding a new sense of appreciation for revision and acknowledged vulnerability as a challenging but important variable in their cultural identity constructions as writers and mentors. The discourse of course instructors filtered through pedagogy of vulnerability and their critical stances as educational researchers, created agentive positions for undergraduates to embody and disrupt conventional notions of what it means to be a writer and mentor. This study offers insight into two under explored areas, creative writing instruction based on pedagogies of vulnerability and the agentive and linguistic nature of positioning in higher education literacy courses and K-12 classrooms.

Keywords: Positioning, writing pedagogy, vulnerability, higher-education, literacy

Introduction

Visualizing writing as a social process (Graham, 2019; Graves, 1983) can be challenging because writing often feels like a solitary experience. Yet, while writers may appear to be alone, they write “within a charged social space shaped by contemporary culture, ethnic and erotic identities, home language, economics, power dynamics, genre and gender expectations” (Goldblatt, 2017, p. 443). Individuals construct their identities as people and as writers in relation to these sociocultural variables. Davies and Hunt (1994) posit, “Being positioned or positioning oneself in terms of one category or another, in terms of one discourse or another, as one who can and should act/speak/write powerfully, or as one who cannot and should not” (p.389) is flexible in nature and represents one’s past, current, and future positions or images of self. Positions establish the boundaries from which one is permitted to use language to acquire certain “cultural resources” (Harré, 2012, p. 4), such as a student’s ability to exercise agency in academic environments.

This study examines the positions of four undergraduates enrolled in a higher-education community-based literacy course where they were situated as writers and writing mentors in an after-school writing club with fourth and fifth graders. Instructors modeled their own identity-specific creative writing processes as opposed to emphasizing linear skills-based approaches (Graham, 2019; Ivanič, 2004). Co-instructors intentionally positioned themselves as vulnerable by sharing intimate details related to their cultural identities (McKenna & Brantmeier, 2020), by thinking aloud to demonstrate their metacognitive writing processes (Moore & Bass, 2017), and by writing alongside the undergraduates and writing club students (Graham, 2019).

This study understands pedagogies of vulnerability in higher education in relation to privilege and power dynamics in social contexts (Brantmeier, 2013). When referring to

vulnerability in this paper, I am only addressing it as it relates to being a writer. Privilege within the immediate course construct and in society in general influences vulnerability and social writing experiences. The degree of vulnerability that participants and instructors were comfortable embodying within the context of the course is impacted by a variety of variables. Examples of these factors include writing experiences, race, gender, and culture.

This case study was conducted in the Fall of 2021 and is part of a larger, ongoing investigation (See Author, 2021). The emphasis of the mentoring experience was unconventional and rooted in affirming the writing identities of elementary students (McBride & Rentscher, 2020). Undergraduates were interactively positioned as capable (Vetter, 2010) with the understanding that one does not have to consider themselves a "good" writer to be a strong writing mentor. Moreover, the experience was designed to disrupt the practice of subjectively assessing writers' creative compositions (Joseph et al., 2020; Ivanič, 2004).

Final writing products were never assessed in terms of the course instructors' perspectives of literary quality (Joseph et al., 2020). Additionally, the elementary after-school writing club students wrote in an asset-based environment (Flagg-Williams & Bokhorst-Heng, 2017) without pressure of any narrow skills-based critique from university instructors or college mentors (Dutro et al., 2013). This contradicts how writing is typically taught in institutions of higher learning (Goldblatt, 2017; Moore & Bass, 2017) and in North American K-12 academic settings (Grünke & Leonard-Zabel, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Grounded in positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Kayi-Aydar, 2019), this single-case study (Merriam, 2009) is driven by the question: How did undergraduates in a community-based literacy course position themselves and others in relation to vulnerability when

situated as writers and mentors in an after-school writing club with fourth and fifth grade students?

Positioning

When people have conversations, their language moves position themselves and others in relation to power and agency (Davies & Harré, 1990). Unlike roles, positioning is considered “reciprocal, in the sense that when one positions oneself, others in the interaction are also positioned” (Herbel-Eisenmann et al., 2008, p.188). Positioning acts are intertwined with our roles, gender, culture, lived experience, and beyond.

Positioning theory, as Harré et al. (2009) assert, “is concerned with revealing the explicit and implicit patterns of reasoning that are realized in the ways that people act towards others” (p. 5). The notion that social identities are constructed through discourse is a central focus (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Davies and Harré (1999) define discourse as “an institutionalized use of language and language-like sign systems” (p. 34). Positioning represents an infinite sense of language moves that are possible to occur in social episodes (Tirado & Gálvez, 2008) because autonomous discourse in any given moment is recognized in relation to contextual power dynamics.

Internal perception of one’s social identities and positions establishes how one can name who they are within a social context (Collins, 1986) and their opportunities for future iterations of self (Takacs, 2002). As a result, positions “importantly determine the way people have access to cultural resources” (Harré, 2012, p. 4), such as power or a sense of acceptance within a community (e.g., belonging). It is critical to keep in mind that “these cultural resources” (Davies & Harré, 1999, p. 39) are not necessarily understood in similar ways by all people.

For this study, my goal was to understand how participants negotiated their identities in relation to vulnerability when situated as writers and mentors in higher educational, community-based, and cultural contexts. I found positioning fitting and practical as both a theoretical optic and methodological mechanism.

Pedagogy of Vulnerability in Higher Education

Pedagogy of Vulnerability (PoV) is a mutual exchange based upon three teacher-led actions: a) intentionally disclosing personal, intimate stories and identity characteristics, b) positioning oneself as a co-learner by openly engaging in critical reflection to foster a reciprocal exchange of learning, and c) acknowledging when they do not know how to explain, respond to, or broach topics that arise (Brantmeier, 2013; McKenna & Brantmeier, 2020). These three foundational blocks are connected to self-disclosure, which can lead teachers and students toward taking up positions as co-learners or agentive equals in learning environments (Behari-Leak et al., 2021). Co-learning fosters mutual vulnerability (Zinn et al., 2009).

Recently, Behari-Leak et al. (2021) postulated, “Vulnerability can be used as a productive tool and decolonial catalyst to invigorate teaching and learning engagements in local and global university contexts” (p. 5). When teachers in higher education position themselves as co-knowledge builders, they challenge cultural and conventional notions commonly associated with authoritarian approaches to teaching (Behari-Leak et al., 2021). Dismantling these patriarchal narratives through PoV can stall the deficit-based continuation of “banking” in education (Freire, 1970, p.72).

Vulnerability and Writing Instruction in Higher Education

Educators can implicitly and explicitly take up vulnerable positions with student writers thus making vulnerable positions available for students to embody, as “vulnerability of others

illuminates our own vulnerability” (Johnson, 2014 p. 583). With an imbalanced concentration “on professional and theoretical understandings of writing instruction—especially in the context of higher education budget cuts... and more calls for standardized quantitative assessment—we can forget the importance of two impulses that compel writers: the desire to speak out of your most intimate experiences and to connect with communities in need” (Goldblatt, 2017, p. 442). Teachers can motivate students to write with voice within a community by modeling their own identity-based writing processes and by frequently encouraging students to choose topics connected to their lives, which can serve as a source of agency (Johnson, 2014).

Method

Setting

The research occurred in the midsouth United States, through a metropolitan university. The first four class meetings and course assignments were geared toward supporting undergraduates in: (a) engaging in a vulnerable collaborative writing process to cultivate agentive and positive images of themselves as writers (Nieminen et al., 2022), (b) examining writing experiences with a focus on how social systems shape what is valued in writing by the dominant culture (Dutro et al, 2013), (c) recognizing the impact of speaking and listening when writing and mentoring (McBride & Rentscher, 2020), and (d) reflecting upon how identities and positions within society influence assumptions and biases made about writers (Frankel et al., 2018).

Over the next 10 weeks, participants and course instructors met once a week for three hours at a public school. The school’s population was comprised of 100% minoritized students with 96% on free or reduced lunch. Fluctuation in attendance prevented consistency in groupings of undergraduates and elementary students.

Apart from parental permission, there were no prerequisites for the fourth and fifth graders to join writing club. Regardless of context, if you attended writing club; you were considered a writer. There were no red pens or grades imposed upon their drafts or publications. Emerging abilities such as handwriting legibility and editing skills (e.g., capitalization; grammar; punctuation; spelling) were not perceived as deficits. The focus was on scaffolding (Shooshtaria & Farzaneh, 2014) their individual experiences based on developmental and socioemotional needs and affirming and developing positive writing identities grounded by their cultural identities (Sleeter, 2014). Students were not required to participate when they did not feel like it (Truman et al., 2021). These types of pedagogical practices counter the perpetuation of assessment-driven writing instruction in K-12 settings (Graham, 2019) and institutions of higher learning (Goldblatt, 2017). The course attempts to meet two goals: a) improve writing confidence and motivation through autobiographical autonomous composing (Johnson, 2014) and (b) raise awareness of the ways that one's own identity impacts their social linguistic acts when engaging in the writing process within a community of writers (McVee, 2011).

Data Collection

With IRB approval, data collection occurred throughout the Fall 2021 academic semester. The data set outlined below was selected to demonstrate how undergraduates positioned themselves and others through written discourse and retellings (Kayi-Aydar, 2019).

Case study design was appropriate given my goal to gain a deeper sense of knowledge related to positioning, writing identities, agency, and PoV. Participant selection was based on the participants' frequent involvement in written course assignments, consistent in-person attendance, and particularly high levels of engagement with each other in online discussions. The data set for this study consists of the following: (a) 10 online writing and mentoring discussion forums, (b)

twelve self-as writer templates, (c) four final course reflections, (d) field notes, (e) audio recordings of writing conferences, and (f) analytic memos.

Data Analysis

The analysis was a multistage process consisting of repeated readings, iterative independent coding, and analytic memo writing (Saldana, 2016). I aimed to pinpoint variations within and among the participants' storylines (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). Review of the earliest codes allowed me to build categories, such as vulnerability and writing identity.

I also applied narrative positioning analysis (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). This analysis allowed me to locate specific instances of reflexive and interactive positioning. I drew on Bamberg's (1997) three levels of narrative positioning analysis by considering: (a) how the participants were positioned in comparison to others, (b) how each participant positioned themselves in comparison to others, and (c) how each participant positioned themselves in relation to themselves.

Finally, I identified "how positioning occurred, whom the participants positioned, and what happened as a result of a particular positioning act" (Kayi-Aydar, 2015, p. 97). This helped me understand the nature of the positions in relation to agency.

Positions of Course Instructors

Both of us are former elementary school teachers in metropolitan districts and self-identify as white women and feminists. Currently, we are teaching the course in tandem for the sixth consecutive semester. We strive to establish nontraditional writing spaces based on mutual vulnerability (McKenna & Brantmeier, 2020), asset-based discourse (Frankel et al., 2018), and cultural identity exploration by focusing on the individual strengths, narratives, and voices of the undergraduates and elementary students (Author, 2021). Furthermore, we frame the course as an

examination of the ways implicit bias and systemic racism/white supremacy shape what is valued in writing and what constitutes being a writer.

We consciously attempt to improvise our language moves to avoid deficit-based positioning-of-others and to position college and K-12 students with confidence and autonomy as writers (Vetter, 2010; Yoon, 2018). This stems from our shared pedagogical and research perspectives as we actively aim to upend patriarchal stereotypes of instructional writing practices in P-20 settings (Moore & Bass, 2017). By critiquing our whiteness and privilege and openly discussing matters linked to white supremacy and systemic racism particularly in North American society, we counter scholarly contributions that recenter or “invisibilize” and consequently homogenize whiteness (Casey, 2022, p.6).

When reflecting on our positions within the research, we consider how to support participants in their personal examination of their own positions at the macro-level (e.g., positions within society, religion, ethnicity) and micro-level (e.g., positions within our unique lived experience) (McVee, 2011). This two-sided reflective focus is critical because our language moves represent: (a) the positions we embody, (b) the positions we make available for students to embody (e.g., asset-based versus deficit-based), and (c) our implicit assumptions of what students are capable of in relation to their cultural identities (Yoon, 2008). The following section offers insight into each of the four participants’ social individualities.

Undergraduate Participants

The four participants, Renna, Mia, Jaydah, and Terri (all names are pseudonyms), agreed to participate in the study via informed consent. All of them identified as females, with two self-identifying as “Black,” one self-identifying as “African American,” and one as both “Hispanic” and “Native.” All participants received an “A” for their final course grade.

Jaydah

Jaydah enrolled in the course as an honors college student. She was a math major with aspirations of becoming a math teacher. During our first-class meeting on campus, she verbally expressed feeling anxious about returning to face-to-face classes after the COVID-19 quarantine. She described her identity as, “Black, proud, sister to her sisters, nerdy, tricky, fearful, sad, foodie, and cheerful.” She wore glasses and had a soft-spoken voice.

Renna

Renna relocated from the Midwest to the midsouth region of the United States shortly before the study began. The words she wrote to describe her identity include: “Hispanic, Native, bisexual, broke, young, tough, creative, college kid, daughter, adventurous, blunt.” Renna had experience tutoring high school age students prior to enrolling in the course. She spoke to co-instructors during breaks and outside of class about books as she was an avid reader. She drove a brightly colored SUV and wore glasses.

Mia

Mia was a Junior at the time of the study and self-identifies as a “Black woman.” Mia reported “loving basketball, playing sports, spending time with family, watching movies, cooking, and going to the park.” She was helping raise her young niece when she was enrolled in the course. She shared aspirations of opening a non-profit to support women upon their release from incarceration. Shortly after the course began, I found out that we both love Cicely Tyson. This connection was the catalyst for what would become a bond that continues to this day.

Terri

Terri describes her identity as “creative, outgoing, African American, female, a mother, sassy, light-skinned, thoughtful, and family-oriented.” When enrolled in the course, Terri was working

full-time in a local public school as a teaching assistant. She hoped to become a teacher after graduating. Terri was thrilled to share flyers with all of us one night after writing club. Her brother had just opened a new business. The flyers were inviting us to share in her family's excitement of this important time in her brother's life.

Findings

In this section, I consider the identities and positioning acts of each participant (Kayi-Aydar, 2019) in relation to vulnerability and discourse. The findings of the undergraduates' storylines are presented in three sections: before writing club sessions began, during, and at the end of the semester.

Before Writing Club Begins

In online discussions, the participants' sense of writing confidence and comfortability being vulnerable represented contrasting views. When situated as writers, the participants wrote two pieces of poetry and one autobiographical narrative. While all three pieces were identity-based, the use of metaphorical or figurative language was significantly greater in their "I Am" poems compared to the other two compositions.

Cultural Identities and Figurative Language

In an early online discussion, undergraduates post drafts of "I Am" poems. I include representative excerpts of their poetry here to provide insight into each undergraduate's identity. First, Renna writes powerfully about her life. She shares:

I am not a shadow of my future but a beacon to my past.

Never letting the fears of failure stop my dreams of change and allowing hope to flow past the abuse and shame.

I am the totem of my tribe, standing firm in our stories.

Representing years of culture lost to the hands of those who still wished I was silenced...

I am not the cunning crow, or the sly fox, but the fierce wolf who protects its own till its dying breath.

I am not to be silenced anymore because...

I am the daughter to [Father's first name] and [Mother's first name] [Surname], sister to [Brother's first name].

A family who will not and cannot be stopped.

Renna's use of metaphor offers a glimpse into her Native culture and heritage. She also seems to be using this writing experience to counter "past" positionings when she refers to "abuse and shame" and states she is "not to be silenced anymore." Like Renna, Mia's poem includes a mix of metaphors and literal cultural descriptions. Mia's "I Am" poem:

I am the ground beneath your feet

strong and sturdy

I am not the tectonic plates

disrupted by the rapid heating and cooling of earths' mantle

I am a woman

I am not an ANGRY Black woman

I am just PASSIONATE about my beliefs

I am the cancer in your cells

I won't stop attacking until I reach my goal

I am the dreadlocks on my head

that will never stop growing until I'm dead

Like Renna, Mia appears to be using her voice to address cultural stereotypes (e.g., implicit bias; deficit-based assumptions) imposed by the dominant culture. Both Mia and Renna use figurative and literal language in their poetry and seem comfortable embodying vulnerable positions as writers when they provide details about their cultural identities. In contrast, Jaydah's poem reveals less specific identity-based details in her mostly metaphorical piece. Excerpt from Jaydah's "I Am" poem:

I am the queen of a foreign land, with the power to control all things

I am a woman with the wits of a snake

I am a snow globe who keeps others out

I am a gem buried in the deep, covered up by a lack of motivation and lethargy

I am a flower that has yet to bloom, impatiently waiting for my time in the sun

Jaydah characterizes herself as "a snow globe who keeps others out." While this is a metaphorical description of self, it is relevant to how Jaydah positions herself for the remainder of the course in terms of being less comfortable being vulnerable as a writer. Like the others, Terri uses figurative language in her poem. Terri writes:

I am the star in my kid's sky not wanting their sky to come falling down

I am a tiger ready to embrace the wild not worry about what captivity has to hold

I am as sweet as a bee's honey, but I am not a bee, flying with no direction

I am as beautiful as a flower blooming in a field, but I am not made to perfection

I am strong as the wind in a hurricane that will not be DESTROYED!!!

Terri and Jaydah use more figurative language in their poems than the other two participants. Like Jaydah, Terri does not disclose any culturally specific identity characteristics to her audience. However, Terri does appear to reveal more about her social identity than Jaydah when

she identifies herself as a mother by comparing herself to the “star” in her “kid’s sky.” It seems that Mia and Renna were more comfortable being vulnerable because they incorporate details related to their culture.

Reflecting on Writing Processes

In the same discussion board where they post first drafts of “I Am” poems, participants describe their writing processes, and explain how drafting these pieces could impact their future experiences as writing mentors:

Mia’s reflection: My writing process started off easy because initially the words were flowing. Then I hit a road block...Once I got back in the flow of things it was easy to put down what I believed in....I think that it will give me a better understanding... It will also help me to encourage the students to dig deep and write from their hearts...

Mia appears to value vulnerability since she is willing to admit her own difficulty as a writer.

Now I see how Renna depicts similar process moments to Mia also using the term “blocked” and connecting that challenge as a future source of agency when mentoring:

Renna’s reflection: My writing process felt very blocked compared to when I usually write as I felt so focused on certain frustrations that I haven't been able to voice before. Overall, I am little surprised with how moderately pleased I am with it...I can’t lead students through things I don't understand from experience, so me having gone through the creative frustration and block of this piece will help me guide students through any writing blocks they may have. My question for everyone... do you think I should make this piece more personal and family oriented or take it a little more 'political' and point out native injustices? I would love to use my frustrations and anger for my identity in my piece but feel it could come off as offensive or insulting.

Like Mia, Renna relates the “creative frustration” of drafting a piece of poetry to an experience that will help her “guide students.” Both Renna and Mia use variations of the word “block” to depict their writing challenges. The nature of Mia’s positioning-of-other is seen when she gives advice to Renna:

Mia's discussion board response to Renna: I think that you should use your frustrations in everything that you write. That gives us an understanding about you as a person but it also allows us to think deeper about things that we wouldn't have had it not been addressed. Sometimes the truth is dark but I don't think that there's anything wrong with that...

When Mia tells Renna to “use [her] frustrations in everything that [she] write[s],” she positions Renna to continue writing from a vulnerable place. Mia and Renna’s positioning-of-self and other supports the notion of writers taking up being vulnerable with their audiences. Unlike Renna and Mia, Terri comments on her writing confidence as well as her drafting experience:

Terri's reflection: From the beginning after hearing the other poems, I wasn't sure I would write one. I wrote five lines and then became stuck. I keep thinking it doesn't sound right or mine isn't that deep. I know writing is something I am not good at and my writing don't always flow so I will be able to know how students feel to not be the best writer.

I interpret Terri’s words to be a sign of self-doubt stemming from her admission of limited writing confidence. Yet, Terri imagines how her deficit-based writing confidence can give her agency as a mentor. In this agentive expression, Terri disrupts the notion that one must consider themselves a “good” writer to be a “capable” writing mentor. Jaydah’s process reflection is somewhat similar to Terri’s in relation to being “stuck” when writing:

Jaydah's reflection: What we think, believe, and know all comes together to create a picture of who we are... I wasn't certain where all to take that idea, and I was a bit stuck, so I picked a few things to zone in on...I believe that by reaching into and understanding myself I can help the children I will be mentoring also look into themselves and put it on paper...by opening yourself to others, they will open up to you, creating an environment of vulnerability and understanding.

Similar to Terri, we see Jaydah share she got "a bit stuck" when drafting her poem. However, dissimilar to Terri, Jaydah does not equate being "stuck" to an obstacle that will become a mentoring asset that she could draw upon. But Jaydah's response does suggest that she "[believes]" examining her identity (e.g., being vulnerable) could lead her in "help[ing] the children." Yet, like Mia, Jaydah connects "creating an environment on vulnerability and understanding" to her ability to support students. In this discussion, I interpret Jaydah's discourse to be an advocate for vulnerability in writing and writing mentorship.

As the semester progresses, participants began to compose prose. These compositions were autobiographical short stories related to brief, yet meaningful moments in their lives. In an online discussion, participants were asked to describe how writing these "Explode-a-Moment" short stories compared to writing poetry. In the excerpts below, all the mentors examine their writing experiences. Renna, Jaydah, and Mia share more insight than Terri's brief discussion response:

Terri: I thought this writing was easier than the I Am poem...because it was personal. When Terri depicts narrative writing as "personal" and "easier" compared to poetry, it seems like she does not equate vulnerability with "personal" storytelling. Given how Terri reports having

less writing confidence than the other participants, I wonder if narrative storytelling possibly feels “easier” to her because it feels like a familiar genre.

Unlike Terri, the other three go into more detail when reflecting. In her primary discussion post, Mia writes:

In my opinion this writing is way more difficult than the I Am and I Believe poems. I say this because this writing is making me be more vulnerable. It’s making me think about a moment that had so much meaning and express that. With the poems it was basically just stating my opinions about myself and the things that I believe in. Nothing too personal or vulnerable was necessary. This process has been harder, but I am really enjoying it because it is allowing me to open up about a topic that is very near and dear to my heart without being judged.

Mia’s narrative describes what she experienced when she found out one of her family members passed away. Before drafting, Mia shared her idea with the class and cried in front of us as she talked through figuring out if this was a topic, she could bring herself to write about. Renna and Jaydah post comments in response to her decision to write about this emotional experience:

Renna to Mia: I really noticed how well you are doing with expressing all the thoughts you had running through your head at that time. I know this wasn't easy in the slightest but I appreciate you sharing with us!

Jaydah to Mia: I could feel the sorrow... you felt that day through your piece...There is no shame in showing your emotions and it’s refreshing to see a piece of such vulnerability.

Here I notice Jaydah and Renna’s positioning-of-other in relation to vulnerability and agency. Jaydah positions Mia to continue taking up a vulnerable position as a writer. Additionally,

Renna's reply to Mia corresponds to her positioning-of-self in relation to vulnerability. For example, Renna wrote about her cultural heritage in her "I Am" poem. However, Jaydah's positioning-of-self in relation to vulnerability as a writer counters her response to Mia. Jaydah posts:

My I believe poem feels like it's part of my identity...it can come off a lil strong and can definitely change ones opinion of me. The I am poem felt whimsical, and it was fun to write...The [Explode a Moment] piece was ok... I feel like people are looking for drama and emotion in those pieces, and since I'm neither of those things I didn't enjoy exaggerating on a very specific moment.

Jaydah's positioning-of-self contrasts with her positioning-of-other. For instance, in her reply to Mia above, Jaydah asserts, "There is no shame in showing your emotions." Additionally, and in relationship to the other three participants, Jaydah compares writing across genres in greater depth by dissecting the three self-as-writer assignments. I wonder if she felt more comfortable being vulnerable with the course audience when writing poetry and using metaphors (e.g., less explicit identity-based language).

Renna, like Mia, describes the process of composing narratives as more challenging than writing poetry:

Renna: This was definitely more difficult than the other pieces for me but I still enjoyed it a lot. The similarities I saw came mostly from the prepping, I usually just word vomit all of my thoughts and then organize them later which you can see from my process notes. The biggest difference is the overall structure of this piece, obviously, it being a story it needs to be very clear and flow...

Compared to poetry, Renna and Mia characterize the “Explode-a-Moment” process as “difficult.” I assert the less rigid constraints on structure and use of figurative language in poetry made Renna and Mia feel a greater sense of writing confidence and less vulnerable than when writing personal narratives. I argue this is also true for Jaydah as she relates composing her “I Am” poem to a “fun” sense of writing in metaphor and simile. Terri is the only writer that recounts narrative storytelling as “easier” compared to writing poetry and reported having less confidence as a writer.

I noticed parallels between Jaydah and Terri’s positioning acts that contrasted with the parallels I observed between the other two’s positioning-of-self and other as writers. The difference appears to be relative to how the participants positioned themselves in relation to vulnerability and being a writer in the course. These parallels represent two separate storylines. One is rooted in exploring vulnerability through writing and the other seems grounded by an intrinsic, protective instinct (e.g., refraining from disclosing vulnerable information in poetry and prose). Unexpected changes in their discourse appear in their written reflections after the undergraduates begin mentoring student writers. Before addressing those changes, I analyze how the four of them imagine themselves as mentors prior to meeting the fourth and fifth graders.

Imagining self-as-mentor

Early in the semester, before meeting elementary student writers, participants were asked to engage with the text *This Book is Anti-Racist* (Jewell, 2020). The undergraduates considered their social identities by creating identity maps and were prompted to explain how this type of activity is applicable to their future roles as mentors in the after-school writing club (Jimenez, 2014). In the following discussion, all four mentors position themselves and their future writing club students in relation to vulnerability and agency. Mia posts:

When it comes to the young writers, I will always encourage them to use their imaginations. I would always let them know that they are not being judged and that they can speak their truths in their writings. I would let them know that there are no right or wrong answers... I would also tell them to have fun with everything that they write.

Mia explains how she will “always” let student writers know they can write without fear of “being judged.” Similarly, Terri posts:

We need to learn who they are instead of judging them first. Knowing a student is understanding how that student fits into their community...After getting to know the student’s identity will allow us as mentors to better help them in their needs and build connections.

Like Mia, Terri brings up something similar in terms of avoiding making judgements about the identities of the fourth and fifth grade writers. Renna’s discourse aligns with Terri and Mia’s:

Renna: I consider all writing to be reflections of the writer, because of this it is important for the writer to understand not only where they come from but who they are because of that. This helps fuel the writing from personal experiences, to stories, from traditions and even just norms from characteristics of your identity. Knowing how to do this for ourselves will also help us guide students in their writing process.

Renna equates writing about “traditions” and “personal experiences” as something that will “help us guide students.” Like Renna, Jaydah discusses how writing from a vulnerable position can support her ability to “guide” future student writers:

Jaydah: We will be mentoring young students who are still in development and learning themselves, their beliefs, and who they want to be. It is impossible to guide a young mind

into venturing deep within themselves if we, as adults, can't explain and describe ourselves to others or ourselves.

Jaydah attributes "adults" lacking vulnerability to making it "impossible to guide" a student writer. Like her, the other three participants appear to link vulnerability to agentive positions for themselves as mentors and future student writers.

Writing mentors became familiar with Jacqueline Woodson through the instructors' use of a mentor text titled, *What I Believe* an excerpt from *Brown Girl Dreaming* (Woodson, 2017). and viewed and shared reactions to "Writers Speak to Kids: Jacqueline Woodson" (SBTN Review, 2020, 3:35). Participants were asked to offer ideas on applying Woodson's advice to their future writing and mentoring experiences. Renna responds first with a "powerful" reaction:

Renna: Just her [Ms. Woodson's] own drive of "the stories aren't there because I haven't written them yet" was very powerful for me. In exploring more of my heritage. I have tried to find YA books about native children and have found that it is a very slim selection which was always discouraging but I feel like now there is an opportunity for me to contribute something. I think just encouraging their independence and life stories to be expressed in their writings is the best way to apply her advice to our students.

Renna discusses the void she finds when looking for young adult texts "about native children."

She "now" sees this gap as "an opportunity for [her] to contribute something" as an author.

Unlike Renna, Terri does not connect aspects of her cultural identity. However, she brings up her writing confidence again and situates herself as vulnerable in the process:

Terri: I like when [Woodson] said no one sees our first draft. I do believe everyone does have a story to tell...with young writers...have them think about their lives... I don't think I'm the best writer but in class, I have noticed...I think it's going to be hard but

thoughts start coming to my head and after leaving it alone and coming back to read it again, I come up with more...

I noticed Terri's recursive comments on her writing confidence when she states she is not "the best writer." Terri also echoes Renna's comments regarding mentoring student writers and giving them time to "think about their lives" when they engage in the writing process. Like Terri, Mia comments on Woodson's advice related to first drafts and audience:

Mia: I would apply Jacqueline's advice to my writing process...by always letting myself know that no one is going to see my first draft. I'm also going to allow myself to actually write what comes to mind instead of skipping out on a lot of things due to the fear of being judged or misunderstood. When it comes to the young writers... I would always let them know that they are not being judged and that they can speak their truths' in their writings...

Mia does not reveal information related to her writing confidence like Terri does, but Mia goes on to mention that she could "apply Jacqueline's advice." Similarly, Jaydah discusses:

In our mentoring we should make sure the children always have the stage...When I get writers block it's definitely because I'm fearful of what I may write and how people may interpret it. I especially feel that way in this class, since I feel my story/struggles are different than the class... I noticed that Ms. Woodson seemed very true to herself...her...natural hair stood out to me...similar to my natural hair that I hide underneath my braids, but I loved how she rocked it and how much confidence she had.

Like Mia, Jaydah's response to Woodson's perspective addresses feeling "fearful" of revealing certain parts of her identity as a writer because she believes her "story/struggles are different" compared to her peers in "class." While Jaydah and Mia both discuss "fear" in terms of being a

writer, Jaydah appears less comfortable channeling this emotion as a source of agency the way Mia does. I also noticed that Jaydah commented on Woodson's "natural hair" and "confidence." Jaydah takes up a vulnerable position when she admits hiding her "natural hair."

When imagining themselves as writing mentors, the discourse used by all four undergraduates is agentive in nature. Each of them disclosed ways their writing identities, perspectives, and personal experiences function as resources of strength or sources of autonomy. However, changes within some of their positioning acts occur once they begin in-person mentoring.

After Meeting Writing Club Student Writers

Toward the midpoint of the semester, participants reflect on their mentoring experience after attending a recent writing club session. Participants describe moments when they felt successful encouraging student writers to revise and explain if any challenges occurred, and if so, to describe how they handled those moments.

Renna and Mia use asset-based discourse in their positioning-of-self and other. In the excerpt below, Mia retells her mentoring experience:

Mia: I told her to arrange her sentences in the way in which she felt they flowed properly. All of those encouragements worked. [Child] is always focused and she is a very great writer. I felt like the entire session was successful. [Child] was able to get a lot of her Explode a Moment finished, and she was able to start on her artwork for it as well.

Mia positions young writers with autonomy when she explains how she worked with one child in particular. Mia characterizes the "entire" writing club "session" as "successful." Likewise, Renna posts:

I think just having our students leave and saying they wish they could do this more often. I don't believe it's because of anything I did but it is still encouraging to know that they enjoy the environment and the work they are doing... [Child] just started working immediately... seeing her own sparkle for writing is very heartwarming and makes me want to write more too.

Renna remembers how students left this writing club session commenting on wanting to attend writing club “more often.” Renna also shares that she gained motivation to “write more.” When positioning elementary writers in their retellings, Mia and Renna’s asset-based language promotes student agency. They both appear to position themselves as vulnerable co-learners in their writing club memories as well.

I noticed Terri and Jaydah begin using less agentive language to describe their mentoring experiences. Terri posts:

I don't think talking about a piece for a lot of days works with these students. They work on it one day and they are not interested anymore. It is like pulling teeth and nails to get some more words out of the students... [Child] was uninterested after talking about his piece...

Terri’s language limits student agency. I interpret Terri’s post and her description of an “uninterested” child as a deficit-based assumption and restriction of student agency. She seems to assume they lost interest in revising as opposed to finding creative solutions to spark motivation or wondering if the students may have felt tired after a long day at school. Similarly, Jaydah retells:

I was able to get a lot out of [Child] while he was eating out in the hallway and we were just 1-on-1. As soon as we got in the classroom he lost focus. I can’t tell you what wasn’t

a challenge this session... [Child] was unfocused and eventually just stopped contributing, but it was due to him being hungry and also infrequently coming to writing club and I can't blame him for any of that.

Notice the emphasis on everything being a challenge, the negative assumption that his behavior was related to “being hungry” and “infrequent” attendance. In this retelling, Jaydah focuses on problematic behavior which is out of her control vs. positioning the child as possibly needing her to intervene in school-based issues in which she has agency. Echoing Terri’s sentiment, she appears to make deficit-based assumptions related to attention span. This illustration represents several times Jaydah blamed forces outside of her control, dismissing her own agency and others.

Terri, like Jaydah, also used deficit-based language. When they label students with adjectives like “uninterested” and “unfocused” they not only restrict their perceptions of students’ capabilities but also their own agency as mentors (e.g., reaching frustration level). On the other hand, Renna and Mia position themselves and others as autonomous (e.g., capable) and their assumptions recursively appear asset-based in nature.

End of Writing Club/Course Semester Reflections

At the end of the semester, participants reflect on their writing and mentoring experiences in a final online discussion board and directly to us.

Final Online Reflections

In their final online discussion, we asked participants to describe themselves as writers and explain if any of those attributes changed since the beginning of this course. I noticed Renna and Mia using a shared discourse related to writing confidence, writing about personal and vulnerable experiences, and gaining a stronger perspective of the writing process. In the

following excerpt, congruity surfaces when Renna begins her post by addressing her writing confidence:

Renna: I see myself as a moderately strong writer...I am still very self-conscious of my writing because as much as I would like to share it more publicly, I am afraid it will come across wrong in one way or another. However, I still love writing for myself (not for classes, except this one). I have found that I actually enjoy the revision process, it is a challenge most certainly but one of the good challenges that make you feel accomplished after... I feel a little more comfortable sharing my work and have considered how to do that after this course ends.

Renna shares gaining positive perspective on the revision process. Mia's reflection is also germane to writing from vulnerable positions, new understandings of revision, and strong writing self-concept. Mia discloses:

I believe that I have a lot to say and writing is a great outlet for it...Since being in this course I've opened up more and I've become more vulnerable in my pieces. Being in this course has also helped me broaden my perspective on other types of writings. I classify myself as a great writer now since I have learned how to revise my pieces multiple times without getting frustrated.

Mia and Renna's thoughts on revision are similar. This is interesting because they position themselves and others to feel comfortable exercising agency by embodying vulnerable positions as writers. I assert taking up vulnerable positions is contingent upon one's intrinsic sense of contextual autonomy in relation to a social episode's cultural power dynamics.

Throughout the course Mia and Renna describe vulnerable moments as difficult but also catalysts for strengthening their writing confidence and revision perspectives aligned with the

course's focus on writing as a non-linear and social process. I interpret their thoughts on revision relative to vulnerability because all participants wrote and received feedback from peers and instructors. Like Renna, Mia positions herself and others to take up vulnerable positions as writers throughout the entirety of the course. I argue Renna and Mia found appreciation for revision because they were developing pieces that reflected their positioning-of-self as vulnerable composers.

Unlike Mia and Renna, Terri and Jaydah report no significant change in their writing approaches/perspectives after taking the course. Additionally, transcribed writing conferences and field notes show Jaydah and Terri spent less time conferencing with peers and instructors and asked fewer questions for revision than the other two writing mentors. I suggest the lack of change is connected to feeling less autonomous in relation to engaging in vulnerable, social writing. In the next excerpt, Jaydah discloses her thoughts on being a writer in the course and her focus on getting a good grade:

Jaydah: I wouldn't say much has changed of my writing since taking this course...I generally hide my true meaning of things between the lines of my work, whether it's because I don't want to reveal myself or in fear of stepping on someone else's toes with my own personal opinions. However... I have no choice but to elaborate more in my writing pieces if I want a good grade...Kids are still discovering themselves and having them explore their feelings and thoughts helps shapes them as people. However I'm an adult who knows who they are, I don't elaborate because it's beneficial for myself...

Contrasting Mia and Renna's perspectives as writers, Jaydah's positioning-of-self within the same context is different. Although we as instructors made concerted efforts to challenge conventional power dynamics, Jaydah seems skeptical of her right to remain impervious as an

undergraduate within the higher education course power structure (e.g., compliance; need strong grades to graduate).

Jaydah's description of a dichotomy between "adults" and "kids" represents a convention that we, as instructors, intended to disrupt. I suggest her retellings reflect "fear" based perspectives in her positioning-of-self and other. This is also evident in her recursive reports of feeling a sense of pressure to embody vulnerability as a student in relation to power dynamics (e.g., instructor/student; good grade/bad grade). Her stance appears similar to Terri who reports that her writing attributes were not significantly affected:

Terri: I don't think of myself as a strong writer...I don't think... my attributes changed since the beginning of class. I will still do the same process steps the next time I write.

Writing is still not my favorite thing to do but some writing is easier than others... Here we see Terri chronicling her writing confidence. When brainstorming ideas for her "Explode-a-Moment," Terri told one of the instructors in a writing conference, "I had two choices." The first choice "was kinda really, really personal I just kinda didn't want everyone knowing about it." In the same conference, Terri described her second writing topic idea as a "mother moment." She contemplates taking up a more vulnerable position as a writer but opts, with the full support of instructors, to position herself where she is seemingly more comfortable.

Terri does not elaborate as much as Jaydah does, yet both appear to feel more comfortable in less vulnerable positions as writers within the course. They both agree the course did little to change any of their writing attributes. Unlike Terri, Jaydah appeared more comfortable being vulnerable in online discussions when situated as a college student as opposed to functioning as a "creative" writer. I assert Jaydah and Terri's positioning acts in relation to

agency and vulnerability are counter examples of Mia and Renna's positioning-of-self and other.

Final Course Reflections

In their final course reflections, participants were asked to describe what they learned about themselves as writers and ways they strove to nurture the elementary students' writing identities when acting as mentors. Renna writes:

Renna: I hoped they would see how fun writing can be in their everyday life and know that they were capable of writing for themselves...For myself I learned that I really do like writing, not just for school work but for myself and for fun. It is something I want to pursue more and while I don't think I could make a career of it I think I could still do something larger than just in my own journal...I was just patience and allowing others to speak. This is definitely something I will continue to practice when meeting new people in learning more about them. In both my students and peers it was important for me to just let them be and not try to insert myself.

When reflecting, Renna discusses "hoping" the student writers would realize their own agency. Also emphasizing asset-based perspectives, Mia reflects:

I hoped that the writers would become more confident in themselves. Especially, since hearing my background and where I came from, I hoped that it helped. I also wanted the writers to understand that it wasn't a class. There wasn't a right or wrong way to do things. I hope that they became more confident. I learned a lot of things about myself as a writer throughout the semester. However, the biggest thing that I learned is that it is ok to be vulnerable. Being vulnerable in my [explode-a-moment] piece allowed me to realize that I'm not always being judged. It allowed me to see that it is ok to speak my truths. My

thoughts, my ideas, and my feelings in my writings are valid. I enjoyed exploring that part of myself throughout this semester.

Mia, like Renna communicates that she “hoped” the student writers gained confidence. She also reiterates that she “learned it is okay to be vulnerable” when she references her Explode-a-Moment experience as the cause for realizing she was “not always being judged.” Mia and Renna’s recursive interactive and reflexive asset-based language promotes agency of self and other in their writing club retellings.

Unlike Mia and Renna, the other two participants’ use a mix of asset-based and deficit-based language in their final course reflections. Terri discusses:

Terri: I have never really liked writing...While writing my explode a moment, I enjoyed elaborating on the details to help my reader visually understand... I can say I was becoming a little better at writing... I’ve noticed over time that I’ve advanced in how I structure my paragraphs, however, not so much with my sentences...With [one] student I was mentoring...I just kept encouraging him to finish his piece... on his bad days, I had to be a listening ear to his problems and get him to get in the right mindset to continue his writing...With that being said, make sure you know the story behind every student to be able to help them more and not drag them down even more.

Again, Terri expresses a positive experience writing her autobiographical short story. She admits she is “becoming a little better at writing.” However, Terri still appears to situate herself as less vulnerable and more aligned to conventional interactions between learners and adults. Jaydah goes into more detail in her final reflection:

Jaydah: ...The [children] weren’t the easiest to work with... it also feels like an embarrassment to think that I can’t handle a nine-year-old... working with [Child] was an

eye-opener for me...I saw his constant hunger... and assumed he wouldn't be able to produce anything because of it. I assumed he had food insecurity at home, and that's why he was a constant problem in the writing club. I made all these assumptions and then I saw him at the celebration and was surprised. Not only did he have good relationships with his other teachers, but he was both proud and happy to show off his work....I can only imagine the work he would have put out in the writing club if he had the same bond with me as his teachers...

Jaydah discusses the assumptions she made about one child that she perceived as a “constant problem.” This is an example of how implicit bias can limit and narrow what we expect ourselves and others to be capable of doing. She goes on to disclose feeling a sense of “embarrassment” for not being able to “handle a nine-year old.” This is another example of Jaydah's positioning acts in relation to conventional power dynamics in teaching and mentoring. At the end of her reflection, Jaydah returns to the idea of vulnerability sharing:

I like to withhold information in my writing,...I see information as power, and the more you expose yourself... the more others have to use against you. This class...encouraged vulnerability so that we as a class can form deeper bonds, but it just made me uncomfortable.

Jaydah seems to equate forming deeper bonds to the way the course “encouraged vulnerability,” but shares being vulnerable made her “uncomfortable.” I assert Jaydah's recursive positioning-of-self as a writer reflects her preference to “withhold information in [her] writing.” This exposure can provide others with power “to use against” her. I believe this explains why she felt uncomfortable as a writer in the course.

Before mentoring student writers, all four participants use discourse valuing vulnerability in writing and mentoring. Additionally, each of them discloses feeling capable of mentoring regardless of writing confidence or comfort in being vulnerable within the context of the course. Once writing club began, Terri and Jaydah's mentoring reflections are communicated with deficit-based language, which appears to reveal how they position the elementary students with less agency. Nevertheless, Mia and Renna position themselves as vulnerable co-learners in their writing club memories, yielding agentic positions for self and other to take up as identity-based writers.

Discussion

As a result of a variety of positions made available to the undergraduates, the analysis indicates that the instructors' explicit attempts to position undergraduates were taken up and negotiated in contrasting and unpredicted ways (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). A possible reason for this may be the multiple roles made available to undergraduates in the course (e.g., writer, mentor, student) (Kayi-Aydar, 2019), which were qualified and strained by the explicit pedagogical literacy methods of the course (Goldblatt, 2017; Moore & Bass, 2017). I noticed parallels related to agency and vulnerability between two participants that differed from the parallels I observed in the other two.

Two participants positioned themselves with more agency as writers and mentors when using the word "block" to describe temporary moments of writing difficulty (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a) and believe experiencing these "blocks" as writers will give them a better sense of how to support writing club students. They also described how being vulnerable in the course was challenging but an impetus for strengthening their writing confidence and motivation, revising processes, and their desire to share their writing (Johnson, 2014). Their new thoughts on revision

seemed relative to vulnerability because participants openly shared their identity-based poetry and personal narratives in a community setting that offered feedback from peers and instructors (Behari-Leak et al., 2021). I wonder if they view revision in a different light because of the personal and cultural identity details shared in their pieces, which resulted from being in a course that they considered a safe place to share and conference without fear of being judged (McKenna & Brantmeier, 2020; Johnson, 2014). Additionally, these two participants consistently position themselves and others to take up being vulnerable writers.

In contrast, the participants that describe being “stuck” when composing, position themselves with less agency because the term is a more permanent expression of an inability to navigate the writing process (Merriam-Webster. n.d.b). This could explain why these two participants were less motivated to explore new ways to adapt their writing habits. They also report little to no change in their composing processes because of the course. One of these participants does not position others to write about vulnerable topics, and reflexively positions herself as less vulnerable in compositions by refraining from writing about certain topics because she either did not feel comfortable sharing them with course members and/or did not feel comfortable writing them in general. This is how she defined her vulnerability threshold within the course, which demonstrates how feeling uncomfortable being vulnerable in higher education settings (Behari-Leak et al., 2021) can prevent writers from writing about what compels them the most (Goldblatt, 2017; Joseph et al., 2020).

One participant’s positioning acts were more nuanced than the other three. The tension in this participant’s storyline appears when she positions others to take up being vulnerable as writers in all online discussions but only briefly positions herself in the same way. Her discourse is critical of the course’s interactive positioning and evident in her recursive reports of feeling a

sense of pressure to embody vulnerability as a writer (e.g., reflexive positioning). Her scrutiny is interpreted in connection to power dynamics often associated with higher education courses (e.g., professor/undergraduate; high scores/low scores) and conventional approaches to mentoring or tutoring (e.g., authority/protege; teacher/learner). She seems to imagine and retell experiences based-on traditional mentoring dyads (McBride & Rentscher, 2020) and fear of criticism.

All participants expressed asset-based perspectives rooted in vulnerability before meeting or mentoring fourth and fifth grade writers. Regardless of writing confidence, the four undergraduates imagined themselves as capable mentors in the asset-based after-school writing club. However, the nature of their discourse changed once writing club began and the course's writing focus centered development through revision, conferencing, and feedback. Three participants reported having more writing confidence, and one shared having less writing confidence. However, I interpret the use of asset-based language to be specific to each participants' embodiment of their reflexive positions as vulnerable writers. I do not interpret the use of asset-based language in relation to writing confidence. In other words, I am not suggesting that instructors or mentors must have confidence as writers to be asset-based teachers/mentors.

The two mentors who wrote about their cultural identities and personal challenges in life used asset-based language when acting as writing mentors with fourth and fifth graders. However, the other two mentors refrained from making similar disclosures in their writing and used more deficit-based language about their capabilities and student agency when situated as mentors. This is not to say that all participants were not vulnerable. Two undergraduates were simply not as comfortable being as vulnerable in this context as their peers (Priestly et al., 2012).

One participant was more comfortable being vulnerable in relation to her cultural identity and life experiences when she was situated as a traditional undergraduate in the course (e.g., online discussions) but the opposite when situated as a creative writer (e.g., author of poetry/prose) and mentor (Truman et al., 2021). This demonstrates how the power dynamics in higher education intersect with the role of a college student to understandably make students more hesitant to take up vulnerable positions as writers (Brantmeier, 2013; Moore & Bass, 2017; Kayi-Aydar, 2019).

When situated as writers, the reflexive speech acts (e.g., positioning-of-self) of two participants challenged taking up the vulnerable positions made available by course instructors (Behari-Leak et al., 2021). These two participants recursively: (a) report little to no change in their writing practices as a result of the course, (b) felt less comfortable taking up vulnerable positions as writers, especially when interactively positioned as a creative writer in a community-based higher education literacy course, (c) use the word “stuck” as opposed to “block” to position themselves with less agency within the writing process, (d) do not reveal aspects of their cultural identities in their creative writing, and (e) use more deficit-based language and less asset-based language in their narrative retelling positioning acts, which limits agency of self and other (Herbel-Eisenmann et al., 2008). Despite the deficit-based language used in their retellings, these two participants did not reveal negative assumptions to children, instructors, or fellow mentors in-person.

Participants that interactively positioned others to be vulnerable as writers in online discussions and course assignments while reflexively taking up that same position when writing recursively: (a) describe finding a new sense of appreciation for revision within the social process of writing, (b) use the word “block” as opposed to “stuck” to position themselves with

agency within the writing process, (c) acknowledge that being vulnerable was a difficult but valuable part of their writing and mentoring experience, (d) reveal aspects of their cultural identities in their writing, and (e) use more asset-based language and less deficit-based language in their narrative retelling positioning acts, promoting agency of self and other (Vetter, 2010).

I assert creating writing spaces based on mutual vulnerability (Zinn et al., 2009) in higher education increases the likelihood of college students feeling empowered (Johnson, 2014) to exercise their agency by taking up vulnerable positions as writers and mentors. This can positively affect their attitudes toward revising pieces independently, repeatedly, and in social spaces. I also argue when instructors and college students risk being vulnerable writers (Joseph et al., 2020) in courses like ours and realize they can do so without fear of judgement, they are more likely to consider ways to use language that disrupts deficit-based assumptions rooted in implicit bias, making agentic positions available for other writers to embody (McVee, 2011).

Theoretical Implications

Positioning theory dilates the literature's scope of knowledge to encompass the variety of social experiences that collide to represent one's identity as a writer and one's ability to mentor young writers. In the course, we strove to challenge conventional perceptions of what it means to be a writer and the traditional power dynamics associated with teaching and mentoring (McBride & Rentscher, 2020). The explicit, often improvised, discourse of course instructors significantly affected the social and community-based writing experiences in the course (Auckerman et al., 2017; Vetter, 2010). Teachers' values and beliefs profoundly impact their language moves and their positioning-of-self and other in learning environments, and there is a "need for teachers to gain a greater awareness of how interactive and reflexive positioning operates in classrooms" (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018, p. 11). When teachers speak to students, their discourse not only

reflects their beliefs and values but also the level of agency made available for students to contextually embody as positions (Priestley et al., 2012; Yoon, 2008). Positioning theory enabled me to see this in practice within the university course and after-school writing club (Flagg-Williams & Bokhorst-Heng, 2017) and in my P-20 teaching reflections.

When functioning as a limiting act, interactive teacher positioning often: (a) disproportionately affects marginalized students (Martin-Beltrán, 2010; Yoon, 2008), (b) reflects the institutional power dynamics shaping deficit-oriented perceptions about student proficiency based on high-stakes standardized assessment (Dutro et al., 2013), and (c) could become static in nature similar to occupying a role, which threatens to counteract the inherent fluid nature of positioning (Davies & Hunt, 1994; Herbel-Eisenmann et al., 2015; Kayi-Aydar, 2019). This restrictive element is important to consider because the identities of learners affect the quality of instruction and level of support made available to students by those with power and can be projected in the students' reflexive positionings (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018).

Investigating instructional literacy practices as acts of positioning that influence a student's ability to exercise autonomy can: (a) allow audiences to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between speech and other acts as well as power and access to agency (Harré, 2012; Kayi-Aydar; 2019), (b) offer insight into teacher positioning-of-self and other in addition to student positioning- of-self and other in the areas of literacy, writing, and community-based course development in higher education (Evans, 1996; Yoon, 2008), and (c) decrease the layer of ambiguity within the existing body of literature by differentiating position from role and examining the inherent relationship between power, agency, and discourse in literacy and teacher education (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018; McVee, 2011).

While the literature clearly identifies writing attitudes and self-efficacy as crucial elements in writing instruction and becoming a writer (Graham et al., 2007), the research reports inconsistent findings related to students' positive or negative writing attitudes shifting throughout their educational journey (Pajares, 2003; Flagg-Williams & Bokhorst-Heng, 2017). Moreover, there is a call for future studies to examine pedagogical literacy practices as explicit acts of positioning that influence how students negotiate positions made available to them via conversation in learning environments (Evans, 1996; Frankel et al., 2018; McVee, 2011). When considering voids in the literature along with the utility of positioning theory in literacy research, it is imperative to further examine the effects associated with how pedagogies of vulnerability and teacher discourse (e.g., positioning-of-self and other) locate students in relation to exercising agency and becoming confident, vulnerable writers.

Concluding Reflection

In this study, I aimed to provide insight into theoretical discussions regarding positioning (e.g., agency) and pedagogies of vulnerability (e.g., disrupting traditional role-based power dynamics) in community-based writing courses in higher education. The findings suggest that instructors can assign vulnerable and agentic positions (Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Vetter, 2010, Yoon, 2008) for college students to embody as writers and mentors in out-of-school writing programs (NCTE, 2009). However, vulnerability, in this context, is understood in connection to privilege and power in social contexts (Brantmeier, 2013). When students feel comfortable taking up vulnerable positions as writers by disclosing personal and cultural aspects of their identities, they not only position themselves with agency but are also likely to develop their writing processes through revision and make similar agentic positions available for other student writers to take up.

Literacy encompasses the four gatekeeping skills required to exercise agency in social spaces. I hope that this analysis magnifies the research community's vision of what it means to not only be a teacher of writing but also what it means to be a writer, especially considering the critical nature of discourse, positioning, privilege, and power in P-20 literacy settings.

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