TEACHERS AS WRITERS:
A CASE STUDY OF A TEACHER WRITING GROUP

by

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ABSTRACT

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Writing instruction has been neglected, both in teacher preparation courses and in professional development in literacy. Yet, the adoption of new standards and teacher evaluation systems by many states demands increased writing instruction and teacher “effectiveness” in providing it. Teachers, then, have faced higher expectations for writing instruction with little support for what those expectations mean or how to enact them in their own contexts. To meet these demands, it has been suggested that teachers must see themselves as writers in order to work most productively with children as writers. Therefore, if teachers must identify as writers to be “effective,” then teachers who do not identify as writers are also denied an identity as “good teachers.” These static, binary identity categories serve as “cover stories” to obscure a much more complicated reality.

Informed by critical writing pedagogy and a literacy-and-identity studies framework, this study explored how teacher-writers in one school-based writing group
perform, understand, and narrate their identities as writers and teachers of writing. Utilizing a narrative inquiry methodology for group meetings and interviews, I analyzed the complex, fluid, and sometimes contradictory identities of teacher-writers, and the construction, reconstruction, and mobilization of stories within and about the group. The static, binary identities group members claimed served as cover stories, the static categorical writer-selves that we construct in relation to our conceptions of an idealized writer. My study concluded that the relative autonomy of the writing group provided a shelter from the school culture of accountability where emotion and profanation were possible.

This work proposed that, in acknowledging the complex nature of writing identities and the “ unofficial” emotional lives of teachers, we can push beyond a static writer/non-writer binary and disrupt a hierarchical, outcome-based notion of staff development. As a result, space for staff development, in which a diverse school community joins together to engage in experiences, learning, and identity work that make space for emotion, may be created.
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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

As a staff developer at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP), my summer work is to travel across the country—to San Antonio, Texas; Aurora, Colorado; Mattawan, Michigan; or Logan, West Virginia—to lead Writing Institutes with upper-elementary school teachers. In each of these places, I have asked the teachers—who were, for the week, my students—to write a personal narrative. TCRWP’s philosophy is that teachers should be engaged in the work in which we engage our students—to model, to discover potential challenges, and to deepen our own understanding of the elements of the genre. In each location, throughout our week together, teachers often looked up from their writing and told me, “This isn’t very good,” “I can’t do this,” or even “I’m just not a writer.” By the end of our weeks together, however, these comments often changed. More often, I would hear, “I didn’t think I could do this” or “This was more fun than I thought it would be!” Across the week, the experience of engaging in writing and becoming a member of a writing community, despite its short-lived nature, led these teachers to begin to revise the stories of themselves as writers. At the end of these weeks, I would leave our writing celebrations tired and often emotional. The teachers’ words, whispered with eyes downcast or staring
straight into mine and imploring me to forgive their shortcomings, were memories I could not seem to shake. It was an experience that became a pattern I could not ignore.

Personally, I have always felt at home in the identity of “writer” (though, of course, this is the constructed narrative I tell in retrospect). Writing was something that came easily to me, and because of that, an identity as a writer also came easily. I kept stacks of notebooks full of journal entries and poems throughout my childhood, and could not wait each year for the “Young Author’s Competition” deadline to roll around. I relished the creative writing assignments of elementary school, and smoothly transitioned to analytical essays and research reports as I got older. Writing came “naturally” (whatever that means), in the sense that my practices matched neatly with the expectations I encountered and the “official knowledge” sanctioned in school environments. I would sit down to write, words would spill out across the page, becoming first drafts that I did not look at twice.

As Gee (1989) pointed out, literacy is “intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society” (p. 19). Writing was a skill that was highly valued in my suburban, predominantly White, middle-class schooling experiences, and my love of writing was reinforced with positive feedback. A preoccupation with affirmation of this type may be particular to what Kamler (2001) referred to as “my middle-class good-girl desire-to-please” (p. 9). These identity markers seem entwined with my reading and writing identities. Many of the books I carried with me everywhere I went, for example, were written by women who looked like me about girls who looked like me and lived lives like mine. I never considered that this was not the case for everyone because I never had to. I utilized the discourses available to me to construct
myself as a “good girl”; those same discourses shaped (and continue to shape) my conceptions of teaching and learning, reading and writing (Miller, 2005). As Janks (2010) reminded us, when “we are the ideal reader of a text, sharing its presuppositions and the positions it takes up, then the text appears natural to us and it is harder to step back from it and to see it as a socially constructed representation” (p. 97). My identities as a reader, a writer, and later, as a teacher were facilitated by my identity markers and privilege as a White, straight, middle-class female.

Heading to college, I longed to pursue writing and the more prestigious identity of “author.” But I felt nervous about the criticism, and uncertain of how to turn an English major into a career (an admission that serves to disrupt the “easy” and “natural” writing identity I have constructed). And so I chose teaching, the profession of both my parents, against their wishes. The dream of my own authorship became a dream of inspiring my students to “find their voice” and “tell their own stories”—conceptions I accepted wholeheartedly and had not yet begun to trouble or question. When I arrived to my first teaching assignment as a fourth-grade classroom teacher, there was little writing curriculum and much pressure for students to perform well on the state writing assessment. So, I began writing demonstration pieces and exemplars, and quickly got involved in developing writing curriculum, first at my grade level, then at the school level, and finally, at the district level. Yet, I was happiest in my classroom, modeling my own writing and conferencing with students about theirs. I relished introducing a beautiful new vocabulary word or types of figurative language. I swelled with pride when my students took a risk, revised in big ways, or told a story in their own “authentic” voice (a performance which conformed, of course, to my own expectations). I deeply embraced
the workshop approach and its emphasis on “finding your own voice in your writing,”
taking students’ experiences and meanings seriously and encouraging active student
engagement (Lensmire, 1998, p. 263). My identity as a writer felt so foundational to my
work as a teacher of writing. Was I a writer who taught or a teacher who wrote? There
seemed to be no way of separating them for me.

However, many of my colleagues did not feel the same way. They felt
uncomfortable developing and sharing their own writing, both with their colleagues and
with their students. They were not sure what features of writing they were looking for in
student writing or what feedback to give them to improve. “I’m just not a writer,” they
would tell me, considering the case closed. Since it had come so easily to me, I was not
sure how to support them, how to help them see, as I hoped to show my students, that
writing could be learned, be an identity that could be taken up and strengthened with
deliberate practice. I believed that the writing work happening in my classroom was
powerful, but it was not working for all of my colleagues—or, if I was honest with
myself, for all of my students. It was only then that I began to question why my voice
seemingly fit a writing identity, while so many others were not finding places for their
own voices. What made writing and voice “authentic”? What made a “writer” identify as
such? And who got to decide what “counts”?

That emerging dissonance eventually propelled me to leave the classroom and
come to Teachers College to try out new identities as a doctoral student and a staff
developer. Through these experiences, I came to question my own coherent narrative of a
“natural” writing identity. From my fears of transitioning somehow from “writer” to
“author” governing my college choices to the imposter syndrome that emerged as I
encountered academic writing in the doctoral program, other narratives I could construct (and that were constructed for me) as well as choose to tell would destabilize the seemingly coherent one I have presented. Even now, my “middle-class good-girl desire-to-please” (Kamler, 2001, p. 9) is consistently in conflict with the critical framework I have taken up, as I question and resist the very “rules” and ideologies I have strived to comply with. The narrative of success that I have been telling about myself, then, is in many ways as static and constructed as the teachers who feel they are “just not a writer.” While at first the binary writing identities presented seemed disparate, they are both governed by the same logic of a coherent subject built on mutually exclusive identity categories. These “cover stories” serve to obscure a much more complicated reality.

**Background of the Study**

Through my staff development work, I have had the opportunity to work with a diverse group of teachers. While some of these teachers have reiterated a narrative in which they resist a writing identity, others have embraced the opportunity to share their writing with their colleagues. During lunch on a day of staff development at the school that served as my research site, one of these teachers, Luis, ¹ asked me about my doctoral studies. Upon hearing my areas of interest, Luis said something along the lines of “You know what I’ve always wanted to be a part of? A teacher writing group.” It was an idea that had been in the back of my mind, but one I did not have confidence I could bring to reality. “Who would be willing to participate?” I had wondered to myself.

¹ Pseudonyms have been given to all participants and the school site, with the exception of Luis, who requested that his real name be used.
Yet, as Luis and I discussed it, a writing group felt achievable and exciting. In addition to Luis’s enthusiasm, administrators I went merely to ask for permission to conduct the study asked if they could be included in the group. In the process, what I originally envisioned as my research became research that is an alchemy between my own dissonances and questions and the goals and ideas of the other participants in the group.

What could happen if writing were not isolated in the individual, but in a writing community? Could a writing inquiry community provide a platform for exploring identities that, rather than a static reality, are instead more fluid and constantly becoming? Could a writing inquiry community help us to see that the coherent identities we cling to about ourselves are just one of multiple drafts, open to revision?

**Statement of the Problem**

Writing instruction has been neglected, both in teacher preparation courses and in professional development. Falling under the umbrella of literacy instruction, writing is often tucked into courses, professional development, or curricular materials that focus heavily on reading (College Board, 2003; Dutro, 2010; Norman & Spencer, 2005). Researchers have identified the dearth of writing as compared to the prominence of reading in the professional literature (Brandt, 2001; Monaghan & Saul, 1987; Schultz, 1999). Reading, originally conceptualized as skill acquisition and located within educational psychology, lent itself better to being studied; not only is writing composition more difficult to measure (the dominant discourse for “valid” assessment), but it also suffered from an absence of theory until the 1980s (Monaghan & Saul, 1987).
Yet, the expectations for writing instruction have risen considerably. The adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and new teacher evaluation systems by many states demand increased writing instruction and teacher “effectiveness” in providing it (Graham & Perin, 2007; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003). For example, the National Commission on Writing advised states to double the amount of time most students spent writing and to require successful completion of a course in writing theory and practice as a condition of teacher licensing (College Board, 2003). Even outside of schools, society has experienced a shift that Brandt (2015) termed “the rise of writing”; she argued that writing has overtaken reading as the basis of people’s daily literate experience. Teachers, then, have faced higher expectations for writing instruction with little support regarding what those expectations mean, how to make sense of them, or how to enact them in their own contexts.

“Writing instruction” has been conceptualized as the pedagogical practices that classroom teachers employ to teach elementary students various elements, including (but not limited to) the process of narrative, informational, and opinion writing, revision, grammar, spelling, and writing across the curriculum, as well as practices to foster an “identity” as a writer. In order to meet the demands of these varied elements, it has long been suggested that it is important for teachers to see themselves as writers in order to work most productively with children as writers. Scholars have argued that, through their own writing, teachers can come to embrace the uncertainty and difficulty of writing, help students develop realistic expectations, create conditions for students to become successful writers, and understand how and why students write (Atwell, 1991; Graves, 1984; Kittle, 2008). The writing workshop model, a pedagogical framework that aims to
teach transferrable skills and strategies as children engage in the writing process that professional authors are thought to follow, builds on these assumptions (Calkins, 1994). Writing workshop advocates recommend that teachers model the writing process for students, creating demonstration texts and giving students a vision of the work they are asked to do. Thus, the “writing identities” of teachers of writing are positioned as central to the success of writing instruction. While it has been assumed by many educators (including myself) that there is merit to this stance, we have yet to examine it in a robust way.

There has been some previous investigation in this area, on which my study builds. For example, many of the studies of teachers’ writing identities have focused on preservice teachers (Graham, 1999; Norman & Spencer, 2005) or teachers in secondary and higher education (Vinz, 1996; Yagelski, 1999). However, few studies were found that explicitly focused on in-service elementary school classroom teachers (Dix, 2012; Royster & Taylor, 1997; Susi, 1984; Zarnowski, 1980) or in-service teachers of writing workshop. Additionally, many of the studies of teachers’ writing identities (Graham, 1999; McKinney & Giorgis, 2009; Norman & Spencer, 2005) relied heavily or exclusively on teachers’ writing of literacy autobiographies as data, which are assumed to capture the “truth” of a fixed, coherent self, rather than observations or interviews over time that might enable some troublings of such conceptions, as well as challenges to dominant narratives that circulate about what and who get to constitute what counts as a “writer identity.” Some studies were autobiographical reflections on one’s own teaching (Gillespie, 1987; Lensmire, 1994). Finally, several scholars have provided different ways to classify teachers’ writing identities and the factors that may contribute to them,
including historical and ideological contexts, in static ways (e.g., Frager, 1994; McKinney & Giorgis, 2009). The work that these scholars have done in the area of writing identities contributes to my thinking; however, I hope to extend and complicate their work through the incorporation of a critical theoretical framework that considers identity as position (Moje & Luke, 2009), and a focus on in-service elementary school educators who utilize a writing workshop approach.

In the literature, the writing identities of in-service teachers have often been categorized in static, binary ways that would be significantly critiqued by a critical literacy-and-identity-studies framework—you either see yourself as a writer, or you do not. In this binary framework, those who do not view themselves as writers are simply stuck; if it is assumed that a writing identity is essential to “effective” writing instruction, these teachers are denied an identity as “good teachers.” However, if we are to take seriously the premise that the identities of teachers of writing are central to the success of writing instruction, we require a broader, more nuanced understanding and investigation of the processes, including the dominant discourses about “identity,” “good writer,” and “good teacher,” for example, by which and whom these get constructed. Investigation of the complex and multiple possibilities for writing and teaching identities, as well as examination of the ways that dominant discourses frame normative assumptions about these identities, can help us think through the implications for teachers of writing in new ways.

The stories that teachers tell about their own practice—deciding what stories are sayable, how writing may position an individual as more or less a part of a “community,” or discovering the problematics and tensions inherent in imagining, constructing, and
enacting a writing identity—are important. But they are often undervalued or silenced, as the desire to experiment or take risks can make one vulnerable in evaluation systems and rankings. Teachers are expected to already know, to be complete, as soon as they take responsibility for a classroom. Their stories are considered finished, rather than being continuously revised and co-authored by dominant discourses, including the current iterations of standards and accountability, as well as by students, colleagues, and general publics. The audit culture of education (Apple, 2004; Taubman, 2009), and specifically teacher evaluation systems, require teachers to show evidence of their competencies consistently in both content knowledge and pedagogy; these competencies are expected to be consistently available for observation. This positions teachers as knowers, but not learners. Even though teachers are in the field affecting classrooms full of students, sometimes for decades, our system treats their learning as completed once they enter the field. Some critics have argued, often as part of conservative efforts to privatize public education and teacher education programs, that the professional learning teachers have access to is “poorly conceived and deeply flawed,” while the support and training teachers receive is “episodic, myopic, and often meaningless” (Hunt, 2009, p. 2), creating a climate in which teachers can become stagnant as learners. In contrast, I argue that teachers need spaces in which power might circulate in different ways and where they are given the authority to see their practice and themselves as perpetually changeable. This may open the possibility for new identities to be constructed or new narratives to be written that position (or reposition) teachers (and possibly students) in different ways—that is, in ways that enable teachers’ full decision making about and participation in their own constant learning as an inherent part of their professional “development.”
Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

Utilizing a critical literacy-and-identity studies framework, this case study aimed to explore how and why teachers’ stories are constructed in certain ways and not others, mobilized (or perhaps not mobilized), and how their/our writing identities are constructed and enacted in and through the work of our writing group. Through the structure of a school-based writing group, I sought to engage with what I interpreted to be the stories that teacher-writers tell about their practice, their lives, and their identities as writers. I joined with them as writers, and, through my participation in writing and group discussions, sought to foster a space in which writing and the teaching of writing could be opened up, given time, and experimented with. While I acknowledge that these hopes exist within the context of power hierarchies, and that my self-reflexive interrogations of power being exercised throughout the iterations of the group’s work together must remain a central part of my inquiry, I also sought to explore the ways in which a school-based writing group may open up new possibilities for breaking the silence and isolation of classrooms as containers (Leander, Phillips, & Taylor, 2010), and make room for new stories, perhaps redrafting the stories of our writing practices, both as writers and teachers of writing. Creating the space and, potentially, the opportunity for a community around writing, and repurposing a collaborative school time to do so, may allow for the recognition of complicated in-process identities that are always shifting. This work may lead to insights and implications for meaningful ongoing professional development, as well as exploration of the ongoing interaction between students’ and teachers’ identity construction. In other words, as Okri (1997, as cited in Clandinin, 2013) argued, “if we
change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives” (p. 22). Greene (2000) also called for this imaginative capacity “to work for the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise” (p. 19). In telling different stories, privileging time to engage in the process of writing, and refashioning collaborative relationships, alternate conceptions of who writers are and what they do, and one’s own relationship to the writing process, may be made possible for teachers (and, possibly, for students).

To investigate the work of our writing group, I posed four related research questions:

1. What happens when workshop teachers and coaches from a New York City public elementary school engage in creating and sustaining their/our own writing group?
   a. How, if at all, do these collaborative engagements influence individuals’ perceptions of their/our teaching practice?
   b. How, if at all, do these collaborative engagements influence individuals’ perceptions of their/our writing?

2. How, if at all, do participants talk about their “writing identities”? What, if any, influences to their/our writing identities do participants cite?
   a. What educational experiences, if any, have informed how they/we see or do not see ourselves as writers?
   b. How, if at all, do participants speak about the influences cited as informing their/our practices as workshop classroom teachers, coaches, or staff developers?
c. What importance do participants attach, or not, to viewing themselves/ourselves as writers?

3. In what ways, if at all, are the typical power hierarchies of school roles disrupted and maintained by their/our collaboration?
   a. In what ways is there elasticity and/or rigidity and/or disruption to the roles that individuals take up?
   b. How, if at all, do the professionally assigned roles that individuals take up change over time?
   c. How, if at all, do the writing group roles that individuals take up change over time?

4. In what ways, if any, do my roles as researcher, staff developer, writer, and initiator of the writing group influence the power relations of the group?

   **Rationale for the Study**

   The school site for this dissertation study, P.S. 999, is a school with which I have had a relationship for the past 3 years. I currently serve as the upper-grade staff developer for P.S. 999 through the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. In this role, I meet with teachers in groups, studying and planning literacy teaching and learning together. As discussed previously, the idea for our writing group arose from a discussion with one of the teachers in the school. Teachers and administrators in the school expressed a desire to create a space for teachers’ writing outside the confines of a classroom context. This dissertation study provided a means to work together with these educators to explore what happens when we join together seeking to create a space for
ourselves to both construct and engage (perhaps in different ways) in “new” practices of writing and sharing our writing with one another. Through the stories that were shared by the participants, not only as a part of the group but also through individual interviews and their writing itself, I sought to learn more about their/our layered, fluid, and conflicting identities. I sought to study the conceptions of writing and writers that circulate as well as the ways in which participants’ narratives reinforce or conflict with the constructed narratives they told about themselves as writers and teachers of writing. I aimed to build on the work of literacy scholars (Gee, 1990; Holland & Leander, 2004; McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Moje & Luke, 2009) who argued that identities are constantly becoming, are socially constructed, and are shaped by and shaping dominant discourses that work as a structured system to produce, regulate, distribute, and circulate normative conceptions of, for example, “writing instruction,” “writing identity,” and “good teaching” sustained by power relations.

In addition to narratives and identities, I also attended to the ways in which power circulates through the group and its interactions. Each group member, myself included, holds specific institutional roles. However, through joining together as a writing community, we are positioned to one another in new ways, and the potential for new roles and/or identities is made available. Thus, I also sought to study the ways in which institutional roles and writing group roles, including my own, were taken up in static and/or fluid ways. I argue that within the writing group space, power is exercised by all members at any and every moment as we navigate the formation and enactment of the group. As Harris (1989) asserted, we “write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least
in part, the sorts of things we can say” (p. 12). As in-service educators, each participant has the opportunity, through enacting his or her actions and identities, to instigate and constrain his or her writing community and the stories that can be told, both by teachers and by students, within them. This study provided a unique opportunity to bring these influencers together and examine the discourses around writing in this school community.

P.S. 999, the research site, along with many other schools, seeks to implement a writing workshop model that privileges the teacher’s enaction of a writing identity for their students. The centering of the teacher’s writing identity is based on an assumption that this identity enables him or her to gain credibility, better understand student writers, and create conditions for “successful” student writing (Atwell, 1991; Gillespie, 1987; Graves, 1984; Kittle, 2008; Peckham, 1980; Susi, 1984; Zarnowski, 1980). I argue, then, that there is much to learn about the ways in which teachers view, enact, and discuss their writing identities. In conducting this study, I aim to develop an (albeit partial and constructed) understanding of teachers’ writing identities, the factors that shape and are shaped by them, and the possibilities of revision for our understandings of those identities when they/we are given space in community with one another.

**Theoretical Framework**

I argue that, if we take seriously the stance that teachers’ writing identities are central to “successful” writing instruction, then a more multidimensional consideration of teachers’ shifting and complex identities is necessary. In this study, I investigated teachers’ writing identities through a critical literacy-and-identity studies lens. This approach views teacher’s writing identities, as well as their teaching identities, not as
static “truths” waiting to be uncovered, but as shaped by broader power relations, the voices and discourses that have come before, and the intersectionality of identity writ large. Teaching and writing identities, then, cannot really be separated from the multiple (gendered, raced, classed) subject positions that individuals take up, or the power asymmetries that are inherent in their school context and society at large. This is particularly relevant in a writing space where participants are storying a particular writing identity as a part of a feminized profession within an audit culture. Thus, it is important to note that, in storying themselves as writers, participants (and myself) will certainly draw upon their/our multiple social identities. For these reasons, I drew upon Bakhtinian concepts, specifically through consideration of the speaking subject in everyday interaction and the ways in which individuals’ language is interanimated with other voices and discourses. Then, I examined the ways in which literacy theorists have animated these ideas in studies of reading and writing practices. Specifically, I utilized the metaphor of “identity-as-position,” as elaborated in Moje and Luke’s (2009) literacy-and-identity-studies framework, to consider “how positions get taken up and resisted and how those interpellations translate into identities over time” (p. 430).

**Bakhtinian Theories**

Bakhtin (1981, 1984a, 1984b) asserted that in each “subject” there are unknowables, multiplicities, and changing voices. He defined discourse as chains or strings of utterances, which are inherently dialogic in nature; that is, they are always addressed to someone and anticipate some response: “Any concrete utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication of a particular sphere…. Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually
reflect one another” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 91). Bakhtin also argued that discourse is always historically contingent, inseparable from its context, and that language is productive, both describing and bringing into being a multiplicity of social realities. Bakhtin’s work allows us to look at the dynamic movement across identity positions that can be accomplished through translation (the critique involved in the deconstruction, reconstruction, and application of discourses by speakers) and/or reflexivity (the ways in which talk about social realities both describe and constitute them) (Tate, 2007). Bakhtin presumed a unified and agentive or intentional subject and did not emphasize the circulation of power through discourses—something I attend to in the present study. The self as agentic and dialogic requires attention to the readings and translations of discursive positioning made by speakers and the production of alternative self-positionings in talk. What Bakhtin affords, then, is the consideration of the speaking subject in everyday interaction, specifically the possibility of considering challenge and resistance in everyday talk (Tate, 2007).

I utilized several of Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984a, 1984b) concepts to consider how discourses may circulate and shape the activities and interactions of the members of our writing group. Bakhtin (1981) theorized that individuals gain access to discourses not only in the abstract, but also through individual encounters. When individuals make language choices, they “ventriloquate” both individual voices they have encountered in the past, which Bakhtin called intertextuality, and more abstract voice types, referred to as interdiscursivity. Language, then, is not neutral, but interanimated by other voices; Bakhtin argued that utterances are “populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others” (p. 294). In this way, individuals engage in internal dialogue resulting from
voices encountered in the past; this process may help to construct and reconstruct one’s identity and help make sense of experiences and actions. For example, teachers’ discussions of “good writing” and “good teaching” are likely to be populated by dominant discourses of education and the audit culture.

I also drew on Lensmire’s (2000) use of Bakhtinian concepts to discuss teachers in a writing workshop model, which is based on a rejection of monologic relations between author and character (or teacher and student, or in the case of this study, researcher and participant) in order to embrace possible polyphonic relationships. More specifically, Lensmire drew on Bakhtin’s (1984a) definition of polyphony: “A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices…a plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (p. 6). Thus, a polyphonic project involves a variety of voices and viewpoints interacting with, but not subsuming, one another. The authority of the author/teacher/researcher’s voice is de-centered, working instead in the service of the destruction of a single, dominating, monologic viewpoint.

The author/teacher/researcher’s power is largely expressed indirectly, in the orchestration of context that supposedly allows other voices to emerge. Of course, we can never escape the ways in which power is constantly exercised in these relationships. However, Lensmire’s (2000) metaphor provides a method for thinking about the intertwined power and positioning of all members of the writing community, mine included, as in interaction with one another.
Literacy-and-Identity-Studies Framework

Many literacy scholars have explored the relationship between language and identity. These scholars provided a context for the ways in which the concepts of discourse, identity, and power have been taken up in the literacy field. In the current study, I both complicate and extend their work. I drew upon two metaphors of Moje and Luke’s (2009) literacy-and-identity-studies framework, as well as Gee’s (1996) conception of an “identity kit.”

Identity-as-narrative. Moje and Luke (2009) outlined several metaphors for identity currently utilized in literacy research. The metaphor of identity-as-narrative argued that identities are constructed in and through the stories people tell about themselves and their experiences. Identities are “constantly shifting in response to particular situations and conditions…in an ongoing process of ‘becoming’—rather than merely ‘being’ in the world” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 53). For example, teachers’ writing identities do not remain static upon entering the profession; they continue to be shaped by their colleagues, students, and school contexts. Luttrell (1997, as cited in Rogers & Elias, 2012) proposed the concept of “storied selves” to delineate the process by which people arrive at their sense of selfhood and social identities, arguing that, insofar as individuals’ “stories are about the events and conditions of their lives, their stories are also a part of their self understandings” (p. 261). Sharing narratives about themselves provides teachers with a way to hold together multiple experiences, allowing for a sense of coherence and a sense of self, and thus constructing and claiming an identity as a particular kind of writer or teacher of writing.
As Chase (2005) argued, narrative “is a way of understanding one’s own and others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (p. 656). As I take up in more detail in Chapter III, I utilized a narrative inquiry methodology to conduct this study because narrative is, as Chase (2011) asserted, a distinct form of discourse of “meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one’s own or another’s actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (p. 421). Through their writing and their talk, teachers can narrate both their experiences and their identities.

**Identity-as-position.** While identity-as-narrative metaphors clarify the “what” of identity, identity-as-position metaphors clarify the process of building identities (Moje & Luke, 2009); thus, in the present study, I aimed to integrate these two metaphors. Work grounded in this metaphor argued that “identities are produced in and through not only activity and movement in and across spaces but also in the ways people are cast in or called to particular positions in interaction, time, and spaces, and how they take up or resist those positions” (Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 430). Teacher-writers, then, construct their identities as teachers and writers across the spaces, times, and interactions of their careers. They are called to particular positions, such as “model writer,” and might take up those positions or resist them. Moje and Luke quoted extensively from Holland and Leander (2004) to capture the metaphor of identity-as-position.

The social positioning of persons and groups…is now considered a primary means by which subjects are produced and subjectivity forms. Power relations, in particular, are thought to shape a person’s self (or a group’s identity) through acts that distinguish and treat the person as gendered, raced, classed, or other sort of
subject… A person is “offered” or “afforded” a social position when a powerful body, such as a governmental agency proposes a particular sort of subject…and calls on an individual to occupy the position. Faced with such an offer, the person may either accept the position in whole or part, or try to refuse it. (p. 127)

Drawing on both Holland and Lave’s (2001) concept of “histories in person” and Latour’s (1993) “laminations,” Holland and Leander (2004) argued that identities “thicken” over time as a result of the multiple subject positions a given person experiences in the practice of everyday life. For example, an identity as “just not a writer” may thicken as a teacher-writer moves through experiences of negative feedback as a student and discomfort with calls to be a “model writer” for students. Holland and Leander also argued that laminations help to explain how identities can appear stable, yet are also multiple and, at times, contradictory; laminations are built through the layering of identity positions over one another, so identity as layers of positions carries with it the histories of past experiences, and those layers may peek through in the enactment of identities. Layers may be “stripped away, reapplied, nicked, scratched, or even gouged” (p. 430). In order to account for moments of shift, when an individual crosses identity boundaries throughout times and spaces, however, it is necessary to extend the metaphor to consider multi-dimensional identities, combining the concepts of multiple positions and laminations in a productive way. A teacher-writer may layer multiple professional writing experiences in a position as teacher, while also layering experiences as a student writer or personal writer. This provides an explanation for both fluid and coherent identity representations and enactments, and, like the identity-as-narrative metaphor, conceptualizes identities as enactments in interaction that account for the multiple and potentially conflicting positions people occupy.
An important element of the identity-as-position metaphor is that it makes space for aspects of identity formation and representation beyond the discursive. Identity-as-position does take into account discourse and narrative, but also acknowledges the power of activities, interactions, artifacts, space and time, and embodied experiences (Moje & Luke, 2009). Literacy, from this metaphor, then, can serve as disciplinary technology, assigning labels and providing practices and tools that foster stability, or it can serve as an enabling tool for making meaning and speaking back or resisting certain positions. Positions can be associated with shifting literacy practices and experiences of agency across time and space. As Moje (2004) found in a study of Latina/o youth, for example, “The multiple spaces of their lives conjured up or enabled multiple ways of being, multiple tools—identity kits, in Gee’s (1996) parlance—for enacting those ways of being, and, ultimately, multiple identities to be enacted” (p. 30). In the case of this study, teacher-writers might, for example, be agentic in their classrooms but not in the writing group space (or vice versa); the ways in which teacher-writers are called to positions, such as “model writer,” by others in power and the ways they respond depends, in part, on the context of space and time. As Moje and Luke (2009) argued, “movements across time and space, relationships (including, but not limited to authority relationships) in particular spaces, and access to text and other artifacts made identities and made literate practices” (p. 432). The present study aimed to trace the identities and literate practices of the writing group, their enactment and identification, and how they are utilized for the next positioning act.

**Discourses and identity kits.** Gee (1989, 1990, 2000-2001, 2005, 2012) furthered our understanding of the ways in which literacy scholars have taken up the
work of literacy-and-identity studies and identity-as-position, including how language and stories can shape identity. Gee (2012) argued that “big ‘D’ Discourses” are more than language; they take into account people’s identities. Discourses incorporate clothing, gestures, symbols, materials, and the body, all of which are utilized by individuals to assert group membership in the eyes of the “other” (Gee, 2005). Therefore, a Discourse is an “identity kit” (Gee, 1989, p. 51), a socially situated identity and a way of being in the world. The concept of Discourse as identity is useful in considering how teachers’ writing and teaching practices are animated by the Discourses that circulate in their classrooms, school, and society, as well as the embodied performance of different identities. Teachers may position themselves and their colleagues in relation to the dominant Discourses of teaching and writing to which they have access. Teachers’ experiences and relations with others around writing, such as those with their colleagues and students, administration, and/or curricular materials, may lead to constructed knowledge that both defines and changes the way they participate in the world (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). In this way, teachers’ past experiences with dominant Discourses of writing and teaching, along with their interactions in classrooms and schools, work together to shape the ways in which they enact their own writing instruction. Teachers can construct an understanding of themselves in interactions with their students, which then shapes and changes the next interaction.

Leander and Hollett’s (2013) metaphor of “identity kits composed across spaces” may be useful to understanding teachers’ writing identities as well. Drawing on Gee’s (1989) notion of an “identity kit” (p. 51), Leander and Hollett argued that physical and virtual spaces provide identity equipment and resources that can travel with an individual
and combine in surprising ways. This provides an opportunity to incorporate the ways in which teachers are shaped not only by experience and the physical location of their classrooms, but also by the digital and virtual worlds. Identity kits built across spaces can incorporate the ways in which technology and digital tools have the potential to influence a teacher’s writing, planning, practices, professional development, and interactions with students and colleagues. For example, the ability to follow professional development hashtags on Twitter, sell or purchase lesson materials on Teachers Pay Teachers, or create a Pinterest board of classroom ideas provide new factors that shape and constrain teaching (and writing) identities. These digital spaces could also serve to make a greater variety of possibilities available to teachers. As Leander and Hollett (2013) argued, cyberspace, or the spatiality of the internet, is over; instead, the digital/physical binary has been disrupted and the space of cyberspace has infiltrated classrooms, public spaces, and social situations. This “infiltration” may reach the writing group as well.

**Positionality in Relation to the Work**

As I am an active member within the context of the current study, it was necessary that I examine my own positionality in the work. My research in the current study is complicated by my role as a staff developer. This role, while not supervisory, positions me as an “expert” on process writing instruction; this establishes my role as an outsider despite my established relationships and work in the school and with these teachers for the past 2 years. I needed to be wary, then, of the ways in which power circulates and calls participants to particular positions. Teachers may view me as evaluating their writing practice or seek to provide responses that align with the philosophy of the organization I represent. Teachers may perform particular identities in
our shared spaces. I acknowledge the risks of asking them to share their doubts or
questions, such as opening them up to judgment of their practice or positioning them as
lacking authority. As Alcoff (in Jackson & Mazzei, 2008) cautioned, “anyone who speaks
for others should only do so out of a concrete analysis of the particular power relations
and discursive effects involved” (p. 128).

Therefore, I aimed to incorporate teachers as thinkers in the research about their
lives rather than as data producers (Luttrell, 2009). As such, I hoped to shift the power
dynamics by joining alongside teachers as a writer and a member of the writing group as
we discussed our writing practice. I hoped that in joining together as a member of a
writing group alongside teachers, I would be able to disrupt the power dynamics of
professional development and establish a new space in which different stories, positions,
and identities may be possible. I carefully attended to the ways in which my positionality
was enacted throughout the study; I incorporated an explicit research question to keep my
own positioning in the work at the center of my inquiry. Within the group, I hoped to
rewrite my own position and stories, and in so doing, open up a space for teachers to
revise theirs.

Significance of the Study

While I did not seek to find the “truth” of teachers’ experiences, I did bring to the
study a belief that writing and sharing stories in ways that do not have to conform to
codified notions of “good writers” and “good teachers” can provide a generative space to
enact, story and re-story, and/or position and re-position multiple identities and new
possibilities. I aimed to study how individuals mobilize stories within and about the
group as well as how those stories shift and bounce off of one another, making connection, dissonance, or conflict available. The narratives of individuals and/or the narrative I constructed to represent the work of our group may provide a connection or support to other teachers seeking to perform the identity of “writer” in their own classrooms. In acknowledging the messy and contradictory nature of writing identities, a valuable conversation around this tension and the discourses and power dynamics that animate it may be made possible.

This study provided an opportunity to see what is possible when different members of a school community join together as writers in a way that disrupts the previous ways they have collaborated or engaged in professional development. While the broad and pervasive audit culture of education (Apple, 2004) continues to constrain teachers, providing a space for inquiry, writing, and discussion opens up other possibilities for stories, questioning, and identity construction. This study will document, in depth, one group of teacher-writers in order to interrogate the discourses, stories, and identities of teachers as they are enacted, resisted, laminated, and/or performed. Positioning identities at the center, I sought to situate the experience of engaging in our own writing in relation to our teaching of writing. This positions professional learning communities, and those who participate in them, in innovative ways, providing an alternative conception of professional development. Rather than a hierarchical notion of staff development as top-down and didactic, or structured and outcome-based, a notion of staff development as joining together as a community to engage in experiences, learning, and identity work may be made possible. Though this is only one case and is not generalizable beyond its singular context, learning about what happens when one school-
based writing group of educators in different roles is formed can yield generative
discussion around the potential to open up spaces for other kinds of collaboration and
inquiry in schools.

These implications reflect both my hopes for the study as well as the assumptions I bring to it based on my own disciplinary background. While I worked to interrogate those assumptions throughout the study and the process of writing it up, I must acknowledge that I can never be fully outside of the biases, assumptions, and hopes that comprise my positionalities within the work. I understand that I carry these with me throughout the work, and yet all of the implications—and my own understanding and construction of them—remain open.
Chapter II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To frame this study, I drew upon the work of scholars who have traced the historically rooted ideological conceptions of two significant fields: writing instruction and assessment as well as teacher learning. Each of these ideologies outlines its own seemingly objective criteria for “good writers” and “good teachers,” which are, in fact, socially constructed and situated (Street, 1984). The evaluative terminology conflated with each conception reveals how power circulates to mark particular practices, writing pieces, curricula, or people as superior to others. I aimed to examine, then, not only the ways in which writing instruction and teacher learning themselves have been conceived, but also the ways in which these conceptions manifest particular power dynamics and material consequences for the teachers and students who engage with them.

I begin with an exploration of the historical conceptions of writing instruction. Specifically, I trace the historical trajectory of writing instruction from the beginning of the 20th century through the shift to process writing pedagogy through the seminal work of Graves (1983, 1984), Calkins (1986; 1990), Murray (1985), and Atwell (1987). Finally, I examine the recent ways scholars have built upon theories of process writing by extending them into a critical writing pedagogy that takes up a critical theoretical framework.
Next, I examine conceptions of teachers learning. I utilize Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1999) framework, which partitions the historical development of teacher learning in communities into three differing images: knowledge-for-practice, knowledge-in-practice, and knowledge-of-practice. I review these frameworks of teacher learning, then read several empirical studies through the lens of these frameworks. In particular, I aimed to examine the ways the Practitioner Inquiry Movement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) have been enacted in the dominant model of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), as well as possibilities for how spaces of teacher learning might be conceptualized, enacted, and used otherwise. It is this possibility, I argue, that may make it possible to explore teachers’ writing identities beyond the binary and instead of the transmission of particular “autonomous” knowledge or “best” practices.

**Historical Conceptions of Writing Instruction**

Throughout the 20th century, there has been a “persistent pedagogical and moral struggle over the primary aim of elementary writing instruction” (Boldt, Gilman, Kang, Olan, & Olcese, 2011). Writing in the classroom can include, emphasize, or exclude a variety of different skills, including penmanship, spelling, creative writing, grammar and punctuation, rhetoric, response to literature, research reports, classroom publications, and writing across the curriculum. Teachers are asked to navigate changes in these instructional priorities, implementing the practices valued by administrators and “experts” or dictated by policy, in addition to negotiating these mandates with their own beliefs. While the individual stories that teachers tell about what matters in writing instruction can powerfully shape their teaching and their students’ learning, the
instructional practices they implement are historically rooted, discursively constructed, and enacted in and through differing sociocultural contexts, norms, and practices. These pedagogical legacies impact the ways in which teachers engage and enact writing instruction in classroom spaces, and teachers may draw from multiple ideologies and discourses of writing and instructional practice.

This section provides a historical overview of instructional practices of writing in the elementary classroom. I purposefully begin my review at the beginning of the 20th century because it was a period of change for elementary schools. For example, elementary school was first widely available and attended at this time. In addition, it was a time of emerging professional identity for teachers of writing, including the founding of a professional organization, the National Council for the Teachers of English (NCTE) (Hawkins & Razali, 2012), and Dewey’s (1903, as cited in Lagemann, 2000) argument that primary teachers needed the same professional freedom and training as high school teachers.

To organize this section, I utilized Monaghan and Saul’s (1987) critical examination of writing instruction, as well as Hawkins and Razali’s (2012) heuristic of the Three P’s of writing instruction in the elementary classroom: penmanship, product, and process. However, I acknowledge that these categories are constructed and do not represent a linear narrative of progress. The classroom realities for teachers and students are far more complicated and contradictory. Each instructional approach to writing outlined aligns with a specific conception of what counts as “good” writing. While the penmanship and product models emphasize a skills approach, the process model advocates a “language in use” approach (Boldt et al., 2011; Genishi & Dyson, 1987).
Though they may appear to advance in a neat, linear progression, these three models of writing instruction have not been enacted in isolation. Over time, they have built on and borrowed from one another, and elements of each model remain influential for teachers and in classrooms today. Power circulates through the instructional practices advocated or mandated to teachers in ways that maintain unequal access to pedagogies of independence and choice as well as particular markers of “success.” Teachers are not simply selecting from all available practices; instead, particular practices are animated by intersecting issues of power. Although the performances of identities as writers may look different across classrooms, power circulates to maintain systemic discourses about who is “successful” or “failing.” These markers are inflected by race, class, language, and other identities that preserve the status quo. Writing instruction, then, is not just an individual teacher’s choice, but is layered with remnants of reform and intersecting discourses of power. Contradictory beliefs and practices may be enacted in complex ways; yet, too often, the result is the same: the success of particular students as “writers” and the marginalization of particular students as “non-writers.”

**Writing as Penmanship**

Hawkins and Razali (2012) identified the first stage of writing instruction as focused on “the physical act of putting pen to paper” (p. 306). Monaghan and Saul (1987) traced the utilitarian pedagogy of penmanship instruction even further back to colonial America. Through the early 20th century, writing was believed to be merely transcription of oral language, so instructional practice consisted of traditional methods of rote learning, memorization, and copying models. Therefore, legibility and mechanics (grammar and spelling) were greatly valued, and successful writing meant conforming to
expectations. It was only when children reached proficiency in written formation—often in secondary grades—that they were allowed to move from copying to original composition, although this, too, was limited to response to literature. In this way, writing was “subordinated to, and necessarily followed, reading” (p. 89), and students’ own words and ideas were subordinated to those of others.

It was not until the 1930s and 1940s that discourses around penmanship and writing began to diverge. Shaped by changes in the teaching profession, post-World War II society, and other social factors such as the rise of printed script, gradual shifts in instructional practices and the definition of penmanship began to complicate classroom realities. “Experts” and methods handbooks classified handwriting as a smaller subset of writing and argued that since the purpose of writing was to communicate, handwriting should be viewed as only one of many tools available to writers (Thornton, 1996). New instructional practices, such as teaching handwriting and grammar within the context of authentic composition and individualized instruction, emerged but did not become more common in classrooms until the 1960s and 1970s. As definitions shifted, teachers selected various practices of isolated drills, individual instruction in the context of independent writing, and emphasis on legibility in all written work. This blend of practices was further complicated through the whole language (Goodman, 1986) and emergent literacy (Clay, 1975) movements of the 1970s and 1980s, which further deemphasized penmanship. While penmanship is no longer the primary component of writing instruction, traces of this pedagogy can be found in modern classrooms in various forms. Automaticity in letter formation remains as “an important part of becoming a competent writer” (Hawkins & Razali, 2012, p. 309), and the desire for students to master
handwriting skills before tackling other writing tasks persists in some primary classrooms. Modern handwriting curricula such as Loops and Groups, Big Strokes for Little Folks, and Handwriting Without Tears emphasize fluency of letter formation as a pathway to effective composition. In addition, “neater” products are often scored higher on high-stakes tests which purport to evaluate students’ writing abilities. In this way, while the ideologies of writing as product and writing as process emerged, the ideology of writing as penmanship has not gone away. Kliebard (2004) described the shifting ideological conditions as “a stream with several currents” (p. 174), in which conditions cause individual currents to increase and decline in strength. The reality of present-day classrooms is an intertwining, with each teacher and each classroom drawing upon these currents in idiosyncratic ways.

**Writing as Product**

Hawkins and Razali’s (2012) second conception of writing instruction, which gradually began to intertwine itself and co-exist with penmanship-centered approaches, focused on the written product itself. While at the beginning of the 20th century, product and penmanship were inseparable, progressive educators of the 1920s and 1930s sought to disrupt that binary. Theories inspired by Dewey’s progressivism (1915), including child-centered learning philosophies, advocated self-expression and began to advocate practices such as having students write about experiences from their own lives rather than in response to teacher-assigned prompts. Responding to the progressive education movement’s assertion that schooling should be preparation for life, the NCTE published *An Experience Curriculum in English* in 1935 outlining practical writing activities, such as making signs or filling out forms, for elementary students (Monaghan & Saul, 1987).
Progressive educators believed that writing was “an art that could be learned, but not taught” (Hawkins & Razali, 2012, p. 310); thus, the teacher’s role was to create an environment that would stimulate “self-learning.” Yet, despite the theoretical push for these shifts, was such a drastic shift from daily penmanship drills possible in the lived realities of classrooms? Researchers have noted that progressive reform did little to effect practical change in the instructional techniques of many teachers; Kliebard (2004) argued that “not more than one fourth of teachers adopted some sort of child-centered practices” (p. 215).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the concern over the state of American education in the wake of the launch of the Russian satellite Sputnik fostered a push to “systematize” writing instruction, adding more voices to the pedagogical discourse. Educational psychology research led to new behaviorist theories that challenged Dewey’s progressive ideology and instead emphasized observable changes in behavior that could be systematically measured. Behavioral theorists believed that writing could be divided up into “small sequential parts to be mastered, and this mastery could be objectively tested” (Hawkins & Razali, 2012, p. 311), placing the emphasis on the final written product. Progressivism, a theory advocating a literacy curriculum proceeding from student interest, and “scientific” behaviorist approaches, which advocated practice in sequential skills and the corresponding measurement movement, each sought professional acceptance and were taken up in varied ways.

While progressive theories and curricula pushed for students to write from personal experience and for authentic purposes and audiences, studies of classroom practice indicated a more complicated reality. Applebee, Langer, and Mollis (1986a,
1986b) found that two-fifths of 13-year-olds and one-third of 17-year-olds reported receiving little to no writing instruction at all. In addition, the authors found little change in instructional practice throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Writing instruction still often took place at the word or sentence level, limiting students’ opportunities to engage at the idea or discourse level. In addition, students were limited to particular genres of writing; creative writing, for example, was regarded as a curricular frill to be taught only to the “gifted” (Monaghan & Saul, 1987), or those with the social capital to be designated as such.

It is evident, then, that multiple realities existed for writing teachers and student writers. Teachers drew on pedagogy marked as “traditional” as well as practices labeled “progressive” or “innovative” in ways unique to their own context and experiences. The ways that particular pedagogies were tied to particular contexts often perpetuated existing inequalities, as evident in the access to the genre of creative writing. Thus, the “progression” from a focus on penmanship to a focus on product represents one of many truths, a construct that is abstract rather than universal, and overlooks the individual agency of teachers enacting pedagogy in their own classrooms. In fact, as Monaghan and Saul (1987) argued, “it is very much easier for a teacher to change writing instruction than reading instruction” (p. 95), particularly due to the disparity in the cost of equipment. Thus, the enactment of writing instruction was varied and could be guided by teachers’ own conceptions and identities.

The view of writing as product still remains a significant element circulating within educational discourse. It is fostered by the current audit culture, which focuses on the measurement of student and teacher effectiveness (Apple, 2004; Taubman, 2009).
Widespread use of scoring systems and rubrics for writing such as Ruth Culham’s (2003) 6+1 Traits and Writing Pathways (Calkins, 2013), as well as the inclusion of rubric-based writing samples on high-stakes tests such as PARCC, Smarter Balance, and other state-level assessments, reified the evaluation of writing products. Though these rubrics incorporate a wider variety of genres as well as multimodal composing, the emphasis on systematic measurement of writing products is still central to the reality of writing instruction in schools. These evaluations establish particular problematic power relations, enacting a form of surveillance on the types of writing that are “appropriate” for classrooms and positioning particular teachers and particular writers as “effective” or “ineffective.” These elements of the audit culture, such as “hostility toward diversity, student voice, and teacher professionalism are masked through the reassertion of the argument that equality in education means standardization of curriculum and of what counts as worthwhile writing” (Boldt et al., 2011, p. 440).

**Writing as Process**

Other important voices joined the conversation on writing instruction, beginning with the highly influential Dartmouth Conference in 1966 (Dixon, 1967; Muller, 1967) and continuing through the 1970s and 1980s, to argue that the definition of writing as product should shift to one focused on the writer’s process. Whole language, emergent literacy, and process writing approaches (Calkins, 1994; Clay, 1975; Goodman, 1986; Graves, 1983) gained popularity in the 1980s. These scholars emphasized the meaning-making process of composition over transcription, along with the idea that children could only learn how to write through writing. Emphasis began to be placed on the meaning of a piece rather than on simply the mechanics or structure. As each conception of writing
and writing instruction layered into the circulating discourse of “best practices” and “good teaching.” Classroom writing instruction was, and continues to be, “the servant of many masters” (Monaghan & Saul, 1987, p. 91), subject to multiple interpretations and purportedly applied to multiple purposes.

Emig (1971) and Flower and Hayes (1981) were among the first to study the composing practices of the individual writer and advocated for an emphasis on writing process. Emig’s case study of secondary school writers found that the classroom writing experiences, in contrast to the practice of the “best” current writers, were “unimodal” and focused on evaluation by an other—namely, a teacher “interested chiefly in a product he can criticize rather than in a process he can help initiate through imagination and sustain through empathy and support” (p. 97). Emig cited a lack of viable criteria and, most critically, writing teachers who had “no recent, direct experience of a process they purport to present to others” (p. 98) as the reasons that the process of writing was underconceptualized and oversimplified in classrooms. Moreover, Emig challenged the overwhelming opportunity for dominance that teachers wielded through their evaluation, yet also made harsh critiques such as attributing poor instruction to “teacher illiteracy.” Consequently, her study has been both praised for its influence and critiqued for its shortcomings (e.g., Hillocks Jr., 1986; Nelms, 1994; North, 1987; Voss, 1983). Emig perpetuated the categorization of students as “average” and “below-average,” or “high creatives” and “low creatives,” reinforcing hierarchical power dynamics that encourage students to perform a particular “successful student” identity and reinscribing the exclusivity of a writing identity only available to those who adapt to certain ideals of conformity and compliance.
Flower and Hayes (1981) introduced a theory of cognitive processes involved with composing, arguing that writers orchestrate hierarchical, highly-embedded thinking processes guided by the writer’s network of goals. This, they articulated, moved the focus from stage models centering the growth of a written product to the inner process of the person producing it. These authors relied on the writer’s think-alouds, narrating their process as they composed a piece, in order to develop their theory. While this theory did shift attention to a writer’s process and lay out a research agenda for others to continue to explore, two significant issues are raised by this study when examined from a critical literacy-and-identity studies perspective. The first is that the reliance on a cognitive model places the learning and composing solely in the mind of the individual, ignoring the influence that social and contextual factors have upon the composing process of an individual. The process exhibited, for example, while narrating a task into a typewriter, might be different than that undertaken when writing alone in one’s journal. The second consideration is the inherent assumption that the writer’s process is linear, stable, and solely cognitive. Yet, an identity-as-position perspective emphasizes the ways people are cast in or called to particular positions in interaction, time, and spaces, and how they take up or resist those positions. Flower and Hayes (1981) did not account for moments of “shift,” when an individual crosses identity boundaries throughout times and spaces; perhaps, for example, the process changes for a writer across genres, from the classroom to the kitchen table to the research lab, or when it is silent as compared to when it must be narrated. Writers under study may be called to perform a “writer” or a “writing process” in a way that they may otherwise (in other settings, times, or social situations) resist.
The ideas of a writing process approach slowly made their way into classrooms. As these theories and practices began to influence practice, other factors emerged as influential in pedagogical decisions. For example, the *Newsweek* report “Why Johnny Can’t Write” (Sheils, 1975) announced a writing crisis signaled by the decline of standardized test scores such as NAEP and the SATs. The article cited colleges and businesses who lamented the poor preparation of students and workers and utilized alarmist language to blame a variety of factors, including the influence of television, the move from expository to creative writing, and the acceptance of students’ home language and dialects. The article aimed to exert pressure for educational change; Sheils called for schools to “stop the rot” by once again centering instruction on the “prestige” dialogue of standard English (p. 3). The article sparked a flood of criticism and then new research on writing instruction. Researchers began to utilize qualitative, long-term case studies and ethnographic research to study the development of literacy acquisition over time, seeking improvement from the “crisis” at hand.

Murray (1968), Graves (1983), and Calkins (1994) examined the practices of professional writers and sought to translate these practices to writing activities in classrooms. They articulated a vision for curriculum that drew attention to children’s capacity as writers and thinkers and embraced the diversity of student experiences. As Kamler (2001) and Lensmire (1998) acknowledged, the process model is committed to centering students’ meanings and experiences, in comparison to writing pedagogies in which teacher control and convention were centered at the expense of personal meaning. In addition, the process model is committed to student engagement, emphasizing student agency through topic selection and authorship. This theory represented a significant shift...
from prior writing pedagogies that emphasized student passivity and conformity to hegemonic structures and discourses. This shift, where it was enacted, allowed for the possibility of increased agency of both teachers and students.

Yet, these ideas also became popular at a time when *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), through its claims of a “rising tide of mediocrity” in education, inspired a culture of “teacher-bashing” still prevalent today, as well as a “back-to-basics” approach, and prompted movement away from process-oriented pedagogy. This tension between competing visions for the purposes and form of writing instruction illustrates a particular debate about conceptions of writing instruction that remain unresolved. Frank Smith (1994) framed this debate as one between tools (mechanics, spelling, etc.) and immersion in the writing process. The process-centered ideology was able to find traction partially because the results of this wave of research were immediately made available to teachers through foundational professional texts that made new methods of classroom writing instruction possible: *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (Graves, 1983), *The Art of Teaching Writing* (Calkins, 1994), and *In the Middle: Reading, Writing, and Learning with Adolescents* (Atwell, 1987). In addition, the National Writing Project (NWP) was founded in 1985, adding momentum to these ideas in educational circles. The core principles of the NWP model of teacher change include: teaching (not only assigning) writing K-6, a research-informed community of practice, frequent and systematic learning opportunities, and teachers engaging in their own writing (Whyte et al., 2007). While advocating a person-centered supportive approach to professional development for writing teachers, however, the NWP classified teachers as having “high” or “low” writing lives and failed to address the outliers—those
who worked with NWP and had “low” writing lives and those who did not and had “high” writing lives. The tensions and contradictions inherent in teachers’ writing identities remain unexamined.

As a process pedagogy began to be taken up in some classroom settings, it prompted a reframing of the teacher’s role in those locations. The teacher was positioned as a facilitator rather than an evaluator, coaching students throughout the writing process. Teachers were also valued as writers along with children, an important distinction as elementary school teachers “have not…traditionally thought of themselves as writers” (Monaghan & Saul, 1987, p. 115). Through their own writing, it was argued, teachers could come to understand how and why students write, how to create conditions for students to become successful writers, help students develop realistic expectations, and embrace the uncertainty and difficulty of writing (Atwell, 1991; Graves, 1984; Zarnowski, 1980). Teachers’ modeling of their own writing could also help them to gain credibility with students in addition to supporting students’ learning (Gillespie, 1987; Peckham, 1980; Susi, 1984). These assumptions, however, have rarely been empirically studied. Given the relatively greater control that teachers have over writing instruction than reading instruction, due to the proliferation of high-cost, prescriptive reading programs (Monaghan & Saul, 1987), teachers in some contexts were able to implement process-writing pedagogy with a degree of autonomy due to the low cost.

Process writing, then, has joined the existing discourses circulating in elementary schools, becoming even more prominent in elementary schools throughout the 2000s (Graham, Harris, Fink-Chorzempam, & MacArthur, 2003). The adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has also resulted in increased attention to writing. While the
No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation focused on reading and placed little emphasis on writing, the CCSS weigh both reading and writing equally. National writing standards, assessments, and evaluations have all increased over the last 15 years since NCLB, resulting in a “dramatic loss of professional control, characterized, at least in part, by increased pressure to teach to standardized curricula” and “demands to understand writing, children, and ‘good’ teaching in increasingly narrow ways” (Boldt et al., 2011, p. 440). Concerns arose that the focus on process took attention away from producing products that would score well on accountability exams (Baines, Baines, Stanley, & Kukel, 1999). The decline in trust for the teacher as a professional coincided with an increase in trust of the technology of “scientifically-based” commercial literacy curricula. Once again, the discourse of standardization has risen as a dominant force in the elementary writing curriculum, placing an emphasis on “good writers” as those who produce “good” products, as determined by external adults.

**Lived Experiences of Curriculum**

Process-writing pedagogy was the “dominant instructional paradigm of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s” (Hawkins & Razali, 2012, p. 314), and it has since inspired the work of many other scholars. Looking at writing workshops through different methodological and theoretical lenses has allowed researchers such as Delpit (1988), Dyson (1992), Janks (2010), Kamler (2001), and Lensmire (1994, 1998) to extend our understanding of the work occurring in writing workshops, adding to and complicating the body of literature regarding its enactment, challenges, and implications. The range of theoretical and methodological lenses these authors employed serves to destabilize the neutrality or universality of the “official” curriculum. These scholars pointed to the need for
considering student identities and how power is enacted to determine what practices are validated as those of the “ideal student” or “good writer.” They utilized varied theoretical and methodological lenses to highlight the ways in which writing pedagogies and practices are actually taken up in classrooms and what teachers and students actually do with their curriculum. This focus on the interplay of teachers, students, and curricula further develops our understanding of the writing workshop in several powerful ways that informed this study.

Dyson (1992) and McCarthey (1994) offered examples of methodologies that stress the importance of how instructional practices are lived in classrooms, in particular by highlighting the perspectives of students. Dyson (1992), for example, called attention to the assumptions embedded in process pedagogy and the ways in which the literature of process pedagogy assumes particular practices to be natural and neutral, when that may not be true for all students or populations. She centered the ways in which students take up curriculum and engage with it based on their own social hierarchies, cultures, and experiences. Dyson also drew attention to the adult-centric nature of the writing workshop, and the power that teachers hold to construct discourses about what counts as writing and who counts as a writer.

McCarthey (1994) also centered student experiences and calls for an increased consideration of power dynamics in the writing workshop, specifically in terms of the vulnerability of writers who share their work. She pointed out that while there are positive possibilities, there are also inherent risks. Moreover, she cautioned against intended consequences such as “the potential for coercion for students who are not ready to reveal personal issues, limiting students’ voices by narrowing the number of possible
genres, potential cultural conflicts, and a misunderstanding of the role of autobiographical writing in professional authors’ work” (p. 190). Through their emphasis on sharing “deep” and emotional stories, teachers may unknowingly enact their power over students, positioning students in potentially painful positions. Both students and teachers may be unprepared and unequipped to deal with the emotional outcome of inviting those stories into the workshop space.

Thus, both Dyson (1992) and McCarthey (1994) remind us of the interplay between curriculum and the lived experiences of those engaged with it. Much as teachers draw upon the remnants of layers of reform and educational discourses, students also shift their practices and borrow from different discourses, including dominant discourses, vernacular and dialects, and pop culture. Delpit (1986, 1988) also took up the different discourses students draw upon and put to work. She argued that the writing workshop provides a romanticized view that does not consider the social context and power hierarchies at play for both students and their written work. Delpit (1988) called for an increase in the explicitness of instruction in Formal English within the writing workshop curriculum. This explicit instruction, Delpit explained, could offer increased access to codes of power for students who were often expected to code-switch between the dominant discourse of Formal English and their home languages or vernacular. Without explicitly addressing hierarchies in language variety or teaching the power codes, writing workshop could implicitly value Formal English and marginalize the language resources that students brought to the classroom. Instead, Delpit argued for writing curriculum generated through the collaboration of teachers, students, and community members, with particular consideration of the power embedded in different linguistic forms.
While the seminal scholars of writing process did not specifically take up questions of power and access, these have become prominent topics in more recent writing research, as scholars have explored the ways in which power works through classroom dynamics and the writing process to produce knowledge about writers and writing. For example, Lensmire (1998) highlighted the potential conflict and risk of classroom social interactions around writing. Teachers are implicated in this risky interaction because the institutional authority of the teacher is always present in interactions around student writing. However, Lensmire also argued that the personal voice articulated in the writing workshop may actually protect writers from critique. This is true, Lensmire asserted, even if the writing is perpetuating existing unequal power dynamics or problematic discourses. Because the writer and the piece were tied together in such a way, as the personal experience of the writer, it could not be challenged. In this way, the position of writer offered a differential power structure. While teachers could confer with (or coerce) students about craft and structure, the power of meaning rested with the author. Lensmire proposed, instead, a conception of voice as project involving appropriation, social struggle, and becoming. Through this conception, Lensmire concluded, students need teachers “who recognize their struggles for voice, and help them transform these struggles into occasions for becoming” (p. 286). This position marks a shift to consider the exertion of power in the writing workshop.

Lensmire (2000) continued this work, later challenging the assumption that the workshop would be a supportive, productive place for everyone by arguing that workshop advocates overestimate the effectiveness of teacher intervention and students’ openness across lines of class, gender, and race. Drawing parallels to Bakhtin’s (1984b)
carnival, Lensmire argued that while the space of the workshop can be free and playful, it can also reinforce and reassert an unjust classroom hierarchy. The meanings and values embedded in stories, then, have tangible consequences. Lensmire called for teachers to take a critical stance toward the larger society in which student work is created.

Further, what little guidance teachers receive around writing instruction tends to focus on the product or the “autonomous” set of neutral and discrete skills required to create it that can, assumedly, be taught and learned regardless of context (Street & Street, 1995). As Kamler (2001) outlined, there have been few models of scholarship focused on critical writing practices, and most teachers “negotiate the complexities of learning to teach writing alone” (p. 123). Teachers’ struggles to learn how to teach are “not collaborative in the sense of having a community to discuss and critique their evolving pedagogies. And writing rarely plays a significant part in this process” (p. 123). Teachers are simply not given the opportunities to cultivate these practices. Workshop advocates, then, “have drastically underestimated the sort of intellectual, moral/political, and aesthetic influences and leadership actually required of writing teachers if they are to be responsible in their work with children” (pp. 26-27). Additional attention needs to be paid to the power and authority teachers wield within the writing workshop, as well as to the preparation they need to cultivate that leadership in thoughtful and supportive ways.

Kamler (2001) addressed these concerns as she articulated a conscious move from voice to narrative, arguing that the latter allows for a more textual orientation, creating a clearer separation between the writer’s life and what he or she is writing about. This allows teachers to position all writing as a representation. Texts are one version of the truth, not the one truth of a writer’s experience, and as such, can be revised. It becomes
possible to offer critique or suggestions of the writing, without critiquing the writer personally. Thus, Kamler (2001) argued that, rather than the expression of a unitary and effortless voice, the goal of the writing workshop should be to develop agency as a textworker who works to shape a text actively and consciously.

Through its ability to uncouple the writing from the selfhood of the author, Kamler’s (2001) critical lens creates a space “to work with the writer’s personal experience, but differently…in a way that allows a more critical engagement” (p. 1), so that writing about the self becomes an opportunity to identify, analyze, and critique in order to understand the discursive practices that construct the sense of self. The writing workshop is, Kamler posited, a pedagogic space in which writers design both texts and identities. Kamler argued that a critical writing pedagogy has the “power to remake self and reposition writers with greater agency,” leveraging the “intimate and reciprocal relationship between the forms of representation and the forms of subjectivity produced” (p. 181), in order to rewrite text and subjectivities. Textwork also has bodily and material effects; the goal of the writing workshop, therefore, is not just to produce a better text, but to produce better practices that serve to advance the writer’s purposes and disrupt the status quo. Through the process of writing and reconstructing a text, individuals can also revise and negotiate their subjectivities. Put differently, as Harris (1987, as cited in Lensmire, 1998) asserted, writing “is not simply a tool we use to express a self we already have; it is a means by which we form a self to express” (p. 266). We can learn more about who we are and what we think in the act of writing itself, constructing new, complicated, and contradictory identities.
The construction of writing in classrooms remains a contested issue. While applying new theoretical lenses allows researchers to see and investigate in new ways, teachers must define themselves and their pedagogy in the midst of competing discourses that can regulate and discipline them. Yet, following Kamber (2001), I hold on to the optimism that a critical writing pedagogy could offer the opportunity for writers to have the agency to choose the meanings they make and begin to work towards social justice on a local level.

**Teacher Learning and Identity**

While the specific focus of this study is rooted in writing instruction, it is also embedded in the broader literature on teacher learning. As I previously argued, teachers’ writing identities have been positioned as essential in a writing workshop model, but there is little time in the school day or in professional development for teachers to learn more about writing and themselves as writers. Thus, it is important to examine conceptions of teacher learning as they relate to opportunities for teachers to engage in writing and, during the process, explore their own writing identities.

As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) argued, it has long been assumed that “teachers who know more teach better” (p. 249), but there have been significantly different conceptions of what “knowing more” and “teaching better” actually mean, and this remains a debate without a final conclusion. Seminal scholars have provided different frameworks for teacher learning, the contexts that support it, and the ways in which it is linked to educational change. In this section, I review several different frameworks of teacher learning, then read several empirical studies through the lens of
these frameworks. In particular, I aim to examine the ways in which the Practitioner Inquiry Movement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) has been enacted in the dominant model of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), as well as possibilities for how spaces of teacher learning might be used otherwise.

**Seminal Theories**

The research on teacher learning began with its roots in behaviorism and psychology. Drawing on the work of Piaget (1972), Bruner (1974), and Vygotsky (1980), seminal scholars such as Berliner (1986) and Shulman (1987) provided conceptions of teacher learning and expertise that were rooted in individual development. Eager to codify the knowledge base for teaching, these scholars sought to raise the level of professionalism for teachers by establishing the types of knowledge teachers needed to obtain in order to be successful. Positioning themselves and other academics as the generators of knowledge, these scholars sought to categorize the knowledge bases of “effective” teachers through observation and interview. Thus, teacher knowledge has often been conceived of as static rather than fluid or dynamic.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) provided a framework for conceptualizing the development of teacher learning in communities and advocating for a conception of teacher learning that is socially constructed and stems from and is disseminated by the teachers themselves. These researchers partitioned the historical development of study in the field into three differing images: knowledge-for-practice, knowledge-in-practice, and knowledge-of-practice. These images are utilized to examine the ways in which teachers are positioned, unpacking both the purposes and consequences each image holds for teachers and their students. In so doing, Cochran-Smith and Lytle provided “an analytic
framework for theorizing teacher learning on the basis of fundamental ideas about how knowledge and practice are related and how teachers learn within communities and other contexts” (p. 251). I took up Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s categories not only to read the work of seminal scholars such as Berliner (1986) and Shulman (1987), but also to explore the possibilities for teacher learning within the space of my own study. However, I acknowledge along with Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) that these three categories are heuristics; they exist together in the world, and the lines between them are not perfectly or rigidly drawn. They are constructed stances, and there is fluidity and overlap of movement among them. In schools, and in the ways schools take these ideas up as practices, all three stances may co-exist in complicated and even contradictory ways.

**Knowledge-for-practice.** In this first conception, university researchers generate “formal knowledge” and theory for teachers to use to improve their practice. This image rests on the idea that having more formal knowledge—both subject-matter knowledge and knowledge about teaching as a profession—leads in a direct and linear manner toward effective practice. Teachers learn this knowledge in preservice courses and professional development experiences. Thus, an “effective teacher” is one who enacts the formal knowledge he or she has received from outside “experts,” applying it to a practical situation.

Berliner (1986) provided an example of this image of teacher learning, exhibiting the desire to increase the professionalism of teaching by establishing an official and formal body of knowledge that marks expertise, tying education to other major professions. For Berliner, teacher expertise, which was made up of content knowledge and classroom organization/management expertise, developed over a long period of time.
For “expert” teachers, management became routine so that the teachers could focus on the context: “An expert teacher can categorize problems to be solved at some kind of higher level, whereas novices classify problems to be solved by the surface characteristics given in the problem” (p. 10). Yet, these “expert” teachers were not always aware of what they did routinely and “lack the ability to articulate the basis for their expertise” (p. 7). Therefore, Berliner argued, researchers needed to help these experts to articulate their practice through observation.

Thus, a power hierarchy is inherent in this image of teaching and learning. University researchers are positioned as the generators of knowledge and theory, while teachers are positioned as knowledge users and use their knowledge to manage their students. The goal of smooth management, which allowed teachers to focus on content, was evident in Berliner’s (1986) discussion of “expert” teachers who accomplished what he called “grooving” students; they were able to “quickly establish that teachers give orders while students carry orders out” (p. 12). While students were positioned as passive, the language of this discussion was also condescending to teachers, as is evident in the following quote: “We will continue our pursuit of the expert pedagogue. If we ever feel really secure that we have found a few of these elusive beasts, we will study them in great depth and share those findings with those who also await their capture” (p. 13).

Within this image of teacher learning, there appears to be a linear progression from novice to expert. Teachers are discussed as gaining experience and, with that experience, increased knowledge, which can then be studied. This stance overlooks any difficulties teachers may face along the way and also creates a binary between novices and experts in the field. While the “elusive beasts” who exhibit expertise should be
studied and the novices should apprentice themselves, there is a lack of consideration for the vast majority of teachers who fall somewhere in the middle. What does their learning look like?

Finally, the expertise that is presented in this image of teacher learning neglects to consider the context in which that expertise is enacted. In this conception, expertise is positioned as transferring from one context to another; a teacher who is an expert in one classroom would be an expert elsewhere as well. This ignores the considerable differences in age and development, content, language, resources, culture, and more across classrooms. In addition, Berliner (1986) posited that expertise could be observed and then passed on to novices. However, the exact nature of what forms his or other observers’ definition of expertise is absent. Can we, in fact, see all that is necessary for “expertise” through direct observation?

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) also categorized Shulman’s (1987) work on the wisdom of practice in the knowledge-in-practice framework. Shulman argued that the wisdom of practice was one of the most important sources of the knowledge base from teaching, yet it was generally absent from the literature on teacher learning. He, and later his colleagues at Stanford University and Michigan State University, followed a program of research that attempted to formalize what teachers needed to know about their students as well as what they needed to know about how to enact that knowledge (e.g., Ball & Forzani, 2010).

Drawing on the fields of psychology and philosophy, Shulman (1987), like Berliner (1986), attempted to codify school-based teachers’ knowledge. Shulman argued that the knowledge base for teaching is made up of four components. The first is
scholarship in the content disciplines because “a teacher is a member of a scholarly community” (p. 9). A second component is the materials and settings of the institutionalized educational process. He argued that “teachers necessarily function within a matrix created by these elements, using and being used by them,” (p. 9). Shulman also cited research as a component of the knowledge base, including both empirical research as well as “normative, philosophical, and ethical foundations” (p. 10). The fourth, and most influential, component outlined by Shulman is the wisdom of practice, or “the maxims that guide (or provide rationalization for) the practices of able teachers” (p. 11). This distinctive factor was positioned as the key to understanding the knowledge base of teaching and “lies at the intersection of content and pedagogy, in the capacity of a teacher to transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students” (p. 15).

While this view shifts some of the power back to teachers through acknowledging their ability to generate some of the knowledge that is included in the professional knowledge base, tensions still exist. Critical features, such as who the learners are or what the classroom context is, are often ignored in this process of determining “effective” teaching. Thus, the relationship between effective teaching and student achievement is positioned as linear and universal, with little consideration of whom it is empowering to be successful. The concept of “expertise” here is positioned as a powerful identity, and a particular type of expertise is valued. This expertise is determined by university researchers, who may be privileging a certain type of expertise and a certain type of teacher; this stands as a barrier to recruiting a diverse teaching force.
The larger tension that is evident throughout the work of Shulman (1987) and his colleagues, however, is their admission that the knowledge base of teaching is “not fixed and final” (p. 12), juxtaposed with a consistent drive to record and organize the reasoning and actions of gifted teachers to establish standards of practice; “good teaching” is simultaneously positioned as dynamic and something that can be pinned down and fixed. Shulman, for example, warned that “the great danger occurs…when maxim becomes mandate” (p. 11), arguing that linking “best practices” to a judgment of a teacher’s worth likely injures the teaching profession more than it improves it. Yet, standardization and institutionalization of these discourses about “effective” teaching and the knowledge base of teaching seem inevitable, once general teaching principles are explicated. In fact, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) pointed out, many of the current initiatives for teacher learning and development, including efforts to “improve” preservice teacher education, professional development for in-service teachers, and state and national certification policies, are grounded in this image of knowledge-for-practice. This serves to over-simplify the “outrageously complex activity of teaching” (Shulman, 1987, p. 11).

**Knowledge-in-practice.** A second image of teacher learning put forth by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) is knowledge-in-practice, which emphasizes knowledge in action. Knowledge-in-practice is manifested in the actions, decisions, and judgments that “capable” teachers express or embed in the artistry of their practice. This assumes that the practice of teaching is “an uncertain and spontaneous craft situated and constructed in response to the particularities of everyday life in schools and classrooms” (p. 262). Lifting the status of teachers’ practical knowledge, this image of teacher learning assumes that opportunities to articulate, examine, and reflect on “good practice”
are essential for teacher learning and the improvement of practice. Thus, teaching is understood in its immediacy, with “effective” teachers able to draw on their previous experiences and reflections to act and think wisely in the moment.

This image of teacher learning is exemplified by the work of Schon (1983, 1987, 1995), who wrote that it “seems right to say that our knowledge is in our action” (1995, p. 29). Thus, rather than solving practical problems by applying research-based theory and technique from the knowledge-in-practice perspective, practitioners both pose and solve problems, synthesizing the complexities of their experiences and knowledge. Thought and action, and knowledge generation and knowledge application, are linked; they cannot be easily separated out from one another. Teachers invent and design new knowledge in action and are able to apply it, thereby responding to the immediacy of their needs in a way that “formal” research cannot. While practical knowledge, or “craft,” is sometimes positioned as inferior to formal knowledge, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) highlighted the stance of progressive educators such as Grimmett and MacKinnon (1992), who defined craft knowledge as a combination of Shulman’s (1987) “pedagogical content knowledge” and “pedagogical learner knowledge” (p. 387). Taking up a critical and political stance that is relevant to the narrative inquiry approach of the current study, Grimmett and MacKinnon (1992) argued that “the essential validity and morality of craft knowledge resides in readers ‘living’ the life of particular teachers through stories, narrative, case studies, and other forms of vicarious experience” (p. 396). Thus, within this image of teacher learning, teachers’ stories and narratives are privileged as an access point to articulate what is tacitly known.
This “living in” other teachers’ lives is often cited as occurring either in dialogue with another teacher, as in a student teacher and cooperating teacher relationship, or in teacher groups, as in professional development groups led by an “insightful facilitator.” These initiatives aim for “teachers to consider and reconsider what they know and believe, to consider and reconsider what it means to know or believe something, and then to examine and reinvent ways of teaching that are consistent with their knowledge and beliefs” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 272). Rooted in constructivist ideas, these models emerge from a view of learning that is social and situated and foster “assisted practice” (Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996). Experienced teachers work to induct novice teachers with the idea that good teaching can be coached but not taught.

An example of this stance can be found in Elmore and Birney’s (1997) case study of professional development in District 2 in New York City. The authors cited the coordinator of the district’s professional development activities, describing the process as a gradual softening up of teacher’s preconceptions about what is possible, an introduction to new ideas in settings and from people who have credibility as practitioners, a chance to adapt new ideas to teachers’ existing practice under the watchful eye of someone who is a more accomplished practitioner, and reflection on the problems posed by new practices with peers and experts. (p. 16)

Working toward lateral networks of shared expertise within the district, the administrators fought the “enemy” of isolation for teachers, exhibiting their understanding of teacher learning as social and situated. The moral and political stance of Grimmett and MacKinnon (1992) is also evident in the superintendent’s argument that deep and sustained learning and change “[require]s that people feel a personal commitment to each other and a willingness to manifest that commitment by demonstrating mutual care and concern” (Elmore & Birney, 1997, p. 20). These beliefs
are manifested in particular practices in District 2, such as a professional development agenda that constantly shifts based on teachers’ needs, in- and out-of-district instructional consultants who coach teachers individually and in small groups on-site, and experienced practitioners who take on the role of “Resident Teacher” and host “Visiting Teachers” in their classrooms. While these activities are presented as a model within the case study, Elmore and Birney pointed out that these models are labor-intensive and require extensive involvement repeatedly over time. They require consistent focus over a number of years in order to have a cumulative impact. While this case study and this stance allow for variation among teachers and privilege teachers as generators of knowledge, there is a linear narrative of progress presented as well as an assumption that all expert teachers would be effective coaches, and that all novices would respond to coaching and apply what they learn to their own teaching. In addition, although this case study focused on teacher learning, the voices and decision makers were administrators. Teacher learning is still limited to the bounded roles of day-to-day classroom management. Teacher voice, narrating and allowing the reader to “live in” his or her story, remains absent.

**Knowledge-of-practice.** The final image of teacher learning put forth by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) is that of knowledge-*of*-practice. This image disrupts the assumptions of the first two that there are two distinct kinds of knowledge for teaching—formal and practical. Instead, questions of knowledge and teaching are always fluid and open to discussion. Knowledge making is understood as a “pedagogic act,” and knowledge does not exist separate from the knower. This stance builds on the idea that knowledge is socially constructed by teachers who work together, evident in the second stance. However, it also incorporates knowledge that is constructed by “teachers and
students as they mingle their previous experiences, their prior knowledge, their cultural and linguistic resources, and the textual resources and materials of the classroom” (p. 280). Knowledge is generated in the context of use and serves both application to the immediate context and the process of theorizing. Knowledge-of-practice is grounded in the assumption that teachers across their professional lifespan (no longer a part of the expert/novice binary) “make problematic their own knowledge and practice as well as the knowledge and practice of others, and thus stand in a different relationship to knowledge” (p. 273). When teachers treat their classrooms as sites for intentional investigation and interrogate the knowledge and theory produced by others, the constructed binary of formal and practical knowledge is disrupted, and both knowers and knowledge can be connected to larger social and political agendas. This allows the role of teachers to become broader, encompassing theorizing, leadership, and activism.

This new stance and relationship to knowledge, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) argued, require a new approach to professional development for teachers, one in which teachers learn collaboratively in inquiry communities or networks. Inquiry communities, like the one this study formed, often involve the joint participation of individuals who are differently positioned from one another, each bringing his or her own experiences and expertise to the group’s work. The most important element, however, is that “all participants in these groups…function as fellow learners and researchers rather than experts” (p. 278). These collaborative relationships take the place of experts and novices, coaches and facilitators. Instead, all group members engage in the same intellectual work together as a community, inquiring into the complex and messy work of teaching, learning, and social change. Essential to the work of inquiry is “breaking the professional
silence” through thought, talk, writing, and reading the text of teaching (McDonald, 1992, p. 43).

As in the previous conceptions, of course, the methods and structures put in place are not the defining characteristics of a knowledge-of-practice stance. Rather, the images of knowledge, practice, and change are essential. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) referred to the positions that teachers and others who work within a knowledge-of-practice stance take toward knowledge and its relationship to practice as “inquiry as stance.” This construct “is intended to offer a closer understanding of the knowledge generated in inquiry communities, how inquiry relates to practice, and what teachers learn from inquiry” (p. 288). The agenda of this work, ultimately, is not individual in nature, but broadly communal and political. Through an altered relationship to knowledge, practice, and change, a space is opened up to transform the traditional relationships of power, voice, and participation. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) characterized an inquiry stance as “a worldview, a critical habit of mind” that locates teaching “within webs of social historical, cultural, and political significance” (p. 120). They argued, “Fundamental to the notion of inquiry stance is the idea that educational practice is not simply instrumental in the sense of figuring out how to get things done, but also and most importantly, it is social and political in the sense of deliberating about what to get done, why to get it done, who decides, and whose interests are served” (p. 121). This task is always ongoing, an understanding that is always forming and reforming in response to the lived experiences in classrooms and schools. It is a social and political agenda that disrupts the historical “egg-crate” model of schools; it is never accomplished but always in progress.
**Professional learning communities.** Historically, schools have been structured so that teachers work alone, responsible for their own materials and instruction, and given little time to plan, share ideas and practices, or evaluate student work together. This cellular model (Lortie, 1975) of “the fundamental conditions of privacy in teaching” (Little, 1990, p. 511) has resulted in an individualistic ethos regarding teacher’s daily work. Teachers have learned to close their classroom doors in order to succeed independently, presiding over their own classroom kingdoms (Elmore, 2004; Thessin & Starr, 2011; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). These norms of school culture have also proven challenging to change, particularly when school structures and working conditions continue to privilege isolation and privacy (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Professional development (PD) has often served to reinforce the cellular nature of teaching through its grounding in a knowledge-*for-*practice model. Today, as in previous decades, the most common form of professional development comes in the form of a workshop delivered by an external “expert,” often lasting less than a day and focused on a discrete topic (p. 9). These episodic workshops are disconnected from practice, placing the burden for application to the classroom on teachers alone. PD in this format makes teacher learning an end unto itself, rather than connecting it to social, political, intellectual movements and purposes of education. This resulted in a system of professional learning that is “poorly conceived and deeply flawed,” as the support and training teachers receive are often “episodic, myopic, and often meaningless” (Hunt, 2009, p. 2). Effective PD, researchers have argued, is instead ongoing, intensive, connected to practice, and focused on specific academic content, and it fosters collaborative relationships.
Inquiry groups, with an emphasis on teacher collaboration, have been posited as a primary mechanism for schools to disrupt the historical isolation of teaching work. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, 2009) advocated for inquiry communities as a direction forward in advancing teacher learning grounded in inquiry-as-stance and knowledge-of-practice. Nearly two-thirds of teachers reported having structured opportunities for collaboration in their schools, particularly at the elementary level (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010). Yet, much as curriculum is taken up in different ways based on the context, culture, and lived experiences of teachers and students, practitioner inquiry takes a variety of forms as it is enacted in schools. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) drew an important distinction between practitioner inquiry and PLCs. These two collaborative models for teacher learning do involve some overlap. For example, each model engages communities of colleagues in inquiry into a question or problem to learn about and improve teaching and learning. In addition, both models seek to learn from the data of practice and to affect the cultures of schools in service of an equity agenda committed to improving learning experiences and outcomes, particularly for marginalized students. Perhaps most importantly, each model positions the teacher as knower and agent of change. However, Cochran-Smith and Lytle argued that the similarities in the language and rhetoric of these two models resemble each other so strongly that the inherent differences in their goals, traditions, and consequences for teachers and students can easily be overlooked. Yet, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle noted, there are important distinctions between the purposes, frameworks, and assumptions of PLCs and practitioner inquiry.
The practitioner inquiry movement is grounded in the literature of the British and North American teacher research movements, the action research movement of Latin America, Australia’s development of critical action research, and other movements of progressive education that have sought to challenge the external knowledge base for teachers and make space for the knowledge generated by teachers. Teachers make their practice the site of their inquiry, incorporating a broad variety of data, including their plans and writing, artifacts, and talk among colleagues, parents, and students. Similarly, professional inquiry communities are constituted in a variety of ways, across multiple locations, levels of experience, and contexts. Because of this, practitioner inquiry positions communities as both the means to achieve particular long-term goals as well as ends in themselves. The community, in fact, becomes a merger of the personal and the professional, and the intrinsic value of the community itself is recognized (Westheimer, 1999). Practitioner inquiry, then, requires sufficient time and duration, discourse of rich, descriptive talk and writing, and a sense of purpose to make consequential change. All of the work of an inquiry community is ultimately in service of a broader aim: “enhancing educators’ sense of social responsibility and social action in the service of a democratic society” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 58). Through explicit or implicit links to larger movements of social justice and change, practitioner inquiry works toward an equity agenda through a deep commitment to students’ learning, broadly defined.

In contrast, PLCs, which Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) referred to as “a current trend in educational reform,” have become common in schools over the past two decades as a potential “lever for educational reform” (p. 38). PLCs involve teachers working collaboratively in school-based groups to study student and school-wide data together.
These teacher groups are often structured by engagement in the inquiry cycle and an emphasis on establishing a shared vision of school culture and a shared ownership for student learning outcomes. Rooted in research traditions from the sociology of the workplace, school effects research, and organizational theory, the literature on the topic of PLCs is broad and growing; thus, the implementation of this model is varied. However, an essential characteristic of the PLC model is the assumption that school reform efforts should focus on elevating teachers’ learning capacity and the school is the necessary unit of change. Thus, the focus is on place-based learning and the structures that organize and influence teachers’ work as well as the processes that generate academic outcome. Teacher learning in this model, then, is a means to an end rather than worthwhile in and of itself. The view of community is instrumental, as a means to the end of increasing test scores, decreasing absenteeism, or meeting another benchmark. Because of this, PLCs operate within the dominant accountability frame and run the risk of becoming too narrowly focused on testing data, positioning themselves as either quick fixes for boosting test scores or methods for surveillance of teacher compliance with school and district mandates (Hargreaves, 2007, 2008). In these manifestations of PLCs, teachers do not inquire into their practice or their students; rather, they inquire into testing data. Moreover, an equity agenda is limited to closing the achievement gap on high-stakes tests rather than in service of a broader definition of learning and opportunities.

Thus, in some circumstances and contexts, PLCs have served to perpetuate dominant epistemologies and ideologies about the purpose of schooling, the generation of knowledge, and the nature of inquiry and collaboration. In fostering a procedural
approach to achieve narrow goals, PLCs exhibit the remarkable durability of the “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 87) The particular conceptions of what occurs in professional collaboration spaces and the existing structures of power and privilege that govern them serve to regulate the identities that teachers should or can perform within them. The structures, procedures, and protocols that are a part of the way schools have taken up the PLC model leave little space for inquiry as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, 2009) framed it, and present a “schooled” version of inquiry instead. These PLCs remain rooted in a knowledge-in-practice framework rather than adopting inquiry as stance in a knowledge-of-practice framework.

**Implications for the study.** These frameworks for teacher learning and teacher inquiry provide a context for discussing this study. While I previously worked with teachers as a staff developer, which is work situated by the TCRWP in the knowledge-for-practice framework, this study aimed to reframe my positionality and the work of the new group within the knowledge-of-practice framework. While I recognize that previous power dynamics cannot be erased and all participants bring multiple identities to the group, reflecting on and documenting my own performance within the group was one essential component of fostering a space with possibilities for practitioner inquiry. As the site for this research already had PLC practices in place, the group always worked within and against the PLC model and a sense of the way professional learning spaces are used. I needed to think intentionally about how to set the stage to disrupt some of the taken-for-granted aspects of teacher learning spaces and explore how inquiry in the knowledge-of-practice framework could happen within (or around, through, despite) those spaces. I
explored what kinds of inquiry could happen in the space that our collaborative group created.

While in many ways, the work of this study aligned with Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1999) concepts of practitioner inquiry, knowledge-of-practice, and inquiry as stance, in several ways it deviated from and, at the same time, built upon their work. The inquiry community convened for the current study sought to explore writing—the act of writing, the texts of teacher writing, and the identities of teachers as writers. Through this act of engaging in and sharing writing, the practice of teaching writing did arise, and our practice also became a text for inquiry. However, practice was not centered as the starting point for the group’s inquiry. In addition, this group emerged from a teacher’s request for a space to work on writing as a craft in the company of other teachers. Other participants also sought out membership within the group. However, the lived reality of schools is such that a community must often balance the optional and compulsory elements of practice. As members were brought into or dropped out of the group, we had to adapt to the constraints of others’ scheduling as well as the power and positioning inherent in their coerced participation.

Each of the prior views of teacher knowledge, including knowledge-for-practice, knowledge-in-practice, and knowledge-of-practice, presents a particular view of both the types of knowledge that teachers should know as well as a framework, either explicit or implicit, for how teachers should learn that knowledge. If, however, identity as a “model” writer is positioned at the center rather than particular knowledge, this has implications for what the spaces for teacher learning might look like. Rather than a procedural “schooled” PLC model in pursuit of narrow ends defined by test outcomes, a model of
teacher learning that centers on the constant becoming of fluid identity work might implicate a space for teacher learning that is also more fluid. This model could open up spaces for teachers to have and explore experiences rather than being taught particular bounded “cartons of knowledge” (Miller, 1990, p. 87).

**Examples of Teacher Inquiry Groups**

Two examples of spaces in which more fluid inquiry was made possible through teacher experiences, rather than the learning of particular pre-determined knowledge, were modeled by Janet Miller (1990), in her book *Creating Spaces and Finding Voices*, and Ruth Vinz (1996), in her book *Composing a Teaching Life*. Miller and Vinz both utilized teacher inquiry groups to extend relationships with their higher-education students who served as in-service teachers, and to disrupt the novice/expert binary of teacher/university-researcher relationships.

**Creating spaces and finding voices.** Miller (1990) participated in an inquiry group with five of her graduate students to open up spaces for teachers to explore the implications of attempting to enact “critical pedagogies” (at the time of this group’s voluntary formation, “critical pedagogy” and its discourses of “empowerment” were popular in U.S. higher education) in settings that closed these spaces. The group shared an uneasiness around deficit models of professional development and curriculum development that implicitly assumed deficiencies within teachers and offered prescriptive remedies to address those shortcomings. Multiple accounts from all group members provide a narrative of community (but was one that all participants challenged, in one way or another, as in any way “unitary” and “always the same”) with an equity agenda; driven by “feelings of isolation and restriction within predominant and accepted forms of
research and teaching,” group members sought to challenge “educational environments and structures that often closed rather than opened the psychic and physical space deemed necessary for critical dialogue and humane action” (p. 4). The narratives of the disjunctions and clashes of their “collaboration” disrupt the idea of static and complete stories, or of any seamless, linear, developmental notion of collaboration, which may be framed by a more distant researcher’s gaze.

Situating the collaborative experiences of the group at the center of their inquiry, Miller (1990) highlighted the ways in which power circulated and shifted throughout the changing relationships and narratives of the group members. For example, the group struggled with expectations of Miller’s role as leader of the group and her resistance to that role. In addition, the group grappled with seeking the “right way to go about this” (p. 25). The group resisted the drive to resolve feelings of discomfort and to “remain in the mess” (p. 58). They worked against the pressures to follow “correct” or “prescriptive” conceptions of their work, both as researchers and educators. Remaining in the mess, the group took solace in Berthoff’s (1987) guidelines for “learning the uses of chaos”: tolerating ambiguity and being patient with beginnings. This remained a struggle for the group and required constant vigilance, as inquiry and reflection work were not invited or given space within their individual contexts. Miller (1990) argued that it was the care for one another’s struggles and concerns that allowed the group to continue to challenge themselves in their inquiry. In this way, the group continued to generate, interrogate, and struggle with disunities of “collaboration,” “identities,” and “community” throughout their time together.
Miller (1990) also articulated a strong felt need to respond to calls for portrayals of concrete situations in which teachers work to challenge the dominant traditions of “curriculum as product, of research as prediction and prescription, of teaching and learning as a series of measurable skills” (p. 2). For the group, this was symbolized by a file carton of codified curriculum given to one participant, which Miller referred to as “the carton of knowledge” (p. 87). This served as a concrete manifestation of the pressures of prescription and conformity to expectations of “good teaching” as well as static notions of “curriculum” as only course content, predetermined syllabi, or packaged forms of textbook-sanctioned “official knowledge.” In the wake of points of dissonance such as the “carton of knowledge,” Miller and her colleagues shifted the focus from the “empowerment” and “emancipation” of teachers, which often presented others’ conceptions, authorization, and transmission of power to teachers, to the generation of knowledge that “increases awareness of the contradictions hidden or distorted by everyday understandings, and…directs attention to the possibilities of social transformation” (Lather, 1986, p. 259). This work was driven by a question posed by one participant; the group challenged its limiting situations and looked for possibility by consistently asking, “What can we do?” (Miller, 1990, p. 39). Specifically, they attempted to note the ways in which expectations and tensions were shaped by the discourses of power, control, and accountability of their contexts, and to find the spaces where they could take action for change. In Chapters IV and V, I note similar factors in our writing group’s context.

Writing provides a central tool for participants in this inquiry group to work through their thoughts and experiences. The group began with the assumption that journal
writing would provide one form of dialogue for the group; group members, replicating their assumptions of and expectations for Miller as the professor or “the one in charge,” wanted her, initially, to respond to the others’ journals, but eventually—as roles within the group evolved and Miller continued her resistance to her role as “the one in charge”—group members responded to one another as well. This was not without tension, though. One participant, Katherine, expressed a fear at the permanence of writing and being unprepared for the understandings writing might reveal. She withdrew from journal writing temporarily and engaged with the group through oral discussion instead. On the other hand, other participants sought to draw the benefits they found through dialogue journal work from the research group into their teaching roles, asking the students or teachers they worked with to engage in the process as well. Through their own writing, participants found that their layers of assumptions, particularly around knowledge as generated externally, continually resurfaced. Though writing functioned differently for each participant, the process of engaging in and responding to writing work played a significant role in the learning process of the group; this also describes the current study.

Another similarity to the present study was evident in the way that Miller (1990) found a connection between her own interests, questions, and perspectives and those of her participants, and sought together to create spaces in which teachers were participants to determine the inquiry focus and interpretation. Although Miller was beginning to incorporate poststructural perspectives into her work in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this text still harbors constructivist, humanist assumptions. Miller’s own self-reflexivity on how her positionality influenced the space relocated the researcher’s stance from
outside to inside the subjects’ spaces and centered various participants’ differing
narratives of both the possibilities and difficulties of “collaboration” and “community” as
the research focus. Positioning oneself as both researcher and subject was a project I took
up as well; this was summed up by one of Miller’s (1990) participants, who declared,
“Now I think my project is me” (p. 39).

**Composing a teaching life.** In *Composing a Teaching Life*, Vinz (1996) explored
how English teachers construct their teaching identities. She argued that, in order to
“actualize who we are and what we are about as teachers” (p. 243), teachers should read
their own teaching histories in the same way that they read any text, to open a field of
inquiry and make meaning from it. To do so, it is necessary to push back on common
perceptions of the work of teaching in an audit culture (Apple, 2004), opening long-
running practices up for questioning and critique. In coming to understand “teaching as a
composing process…we might learn to challenge, reinvent, and retheorize what it means
to be and become a teacher” (Vinz, 1996, p. 243). Such inquiry, Vinz argued, is a method
through which teachers can “map the terrain of their teaching histories” (p. 102).

Drawing on some poststructural tenets, though also harboring some constructivist,
humanist assumptions, Vinz (1996) conceptualized becoming a teacher as a “continuous
process, and one through which a teaching identity is produced and reproduced through
the particular social interactions and ideologies that inform us” (p. 6). To surface these
identities which are always in the making, Vinz recommended explicit reflective inquiry
into one’s experiences; analyzing critical incidents that occur in the classroom and in
one’s own history provides an opportunity to develop insights into teaching and
rethinking assumptions and beliefs. To explore this, Vinz undertook a year-long study of
three different groups of English teachers: four student teachers, four first-year teachers, and three veteran teachers. Through interviews, group discussions, classroom observations, and reflections on critical classroom incidents, Vinz constructed themes from her interpretation of the ways these teachers reflected on planning, implementing, and evaluating their practice.

For example, for both the student teachers and the first-year teachers, a persistent theme was the disconnect between their expectations of teaching and their reality. Translating their beliefs and plans into action was difficult, and many mandated or supposedly “effective” rituals, structures, and methods in the school system were not aligned with what these new teachers desired or had been educated to expect. Vinz (1996) connected these tensions to incidents in which “a warranty of experience is pitted against the vagary of naiveté as a way of maintaining the ‘regime of truth’ about teaching” (p. 245). Vinz illustrated that representation, resemblance, and repetition are all part of the discourse of learning how to teach, emphasizing that what has been done ought to be emulated and continued. The intersecting school discourses work to perpetuate existing power structures and initiate new teachers into taking up the “teacher” role. Vinz argued that through practice-centered reflection, productive work can emerge where versions of teaching and learning are contested. Teachers can move beyond what is convenient and conventional “to act and interpret, as well as to write, new events and words” (p. 264). In the current study, teachers’ writing and narratives worked alongside practice-centered reflection to open up spaces for contestation and writing “new events and words.”
Through this work, each teacher’s identity can be conceived as a palimpsest, a text written and rewritten, practices reproduced and revised, always carrying traces of what has come before. Vinz (1996) echoed Britzman’s (1991) argument that teaching must be “reconceptualized as a struggle for voice and discursive practices amid a cacophony of past and present voices, lived experiences, and available practices. The tensions among what has preceded, what is confronted, and what one desires shape the contradictory realities of learning to teach” (p. 63). Teachers work to compose their own teaching identities and practices, but they cannot start with a clean draft; they are revising the work of those who came before and yet are working to bring it closer to their own intentions.

For veteran teachers, this work has been in progress throughout their careers as they continually strive to bring their practice in greater alignment with their goals. Vinz (1996) drew on Kelly’s (1955) personal construct theory to illustrate how “a person’s accumulated experiences may build a network of meanings, a construct, that continuously makes sense of, anticipates, or reformulates knowledge” (p. 94). Thus, Vinz argued, home and family experiences were formative to the ways in which the veteran teachers defined what literature is and what it means, with early experiences that become foundational to their understanding of teaching. Curriculum, then, is shaped out of individual personalities and purposes. Veteran teachers, then, “teach profoundly what we are, what we know, what we value, and what we believe” (p. 185). A dialectic between teachers’ curriculum composing and their beliefs about learning is evident.

Vinz (1996) also argued that the shaping force of one’s own teachers was an influence that stayed with the teachers of writing. Specifically, teachers carry with them
“ghosts” of particular teachers from their past; these ghosts shape their theories about teaching and teacher’s work. Through connecting past incidents with present classroom realities, teachers gain a “dual vision” through which they can reflect on or even challenge their practice (p. 7). Minister (1991) also invoked the concept of hauntings to describe the ways in which an imagined “ghostly audience” shapes the way a narrator shares a story. The ghosts of teachers, parents, and even students have the potential to haunt and shape the ongoing identities of teachers as they enact writing instruction, and infiltrate the stories teachers tell about who they are as writers and as teachers of writing.

Conceptions of teachers’ writing identities. McKinney and Giorgis (2009), who studied 11 literacy specialists’ identity construction as writers and teachers of writing, found “no empirical studies that specifically addressed this assumption [that teachers who identified as writers worked more productively with student writers]” (p. 108). While they framed their study in the theories of multiple and fluid identities as well as performance of identities, they ultimately categorized the literacy specialists they studied into four groups based on the interaction between their writing identities and teaching identities. Categories included: writers who teach writing, sometimes writers who teach writing, nonwriters who teach writing, and nonwriters who do not teach writing. McKinney and Giorgis (2009) found that teachers who did not view themselves as writers either taught writing through commercial programs in a technical way or chose not to teach it, while those who viewed themselves as writers modeled the writing process for students and made reading-writing connections, indicating that a teacher’s identity construction as a writer can have significant implications for classroom practice. Whether or not teachers identify themselves as writers, a teaching identity and a writing
identity seem to be intertwined; teacher-writer Vivian Gussin Paley, for example, explained in an interview with Lindfors (2004) that writing was her “way of thinking about the classroom, and…teaching became my way of focusing upon the subject of my writing” (p. 149). Frager (1994) also explored this connection, arguing that, by analyzing “teachers’ perceptions of themselves as writers, we may understand more about how teachers’ writing ability affects their work and qualifications as writing instructors” (p. 275). Frager identified three categories of writing identities: Reluctant, Practical, and Integral Writers, arguing that teachers’ writing identities can change; teachers can form more positive writing identities through experience. While Frager recognized that “our identities and history influence how we teach and what our students learn” (p. 278), writing identities were still classified into categories, without attention to multiplicities or contradictions.

Vinz (1996) resisted categorizing teachers’ writing identities, and instead argued that one’s teaching identity is “produced and reproduced through the particular social interactions and ideologies that inform us” (p. 6). Vinz identified discourse that had the power to shape teachers’ views of themselves and their relations to pedagogy and learning in significant ways, including representations of teachers from literature, popular culture, professional literature; one’s own past; and parent and student perspectives. These different discourses “become part of the social construction of what it means to be a teacher” (p. 12). In this way, teachers take up the discourses of the audit culture and utilize them to regulate their own identities as writers. They do not view themselves as writers because they do not view their own stories as “important” or meeting the expectations of academic or literary discourse. Thus, one’s writing identity is intertwined
with a sense of power and status, thickened and laminated by one’s life experiences and relations around writing.

**Incorporating development and desire.** Hargreaves (1995) raised a final consideration in our understanding of teacher learning. While much of the discourse and literature around teacher learning has focused on knowledge and practices, Hargreaves (1995) called attention to the importance of purpose, passion, and desire. Teacher learning, then, “is not just an item of detached intellectual curiosity, but also a focus of missionary purpose and passionate desire” (p. 3). While “good teaching” is often framed in terms of knowledge and skill development, Hargreaves argued that this is insufficient, as teachers often resist or reject this type of “training”; this model is too inflexible for the practical complexities of classrooms and does not “address the personal identities and moral purposes of teachers, nor the cultures and contexts in which they work” (p. 14). Instead, Hargreaves posited four dimensions of teacher development, which he argued work only in interaction and integration: technical skill, moral purpose, political awareness, and emotional involvement.

Like Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, 2009) as well as many other scholars, Hargreaves (1995) argued that teaching is inherently political and power in education is everywhere. Thus, teachers must take a critically reflective stance on one’s own practice to consider social conditions, contexts, and consequences. Hargreaves recommended working to discern who holds formal and informal power as well as how power is exercised and circulates to engage and enact power for the benefit of one’s students. Within spaces for teacher learning, teachers can work together to develop an understanding of the “micro-politics” of their school context and take action in response.
Similarly, Hargreaves (1995) argued that teaching is inherently a “moral craft” (p. 14). He advocated for space in teacher learning experiences for teachers to “articulate and rehearse resolving moral dilemmas in their work” (p. 16). Narratives of their own or others’ experiences position practice as the text for inquiry, but rather than determining the most effective instructional practices, teachers work collaboratively to determine thoughtful and principled approaches to moral dilemma and work to avoid personal prejudice or moral absolutes. In this way, teacher learning spaces that incorporate moral purpose can help to create a culture of collaboration in which teachers can develop, clarify, review, and revise their purposes, missions, and visions together.

However, the most pertinent of Hargreaves’s (1995) dimensions is his argument for the inclusion of the emotion at the heart of teaching. The research into teacher learning, as Hargreaves asserted, tends to be rational, cognitive, managerial, and masculine. Yet, human emotions and passions are often at the very heart of teacher commitment and desire. An emotional connection allows for creativity and spontaneity, and without this emotional desire, teaching becomes “empty.” For example, when given the chance to exchange narratives and exhibit care and connection through storytelling, instead of intellectual task-centered forms of collaboration, teachers learn about the moral principles that guide one another’s work and try to establish a culture of “communal caring.” Thus, understanding the “emotional life of teachers, their feelings for and in their work, and attending to this emotional life in ways that positively cultivate it and avoid negatively damaging it” should be central to teacher learning (p. 21). Yet, the changeability of teachers’ emotions is typically either ignored entirely or conscripted into rational frameworks where they can be planned and managed. I argue that the powerful
emotions inherent in the work of teaching cannot be contained or tamed in this way. The attempt to ignore or suppress teachers’ emotions has only resulted in anxiety, frustration, and guilt for many teachers, and cynicism and burnout for others. Teachers’ emotional lives, changeable and tempestuous as they may be, are in need of spaces to be explored, affirmed, and channeled into the work of passionate teaching and learning in service of a social justice agenda. Our teachers’ writing group served as one such space.
A case study is undertaken because the researcher seeks a better understanding of a “specific, unique, bounded system”—the particularity and complexity of a single case (Stake, 2003). Specifically, I studied a school-based writing group as a case to explore how teachers perform, understand, and narrate their identities as writers and teachers of writing. To do so, I utilized narrative inquiry methods to analyze the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories told in and around the act of writing and the act of teaching writing by four members (including myself) of a school-based writing group over the course of a semester. A case study methodology allowed me to study “the messy complexity of human experience” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 3) by examining a small but complex social unit for an extended period of time.

Narrative inquiry is a particular subtype of qualitative inquiry that revolves around an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them (Chase, 2011). Constructivist narrative theorists have defined narrative as a distinct form of discourse, “as meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one’s own or another’s actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (p. 421). Chase (2005, 2011) and other narrative researchers have argued for maintaining a focus on narrated lives because a person is, at once, “engaged in living,
telling, retelling, and reliving stories” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). In the current study, I explored the stories and identities of all participants and the ways in which we/they story and re-story writing and teaching. Chase (2011) pointed out a need to know more about narrative environments that “make possible and even encourage creative explorations of self, identity, community and reality” (p. 430). Following this, I studied a particular case of a narrative environment to investigate the explorations it makes possible.

Additionally, I utilized conceptions of identity that are fluid, shifting, and complex to complicate the existing research into teachers’ writing identities. Thus, while a goal of narrative inquiry is “amplifying” others’ voices (Reissman, 2008, p. 223), I must acknowledge the complexity and tensions inherent in attempting to represent identities that are always shifting. What I sought to do in this work was to trace how power circulates and surprises, explore how identities are shaped by and shape discourses, and follow teacher-writers’ movement across multiple and conflicting identity positions. Therefore, I did not aim for neutrality in my study, nor did I propose that neutrality is possible or even desirable. I situated this study within one unique context and did not intend for it to lead to generalizable claims applicable to professional development or curriculum for all teachers or schools. However, I hope that what I have learned in this very particular social space might help others imagine possibilities for considering and narrating the identities of teachers or the potential for their own professional development or inquiry spaces.
Research Questions

1. What happens when workshop teachers and coaches from a New York City public elementary school engage in creating and sustaining their/our own writing group?
   a. How, if at all, do these collaborative engagements influence individuals’ perceptions of their/our teaching practice?
   b. How, if at all, do these collaborative engagements influence individuals’ perceptions of their/our writing?

2. What, if any, influences to their/our writing identities do participants cite?
   a. What educational experiences have informed how they/we see or don’t see ourselves as writers?
   b. How do the influences cited inform their/our practices as workshop classroom teachers, literacy coaches, administrators, or staff developers?
   c. What importance do participants attach, or not, to viewing themselves/ourselves as writers?

3. In what ways, if at all, are the typical power hierarchies of school roles disrupted and maintained by their/our collaboration?
   a. In what ways is there elasticity and/or rigidity to the roles that individuals take up?
   b. How, if at all, do the professionally assigned roles that individuals take up change over time?
   c. How, if at all, do the writing group roles that individuals take up change over time?
4. In what ways, if any, do my roles as researcher, staff developer, and initiator of the writing group influence the power relations of the group?

Overview of the Research Design

As previously discussed, the idea for this study began with a suggestion posed by one of the teachers at P.S. 999, where I have served as a staff developer for the upper-elementary grades for the past 3 years. Therefore, I had already established ties to and knowledge of this research site. Thus, as Horvat (2013) argued, my analysis already began in that my knowledge of the school and its faculty were driving my project and it was this knowledge that opened up the space for me to pursue these inquiries. For example, I had knowledge of some of the discourse around writing instruction and teaching that circulated within the school, as well as knowledge of some of the identities teachers performed in professional development and collaborative spaces—though, of course, my knowledge was incomplete. Qualitative research was best suited to this inquiry because I was interested in the meanings that individuals made of their teaching and writing lives in a particular context; in order to learn from my participants about their meaning-making, I worked from the assumption that teachers “make sense of talk and text within physical settings and through social activities that are informed by the world beyond the visible one” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 9). To study the perspectives and language of my participants, I engaged in a case study of the writing group.

A case study is one interpretation of a particular phenomenon, occurring in a particular context, and with particular participants. I sought to examine the “case’s own issues, contexts, and interpretations, its thick description” (Stake, 2003, p. 140). To do so,
I used ethnographic methods for the purpose of coming to understand the socially situated narratives and discourses of writing group members over the course of a semester. Beginning with the group’s first meeting provided an opportunity to explore how the group (myself included) initially established group norms and working practices, as well as the ways in which all participants interacted with each other and their writing over the subsequent months.

Further, this study was grounded in narrative inquiry methodology, through which I explored the complicated identities of teacher-writers. As a researcher with a background of training in literacy, as one who “trade[s] in words and discourse” (Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 427), narrative methods provided me with one possible method for representation. Here, I followed Connelly and Clandinin (1990) who, from a constructivist paradigm, argued for the employment of narrative methods because “humans are storytelling organisms, who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2). More specifically, Connelly and Clandinin (1994) explained:

Life is a story we live…we have one or many plot lines; we are a character in our own stories; others become characters in our stories; we live our stories in cultural and social settings that shape the stories we live and tell; we are gendered characters; we are characters in other’s stories. Thinking of life as a story is a powerful way to imagine who we are, where we have been, and where we are going. (p. 149)

The stories that we tell ourselves and others play a role in how individuals make and continuously re-make meaning. Yet, as Park (2005) argued, narrative “does not try to mirror reality; it tries to replicate lived experience” (p. 41); narrative is evocative rather than representational. Smith and Watson (2010), building on Scott (1991), noted that making meaning, or making “experience” of events, is discursive and happens through language and narrative. Meaning is made retrospectively, then conveyed to others
through storytelling. As these stories are told, “discursive patterns both guide and compel us to tell stories about ourselves in particular ways” (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 32). Within the writing group, participants construct and share multiple narratives through their writing as well as through their conversation. As Moje and Luke (2009) argued, “regardless of one’s take on identity, it is difficult to argue against the idea that identities are at least in part represented in and through language” (p. 427). This is what my analysis focused on.

Investigating how my participants, and how I myself, narrate our experiences was one way to begin to understand the identities we bring to and perform in the writing group space. Although I did have a prior relationship with the participants, their identities were constantly shifting and becoming as they engaged with students and colleagues, and picked up, put down, or ventriloquated certain practices and discourses. Park (2005) argued that writers create all writing in the “riparian zone” (a term borrowed from ecology), a space of great diversity in which writers can construct a sense of self and negotiate relationships with others and the world through the creation of texts, which can serve as artifacts to be mined for meaning and significance. The “riparian zone” is the place where self and culture meet, “a place that is both a zone of construction of the self, and a site of negotiation of meaning between the personal and the social” (p. 8). Writing, then, is both an individual act and a social construction, influenced by membership within particular discourse communities. The writing group provides a locus for the individual and the social, and the negotiation between them.

To study the complex case of our writing group, I utilized participant observation, semi-structured individual conversations, and document analysis. During writing group
meetings, I joined as a participant observer. I engaged in the writing process and shared my writing alongside my participants. In addition, I attended to the participation of those within the group. In the interest of studying life experiences as narrated by those who lived them, meetings were recorded and transcribed so that the exact language all the participants used to narrate their writing and teaching experiences was captured. I also attended to the nonverbal cues and interactions in the room that may not have been captured on the recording through the maintenance of field notes and a researcher journal. Additionally, I attended to the circulation of power and maintenance of institutional roles by taking notice of turn taking and interactions within the group, with particular attention to my own positioning, with whom I engaged, and who/how I affirmed or denied contributions or participation.

In addition to my role as a participant observer in the writing group itself, I also engaged in one-on-one conversations with each of the writing group members. These conversations were semi-structured (Spradley, 1979), as I was not seeking any particular answers and aimed to encourage participants to pursue their lines of thinking freely. My protocol was intended to prompt conversation and invite narration; however, it was tentative and fluid, allowing space for multiple or conflicting identities or narratives to emerge. Finally, I gathered the writing that participants drafted and completed as a part of the writing group. These included “finished” pieces and plans, drafts, and/or revisions of ongoing projects. Some were created in the space and time of group meetings, while others were written in individual contexts and shared during a group meeting. These documents, along with emails, text messages, and social media posts, were collected for analysis as well.
Implications From Pilot Study for Present Study

During the fall of the 2015-2016 school year, I completed a pilot study at P.S. B, a Pre-K-fifth grade elementary school in the Bronx. In this exploratory study, I completed observations and interviews with three teachers who comprised the fourth-grade instructional team. The pilot study allowed me to begin to perform an identity as a researcher, engage with teachers around both planning and discussing writing and writing instruction, and establish the goals and methods of my overall research. The site was its first year of implementing a newly adopted literacy curriculum with literacy staff development. The fourth-grade team, comprised of three teachers with between 4-8 years of experience, was selected in collaboration with administrators because it began the year with staff development focused on writing instruction.

During the three observations of the pilot study, my role was as a participant observer, learning through “firsthand involvement in the social world chosen for study” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 140). Meetings were audio-recorded as it was vital for me to capture teachers’ language as they discussed instructional practice. However, despite the recording, I understood that my writing was only one way of framing the narrative of these interactions.

In addition, the pilot study afforded me the opportunity to conduct semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 1979). I gained experience audio-recording and taking field notes for each 45-minute interview, then transcribing each one verbatim. In addition, I had the opportunity to facilitate a member-check focus group (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), in which data and themes were presented to all three participants to check for perceived accuracy.
and reactions. As this was an initial pilot study, the methodology of this dissertation study built on and adapted the methodology of the pilot study based on what was learned.

Through the focus group in particular, the teachers and I were able to acknowledge contradictions and multiplicities of their identities and to begin to open them up to the possibility of change. In presenting the contradictions between the themes outlined below, their refusal of the identity of “writer” and their narratives of success as writers, and as model writers in their classrooms, teachers were able to acknowledge and confirm the multiplicities of their writing identities. This confirmed, for me, the need for a more nuanced and complicated conception of identity, which a critical literacy-and-identity-studies framework provides.

Findings

This section outlines the themes identified in the pilot study that were relevant to my study. I constructed several themes that appeared to be the most dominant. The pilot study provided insight into how the individual teachers constructed multiple and conflicting writing identities in and across interactions and spaces. In addition, I was able to explore the narratives teachers shared from their classrooms and lives. Below are two relevant themes selected from my data analysis.

“I don’t feel like I’m really a writer.” While all three participants described various types of writing that they engaged in and incorporated into their teaching practice, each of them hesitated to assign the signifier of “writer” to him or herself. Although the identity itself was difficult for each teacher to take up, through their stories and discussion, each participant revealed a multifaceted writing identity that they viewed as shaped by their past experiences. In studying the language used by teachers to describe
themselves as writers and writing teachers, I found that resistance of the title of writer concealed a more complicated relationship with writing practices. While many previous studies have viewed writing identity as categorical and static through the lens of identity-as-position, I found that teachers’ writing identities were multiple, conflicting, and always in process.

All three participants utilized language to distance themselves from the identity of “writer,” using language to distance themselves from what Sausurre (1916, as cited in Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) called the signifier, through which power and expertise are signified. They dismissed much of the writing done in everyday life, such as writing emails or lesson plans, and positioned a writer as a particular identity: someone who writes often, is published, or writes particular genres.

In addition, participants’ writing identities and the way they took them up were shaped by a connection between writing and vulnerability. Teachers’ comments indicated that feedback they had received has stuck with them; they conflated the identity of a writer with opening oneself up to criticism and judgment. The participants’ comments that served to distance themselves from the title of writer appeared to be connected to the fear and vulnerability that they associated with writing experiences. The participants articulated the ways in which these past negative experiences shaped the ways in which they enacted their own writing instruction.

While the teachers expressed their fear and vulnerability, they also indicated affinity for and success with many writing practices. All three participants reported success as writers in school, citing good grades and an ability to meet expectations and complete assignments without difficulty throughout high school and college. The
teachers’ comments illustrated success in and enjoyment of particular writing practices, both in the past and in the present. These experiences provided counterexamples to the participants’ resistance to the title of writer, illustrating success and enjoyment in writing practices. Not only did past writing experiences influence participants’ teaching, but their teaching of writing also influenced their writing lives.

In line with Moje and Luke’s (2009) conception of identity-as-position, these experiences illustrate the ways in which teachers’ writing identities are in a state of contradiction and becoming. While their past experiences continue to shape their understanding of themselves as writers and their teaching of writing, their teaching and writing experiences from the past and present continue to interact with one another. A writing identity is continually under construction, contradictory, and open to change. These fluid identities, in turn, shape the ways in which teachers enact and describe their writing instruction.

Images of students. In addition to their own shifting identities, teachers considered student writing identities, as well as themselves as students, when discussing their writing pedagogy. When describing their own implementation of writing instruction, participants often told short stories of student responses. Some stories recounted events that happened in the classroom, while others were hypothetical or representative of a common occurrence. Teachers often voiced student dialogue or took a student perspective as a part of the stories. While typically intended to be humorous, teachers also engaged in telling or co-constructing these narratives as a way of identifying predictable problems that occurred during their writing instruction, opening up a space to plan for how to deal with them. Through these narratives, teachers constructed an
understanding of themselves in interactions with their students, which then shaped the next interaction. The storytelling provided opportunities for teachers to voice both sides of the interactions that shaped their identities as writing teachers and discursively construct their knowledge of writing pedagogy. In voicing the student perspective, they can sometimes gain a different perspective on their practice. Naming, voicing, or role-playing student reactions allows teachers to hold together multiple experiences in a way that allows coherence and a sense of self. In this way, student identities were constantly influencing and actually incorporated into teachers’ identities as teachers of writing.

As indicated in the previous theme, teachers also voiced themselves as students. In doing so, they articulated the symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977) inflicted upon them as recipients of writing instruction, and how vividly it remained with them. The teachers’ comments indicated that their own experiences as students were a significant part of their writing identities and remained a part of their own teaching. Yet, the images that participants presented of students and the images they presented of themselves as students seemed to clash in an interesting way, as the participants voiced who they imagined their own students to be based on their writing products. Participants conflated their writing products with a fixed, knowable identity, or “what type of person [students] are.” These “types,” such as “struggling writers” and “successful writers,” are then sedimented and made available for categorizing or evaluating students. This perpetuation of the power hierarchy, in which teachers ventriloquate writing discourses of standardization and evaluation, provides another example of the contradictions and multiplicities of teachers’ writing identities.
Additional Implications of the Pilot Study for the Dissertation

Based on the findings and reflecting on the design of the pilot study, I made several changes to the design and focus of my research for the present study. I was able to collect significant data on the ways in which teachers defined themselves as writers and the influences they foregrounded on both their writing and their writing instruction. However, the single interview with each participant did not provide enough data to examine the construction of multiple identities across times and spaces. Consequently, in this dissertation study, I interviewed each participant twice, along with a few additional informal conversations, some of which were initiated by the participants. In addition, I troubled the traditional semi-structured interview dynamic by incorporating some “‘playing around’ or experimentation with interviewing” (Scheurich, 1997, p. 74). During our group meetings, I incorporated multimodal prompts, such as memes, tweets, and photographs, to encourage interaction and allow for circulation of power within the interaction in indeterminate ways. Occasionally, participants brought artifacts for discussion as well.

Additionally, the member-check focus group provided a great deal of rich data, as participants were brought together to consider the themes and discuss collaboratively without a particular agenda, such as the one I set in our staff development meetings. This alerted me to the importance of participants interacting with one another. Additionally, it indicated the need for a space in which the conversation and exploration, even around curriculum, was more open and allowed for greater agency for the participants to construct and enact identities of their choosing. Finally, the discussion of and around writing pointed to the distinct absence of actual participant writing within the study.
Therefore, rather than acting as a participant observer in staff development meetings, which not only includes complicated power dynamics but also limits the scope of the meetings themselves, I engaged as a participant in the writing group. While I was never able to escape the power circulating, this structure allowed for the possibility of a greater degree of participant agency in directing both the work and the discussion and exploration of the identities that teacher-writers constructed as they were simultaneously constructing texts of their own.

**Research Site**

Located in a culturally and linguistically diverse neighborhood, the context for this dissertation study was highly diverse. Approximately 54% of the school population of P.S. 999 was Hispanic, 27% Asian, 14% African American, and 1% White (New York City Department of Education, 2015). Nearly one third (31%) of students were English Language Learners (ELLs), and over 20 languages were spoken by students and staff. Approximately 90% of students qualified for the Free and Reduced Lunch program. The school serves many recent immigrant students and families. P.S. 999 is comprised of two separate side-by-side buildings; Grades Pre-K through 2 are housed in a lower-school building, while Grades 3 through 5 are housed in an upper-school building.

The school offers several additional support programs to students as well. An Academic Intervention Program provides small-group differentiated support to students in need, both during the school day and in before- and afterschool sessions. A Title III program provides afterschool classes and supplemental school day support for ELLs. In addition, weekly enrichment classes in the content areas, technology, and the arts are
offered for students. The school collaborates with a variety of arts providers to offer dance, art, music, and drama experiences and field trips for all students. The school has partnerships with several local colleges, ranging from community colleges to an Ivy League institution. In addition, a collaboration with Junior Achievement of America allows local high school students to gain teaching experience while assisting teachers and supporting students in classrooms. However, only 28% of students in Grades 3-5 scored Proficient or higher on the state achievement test in English Language Arts last year. As a “focus school,” P.S. 999 has received additional attention from the district superintendent, heightening anxiety in the school community over test score improvement.

The school’s literacy curriculum follows a balanced literacy approach. The school ascribes to the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project’s units of study in both reading and writing. A workshop approach is implemented at all grade levels. Read-aloud and word study are also consistently implemented, as is literacy instruction in content area study. Classroom teachers are expected to follow a pacing calendar, indicating start and end dates for units across classrooms at the same grade levels. The fourth and fifth grades are in their first year of departmentalization, in which one teacher instructs all classes on the grade in reading, while another teacher instructs all classes on the grade in writing. The school administration has articulated a goal of professional development and study as “essential” for faculty. In literacy, this is enacted through Teachers College Reading and Writing Project staff development, cycles of coaching with school-based literacy coaches, weekly grade-level collaborative planning blocks, and weekly afterschool professional development sessions (as required by the district).
Participants

The participants for this study included three upper-grade classroom teachers, two instructional coaches, and one administrator from the school. In addition, I considered myself to be a participant in the study as well. Three of the six participants continued throughout the whole study, completing their writing projects and attending most or all of the meetings. However, three of the six participants initially recruited did not consistently attend the group meetings or complete their writing projects.

As previously mentioned, one of the fourth-grade teachers, Luis, proposed the writing group itself. Because of his learning stance and quick sense of humor, Luis and I connected throughout my time as a staff developer at P.S. 999. On my days in the school, he sometimes joined the literacy coach and me for lunch, or stopped by in the mornings before the school day began to brainstorm ideas together and share classroom successes. In one of these conversations, Luis voiced the desire to participate in a teacher writing group because he felt that it would be valuable to have a place to work on his own writing and be in community with other teachers. Luis is fluent in both Spanish and English, and loves theater, travel, and improv comedy. In previous years, Luis taught a self-contained classroom, often with many ELL students. With the school’s move to departmentalization, at the time of the study he was in his first year as the fourth-grade math teacher. When he learned of this move, he reached out to me to confirm that he could still participate in the writing group and reaffirmed his enthusiasm for the project.

Two instructional coaches, both the literacy coach and the math coach, also participated in the group for the full length of the study. Valerie is the upper-grade literacy coach at P.S. 999. She is a former classroom teacher and frequently works with
all of the upper-elementary literacy teachers. Valerie works with small groups of students who need extra support as well as in classrooms, coaching teachers and modeling lessons with students. Her role also includes professional development, involving planning with teachers and leading team meetings. Valerie is fluent in English and Spanish and has a deep wealth of instructional knowledge as well as many strong relationships with both teachers and administrators in the building. She is a single mother of three children—a high school senior, a middle schooler, and a first grader. Valerie volunteered to join the writing group, articulating a desire not only to support teacher participation but also to get back to enjoying writing again, specifically citing an excitement for the materials of writing, such as special pens and notebooks. Belle, the school’s math coach, joined the group at the suggestion of Luis. Luis and Belle work closely together in planning and implementing the fourth-grade math curriculum in addition to attending and planning math professional development together. Belle’s professional role mirrors Valerie’s, including work coaching and modeling in classrooms, working with groups of students, and planning and leading meetings and professional development sessions. She has experience as both a classroom teacher and an administrator. Belle is a woman of Jewish heritage who is passionate, politically engaged, and is known for her self-deprecating wit.

Additionally, the departmentalized writing teachers for both fourth and fifth grades were recruited to join the group by the school’s literacy coach and principal. Kathy is a veteran teacher who recently transitioned from the primary grades up to fifth grade. After a year with a self-contained class, Kathy took on the role of writing teacher for all of the fifth-grade classes. Tara, another veteran teacher who was transitioning from a self-contained to a departmentalized model, is the writing teacher for all fourth-grade
students. Both teachers have participated actively in staff development sessions over the past 3 years and were selected by administration to serve in their current roles. While both Tara and Kathy felt unable to commit the time to a writing group outside of school, both were initially willing to join when the time was made available during required afterschool professional development time. As the study progressed, however, both Tara and Kathy’s attendance trailed off as other obligations and pressures got in the way of their participation in the group.

The school principal, Joe, also planned to participate in the writing group. Joe requested to join the group when I proposed the potential of P.S. 999 as a research site to him. Proclaiming that he loves to write, Joe was eager to be a participant in the project. He embraced the writing workshop first as a teacher, and then pushed to bring the approach to P.S. 999 when he became principal there nearly a decade ago. Joe attended the first informational session for the group, sharing his ambition to write children’s books and use the group to make time to work toward that goal. However, Joe did not attend any group meetings following the informational meeting and did not share any writing with the group members.

Finally, I joined the writing group as a participant myself. Though I serve in many different roles, such as college instructor, staff developer, and former classroom teacher among them, I joined the group as a fellow writer. Of course, as a researcher and the one responsible for convening the group, I cannot escape the ways in which my own positionality always shapes and is shaped by the group. In this particular context, I both maintained and shifted positions from staff developer to a member of the group. While I continue to work in other spaces in the school as a staff developer, positioned as a
“knower” and charged with setting an agenda, within the context of the group I worked to give up control of agenda-setting and the procedures of the group, striving to position all members as knowers. I shared my own writing and aimed to be particularly attentive to power asymmetries in relationship to the different roles and access to participation. I needed to monitor my own interactions and responses to the other group members very carefully, considering, for example, to whom I responded and whose comments I reinforced or challenged.

**Writing Group**

Because of the ways in which I consider writing not as a static product but as a process that is infused with and shaped by power and social positioning, I sought to construct the writing community space to align intentionally with this conception. Specifically, I aimed to be attentive to the ways in which, in any writing community, there is always resistance and tension. Participants came to the work of the group in different ways and with different investments. Accordingly, individuals took up the group inquiry in different ways, sometimes taking up what I had assumed to be the “sacred” elements of the work in ways that challenged or brought particular dimensions into relief. To conceptualize the work of the writing community, I drew upon Lensmire’s (2000) use of the Bakhtinian concept of carnival to argue that a writing workshop can be a carnivalesque space of playfulness and irreverence. Through establishing a space for teachers as writers, I aimed to make these carnivalesque potentials available for teachers as well. Lensmire highlighted four features of Bakhtin’s carnival and argued that the critical examination of writing workshop approaches can serve as a blueprint for “democratic living” (p. 9). He argued that writing workshop approaches have the
potential to “contribute to the creation of more human and just forms of life in school and society” (p. 26), if they allow for meaningful learning opportunities, open learning relationships with others, and irreverence and subversion of norms. I kept these aspects in mind as I envisioned and continually revisited the workings of the group, and as the group negotiated and renegotiated its process. Consequently, though I did not want to predetermine the practices the group would engage in to allow them to emerge from the group itself, I outline below a repertoire of potential practices that provided possibilities for creating a writing space that was open to interpretation, contestation, and transformation. Given the power inequities inherent in the various institutional roles represented within the group, I understood that I could not escape certain assumptions—both those I held about the goals and process of the group as well as those others held about my role. But I find it valuable to explicate the ways in which, pedagogically, I tried to cultivate a way of being together as a responsive writing community. In outlining these practices, I do not intend to construct a checklist that the group did (or should have) worked its way through; rather, I present the options I thought through for my own response to the participation of the group and how these practices would be useful.

First, Lensmire (2000) highlighted the feature of participation of all in carnival. The lines between spectator and performer are blurred, meaning multiple identities can be taken up. Moving fluidly between the roles of “author” and “audience,” participants were all in active roles. In our writing group, one way this manifested itself was through the conversation in our group meetings. Second, all participants shared written pieces during our time together. Some were self-selected projects, and some were completed by everyone in the group. These pieces took different forms (letters, essays, oral storytelling,
etc.), and particular members chose to share more or less often. However, all participants held both author and audience roles at various times. Other roles were also taken up, such as partner, teacher, coach, and learner.

A second important feature of workshop-as-carnival is free and familiar contact among people. Physical and social distances between people are close and new relations with others are made possible. Individuals connect with one another around their writing, and the “teacher” is among the group as a writer and audience member. These relationships have the potential for equality, as each individual has ownership over his or her own piece and shares work with and gets feedback from others; in this way, the writing workshop aims to disrupt the social hierarchy of the classroom or school. Within our writing group, I aimed to bring together teachers and coaches in ways that helped them close the physical and social distances between themselves. In setting aside time for a writing workshop, individuals who did not have consistent time to share ideas and experiences were able to meet and (re)negotiate relationships. Additionally, inhabiting similar roles within the writing group, despite their/our different roles outside of the group, helped foster more equitable relations around their/our writing. In this way, writers were able to engage in both the construction of self and the negotiation of meaning between the personal and the social through their turns as producers and consumers of texts. One specific strategy that allowed us to (re)narrate our stories and ourselves was through the use of writing as artifact (Kamler, 2001; Park, 2005). As a group, we wrote in response to objects, or from an artifact’s point of view, and interrogated texts, utilizing them as cultural resources. The artifacts, collectively, repositioned teachers and teachers, allowing us to see ourselves in one another’s stories,
to challenge a narration a teacher assigned himself or herself, or to hear alternate ways of being a teacher and doing teaching. When we took on other viewpoints and retold stories through this practice, we were able to juxtapose in-group and out-of-group identities, enable social and/or emotional connections, and provide an opportunity to attend to narratives, counter-narratives, and/or metanarratives represented in our texts. This practice gave us the distance to make dominant Discourses visible and to imagine alternatives (Kamler, 2001).

Similarly, a third important characteristic of workshop-as-carnival is a *playful, familiar relation to the world*. Writers are encouraged to explore their own worlds, select their own topics, play with language, and engage in conversations through conferences and partnerships. This sense of play and enjoyment—the “noise, laughter, and incessant movement” (Lensmire, 2000, p. 15)—may seem frivolous, but Bakhtin (1984b) argued that there is great importance and possibility in the playful manipulation of the everyday world: “a distant, prophetic goal: to dispel the atmosphere of gloomy and false seriousness enveloping the world and all its phenomenon, to lend a different look, to render it more material, closer to man and his body, more understandable” (p. 380). Within our writing group, one way of incorporating a playful element was through the use of technology and popular culture. Selecting and examining memes, tweets, hashtags, Pinterest boards, Facebook or Tumblr posts, or other social media content related to teaching and/or writing infused familiar, everyday material within the inquiries of the group. Incorporating a meme such as this into conversation can make certain realities visible and invite sarcasm or critique (see Figure 1).
Social media content can generate playful conversation, sparking different topics or perspectives, and tap into discourses around “ideal teachers” and “bad teachers,” allowing us to acknowledge what resonates and complicates this binary. It can also serve to destabilize the definitions or conceptions of “good writing” and “authorship” that can become sedimented, providing an opening for questions or even resistance.

The prevalence of technology and pop culture points to the ways in which a relation to the world is not limited to the physical world, but also incorporates the digital world. As discussed in Chapter I, teachers can compose identity kits across spaces, drawing on digital worlds as well as their material context. Through introducing memes, tweets, and hashtags, I aimed to open up additional avenues for dialogue and critical reflection, and also highlight digital storytelling as a valued form of composing. These digital components have the potential to “edit reality—to organize it and reorganize it by mixing form and content, to juxtapose through display, to compare texts to understand difference” (McWilliam, Dooley, Mc Ardle, & Tan, 2009, p. 73). McWilliam et al. argued that this practice is yet to be authorized through mainstream research, yet it is necessary
for modern life. While these practices were taken up in a limited way within this group, the possibility of incorporating digital literacies into the scope of our work was available.

This leads to the fourth important characteristic of carnival, which Lensmire (2000) argued workshops tend to be missing: profanation. This strong antiofficial current of “carnival abuse” is directed at practices or ideas that oppress “the people.” Lensmire argued that while workshop advocates critique “traditional” pedagogical practices, these critiques are seldom linked from the classroom level to larger societal issues and struggles for change. In privileging individual writers’ work, a writing workshop philosophy is at odds with Bakhtin’s (1984b) vision of collective struggle for positive social change. Not supporting writers in opposing and criticizing aspects of their world, Lensmire noted, can have profound effects. Not only do writers lose an opportunity to engage in sophisticated forms of parody or criticism, but talk and writing can actually be used to target those less powerful. Thus, Lensmire argued, a great deal of “intellectual, moral/political, and aesthetic influence and leadership” (p. 26) are actually required of teachers to address these concerns. In our writing group, I attended to the ways teachers spoke about these leadership responsibilities and “profane” behaviors. While students may turn their talk or writing upon one another or even authority figures, teachers may engage in similar acts of profanation—acts that are not “off-task,” but a form of engagement in their own right. However, keeping Lensmire’s critiques in mind, I argue that a carnival cannot be planned or created. I attended to these possibilities but acknowledged that I alone could not bring them into being. Yet, writing to and from objects, photographs, or curricular and professional texts, in addition to teachers’ own individual writing projects, can all provide opportunities for taking on other perspectives
and positions as well as opportunities to identify and talk back to constraining discourses. This may also make possible opportunities for collective action, as Bakhtin envisioned. I examine these dimensions further in Chapter IV.

**Data Collection**

Stake (2003) argued that, “with its own unique history, the case is a complex entity operating within a number of contexts…is singular, but it has subsections…many so complex that at best they can only be sampled” (p. 141). Thus, I began collecting data for this dissertation study with an acknowledgment that these data would be partial. Dyson and Genishi (2005) expressed the significance of starting a case study by gaining an understanding of the research site, in addition to building trust and gaining access to a complex world. Because I have worked in the school site for several years, I had an opportunity to develop relationships with my participants and establish a level of familiarity with the school space. However, my engagement at the site had been spread out, not in depth, and it had been in a different capacity. The writing group itself presented a new, unique case, and I utilized multiple methods of data collection to “sample” the different contexts through which teachers constructed and/or enacted their writing identities. In this section, I lay out the rationale for and the affordances of the ethnographic methods and the self-reflexive practices I employed.

Specifically, I engaged in participant observation of the writing group meetings, recording the interactions and storytelling that took place in the collaborative space of the group. I also conducted two semi-structured interviews with each participant to gain more of their individual perspectives as well as additional narratives of themselves as teachers.
and writers. Finally, I examined the writing that was drafted and shared by members of the writing group, engaging in document analysis of the pieces created within the case study. In exploring the narratives participants told in the writing community, in one-on-one conversations, and in their/our own writing, I approached any narrative as an instance of interaction between the narrator’s active construction of self and the social, cultural, and historical circumstances that enable and constrain the narrative (Chase, 2005).

Through careful attention to the narratives of each individual and the discourses that circulate in and through them, I constructed “what the case’s own story is” (Stake, 2003, p. 144).

**Participant Observation**

As previously acknowledged, I joined the writing group as a participant. Therefore, my researcher role was as a participant observer. Participant observation is a data collection technique in which the researcher learns through “firsthand involvement in the social world chosen for study” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 140). Participant observation of the writing group meetings form the core of this case study. During these meetings, which occurred at the school site every other week for approximately an hour and a half, I engaged in the systematic noting of behaviors, events, and languages (p. 139). The agenda and procedures of each meeting were determined collaboratively by the group (though sometimes with my leadership, a topic discussed further in Chapter V). Through engaging all participants in establishing norms and practices for the group, I explicitly addressed the shift in my role. I characterized this shift by explaining that within our group, we would join as writers, all working through our own process with one another’s support. I was open and honest about my own challenges and asked for
feedback and advice, naming explicitly that I wanted to learn from others too. In addition, all meetings were recorded and transcribed. This allowed me to reflect on the ways in which participants positioned themselves in the narratives they shared about teaching and writing and the shifting and conflicting identities constructed and/or performed. I also attended to the ways in which participants, including (perhaps especially) myself, responded to one another as well as the content of the stories they shared, seeking to explore the discourses at work in and through them. Transcription, which is inseparable from interpretation, also preserved particular features of the oral narratives needed to interrogate performance features, such as shifts in verb tense, direct speech, creative language, and expressive sounds (Riessman, 2008).

Chase (2011) argued that for narratives to flourish, there must be a community to hear them. Stories told in group settings are less likely to be rehearsed and typically lack neat boundaries. In this way, the dynamic and fluid interactions of the writing group provided access to in-process identities that the participants enacted. Chase also cited the reflexive interplay in which narrative practices are shaped by and shape their local narrative environments; thus, through participant observation in the writing group, I sought to understand the “narrative realities” of the local context. This required “ethnographic sensibilities,” or my systematic attention to communicative mechanisms, circumstances, purposes, strategies, and resources that shape narrative production (p. 422).

I argue that the writing group provided a unique frame that, because it was still school-based but external to the classroom, “can help teachers think differently about teaching writing and reflect on what it is that students are learning to write, what they do
with that writing and what that writing does to them and their world” (Kamler, 2001, p. 173). Through coming together as a community of writers, engaging in, sharing, and reflecting on our practices as writers, we open up a time and space that allow for the possibility of self-reflexivity about how social and cultural practices affect both the writer’s identity and the text he or she writes as well as how stories “support, undermine, and struggle with other stories” (p. 174).

It feels important, then, to attend to the vulnerability and risk of sharing stories, writing, and positionings. As discussed in Chapter II, the emotional life of teachers is too often ignored. I had to be prepared, then, to encounter and even participate in not just the communal caring and connection made possible by storytelling, but also the exploration of “the difficult”—the presence of difficult stories and experiences, how they might be taken up, and with what consequences. If I recognize the power of story to move us emotionally, “in acknowledging that power, in attempting to harness it to intervene in what we deem possible to understand and enact in our professional lives, we necessarily make ourselves vulnerable” (Dutro, 2011, p. 208). Dutro (2011) argued that “the difficult can be productive pedagogically and relationally within literacy classrooms” (p. 194). In our writing group space, it was important to attend to the vulnerability that is inherent in classrooms and teachers’ stories, while remaining aware of how privilege and power shape the stakes of those exposures (Dutro, 2011). Through self-disclosure of my own narratives (including those of “the difficult”), I aimed to open a space where each person could share aspects of his or her own identities with one other (p. 205). I sought to share my own vulnerabilities (with an understanding that the stakes for my exposure were lower), and acknowledged through our establishment of group norms the inherent
vulnerability in sharing. We worked to generate agreed-upon protocols around the sharing of difficult stories and vulnerable positions with the group.

**Participant Interviews**

Because I was interested in how my participants, as narrators, made sense of personal experience in relation to social and cultural discourses, I also conducted two semi-structured conversations with each participant (Spradley, 1979), each lasting approximately 45-90 minutes. Questions were generated prior to the interviews and had been piloted in my pilot study (see Appendix B) to provide a starting point to the conversation. However, because I was not interested in achieving any kind of objectivity or seeking any particular “answers,” the number and order of the questions were flexible, so that participants were able to pursue their lines of thinking freely. I moved away from asking participants to generalize their experiences and instead invited them to share specific stories, so my interview guide was sometimes useful, while at other times it was not as I “follow[ed] the narrator’s story” (Chase, 2011, p. 423). Thus, I drew on Rapley (2004) in positioning interviews as conversations, with a give-and-take in which I was an active participant.

Chase (2011) cautioned that researchers who take on interviewing with a narrative inquiry lens witness a range of emotions and require patience to explore memories and deeper reflection. Additionally, emotional maturity, experience, and sensitivity are required. I aimed to attend to these needs while still acknowledging that, no matter how I sensitive or patient I attempted to be, nor how I tried to disrupt the power circulating in the interaction, interviews are “body-to-body” experiences in which researchers require participants to render themselves open to examination (McWilliam et al., 2009, p. 69). I
sought to establish the participants’ corporeal comfort by allowing them to select the location and time of the interviews. However, I also acknowledged that I had an active role in shaping (and being shaped by) the interaction.

**Document Analysis**

The final method of data collection that I employed was document analysis. I collected the pieces that teachers wrote or shared within the writing group in order to study them closely. In this work, I follow Richardson (2000), who positioned writing as a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about oneself and one’s topic; writing, Richardson (2000) argued, is also a way of knowing, a method of discovery and analysis. Through considering writing as method, I was able to experience language-in-use, looking at how they/we “word the world” into existence. Though we are never able to represent reality accurately, precisely, or completely, we as writers keep trying. Similarly, as a researcher, the data I collect, including the writing of participants, can never capture their identities, yet I keep trying. Participants’ writing can provide conflicting or shifting constructions of their identities when viewed against interview or group meeting transcripts. Documents can also provide a view of the discourses about writing or teaching or identities that make their way into writing pieces. Who we are, what we can or “should” be, and how we can write about it are all shaping and shaped by the discourses available to us. Writing, in this way, becomes a research practice through which I can investigate how participants construct the world, them/ourselves, and others, and push back against the ways “standard objectifying practices of social science unnecessarily limit us” (Richardson, 2000, p. 924).
Data Analysis

Due to my disciplinary training in literacy and my immersion in the U.S. culture of education, I situated myself within humanist ways of thinking and analyzing. I sought to work towards Bakhtin’s (1984a) conception of a “plurality of independent, unmerged voices” (p. 6), voices that encounter each other as equals and engage in a dialogue, and are not subsumed or captured under my single authorial choices, to the degree that I was able. In my analysis, I acknowledged that any themes that bubbled up based on my interpretation of the data only partially represented that particular point in time with particular people, and I acknowledged my power in creating them, just as I know that gaps and silences are present.

As Dyson and Genishi (2005) have argued, the data analysis process is ongoing and begins well before data collection has completed. Corsaro (1981) asserted that analyzing data throughout the data collection period can help direct the study as it continues. Thus, I did not view data analysis as one isolated time; rather, it was recursive and ongoing, revisited and revised repeatedly. My data analysis began with thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). This method of analysis was my first instinct to examining any data, due to my disciplinary and educational background. However, my analysis also involved dialogic/performance analysis (Riessman, 2008), in order to attend to context and interaction. I outline these two methods of analysis below.

Thematic Analysis

When my data collection was complete, my first step was to organize all of my interview and meeting transcripts, memos, and documents in order to take one
chronological read-through all of the accumulated data. Next, I drafted a researcher memo to capture my reactions, questions, connections, and constructed themes. Thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) is content-focused and aims to examine the meaning a narrative communicates. I examined the meeting and interview transcripts for narrative units, attempting to keep each story intact, looking at both what was spoken and the “overall structure of each story” (p. 68). In determining the narrative units, I began from Riessman’s definition of “a bounded segment of talk that is temporally ordered and recapitulates a sequence of events” (p. 116), and aimed to preserve sequences rather than coding segments. While the process of determining the boundaries of stories is highly interpretive, it was important that I not fracture these narratives into decontextualized bits of data, as though the pieces were unconnected or interchangeable. I looked first for themes within narratives, then looked across interviews and then meetings (Chase, 2011, p. 424). I looked for repeated assumptions, episodes, and sequences, aiming to explore the discourses that circulated through these narratives and connecting the life worlds of the individual narrators with larger social structures and power dynamics. I relied on prior theories, such as Vinz’s (1996) categories of retrospective, introspective, and prospective language, as a resource for the interpretation of both written and spoken narratives. In addition, however, I also searched for novel theoretical insights from the data. Therefore, I assigned both inductive and deductive codes to the narratives, based on the content of both the data and the literature. Thus, the interpretive process was grounded in the data, but was also reflexive and mediated by my own professional, personal, and collective knowledge and experiences (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). I identified patterns through multiple and overlapping pathways, including declaration, frequency, and similarity. This
process was iterative and I refined or collapsed codes as needed. Finally, I selected the most prominent “thematic threads” for interpretation.

The themes that resulted from this process were constructions. In the chapters that follow, I attempt to create a multivocal text, in which there are different narrators whose stories are represented. In addition, I brought potential themes to the writing group, during group meetings and interviews, in order to get group members’ perspectives and to question and trouble the themes. While the themes are ultimately my interpretation, the members of the writing group were active participants in the interpretation process. Ultimately, however, I acknowledge that I decided which stories to include, how to sequence them, and which to leave out. I also decided when and how to interrupt and interject, questioning my own constructions. Thus, throughout my analysis, I explain why the themes I chose to elaborate on resonate as particularly salient and include tensions and contradictions to trouble the themes that I construct.

Dialogic/Performance Analysis

Thematic analysis, as Riessman (2008) herself argued, has strengths and limitations. While it is what I, as a researcher and an individual, am naturally drawn to as my first line of thinking, there are shortcomings to this method which led me to seek an additional method of data analysis. For example, the investigator’s role in constructing the narratives that are analyzed is often obscured, while, as I have discussed, I attended carefully to my role in shaping and being shaped by the narratives of the group and the individuals within it. Additionally, thematic analysis relies on the assumption that all narrators included in a theme “mean” the same thing when they speak or write, and that meaning surpasses the subjective and particular. This neglects meaning as constructed
and negotiated within a particular context and assumes too direct a lineage between story and intentionality. Little attention is paid to the context in which the story is told, and little attention is paid to language choices and form.

Because of these issues, I also utilized dialogic/performance analysis to add other dimensions to my inquiry. Dialogic/performance analysis interrogates how talk among speakers is interactively produced and performed as narrative (Riessman, 2008). Specifically, this approach asks who is being spoken to, when, and why, considering the purpose for which the narrator is telling the story. This necessitates an explicit consideration that stories are “composed and received in contexts—interactional, historical, institutional, and discursive—to name a few” (p. 105). Thus, the dialogic/performance approach considers each story a social artifact, capable of teaching the audience as much about society and culture as about an individual or a group. As the site-based context of my study was integral to shaping the interactions, discourses, and roles of all members of our writing group, a consideration of context is imperative.

Additionally, dialogic/performance analysis positions the researcher as an active presence in the text, which aligned with my own positionality in the work. For example, all participants were aware that I was collecting data during our meetings, and I was explicit about the kinds of things I hope to understand, sharing my questions and interpretations with them. As a member of the group and as an intended audience, I participated in what Riessman (2008) termed the “complex choreography” of coproducing stories (p. 105). It also meant that readers were also inherently part of the interpretive process, bringing their positioned identities and cultural filters to reading. Including all of these interactions between speaker and listener, narrator and setting, text
and reader, and history and culture requires a shift in method. It also has significant implications for my analysis of identities. Riessman argued that dialogic/performance analysis, drawing on Bakhtin, conceives of identities as situated and accomplished with an audience in mind; therefore, we are “forever composing impressions of ourselves, projecting a definition of who we are, and making claims about ourselves and the world that we test out and negotiate with others” (p. 106). In this way, the “performance” of a narrative is both an act and an enactment, action and representation (p. 109). The reader or myself as the researcher may be an audience to perform for or negotiate with, but audiences might also be imagined or even “ghostly” (p. 113).

This approach, which views meaning not as held by the text but as created in interaction, also allows for conflicting and shifting interpretations. Different readings, even by the same reader, may result in different interpretations. Similarly, a narrator may tell a different version of a story according to context. In investigating different meanings, this kind of analysis can reveal the ways that structures of inequality and power, class, gender, and race/ethnicity are present and doing work in what appears to be “simply” talk. Utilizing thematic material from my data, I re-read and re-listened to the data multiple times, taking up different lenses (including structure and language choices) and exploring different interpretations each time; I captured this thinking in researcher memos, attending to shifts in my own positioning. Additionally, I worked towards locating narratives in broader (historical, social, economic, discursive) contexts in order to illustrate how larger social structures can and do “insinuate their way into individual consciousness and identity, and how these socially constructed ‘selves’ are then performed for (and with) an audience” (Riessman, 2008, p. 116). To do so, I interrogated
my data for instances of appropriation and vetriloquation (Bakhtin, 1981), following Brown (1999, as cited in Riessman, 2008) in questioning the origins of words that speakers/writers naturalize, what meanings are invoked, what history they carry, who has been hurt or silenced by past uses, and what is accomplished through their appropriation. This requires looking past content, as in thematic analysis, to figurative or even unconscious practices of language use. Dialogic/performance analysis affords me the opportunity to interrogate language, as well as the micro- and macro-contexts that shape and are shaped by participants’ narratives.

**Role of the Researcher**

As Riessman (2008) argued, researchers “carry their identities with them like tortoise shells into the research setting, reflexively interrogating their influences on the production and interpretation of narrative data” (p. 139). I carried my memories and relationships, social positions and identity markers, roles and discourses into the research site with me. I cannot separate myself from this work; in fact, my overlapping identities have shaped and are shaped by each phase of the current study—how I am positioned and how I position myself in the research site, the questions I ask, what I attend to, and how I read and interpret data (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Here, I followed Luttrell (2000), who argued: “I don’t believe that researchers can eliminate tensions, contradictions, or power imbalances, but I do believe we can (and should) name them” (p. 500).

Due to the complications of power circulating within our writing group and the multiple roles I held, I sought to maintain the “self-consciousness of a writing teacher” (Kamler, 2001, p. 8). To do this, I borrowed some of the practices of autoethnography in
order to reflect on my role in the group. For example, I attended to my self as a member of writing group in addition to my participants. One of the tools that I utilized was the analytic memo. Maxwell (2005) argued that analytic memos can be used for many purposes; however, I employed memos primarily as a reflection tool. Memos provided a space to attend to my own actions and participation, the ways in which my identity positions impacted the work, and the emotional dimensions of the group (and my own experience within it). Additionally, analytic memos allowed me to question and push back on my own interpretations and analysis. My researcher memos varied in their length, formality, and content (Maxwell, 2005). I wrote memos consistently, following both group meetings and interviews, as well as throughout the analysis process. Once the study was complete, these researcher memos provided me with a way to reflect back on the entire research process and consider the ways in which my identity impacted the ways I interpreted the data.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) urged researchers to listen closely to teachers’ stories of their lives both in and out of classrooms. For this reason, I elected to engage in multiple observations and interviews with each participant. Multiple methods of data collection ensured that I collected a wide range of information and insights. I positioned this research as a process of shared narrative unity (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), where my caring relationships with each member of the writing group allowed me to gain access (to the extent possible) to the participants’ expressed beliefs and doubts. For that reason, I shared my in-process thinking and analysis with the group as well as copies of transcripts, if they so chose. In listening closely and sharing my own stories as a researcher/teacher-writer, my research “work then becomes one of learning to tell and
live a new mutually constructed account of inquiry in teaching and learning” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12), a collaborative story that is created out of both the lives of researcher and participants. The following chapters are the mutually-constructed stories of our writing group, stories that hold new possibilities for teacher-writers, researchers, and readers.

**Limitations**

The current study employed a case study methodology because of the value of exploring one case in depth in order to unpack the messy complexity of everyday teaching and learning in one school site (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). While the work that our writing group engaged in together provides possibilities for other teachers or schools to consider for their own professional development spaces, one clear limitation of this study was the small number of teacher-writers who participated in this study for the duration of the group. This study was contingent on the particular historical moment, particular participants, and particular sociohistorical context in which they/I worked. A larger number of participants would have given me additional data and a broader perspective of the experiences of teachers, both within the context of the writing group itself as well as in the broader context of the school as whole. Additionally, the multiple roles I held within the school spaces (particularly as a staff developer and researcher) likely complicated this recruitment and retention.

There is value in learning one context in depth, but another limitation is that I did not collect data beyond the 6-month duration of the study. Were our group to have met more frequently, or were I to continue working with the writing group across several
years, the work of the group, the individual relationships, and the context of the school would likely shift. Future work, then, could explore site-based writing groups across years of collaboration, or perhaps across sites. This would add depth and complexity to the consideration of teachers’ perceptions and enactments of their writing identities.

**Presentation of Findings**

In the next two chapters, I present the findings of this dissertation study thematically. The first chapter (Chapter IV) is intended to address the first two research questions, while the second chapter (Chapter V) is intended to address the second two research questions. In both chapters, I incorporate data from across collection methods, sharing both the oral and written stories of individual participants as well as the interactions among members of the group. Additionally, I examine the tensions and contradictions within each theme. The final chapter discusses implications for classroom practice, professional development, and teacher preparation as well as future research. Through this work, I hope to provide a description of a collaborative writing space for teacher-writers, which may support possibilities or ideas for other teachers to explore their own “riparian zones,” engaging in constructions of self and negotiating relationships with others and the world.
Chapter IV

COVER STORIES AND WHAT LIES BENEATH

Four of us sat gathered around the table in the center of the coaches’ office. Unsorted books were stacked on all of the flat surfaces around us, and our notebooks and snacks littered the table in front of us. We had all put in full days in classrooms already, teaching and coaching, and outside of the windows that covered one wall, the weather was the chilly gray of February. We were in the midst of our second group meeting, feeling out what this group would be and how we would work together. Valerie pushed her chips to the middle of the table, offering them to everyone. Belle checked in about post-it supplies with one of the other coaches. In between progress updates on our writing projects, we offered book recommendations and shared the television shows we had been binge-watching to pass the winter evenings. Nervous about taking over the group too much, but feeling the pressure to figure out a workable process for all of us, I began the following exchange:

Amy: It sounds like one of the struggles is just finding the time to actually get some writing done. We talked about, last time, setting some time, talking time and then writing time and then sharing time. So, if we take fifteen minutes to actually try out some of the ideas that we’re thinking through, that might be helpful.

Belle: Time for me isn’t the issue. It’s the act of writing. I’m going to do it on a computer. That’s just the way it’s going to be. But, I feel like the kids, I feel like I have nothing to write about. That’s really how I feel. I have nothing to write about.
Luis: I feel like I have too much to write about.
Valerie: I feel like I don’t know where to start.

And with that, a small sense of each individual’s writing identity was laid bare. I placed my own challenge in the center of the group. Then, each participant revealed his or her own challenge as a writer, an obstacle that stood in the way of engaging in writing as a regular practice. We named a part of the process that trapped us, like quicksand, and pulled us toward a reality as a “non-writer.” These personal sticking points in the process, it would turn out, were part of much larger individual stories; they served as cover stories, constructed narratives complicated or even contradicted by the lived experiences of teacher-writers.

**Teacher-Writer Identities: Binary and Beyond**

Many previous studies have categorized teachers’ writing identities in static, binary ways: you either see yourself as a writer, or you do not. Within this framework, if a writing identity is not claimed (“I’m just not a writer”) or is doubted (“I’m afraid to put my writing out there because it might not be good enough”), one cannot be a writer. However, the implications of this false binary are not limited to a writing identity, but also extend to a teaching identity. A writing identity is assumed, within a writing workshop framework, to be essential to an identity as a “good” teacher of writing. Yet, the static identities that each of us explicitly claimed were only the beginning of the story. The plethora of stories and actions that emerged over time from our writing group’s work indicated a more nuanced and complex reality. As I analyzed the transcripts of our group meetings and individual conversations, first thematically and then dialogically
(Riessman, 2008), I revisited instances in which writing identities were claimed, rejected, and doubted by participants alongside narratives of their enjoyment of and success in particular genres, forms, and experiences of writing. The writing identities of each teacher-writer, then, was narrated as a cover story; these were the static categorical writer-selves that we constructed in relation to our conceptions of an idealized writer. This idealized writer, reified by many curriculum guides, was someone who wrote often and consistently, struggled little, and faithfully followed the steps of a linear writing process of planning, drafting, revising, editing, and (often professionally) publishing a polished, laudable product. The enacted identities of teacher-writers, on the other hand, were social and dialogic, shifting with time and context. Yet, the “ideal writer” constrains and edits the identity of teacher-writers, giving only parts of their writing identities permission to show through.

In this analysis, I drew on Moje and Luke’s (2009) description of an identity as position framework; they described how in scholarship that operates from this metaphor, “identities are produced in and through not only activity and movement in and across spaces but also in the ways people are cast in or called to particular positions in interaction, time and spaces and how they take up or resist those positions” (p. 430). I considered how the positions of “good writer” or “good teacher,” for example, get taken up and resisted, and how these actions and stories translate into identities that might thicken or laminate over time.

For example, throughout their engagement in the writing process, participants tended to narrate themselves as writers by centering the process they were working through and the tools that facilitated (or inhibited) that process, allowing for both
successes and challenges as they persisted through the stages of writing. In each meeting, we moved fluidly through writing, teaching, learning, and social identities as we worked and collaborated with one another. The binaries of writer/non-writer or good teacher/bad teacher were a part of our self-positioning and narration, but they were only a part; as we enacted our teacher-writer selves in interaction with one another and our context, these binaries were sometimes reinforced and sometimes disrupted. Identity as position (or layers of positions, laminations) takes into account narrative and discourse, but also acknowledges the power of activities, interactions, space, and time in constructing particular writing identities. Thus, the representation of identity in our cover stories; the enactment of our writing identities within the context of the group (and the personal, social, historical discourses in which it was situated); and the identity of the idealized writer that haunts our stories may provide layers to the student, teacher, learner, colleague, and writer positions.

While I argue that there is greater complexity to a writing identity than an “are you or aren’t you?” dichotomy, each participant presented a cover story of self-identification. Belle, Luis, and Valerie had diverse stances toward the beginning of our work together, but each was clear and firm in how they identified themselves, the emotions they attached to writing, and the reasons for their particular stance. Below, each participant outlines his or her writing history in his or her own words, based on a timeline he or she created during our second group meeting. Then, I incorporate other aspects of their conversation and self-narration, identified by thematic analysis of transcripts of group meetings and individual interviews, to draw out the complexities and contradictions of their dynamic identities as writers. These other excerpts can be thought
of as layers of their laminated identities peeking through, made visible as they enact these identities in the group’s activities. They may also indicate the fluid shifts across multiple positions in which members of the writing group found themselves (ourselves) across the group’s time together. Across these examples, the doing of identity is as powerful a means of self-construction and representation as the narrativizing of identity.

Belle

In her own words.

I just started to list things. In elementary school, it was book reports, where my mother made the cover or we traced the cover with that tracing paper stuff. And then from the elementary school...I was in a K-8 school, so probably some time, seventh and eighth grade through high school, it became about essays on tests and how quickly can I spit back what it was, as short as possible. And then in college, they always, okay, writing 101 and more essay stuff. And graduate school, we had to write real papers and I started to actually proofread things. And then the math stuff that we talked about is informational.

When I was an AP for a couple of years, at the time, the observations were these full one-page narratives which were freaking torture for me to write because I was crazy obsessive-compulsive about them, they had to sound professional. They had to sound really good. The grammar, everything had to be right. But they also, because you don’t know me that well, if the observation was on a Monday, if they didn’t have their full write-up by Wednesday, I was having a meltdown because I can’t have things on my plate.

So, there was this crazy anxiety associated with it, which is the reason I never liked to do papers. The test, you go home, you spend the night before, you study, you spit it back, you’re done. Papers were these long, extended things. So that’s pretty much my writing history. It’s very limited.

In broader context. Belle was initially the group member who held the most negative view of writing and herself as a writer. As she described her writing history above, she remembered the different kind of writing she had done in each role and stage throughout her life. Her writing, despite beginning in elementary school and running to the present (her “math stuff”), was described as “limited.” Despite her skills being, at
minimum, competent enough to take her through graduate school and into employment, in her descriptions she associated writing with negative emotions; the terms “torture,” “crazy anxiety,” “obsessive-compulsive,” and “having a meltdown” highlighted Belle’s perception of her writing experiences. Her cover story of a “limited” writing life was contradicted here, but the emotional nature of these experiences seemed to peek through for Belle and obscure the ways she had successfully used these practices throughout her life. As she had experienced these positions of anxiety in the past, she came to imagine her future self moving within these positions as well.

Later on in our work, Belle outlined a distaste for the physical act of writing as well as a sense of anxiety over the products she produced. For example, she explained:

There’s two parts. There’s the physical act, which we’ve talked about, I hate. Even more because I told you, I think I’m getting Carpal Tunnel, or something or other. It’s not something I enjoy doing. I don’t mind the first part of it, of writing everything down, so I don’t forget, or typing everything down so I don’t forget. Having to get it into...It requires a lot of effort and it requires being in the right mood.

Belle’s physical actions as a writer, and the pain those actions evoke, contributed to her cover story as “not a writer.” While Belle took on multiple positions here, acknowledging there were parts of the process she did not mind and she could be in the “right mood,” she represented herself as “hating” the act of writing. Her perceived lack of writing experience and acumen made Belle more conscious of her participation in the study, and she often voiced her self-deprecating concerns that she would not be a productive participant or live up to the expectations of the group. The excerpt below is from our first interview together.

Amy: Were there particular people that influenced you as a writer? Maybe not in elementary school, but maybe later on?
Belle: No, because I had almost no... Again, any writing I did I had to do because I had to do it. There was literally no writing in my life. Now that I’m talking about it, it’s just so interesting, because reading I can talk a lot about, even if I wasn’t taught it explicitly, I can talk a lot about influences in reading, in sitting with my father, in his big giant chair. He would fall asleep half the time. I have some of the books that he used to read to me over and over, as a really, really little kid, but writing, no. This isn’t working well for your doctorate.

Amy: No, no, it’s fine. Absolutely. There’s no right or wrong answers, I promise.

Belle: I mean, I can’t go back into my history and get it.

Amy: Right, exactly.

Belle: You need something meaty to write about, and I’m not meaty.

Indicating that there “was literally no writing in [her] life,” Belle rejected a past identity as a writer in its entirety. She positioned herself clearly on one side of the binary identity, indicating that she had difficulty talking about writing and making a comparison to her own feelings and memories about reading. This seemed to be an identity that has laminated with retellings over time, as Belle described engaging in “no” writing as a child and a student, and continuing to avoid the task as an adult. This self-declaration is a refusal of the “ideal writer” that Belle felt pressure to embody, not only in talk but in the production of her written products. For example, Belle referred to another dichotomy, that between assigned writing tasks which she must complete for school or work, and writing she initiated herself, or what Emig (1971) referred to as “self-sponsored writing.” Belle saw self-sponsored writing as an essential component of being a writer. By denying her past writing practices or successes and resisting the “good writer” label, Belle also protected herself from future expectations—and therefore, anxiety about judgment—connected to assuming a “good writer” identity.
This positioning threads through Belle’s confidence in terms of her written products. She described an “intangible” quality of effective writing that she was sometimes able to capture, while other times it felt unreachable; thus, sometimes, she was successful in a writing task, and other times she was not. Again, her comments suggested that writing was not solely an autonomous skill for Belle, but one with a deeply emotional component. It was also an indication that her identity in activity was actually much more fluid; her successful writing experiences intermixed with the times she fell short. For Belle, this process—when writing goes well, when it does not, and why—seemed to have no discernable pattern; however, she felt it could be the result of a lack of practice. She noted:

The thing that is just...I always think that sometimes it’s like something just comes out and once I’ve done it, just sounds real, it sounds right, it sounds professional. I think I even have something I saved that I wrote as [an assistant principal], because I’m like, “Wow, this one came out good.” Then sometimes, no matter what I do, it’s grammatically correct, and yet it doesn’t sound the way I want it to sound, and it’s such an intangible, and I think obviously the more you do it probably the better you get at it.

Belle connected her perceived lack of practice and fluency in writing with ineffective or unsatisfying products. Falling short of this ideal, even only *sometimes*, is enough to limit Belle’s ability to narrate herself as a writer. As a structured, linear thinker, she aspired to follow the steps of a process to achieve a “professional” product consistently. Yet, a structured, linear writing process did not work for her in a reliable way that could be replicated across pieces.

As a self-professed non-writer and a math coach, Belle was perhaps initially an unlikely candidate for participation in the writing group. Her entrance into the writing group was, admittedly, reluctant. She recounted:
I had no intention to being part of it, and then I...Luis said something, I’m like “Yeah, I can’t be a part of that, that’s so hard.” He was like, “Well, that’s why you should be.” I started to think about all the people saying, “I don’t want to do a math problem because it’s hard and I don’t like math and la, da, da, da.” I’m like, “Yeah, Belle, practice what you preach.” It was really about stepping up to the plate for myself, like not that I think anyone is going to know other than Luis and Valerie and you. It’s kind of like, “Yeah, you talk the talk, you better walk the walk.” That’s really, really what brought me to the group.

Luis, then, offered a subject position to Belle, calling on her “good teacher” identity, proposing that she was a particular type of subject (one who serves as a model for others and backs up her words with actions). Belle, in turn, had to decide whether to accept or refuse that position. The commitment, for Belle, was both about social obligations (meeting a friend’s challenge and then honoring a commitment she made to me) and about living a life in line with her own values, living up to the self as interpellated (Althusser, 1971). As the math coach, Belle has often encouraged reluctant teachers to embrace math work, even when they were “not math people.” Faced with a similar challenge to her own identity, Belle felt obligated to follow her own advice; with an understanding of math identities as fluid but her own writing identity as a binary, Belle was pushed to reconsider her understanding of herself as a non-writer. In other words, her role as a coach prompted her to consider her role as a learner and a practitioner of writing. Her multiple identities began to “overlap and layers [began] to congeal across identity compartments, thus producing hybrid identities” (Hall, 1996, as cited in Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 431). When asked about her goals for the group’s work, then, Belle was committed to engaging and practicing, but uncertain of her own abilities.

Belle: I made a commitment to you, and I’m really going to try to stick with it, and come up with some finished product. How good it will be I don’t know, but by the end, yeah…
Amy: So, what is your goal of across the rest of our time?

Belle: To finish, to get it finished, and for it to not sound like a two-year-old wrote it.

Belle’s direct acknowledgment of the study, as seen in the beginning of this excerpt as well as the excerpt that began this section, spoke to my positioning as well as our relationship. She wanted to “do well” in the study and compared herself to her conception of what I “want” from her, an idealized interviewee. Her comments implied that she wanted to do well for me because of our existing relationship (“I made a commitment to you”); she felt as though she was somehow letting me down because her writing experiences were “not meaty” enough. She drew attention to her perceived “novice” status as a writer in her goal to write in a way that did not sound “like a two-year-old wrote it.” Her comments positioned her as a “good colleague,” while at the same time distancing herself from an identity as a writer.

Luis

_In his own words._

I looked at...it was in like three chunks. I talked on my timeline, it was like two random things, fourth grade, and then twelfth grade where Ms. Wheeler, in my twelfth-grade senior writing class, where she was a stickler about the five-paragraph essay, followed by the next year where my English teacher was like, the five-paragraph essay is crap. It’s not how people write.

And then the next part, I guess these two moments. One was writing about...I was a history major, so all of it was blue book writing about... It was a lot of recall, you know, writing essays. But then my senior year, into my second degree is where I had this kind of major shift, that writing about history could be analytical and critical as opposed to regurgitory.

It was this mind-blowing thing where like, wait I could be critical about history, as opposed to it’s just like fact recall…. It was my senior seminar class. Yeah, it took me until my senior year of college, right?
And then my last chunk is my teaching experience. As I look through, I almost wrote here. Actually, I feel slightly jealous for kids now in terms of...the opportunity. That if I now, as an adult, if I had the opportunity to be able to write, grow up and try to write in that same manner. I think a lot of it is really...it is about being critical, and it is about trying out these craft moves and studying things that if I were taught those in those years, I would’ve been like, wow. I would’ve gone to college, I would’ve been like maybe a phenomenal writer perhaps. Or maybe I would hate it. I don’t know.

I think [Valerie] sparked like, just even the diary writing. I did that as I first started traveling. So I do have notebooks where I could probably go look through. But it was like, I just keep remembering sitting in Paris at a café because I was by myself and I didn’t want to look stupid. But I would write. I was like, “That’s the thing writers do in Paris. They sit at these cafes and write.” But I was writing about my travel experiences. That’s kind of how I thought about how it grouped into these weird, like, phases.

**In broader context.** Luis narrated his writing history in a series of vignettes that showed the breadth of his writing experiences. He highlighted conflicting standards and instruction, specifically naming the teacher in this vivid memory. This provided a clear example of what Vinz (1996) called the “ghosts” of particular teachers from their own past whose lasting influence shapes teachers’ theories about teaching and teachers’ work. Luis moved through essay writing that emphasized recall to a “mind-blowing” experience when a new genre, new tools, and a new position opened up for him. He juxtaposed this personal experience with those of his students, who had access to those genres much earlier. Luis acknowledged that he felt “jealous” of the materials his students have access to in building their own identities that were not made available to him until much later in his own writing life. Yet, Luis also acknowledged one way he has found to make writing personally meaningful: by connecting it to his travels. Despite narrating his school writing experiences as primarily structured and formulaic, Luis found the space for personal writing. He was initially not planning to include his travel writing experience on his timeline, perhaps due to discounting this form of writing as “less than,” as indicated
by his use of “but” and “just” in describing the activity. However, it was Valerie’s
description of her own diary writing that “sparked” his inclusion of his travel writing in
his description of himself as a writer. Even this personal writing, though, did not escape
the haunting presence of the ideal writer. As Luis described, he was enacting “the thing
writers do,” and the emotion and uncertainty could not be divorced from the activity: he
“didn’t want to look stupid.” Luis’s discussion of the “weird phases” of his writing life,
then, exemplified shifting, complex writing identities with layers of experiences,
messages, and “ghosts” laminating onto one another and peeking through at different
times.

In interviews and the group, however, Luis’s cover story often showed him
comfortably at home with writing and his identity as a writer. As previously outlined, the
group was originally his idea, and he was responsible for recruiting Belle into the group.
In our first group meeting, Luis described his difficulty in settling on a genre of writing
because he was “interested in everything” (a juxtaposition of difficulty framed as a
strength). An enthusiastic learner, Luis described a desire to work together with
colleagues and engage in creative endeavors.

But I had been wanting something like this for a while where I could write, try
it out, the process…it’s tapping, like I’ve had this creative…I’ve talked about it,
but I just felt I was in that creative place like, “I do want to write.” I have things
to say, I want…there’s something I want to say or there’s something I want to
explore…. Inside of me, recently, there’s been this need to get this creative outlet
out, an outlet for this creativity, or what I feel like I have to say. So, it’s been
great to be able to say, “Okay, I’m going to write, I’m going to spend some time
writing. I’m going to try it out,” you know? “I’m going to put it down. What does
my voice sound like? And how do I do that?” Often, I think about…when I revise
and I’m like, “Does that sound like a good word?” like annotating it “Does that
sound like it would be a good word?” I think I was over here, I used charm and
then charming, and I was like “Oh, does that sound like it’s too repetitive? What
do I think, what could be another word for that I could use there?” I think then I
mentioned to you quaint, from charming to quaint. So, you know?
So yeah, it’s been really great and I’ve engaged in that process. And like you said, I feel like I wanted something like this, so it’s nice to be able to have that outlet, you know? And I come in with this...well, I’m super excited about it. That’s how I am as a person, like I’m very excited to learn and to do something to get better at something, you know?

[I]t’s who I am as a person, I just want to be able to do a lot of things, and some of it comes from my grandfather who was almost like a renaissance man in that he could just do something, pick it up, try stuff out, painting, woodworking, different things, and it’s kind of like I feel that way too, just who I am as a person. You know? And...you know, I want to try things out. I did improv a bit, I loved it. I got out of my system, but I still might engage in it, one day. At this point it’s just something I want to do, you know? So, for me it’s been wonderful, because I’ve been wanting to write.

In this retelling of his early experiences with the group, Luis revealed several important aspects of his multifaceted identity—shifting quickly across different positions. He articulated that writing was one aspect of a creative, renaissance man identity that he has crafted for himself—one which, importantly, he viewed as a connection to his grandfather. Luis moved from declaring his writing identity (creative, having something to say, trying it out to find his voice), to declaring his learning identity (excited to learn and do something to get better at it), to declaring a broader familial identity (I feel that way too, who I am as a person). As previously described with Belle, Luis’s multiple identities began to “overlap and layers [began] to congeal across identity compartments, thus producing hybrid identities” (Hall, 1996, as cited in Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 431). His narration across these different positions were tied together into the hybrid identity of “who I am as a person,” a renaissance man. Luis pointed to several enactments of this identity—questioning and revising word choice in his writing and improv comedy—in order to have his “renaissance man” identity recognized (by himself and others). In addition, he positioned himself as an enthusiastic learner, someone willing to work at
new things to get better at them (and encourage others to do so, as Belle revealed). He also indicated a confidence in his own creative abilities in general, and his writing abilities in particular. Luis asserted ownership over a writing voice (even “voicing” it in his retelling), a revision style, and “something to say.”

However, Luis’s identity as a writer was not consistently as confident and enthusiastic as this particular story indicated. In discussing his own history as a writer, he also described times in his life when he doubted his writing abilities. For example, evident in his narration of his timeline was the rote nature of writing for him throughout much of his schooling and the significant shift in both content and craft that he had to face during his college years. It also came up in conversations around his teaching of writing, and the uncertainty that came with modeling writing for students. In our first interview, for example, Luis said, “I remember having anxiety like in teaching units where it’s like writing the piece alongside these kids, you’re like ‘Oh my goodness, I have to do the actual writing and I don’t necessarily know the keys,’ so it was hard.” Pairing this comment with Luis’s naming of his jealousy about the exposure his students have to wider writing opportunities than he did himself illuminated the ways in which Luis’s own writing history shaped his writing instruction as well as the tangled emotions these experiences infused into the expectation that a teacher be a “model writer” for his or her students. Luis was expected to model an experience for his students that he had not had as a student himself. Even for someone whose cover story asserted confidence, this expectation produced anxiety.

As we continued discussing these experiences, Luis revealed a pivotal moment in which these doubts not only affected him emotionally, but also affected his actions and
choices; the congealing of this experience produced the gel (McCarthey & Moje, 2002) of identity for Luis. Discussing his decision to move from Florida to New York to become a teacher, Luis described the moment he decided not to pursue a career in academia and the role his writing identity played in that decision.

I remember meeting, when I was ending…my bachelors, my second one. I actually remember meeting with [my professor] that really...like I really, really...I saw him as this really awesome guy, whatever. I remember going to his office one time and just kind of thinking about what I want to do. I was kind of like “Maybe I’ll be in academia, like I could do French history or something. I really like history, whatever,” and through our conversation I got this impression...it maybe was my impression, but I just felt like he didn’t think I was a good enough writer to go in that direction, and I was like “Oh, okay.”

It was so...It was kind of like a way of like, the way the things he said at that time were kind of like, “Oh, well, you never know what could happen, there’s great things,” and I got that feeling. And part of it maybe was my own insecurities about writing that maybe...you know, maybe it was my own thing, that I felt bad, but I kind of got that feeling of, “Oh, well, you’re not cut out for like masters programs, writing about these critical things,” and I was just like “Oh, okay.” I was lost, I didn’t know what to do. And so, I moved back home for eight months and then, you know, I came to New York.

In this story, Luis presented a conflicting identity to that of his “renaissance man” narrative. His own chronology indicated distinct phases in his writing history, moving from essay writing regurgitation to critical analysis and on to modeling in the classroom. Anxiety remained within each transition, and the identity that laminated during the vivid moments in the professor’s office co-existed with the eager creativity of our group meetings. Luis juxtaposed the different facets of his writing identity together himself when asked about his goals for the time our group spent together.

I don’t know, I’m really happy. I know that there’s this passion between my traveling, and as I’m writing I’m like, “Oh, this is wonderful.” I don’t know. I don’t know. I’m waiting to surprise myself, see what comes out of it. Maybe I decide to start a blog or something, I don’t know. I don’t know. I really don’t. I just want to see where it goes, what comes from it. I think, active thinking about where.... Maybe I just decide to write for fun and it becomes something. I don’t
necessarily have a goal. Just to be able to write stuff down more. I don’t know. Maybe it becomes like a storytelling kind of thing. I took a storytelling class and you do the same thing. Write it out, then you kind of chop it up, make it shorter to fit this thing. I don’t know. Maybe it’s just for my own personal life.

I think it’s just a nice way for me to...It’s that part, like “Yeah, I can write. It’s fine. I can do it.” Like I know now I have the tools to be able to go back and say, like, “Okay, I can reread, revise various things,” and maybe it’s just kind of a way for me to get out of my head and get past all those kinds of experiences that I had growing up to be like “Oh, I know.”

As the member of the group who initiated its work, my (obviously unfounded) assumption was that Luis would have a clear goal for his own work within the group. However, this assumption was turned on its head as Luis made it clear that he hoped to use the group to explore possibility and he would allow the process to get him there, without determining a destination at the outset. He was open to many outcomes and to the experience itself, embracing the “process over product” philosophy at the core of writing workshop. However, Luis was also pushing up against the ideal writer here, which positioned writing for publication or professional purposes as the preferred end goal. Though he was uncertain, as indicated by all of the times he repeated “I don’t know” here, Luis pushed to make space for writing in a way that mattered to him. Through the building repetition of the phrases “I don’t know” and “maybe,” Luis did give way to a more specific, emotional goal: breaking through the anxiety or negativity of past experiences in order to gain a sense of confidence in the creative identity he has worked to craft for himself. This statement implicitly acknowledged Luis’s uncomplicated excitement for the creative endeavor of writing as a cover story, and his efforts to prove—to himself and others—that he was the eager, confident writer he narrated himself to be.
Valerie

In her own words.

I made a double timeline. I looked at it from school and personal. From school, like elementary, middle school, high school, college, grad school and then work. Then I went just personal timeline from when I was a kid to when I was a teen to when I was an adult. And in my personal life, I’ve only ever written in the form of a diary, which I had mentioned before. And that’s a place where I write things that I cannot say or I feel like I can’t say, whereas the timeline that I have for school and work, it’s only been the writing because it’s been task oriented. Even for work, right? Even when I think about anything related to the work that I do, when I was in the classroom or out of the classroom, it’s always been because I had to, not because I wanted to, versus my personal, which is because I wanted to. Those are the two distinctions I made in my parallel timeline.

I was just trying to see that if I can find anything where in school, in that school-work timeline, if at any point in time, any of my writing came from me as opposed to because I had to do something for somebody else, for the purpose of someone else or the purpose of something or someone, to complete something. And it’s only ever been because of that. But there were two times in that work slash school time where it was meaningful to me. One was when I won an award for writing a paper in philosophy. This was my second year of college in philosophy, of why we should believe in God. I won two hundred bucks.

In broader context. In her timeline, Valerie immediately made a distinction between what she considered two aspects of her writing identity: professional (school and work) and personal. She ascribed different values to each of these categories as well. Personal writing was writing she has done “because [she] wanted to” and was coming “from [her].” Professional writing, on the other hand, was “task-oriented” and “because [she] had to do something for somebody else.” This distinction is perhaps not as binary as it seems at first, however. Towards the end of her story, Valerie highlighted finding meaning in external recognition—a task-oriented writing experience that resulted in an award and a financial reward. She also acknowledged, in later discussions such as the one below, a purpose to her writing work in school. She crafted model writing that she shared with teachers and students. Valerie acknowledged that this practice was “helpful” and
that she recommended teachers produce the same type of writing, indicating that she found value in it. Yet, Valerie undermined the value of this professional writing by contrasting it to her journal writing, which felt purposeful, while the professional writing did not.

I’m a journal writer. I do talk a lot, but I don’t say a lot of the things that I feel all the time because I just don’t. I’ve always had a journal. I’ve always written down my thoughts, or things that I want to say to people that I don’t say and I record it in journals. Not to mention the fact that I’ve mentioned to you that I love notebooks and therefore, that’s why I do it. I love pens and I like the act of writing itself. I’d rather write than type most times. I am working on my penmanship because I get really sloppy with it.

My process for writing is just jotting down what’s in my head. As a learner, for writing, I take extensive notes when I’m learning. From my notes, I rewrite them after I’ve taken extensive notes on what the big ideas were from my notes and sort of organize them in like big ideas, and then details on the bottom. Big ideas and details on the bottom, sort of like the boxes and bullets. I’ve seen myself do that. I keep an agenda, an agenda where I mark important things that need to get done. I like to write notes to people and mail them. Like I’ll send my aunt, who’s in Florida, I write her letters just to say hello. I like to do that, again, just because of the paper. I like to get all that pretty paper.

Do I have a purpose for writing other than my journaling? I don’t. I have a writer’s notebook here for my coaching for grades three, four and five, where I go through the writing process for every unit of study as a model for teachers and in some cases, when I’m coaching into cycles for students. I bring it with me, but I also bring it with me to show teachers that they should have theirs to show kids. When I don’t see it, I sort of share mine with them and they like say, “Oh, this is a great idea, I’m going to copy that,” so I feel that’s helpful. However, I don’t see it as often, as much, when I do go into the classroom, where they’re bringing it to the table. Maybe they make it but they don’t use it. What else can I say about myself as a writer? I think that’s it.

Here, Valerie expanded her original two categories to three categories of her own writing: personal writing, which she engaged in to process emotions or unresolved conversations; functional writing, which she engaged in to capture her learning and maintain her schedule and relationships; and professional writing, which she used in classrooms and meetings to teach and coach. Yet, Valerie still seemed to ascribe
“purpose” only to the personal writing, discounting the other forms of writing she employed in other ways. Emotion seemed entwined with the sense of purpose for Valerie; capturing her feelings and processing relationships led her to name this writing work as an explicit identity (“I’m a journal writer”) in a way she did not with any of her other writing actions (she was not, for example, “a letter-writer” or a “note-taker”). Emotion even seeped into her conversation around the tools of journal writing. “Love” and “like” peppered her sentences as she discussed her passion for all of the tools of the trade—notebooks, pens, stickers, and more. Even here, though, the “ideal writer” lurked; despite liking the physical act of writing with her beloved tools, Valerie admonished her “sloppy” handwriting and identified this as a goal for improvement even within a personal journal she wrote for herself.

The distinction Valerie drew between “tasks,” or writing she must complete for school or work and “writing that came from [her],” complicated her writing identity beyond her original demarcations, shifting across multiple and even conflicting positions as she traversed between genres of writing and used them for different purposes. Valerie’s cover story was that of an expert writer, one shaped by the idealized writer and the idealized process of how one “does” writing. She was quick to confess her love of writing, claiming the binary identity of a writer. Outgoing and bubbly, her infectious enthusiasm was evident as she described the joy that writing can bring her and the variety of writing tasks in which she engaged. However, even as Valerie proclaimed her love of writing, she moved back and forth between asserting that love and several self-critiques of herself as a writer, comparing her “actual” practices to the ideal.

I love it. I love it. It doesn’t make me feel nervous. I love writing. I’ve always loved writing. I second guess myself a lot. I’m trying to do that less because I just
want to write it out and then think about the revision part later, but I still haven’t finessed that. I still second guess myself a lot as I’m writing. I find that writing also lets me play with a lot of vocabulary that I’m not very comfortable with, but I used it anyways, whether I’m using it incorrectly. I find that I try to be smarter when I write, in the sense that I speak of or reference different quotes, authors, places that I’ve been to, so that my writing is powerful. [A colleague] also used to do, on her agenda, she used to quote at some point.... What’s his name? Joel Osteen. She used to put quotes on the top of her agendas and I found that to be very powerful because it just speaks to like where all this is coming from. I try that. I’m not as good as she is, but I try that. I just love it, I love to write.

I love it. Give me a task. Other than journaling, I won’t write unless it’s a task. That’s true. Unless it’s a task, I won’t write. Other than my journaling, because... I don’t know, I either I don’t have the time, or I don’t make time for it.

Within this response, Valerie used the term “love” to describe her feelings about writing seven times. Yet, she also complicated the earlier distinctions she has made between types of writing. Here, she even extended her “love” to professional writing, saying “Give me a task.” Valerie also described second-guessing herself, parts of the process she has not yet “fi nessed” and using vocabulary she was not comfortable with to “try to be smarter,” a negative comparison of herself to a colleague, and a belief that she was not writing enough. Five separate concerns lived alongside her love of writing, the “bad” tangled up with the “good.” Her struggle often resulted from pushing up against a conception of “perfection”; when she fell short of the ideal, it felt as though her writing, and thus what she perceived as her writing identity, was not good enough. In one of our group meetings, she named this pressure explicitly and described her attempts to disrupt it for herself and her students.

I feel like it has to be perfect, but I know it doesn’t have to. So finding that fine balance, because then I take longer to get that draft in because in my head I’m like, “You have to be perfect, you have to be perfect.” But then again, I know that it doesn’t. And so, I feel like as a writer, that’s something that I’m constantly battling with, also I wonder if kids go through that same process, right?
Valerie described a “constant battle” between what she “feels” (the pressure, the anxiety, the self-doubt) and what she “knows” (that it does not need to be perfect, that writers go through steps, how the process “should” work). These layered writing identities were in tension as she moved throughout and across multiple spaces, times, and experiences.

Valerie was able to represent herself in narrative, presenting the cover story of a coherent identity as an expert writer. At times, however, her writing identities appeared multiple, fragmented, or conflicting. For example, Valerie was clear on all the positive feedback she has received for her writing, particularly in college, and her enjoyment of it. Yet, she was also able to articulate clearly the parts of the writing process that were challenging for her and the doubts that nagged her as she wrote and rewrote.

When I’m trying to say things...I guess when I’m writing directly to someone or for a direct purpose, and I write out a piece, I second guess myself whether or not it makes sense, whether or not I should say it that way, whether or not I should even say that. Then I delete, delete, delete, delete, delete in cases of typing, and in cases of writing, crossing out and then I’m starting over again like five or six times.

Instead of just going through the whole thing and then revising, I’ll rip up pages, I’ll cross things out, and start again, because I feel like either my tone is too aggressive or I’m not saying things correctly or I don’t make sense, whatever. I just stop and I second guess myself.

…I always thought that that’s how the writing should have been. I don’t know why, and I never learned it like that. I took an English course in college, where we did free writing and she would say just, “All right, take thirty minutes and just write something down,” and never said, “In the middle, stop and revise,” but I always did that. That’s just how I am. Again, because I feel like if someone reads it, and they’re either not going to make sense of it, it makes me nervous, or because I feel like I’m not making sense or I didn’t say it the way I wanted to say and somebody’s going to read it and interpret it the wrong way. I second guess myself, but no one’s ever taught me that. I just do that innately.

Revising as she writes was a practice that Valerie believed “should” be a part of the writing process. This, too, connected to emotions: Valerie was nervous that if she did not
make improvements as she drafted, she would not be understood. Second-guessing herself felt “innate” to Valerie, as it was not a part of how she was taught to write. Even as an “expert” writer, one who modeled her own writing for both students and teachers, Valerie found herself struggling to enact the writing process in a way that aligned with the constructed narrative that teachers are asked to portray to students.

As we met as a group, Valerie elaborated on these feelings in our group meetings, exhibiting a keen awareness of her writing process and needs. She pushed us to set deadlines to keep her accountable and asked questions like the following to think through her process and the pressures she put on herself.

How do we get from the talk to the actual writing? It’s really hard. Once I get going, I think I got it, but getting there...I’m a procrastinator. Until you say, “Valerie, the deadline is tomorrow,” I will not do anything. It’ll just be ideas. And then my little nice notebook sits there until...I start putting stickers on it.

Yeah, and I think as adults, too, but I think some of our kids are the same way. We have trouble accepting the messiness of it, that our first draft isn’t perfection. We put so much pressure on getting it down the right way, and I don’t know. That’s something that I’ve always had trouble with, is embracing your revision process. And I think part of it is the time that it takes.

Valerie added a new layer to her laminated identities here, acknowledging “I’m a procrastinator.” She named the hard parts of the process, beginning with actually starting the writing, accepting the messiness of the process, and embracing revision. This messiness pushed up against conceptions of an ideal, rational, linear process, which Valerie at once strained against and attempted to conform to. The tension between the idealized process and her “actual” process led Valerie, in this example and others, to reflect on the implications for placing similar idealized expectations on students. If she, as the “expert,” had trouble following the process, students are likely to as well. The shifts that occur in her own writing identities can then be acted on in the next round of
meaning making with students. Through these conversations, Valerie revealed her complicated and shifting writing identity, sharing her struggles honestly, and pushed all of us to do the same.

(Re)Writing the Writing Process

As I have argued, writing identity should not be viewed only in binary, fixed terms; beneath the binary are messy, complicated, shifting identities. Yet it is not only our understanding of writing identities that must shift from fixed to fluid, but also our understanding of the writing process. While the product of writing has long been centered in discussions of writing identity (a writer is one who produces writing), the work of this inquiry group indicated that perhaps the experiences one has while writing may be even more significant (a writer is one who is writing—or planning, reading, revising, thinking, rereading, responding, and discussing writing). As Dawson (2017) argued, “It can be tempting to think about the purpose and outcomes of teachers’ writing in reductive ways, focusing narrowly on the production of texts. Yet much happens across a writer’s creative processes, and these experiences are important in themselves” (p. 3). Focusing on the product ignores the people, what is happening to or in or between them as they create the text. Through the acts of composing texts, teacher-writers are also composing ways of being in the world (Grosskopf, 2004; Yagelski, 2009); they are writing and being written, by themselves and others, within the context of the group. The process of writing enacted within our group did not always align with the linear, rational, “ideal” process outlined in writing workshop curricula and pedagogy. Instead, steps or stages were flexible and personally meaningful, though not always linear. Pieces were written with, by, and in
community rather than as an individual pursuit. Perhaps most importantly, the process of our group left space for emotional intensities and the power of spontaneity. We worked both in and against writing process pedagogy.

**Embracing Spontaneity**

One of the most vivid examples of the (re)written writing community conditions (specifically, flexible process, incorporation of digital and physical materials, collaborative work, and space for emotion and spontaneity) occurred approximately two-thirds of the way through our group’s time together. It began with a seemingly unremarkable moment; as we were getting ready to leave, our group meeting over for the day, Belle was rushing to get home for her typical Tuesday evening laundry regimen. As a group, we all knew that Tuesday night was Belle’s laundry night. She rushed home for this weekly routine, and she would not miss or change it under any circumstances. She had, in fact, cut off previous meetings, announcing it was time her to get home for laundry. On this particular day, while we packed up, Luis teasingly told Belle that she should write about her laundry routine since it was so important to her. Belle laughed the comment off in the moment and we all parted ways. However, when Belle took Luis’s suggestion and put it into action, this unremarkable moment and the effect it ultimately had on Belle became a critical incident for analysis, one that shifted the direction of the group and how it was negotiated.

One day not long after, I was in the school for staff development, with no group meeting planned, and Belle asked me to come see her when I had a moment. When I stopped by, she began recounting her success in writing about her “laundry anxiety.”
I was thinking about this whole.... And I know I’ve brought it up before. This whole...The way school works. You’ve got forty-five minutes, and you need to do your draft. And in another forty-five minutes you need to figure out your math problem. And in another forty-five minutes you...And it’s like, brains don’t work that way. They just don’t. I happened to have this idea, or Luis. I don’t even know who had it. I thought about it on the train, I sat down, and it worked out. I happened to just write it, while in between going up and down to get my laundry and eating, in one sitting pretty much. But you know the piece on [the Chancellor] is taking me months and months and months. And it’s not very good.

Belle referred here to the co-creation of the story, sharing some of the credit with Luis by indicating she was not sure whose idea it was and acknowledging the spontaneity of the piece. She also contrasted this new writing piece to her previous project. While she was previously working on an informational letter to the School Chancellor, an idealized “professional” text, this moment of teasing led to a writing piece that began:

I am anxiety prone, a Nervous Nellie, a worrywart, the kind of girl who always has butterflies in her stomach. And yes, I hear you, that is one of the pervasive laments of our culture.... But my brand is rather unique. I have a huge case of LAUNDRY ANXIETY. Joking—I am not. Here’s the deal.

This essay came complete with a diagram that indicated the preferred washers and dryers, and the many challenges of the laundry room, such as linty dryers and washers that were just not cost-effective.

Figure 2. Belle’s laundry room diagram
Finding a new genre to write in—essays that incorporated her self-deprecating humor—opened up Belle’s writing in a new way. Luis’s casual comment tacitly gave Belle permission to take on a new identity as a writer, one that would not have been possible without the group interaction. The moment of teasing, then, emerged as a moment of irreverence or interruption in the work of the group, an example of carnival or perhaps even profanation (Bakhtin, 1984; Lensmire, 2000) in which Luis drew on the language of writing workshop pedagogy (the urge to write what is important to you) in a parody (to write about doing laundry), opening up a space in which Belle could engage in playful manipulation with what “counted” as writing. This new possible writing identity, co-written by Belle and Louis and pushing back on the “ideal” writer, continued to grow in ways none of us expected across the rest of the group’s time together. In our concluding interview, Belle narrated her new writerly identity as follows:

Deb: So, big picture...I’m your success story!

Amy: Yay!

Valerie: Make her a little picture frame.

Amy: I will. Make you a little award: Most Improved.

Belle: Let me find this because I decided. I don’t know if I’m really gonna follow through on this, but theoretically I’m gonna have, over a long time, something titled...I have a book called “Laundry Night and Other Overwhelming Life Issues,” because I wrote another little piece about classroom pets. I’ve had some very bad luck with classroom pets.

Amy: Oh, I also have had bad luck with classroom pets.

Belle: I was talking to [a classroom teacher], a couple weeks ago. I stopped by the room because I was supposed to do some planning with them, and they weren’t there. I stopped by, and they’re like, “Oh, we’re on a field trip. We forgot to tell you. Sorry, bye, no big deal.” Where’d you go? To the auditorium. I’m like, “Oh, was it a
good field trip?” They brought in birds of prey, whatever, whatever. I’m like, “Birds of prey are creepy.”

Then we got in this whole conversation about pets, and she’s like, “You really should write about that.” I’m like, “Okay,” so I went home. It was also Tuesday night, laundry night apparently is a good writing night.

Amy: Okay, that’s good to know.

Belle: Then I wrote “Classroom Pet Story.” So I said from the one...I actually even did a little bit, it’s still not done, but I did a little work on the Carmen piece. I feel like I’ve come very far considering I wasn’t supposed to be in the group.

Amy: Yeah. That’s great.

Belle: So that’s how it’s been.

Amy: You’ve taken on multiple writing projects at this point voluntarily.

Belle: I have. I know. It’s weird.

Amy: Why is it weird?

Belle: Because now I’m amused by the whole thing. Going in, basically Luis shamed into being in the group and I had wanted to write this letter...for a long time. It was an excuse to force myself to do it. But it’s like I’m not a writer, and I’m not really because what I’m doing is I’m sitting down, and it’s almost this sort of stream of consciousness thing. I do it in one sitting. Valerie proofread this one. She made a suggestion. I did change it. But other than that, it’s like I’m not going through the process in the way that I think about or I think is the writing workshop process but it’s on the road possibly.

This exchange showcases Belle’s new self-positioning—as a success story—and her new process—an all-in-one-sitting flow, something she felt she could not get into before. She did make it clear that she was still not living up to her idealized vision of writing, saying “But it’s like I’m not a writer, and I’m not really...it’s like I’m not going through the process in the way that I think about or I think is the writing workshop process but it’s on
the road possibly.” Despite the lingering doubt that she was not following the process she “should,” Belle named her fluency, her revision, and her future plans to continue to work on this voluntary writing process. Though she still rejected the binary “writer” label, her first phrase, “I’m your success story!” and last phrase, “it’s on the road possibly,” displayed a shift in her experience of her own writing identity. While still hesitant to explicitly call herself a writer, Belle’s shifting sense of herself as a writer was evident in her “amusement” with the process, as well as her plans to continue to work on a collection of humorous essays.

Also revealed in this exchange were the ways in which the writerly relationships developed within the group time were spreading out into the school days when the group did not meet. Belle and I discussed her progress with her new project at an unscheduled time, bringing the work of the writing group into her coaching day and my staff development day. Additionally, the new writing project she wanted to share with me stemmed from her willingness to share her writing ideas with a classroom teacher not in the group. Belle also came to Valerie for feedback on her piece outside of the group meeting. These examples indicate that not only was Belle’s sense of her own identity shifting, but her enactment of that identity in interaction with others was shifting as well. This dynamic of co-writing Belle’s (re)written narrative was evident, for example, in the way in which Valerie and I responded to her declaration of her position as a “success story.” We teased that we would make Belle an award which we might frame, indicating the playfulness and irreverence of interactions around Belle’s enactment of her writing identities. This was part of the carnivalesque humor, working to make visible the ways that writing is ranked and evaluated within school spaces.
Embracing Emotion

This co-writing of identities was also evident in the moments when one individual’s storytelling would spark the storytelling of others. This process of oral storytelling not only allowed us to generate ideas for potential products of writing, but also allowed us to develop social and emotional bonds as individuals and colleagues beyond the specific work at hand. Aligned with the free and familiar contact among the people aspect of Bakhtin’s (1984) carnival, the personal relationships we cultivated incentivized coming to meetings and participating; individual members, myself included, felt as though the other members of the group were relying on them for attendance, feedback, and shared work. This social trust also built the foundation for us to share our writing in courageous ways, even when we felt vulnerable and had to admit difficulty to one another. Facilitated by what Christine Dawson (2017) referred to as a “breathing space,” or the open spaces in the group’s work, talk that I initially worried was “off-task” or distracting eventually revealed itself as an essential component of the group’s work.

One example of this shared storytelling began when Luis recounted the trip that inspired a travel essay for which he had an idea but had not gotten around to writing yet. He told us about his trip to Colorado and the first time he, as a native Floridian, had ever seen snow.

I was traveling like in Colorado like super rustic, like my friend was an outdoor person. Yeah exactly. And one of the memories that always brings me back is like peach rings. It’s about—so that one particularly is how like certain things are tied to memories of a trip, so I would say eventually it would be about, because we ate peach rings and listened to Cold Play. So whenever I hear Cold Play or eat peach rings or even the smell of it, I just associate that with that particular trip. It’s a very un-Luis like trip. Like it was my very first, I was like a baby, so young. I came from Florida, I came to Colorado with shorts on, sandals on, like flip-flops. We didn’t stay in a hotel. I didn’t get to shower. I had to poop on the side of a mountain, hill.
But there was like, it’s usually a lake, but in the wintertime it gets—Maroon Bells, which is in Aspen, and we, like my friends, set up a little thing there and we ate breakfast, breakfast and these things. And then he got Tang, the powdered—the orange crap. We got the Tang and we throw the Tang in the snow and you pick up the snow and you eat the Tang-flavored snow.

In turn, Luis’s story about the artifacts tied to his Colorado vacation inspired the following exchange between me and Belle.

Belle: And what I associated with vacations, because my first early in life, we would always go to Florida and see my grandparents and for a few days, whatever. Cause oh on vacation, you buy things. When I was younger, you go to the toy store and you get, like, presents, and as I got older, you buy clothing. That’s my association with vacation.

Amy: That’s my mother’s style of traveling for sure.

Luis: Is shopping?

Amy: Yeah.

Belle: On vacations, like, you go shopping.

Amy: Yep.

Belle: And somehow it’s like...

Amy: You find the outlet malls and you spend a whole day at the outlet malls.

Belle: Oh no, no, no.

Amy: You bring an extra suitcase that’s empty to be able to pack it to bring home.

Belle: No, not that. When we would visit my grandparents in Florida, I mean there’s just so many times you can go to the monkey jungle, you know?

Amy: Sure.

Belle: That was more like oh, every time there we’d go and we’d go to the harbor and FAO Schwartz, like when we were little. And then my aunt and uncle live in Tampa so we would always go there. So by then my aunt, I went there almost every winter even like through teaching and whatever. Or sometimes in the summer, like so my aunt would always take me shopping
and buy—like when I was younger it would be like a Hanukkah present because it was December. I’m always going to buy you something. And then as I got older, I like, don’t bring an extra suitcase, I’m a very light packer, but it’s like things I wouldn’t consider buying because they’re too expensive here, like on vacation I’m like, “Oh yeah I want that dress” or “I want that outfit.”

Amy: Yeah, vacation is the time to treat yourself.

Belle: And it doesn’t count because it’s part of the whole vacation spending, it’s not like you’re spending too much on a dress.

Amy: Mm-hmm.

Belle: That’s just the way it goes.

Amy: I wholeheartedly agree with that.

Through this exchange, we not only learned more about Luis, but Belle and I also revealed details about our own family relationships and memories. We were comfortable enough with one another to move from academic or professional topics and delve into our personal lives, finding connection points and moving us from professional collegiality towards friendship. This provided a concrete example of what Park (2005) referred to as the “riparian zone,” the place where self and culture meet, “a place that is both a zone of construction of the self, and a site of negotiation of meaning between the personal and the social” (p. 8). While Park referred specifically to expressive writing, here oral storytelling also took place in the riparian zone and allowed the personal and the social to connect.

Luis, for example, shared an experience of himself as “a baby,” a time before we knew him, doing “un-Luis like” things; he gave us access to an identity not usually available in the context of the school building, one which he remembered often. Similarly, Belle and I brought our childhood selves as well as our families into the conversation. These aspects of our own identities, typically not given space within the context of school, led us to
compare and contrast aspects of ourselves, finding connection points and differences. These stories also did the social work of mitigating some of the power differentials of the group. The person telling the story at the moment took the position of leadership, and identifying points of connection or admitting embarrassing or private details helped to break down a sense of hierarchy. These conversations initially seemed tangential, but ultimately fostered the social connections that kept the group together and allowed our work to continue in meaningful ways. Narrating our individual stories to one another allowed us to co-write the story of our group.

In other words, the process of sparked storytelling also provides an example of the way in which the free and familiar contact of carnival (Bakhtin, 1984; Lensmire, 2000) allowed for the physical and social distances between members to be closed and the hierarchy of school roles to be disrupted. Specifically, the roles within our group became more elastic as time went on. Rather than having me set the agenda or process for the group, other members would ask for or declare their own. In this example, Luis co-opted the work of the group to share new technology with us.

Luis: Because we begin I do want to let you know I found the best App in the world. I got an iPad for my birthday.

Amy: Yay!

Luis: Good Notes is like the most amazing thing.

Amy: Good Notes?

Luis: Yes.

Amy: Tell me more.

Luis: Because I have an Apple pencil to go with my iPad.

Amy: Ooh fancy.
Luis: And I’ll show you what I can do with it.

Using the phrase “before we begin I want to let you know,” Luis let us know that he was taking control of the group and shifting our focus. Following this conversational move, we spent about the first 10 minutes of our group meeting discussing Luis’s iPad and how he was using it. While this initially seemed to be an interruption to the writing work of the group, it eventually became clear that Luis was sharing a new process for writing that was working for him—one outside of his physical notebook. Later, in our final interview, he referred back to this moment as a turning point in his writing process. This moment of interruption, or “profanation,” ultimately reinforced and widened the conception of what the work of the group was and how we could go about it.

The personal relationships we developed throughout our group meetings made their value evident when it came time for us to share our writing products. In early May, we brought our drafts to the group for feedback. We discussed the best process for the work and mutually agreed that we would individually read our piece aloud to the group, and then the other group members would offer ideas, opinions, and other feedback. Luis went first, reading several versions of the introduction to his travel memoir, which led to the conversation below.

Amy: But I think you’re right, one there’s like something to reading it out loud, right, and hearing it. And two, just the process of working through, like you wouldn’t have gotten to the third one if you hadn’t written and then thought about the first one.

Luis: Right. It’s nerve-wracking. I’m going to tell you reading it out loud, oh my gosh, there is something about it and I’m not like whatever, but I’m like oh my goodness, there’s something to it that’s...
Deb: Yeah, no, you can tell because I know how you usually speak and how you do things and how you read other things aloud so I could tell that, and I’m thinking I don’t really want to read this out loud.

Luis: There is something.

Deb: But I also think this goes to like—granted this isn’t the only thing on your plate and you don’t have a dedicated hour or forty-five minutes a day to do this. But having said that, because we’ve talked a lot about this with math, brains don’t work that way. Brains don’t say okay in the forty-five minutes or in this one hour you better start to understand division you know, and like just our whole system goes against the way natural thinking happens. And it’s like the more—I never really thought about it in writing. But it’s really true, anything I’ve written has been written over time with breaks and yet it’s like your first draft, get that first draft.

Luis: Right. I also feel like in terms of as I was going through the process, I was aware, I was like, there was this part of me that’s as I’m reading, like, oh my goodness. And it was there. Oh my goodness is that the right word choice, like what are they going to think about that word choice? What are they going to think about this structure of the sentence? Was that too overly descriptive, was that not descriptive enough? You know what I’m saying? As I was reading it, those were the things that like—that was happening, which is so interesting.

Amy: Yeah.

Luis: There’s an anxiety, right? The anxiety of sharing your work.

Deb: So, having said that, I actually think, I don’t think you can edit something unless there’s something clearly grammatically incorrect that you catch. But I think I should read it out loud for the purposes of reading it out loud, even though it’s going to be painful. This is me taking a risk.

Amy: I think that’s great.

Luis: And then you can see if you have that same anxiety I had.

Deb: No, it’s already there and considering the fact that I’m a million times more anxiety ridden in general than you are. Let’s remember what laundry night is about.

Amy: I mean, I told my husband on the way here I was like, “I have to go to my writing group and my draft’s not done, like I’m really worried about, they what if they all have theirs done and I don’t have mine done?” And he’s
like, “That’s part of this right? That’s part of your data.” And I was like, “Okay you’re right, you’re right. Writing is a process.”

Through this conversation, all three of us in attendance at the meeting confessed to our sense of anxiety and vulnerability as we prepared to share our writing with one another. Luis specifically called back Valerie’s earlier concerns about second-guessing herself, indicating that this doubt crept in as he read his piece aloud. He mentioned that “there’s something” three times, yet trailed off and did not name what the something was. Though he seemed to have trouble naming it, this “something” seemed to refer back to his comment that reading his work aloud was “nerve-wracking.” Yet, all three of us met that challenge head-on and read our pieces, acknowledging the power of hearing one’s piece and the reaction of an immediate audience. The personal relationships and mutual respect fostered from our group’s time together and the parts of our stories we had already revealed provided an additional incentive to share our work, despite the inherent vulnerability of this practice. All three of us made it clear that writing was not an exclusively autonomous skill; there was an emotional component as well. The embodied performance of these emotions—our laughter, our anxieties, our vulnerability—imbued our work with an emotional significance outside of the cognitive tasks in which we engaged and interrupted the reification of what an ideal writer is and does.

Belle summed up her thoughts at the end of the conversation by contrasting her feelings of anxiety about her coaching role and her feelings of anxiety when sharing in our writing group:

[In coaching,] they have to respect you, they don’t have to like you, and like that’s really uncomfortable if the whole world hates you. In most cases [at this school], that’s not the case I don’t think, but it’s sort of like I’m more comfortable with like, all right if they don’t agree with me or they don’t like me—I don’t care
that much. I care in this room. Like you know when you respect somebody and you like somebody, it, like, matters more.

Belle pointed to the personal relationships we had built across our work together, drawing out both the value of our relationships with one another as well as the higher stakes of being vulnerable and putting our work out there to others whose opinion we valued. In reflecting on sharing her piece, Belle connected the anxiety and feeling of vulnerability she had with the social connection and respect the group had built together, exhibiting the power of harnessing emotions in our professional work.

During the next group meeting, when Valerie was with us again, she echoed the feelings the three of us had named previously, describing a “jelly-belly feeling” when she was ready to share her draft. Following the discussion of her piece, which included another shared storytelling session that explored one another’s cultural traditions, Valerie also explicitly asked to hear everyone else’s pieces. She felt vulnerable having her piece as the only one opened up to the group, and requested that the other group members meet her sense of vulnerability through sharing their own pieces. Each of us met her request with a different renewed description of our own nerves. Luis offered to read “a little,” and prefaced his reading with a lengthy description of his writing process since his last share, adding that he had “written a lot more” but “hated it and deleted it”; this exhibited the nonlinear path of his writing, and the conflicted and shifting ways his writing identity was both experienced and enacted. When it was my turn, I described reading as feeling “like you’re standing out there alone on stage,” using comparison to name my emotions and connect to Valerie’s sense of loneliness in being the only one to share. Belle got ready to share by saying, “So we’re all on the same footing here, with the nervous stomach,” again exhibiting the embodied experience of putting writing into the room for
feedback and response. Though there was an intellectual understanding that the work of our group was supportive and collaborative, each of us still felt the fear of putting our work out because we expected judgment to follow. The thickened layers of our writing identities showed through. Our mutual willingness to put our work out there despite our fear, to make ourselves uncomfortable in this way, was made possible by the emotional and social bonds we had already forged.

While the feedback that was given in these instances ultimately shaped the writing pieces we each composed, these emotions and actions were as meaningful to the work of our group, if not more so, than the products that were ultimately produced through this process. Lensmire and Schick (2017) shared their experience of a writing group and concluded, “[t]his work cannot be done alone; it is in the story telling and story writing with others that we (re)narrate toward a sense of collective well-being” (p. 101). It was in our interactions around our texts that we were able to support and push one another, (re)narrating our relationships and imagining new ways to be “writers.” Our stories became malleable rather than static through our interactions with one another, and we could (re)position our views of ourselves and one another. It was in the interaction, in the enactment of our identities with an audience, where carnival emerged and was made possible. The stories of ourselves as writers were and are partial and in progress, and they continue to be written with, in, and by our community.

**Embracing Digital Materials**

An additional consistent presence shaping the work and identities of our writing group was that of ubiquitous connections to the internet and social media. As Leander and Hollet (2013) argued, cyberspace, or the spatiality of the internet, is over; instead, the
digital/physical binary has been disrupted and the space of cyberspace has infiltrated classrooms, public spaces, and social situations. This was also true within the “breathing space” of our writing group (Dawson, 2017). Social media and the internet were incorporated into our individual writing, our conversations about writing, and our social interactions in both intentional and unintentional ways.

Some of the ways the digital world was omnipresent in the work of our group were unintentional. Everyone had his or her Smart phone on hand for most of each meeting; for example, some of my field notes tracked teacher-writers studying their phones, then putting them down or turning them over to give their full attention as other group members prepared to read their drafts. However, social media also entered the work of our group in particular ways that I intentionally cultivated. My intention was twofold; first, social media is a daily part of my life, including the ways in which I think about and engage in writing, and I sought to share this aspect of my own writing life with my fellow teacher-writers. Second, in bringing in aspects of my own digital writing identity, I hoped to grant a kind of tacit permission, perhaps pushing back against the reified ideals of a pen-and-paper process and creating a space in which the other members of the group were able to incorporate outside aspects of their own writing identities as well. One way in which I brought these two intentions to bear in the group was to bring printouts of particular tweets about writing that were thought-provoking to me, or made me think about the work of our writing group or one of its members. I distributed these tweets, pointing out the following tweet as one that specifically reminded me of previous group conversations.
After we read the tweets aloud, I asked what the group members thought of them.

Opening the conversation up in this way led to a variety of general “I love that!” and “So true!” reactions, before developing into a conversation about the writing process. Valerie started the conversation off by expressing her reaction as follows:

   So there’s something to be said about being inspired by these quotes right? Having them out there, existing in the world where it’s not just my issue with writing, but it is an issue with writing that we feel like we have to either make it perfect or give up. Like those are the only two options. This brings it to light that everybody goes through that struggle. We gotta work past that.

Valerie pointed again to the social aspects of writing, finding permission in working through her own struggles through the connections to other individuals who were experiencing the same issues—even if she had only met those individuals through Twitter. She also used the material of the quote to push back against her internalized conception of the ideal writer; if this was the advice of a professional writer and it went against the ideal, it gave Valerie permission to think that alternatives (options other than “make it perfect” or “give up”) were available to her. Valerie followed this statement with a more specific connection to her own writing process.
Valerie: I’m gonna go back to the idea about my draft has to be perfect, because even though I know it doesn’t have to be perfect, as I’m writing it, I feel like it has to be perfect.

Belle: Yeah, I feel that.

Valerie: I feel like it has to be perfect, but I know it doesn’t have to. So, finding that fine balance, because then I take longer to get that draft in because in my head I’m like, “You have to be perfect, you have to be perfect.” But then again, I know that it doesn’t. And so I feel like as a writer, that’s something that I’m constantly battling with, also I wonder if kids go through that same process, right? Or not even the process just it has to be perfect, but I don’t know how to get started and just letting it flow.

Valerie worked here to compose her identities across spaces (Leander & Hollett, 2013), drawing on both physical (taking longer to physically turn in a draft) and virtual spaces (drawing on the tweet above) to narrate her process and her understanding of herself as a writer. As previously discussed, the layers of her writing identities were in tension here as she moved throughout and across multiple spaces, times, and experiences. Valerie then moved to describing classroom spaces, connecting both her own experiences (“in my head,” “something that I’m constantly battling with”) and the virtual experiences of others (“having them out there, existing in the world”) with those of her students. The virtual connection to another writer’s challenges allowed her not only to speak back to her own struggles and question her laminated sense of an idealized writing identity, but also to posit a similar opportunity for her students’ writing identities.

Valerie also utilized text messages and emails to check in between writing group meetings and bring her in-school identities and relationships to her out-of-school world. Some messages were logistical, focused on how her work was progressing (or not) or who was able to attend the next meeting (or not). But others highlighted the ways in which the work of the group inspired us to connect over and recommend other things.
that were not writing related—books, television shows, and movies for one another, Instagram and Twitter accounts to follow, restaurants to try, or book recommendations for the kids in our personal lives. Valerie was able to maneuver smoothly through her different identities, enacting the multiple positions—mother, teacher, colleague, friend—in which she found herself on a daily basis. The exchange below provides an example in which Valerie followed up with me about both an Instagram account and a book I had recommended that my nephew adored and she wanted to purchase for her son.

![Sample text message exchange with Valerie](image)

**Figure 4. Sample text message exchange with Valerie**

This text exchange provides a window into the consistent presence the internet and social media maintained in our conversations and interactions with one another as we mobilized different accounts to establish relationships, explore similar tastes, and often add humor to our group work. Additionally, Valerie expressed pleasure with the group’s work, more broadly defined. Here, Valerie was not limiting the ideas the group offered to a narrow
conception of writing skills and strategies. Instead, the ideas generated from the group seeped into her everyday personal life, impacting her other identity positions as both mother and New Yorker; this provided another example of Hall’s (1996) hybrid identities. In this way and others, the group worked as a hybrid space that depended upon both the digital and the physical, one that was permeable, that included interactions, communication, and forms of digital and physical production that flowed back-and-forth between the virtual and the physical, or rather, within an imbricated physical/virtual space. (Leander & Hollett, 2013, p. 36)

While an idealized writing process privileges the ubiquitous “writer’s notebook” as part of an individual process done in isolation, our group’s experiences drew on both physical and digital materials throughout our work. As Luis made clear earlier with his iPad, and Valerie made clear here through her texts, we build identity kits across both digital and physical spaces, using a range of materials to craft both our texts and our identities.

While Belle was vocal about her aversion to handwriting her work and her commitment to using her laptop to research and type the persuasive letter she was working on, Luis was often the group member who brought technology to the center of the group’s work. For example, as mentioned previously, when Luis got an iPad Pro for his birthday, he took control at the beginning of a meeting, co-opting the group and shifting our focus to his new technology. He highlighted not only his ability to select the type of paper, draw, handwrite, and choose where to upload his notes, but also the ease of sharing his plans and notes with his co-teacher. We spent approximately the first 10 minutes of our meeting letting him take us on a tour of this new technology. He showed us the Apple Pencil and the different notebooks he was keeping for his writing, his teaching, his language learning, and more. Luis was able to draw materials from across
his identity positions—as a writer, teacher, mathematician, coach, colleague, learner, traveler—and gather it in one place through the technology on his iPad. In bringing the device to the group, he was able to walk all of us through these different identities and the way he was navigating through them.

The ways in which the internet and social media were incorporated into Luis’s identities were also evident throughout our interviews. In our first conversation, Luis and I were in the midst of a discussion about appreciating the beauty of language, both as readers ourselves, and wanting to foster that love in our students. As we discussed the value of exposing students to the wonder of language in authentic contexts rather than isolated drills, we had the following exchange.

Luis: And in that authentic way, like I actually enjoy it. It’s like...Oh, yeah, it’s really cool. You know? I think it’s...especially in the community, it’s like...it also ties down to what are our perceptions of what people understand. Even in math, I’m diversifying my language to be like, “Is this viable? Is this feasible?” “Feasible?” “Yeah, like reasonable? Is it reasonable? Is it feasible? Is it viable?” I could describe this word in different ways, you know? One of the girls was like, “You use really big words.” And again, I’m not shy to do that. Like why can we...why is it that we can talk to our own kids in a certain way, like our own personal kids, you know, but we can’t speak to our students that way because we don’t think they’d understand, you know? So...I don’t know. It’s also funny to watch...did you watch Lemony Snicket?

Amy: No, I haven’t seen it yet, it’s in my Netflix queue.

Luis: It’s...In that, they always use big words, and they’re like, “which means...” and the kid’s like, “I know.” And like in the book, the kids are like, “I know.” It does do that, but it’s like, okay. Let’s expose them to these...

Amy: What a beautiful way to teach the definition, right? It’s funny and kind of cheeky, but kids also get the definition tucked in, so that they can know it, like “I know!”

Luis: I guess, you know, we live in a different world, right? And it’s like...how do we get students to be engaged and to really appreciate these things? To
really appreciate the idea of lifting up... And I was thinking about this in the shower today, because I was like “Okay, we live in a world now where kids text a lot, so they don’t...their writing consists of texting, emojis, whatever, whatever,” so it’s like, how do we, in this day and age, how do we get our kids to still be passionate, or have passion for written language, when it’s moving towards this...back to hieroglyphics? Right?

Amy: That’s...I never thought of the hieroglyphics piece, that’s interesting.

Luis: I just also think I’ve been on other people’s Facebook or something, and it’s like it had a picture of hieroglyphics and underneath it said emojis. I guess that saying’s true, “Whatever’s old becomes new again.”

In addition to a Netflix show inspired by the children’s book series *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Luis also referred to the following meme he discovered on social media.

![Figure 5. Meme comparing hieroglyphics and emoji](image)

These resources became “equipment” in Luis’s “identity kit,” as he composed his identities and stories about teaching, learning, students, teachers, and writers (Gee, 1989; Leander & Hollett, 2013). He cited the children’s books alongside the Netflix show, giving them equal weight as texts. He connected the concerns of texting and emoji to teaching students about writing, showing how this connection was on his mind across
spaces, even “thinking about it in the shower.” This question (“How do we get students to be engaged and to really appreciate [the beauty of language]?”) was also connected, for Luis, to broader social, cultural, and political issues. He pointed out that engaging and challenging students was important “especially in the community,” indicating the diverse, low-income neighborhood in which P.S. 999 is located. He pushed this concept further by contrasting the way “we talk to our own kids” and the way we “talk to our students,” alluding to a deficit perception of the school’s students who are predominantly children of color, many of whom are immigrants and/or are learning English as a new language. The “we” he referred to here was likely the faculty of the school, and he pushed against their perception of the students and their capabilities by questioning why that impression exists and positioning himself, in contrast, as someone who was “not shy” to utilize sophisticated language with his students.

During our second interview, Luis brought another quote he had discovered on social media to our conversation, pulling it up on his phone to read to me. Similarly, he used this digital material to make a statement about himself and to narrate his identity in a particular way.

Luis: I want to share this with you because my.... It’s a picture, like a posting that I put on Facebook and my friend, she became the principal of my alma mater, my high school in Tampa. She does phenomenal work. She really connects with the kids and for a while, she’s taught at this high school. She became the principal and actually a guy I graduated from high school with, he is now the assistant principal at our alma mater, so he went back. Anyway, she posted this paragraph, this picture, from a book and I posted it. I’ll read it to you because it’s so interesting. I was like, “Yes!” It was like, “Wow, so true.”

It says...I’m going to read it, “The kind of teacher you will become is directly related to the kind of teachers you associate with. Teaching is a profession where misery does more than just loves company. It recruits, seduces, and romances it. Avoid people who are unhappy and disgruntled
about the possibilities for transforming education. They are the enemy of the spirit of a teacher.”

Amy: Wow.

Luis: I was like, that is true. I think about, who do I associate with? Like I said, I try to associate with people I can have meaningful conversations with. And I don’t talk to the people around school who don’t have that way about education.

Amy: I really like the part about misery doesn’t just love company. It romances it. There is a seductive thing in schools. I’ve been in a lot of schools at this point, and you can tell the ones where it’s almost like a black hole. It just sucks in everything around it, that sense of negativity and complaining and people just feeding off of, venting off of each other, and it just pulls people in. People who even might have been more positive to begin with, they get wrapped up in that culture, and it’s scary because I think, ultimately, it’s the kids who suffer. The teachers just write it off as “this is how it is.”

Luis: This is how it is. I’m not perfect. There are days where people feed into you and you’re like, “Oh yeah, I get so frustrated about that.” But I know that’s just the moment and ultimately, I’m passionate about what I do, like I said, about education.

The quote, from Christopher Emdin’s (2016) *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood…and the Rest of Y’all Too*, is seen below in both its meme and book forms, both of which have a social media presence.

*Figure 6. Quote and meme from* *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood…and the Rest of Y’all Too*
In bringing this quote to the interview, pulling it up and reading it to me, Luis sought to articulate something about his own identity. In this way, he marked himself as a teacher who believes in his students and the power of education, and makes a distinction between himself and the teachers who are negative or disgruntled—those “who don’t have that ay about education.” Juxtaposed with his previous comments about the ways in which colleagues presume competence or deficit, Luis again positioned himself as a teacher who works in students’ best interest and associated with like-minded teachers with whom he could have “meaningful conversations.” He highlighted his own identity as a teacher who was “not perfect,” but was ultimately “passionate” about teaching—an identity that a colleague of Luis’s labeled “a real teacher” (I explore this in more detail in Chapter V).

In my response, I signaled my agreement in the way the quote resonated with me; I positioned myself as one of those Luis could associate with, by narrating myself as one who could identify, but is separate from, a negative culture. I aligned myself with the goal of keeping students centered and as one seeking “meaningful conversations.” In a similar way that the mention of Lemony Snicket became a connection point, a mutually understood reference, this quote also became a point for Luis and me to find common ground and mark ourselves as similar; in other words, we co-wrote a shared identity by mobilizing the material of social media. Moje and Luke (2009) described the process in this way: “A person calls out, another responds, meanings are made, identities assigned and acted upon in the next round of meaning making” (p. 431). Our mutual understanding that we were similar teachers with similar goals was a position we then worked from in the rest of our interactions.
Once Luis highlighted the quote to me, I started seeing it in my own social media feeds as well. Ironically, the quote comes from a book that Luis and I both read in the subsequent months; Luis had even started the book at the point of this interview and texted me about how much he was enjoying it. Yet, as this quote is from the end of the book, neither of us had reached this quote in the text yet. The power and ubiquity of our social media feeds were able to mobilize the words and ideas, bringing them to us faster, and perhaps with more impact, than the text itself. However, the quote was also taken out of context from the rest of the text. Without the broader context that the quote was drawn from, the main topics the text explored—race and reality pedagogy—were obscured. The quote, separated from the text, can be put to work in ways far from its original intent.

**Conclusion**

As I have argued, writing identities are complex and multifaceted. They are shaped by myriad factors both past and present, and manifest different aspects of themselves across time and interactions. Teacher-writers are shaped and constrained by a conception of the ideal writer and the ideal process, one that is manifested in their writing curriculum. Their writing identities are edited by this ideal, and teacher-writers develop cover stories in response. However, in the lived experiences underneath these cover stories, teacher-writers’ identities are always becoming, shifting and laminating and sometimes combing in surprising, dynamic, and even conflicting ways. The social nature of the writing group and the relationships formed and developed within it opened up opportunities to reveal new and shifting aspects of our identities to one another. Writing identities, both claimed and enacted, were animated by equipment from across social
media, the internet, one another’s stories, conversation, and interaction. Writing identities were also entwined with teaching and learning identities.

In the next chapter, I further explore the interconnection of teaching, learning, and writing identities. As the participants and I discussed our writing and our writing process, our stories often bridged our own experiences and those of our students. As teacher-writers, discussions of writing and ourselves as writers could not be fully separated from the ways in which we share those products and identities with our students. In turn, juxtaposing our experiences as writers and our students’ experiences as writers raised larger issues of education in our thoughts and dialogue. Specifically, the balance between control and autonomy—for students, for teachers, for writers, for schools—is a theme that requires further exploration.
Chapter V

“IT’S NOT SPECIFIC TO WRITING. IT’S ABOUT EVERYTHING.”

In this chapter, I consider the tension between control and autonomy that permeated both the writing group itself and the broader school context in which the work of the group was situated. To do so, I explore explicit forms of control, which came in the form of, for example, visits from the superintendent and the school’s designation as a “focus school”; the principal’s curricular choices and values; and scheduling decisions for professional development, team meetings, and other extracurricular obligations for staff members. In addition, I explore more implicit control exerted over teachers by the broader Discourses they/we were internalizing and ventriloquating.

It is important, then, to revisit the concept of Discourses to define how I work with the term throughout the chapter. I draw here on the work of Gee (1989, 1990, 2000-2001, 2005, 2012). Gee (1989) argued that literacy is always about more than just literacy—rather, literacy events and practices as situated within power relations. Gee (2012) posited that literacies are a component of Discourses, which he defined as “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities by specific groups” (p. 3). As discussed in Chapter I, Gee (1990) explained that “a Discourse is a sort of ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on
how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize” (p. 142). Individuals use Discourses to affiliate and display their membership in particular social groups; to connect this to the metaphor of identity-as-position in which this study is grounded, people use Discourses to cast or call others to particular positions and in the ways people take up or resist those positions. In this chapter, specifically, this concept is useful for considering how teachers’ writing and teaching practices are animated by the Discourses that circulate in their classrooms, school, and society, as well as the embodied performance of different identities. Teachers may position themselves and their colleagues in relation to the dominant Discourses of teaching and writing to which they have access. As Bakhtin (1981) argued, individuals gain access to these discourses through individual encounters, such as the laminated history of experiences with the people (parents, students, colleagues, administration) and artifacts (emails, memos, curriculum guides) of explicit control, and through more abstract interaction with the dominant Discourses of teacher effectiveness and success as defined by standards, objective outcomes, and high-stakes testing. These different Discourses become a part of the social construction of what it means to be a teacher.

Once accessed, these various practices and Discourses available to the participants, including myself, worked to shape the way the group and its members were positioned within the school community, as well as the ways in which we each performed, told, or enacted our roles within it. As such, each participant was not only involved in constructing and reconstructing his or her roles and identities over time, as discussed in the previous chapter, but our performance in our professional and writing-group roles were “shaped by perceptions and positionings of others and by the internal
voices of the past and present that influence current actions and understandings” and “encounters with [our] own multiple selves and from other people or perhaps new material or situations that challenge previously held beliefs and experiences that make up [our] identity kits” (McKinney & Giorgis, 2009, p. 112). In telling, performing, or enacting their roles, teachers choose how they represent or perform professional and private identities, such as themselves as writers (Sarup, 1996; Wortham, 2001). The embodied performances occurring within our writing group, and within P.S. 999, both reflected and shaped the values and beliefs of those communities. These performances, or the public embodiments of what teachers are doing to be seen as “effective” or “successful” within the school context, are situated within each teacher’s practice, which includes these performances and the actions and commitments that happen outside of the “public” surveilling gaze. Teachers choose pedagogical practices and enact them within the tension of a school culture and a society that characterizes “successful” teachers in particular ways.

Power circulates through the instructional practices advocated or mandated to teachers in ways that maintain unequal access to pedagogies of agency and choice as well as particular markers of “success.” Teachers are not simply selecting from all available practices as though they are neutral and technical (or “autonomous”); instead, particular practices are animated by intersecting issues of power and certain literacies “count” more than others in a given context (Street, 1984). Although the performances of teacher-writer identities may look different across classrooms or schools, power circulates to maintain systemic Discourses about who is “successful” or “failing.” These markers are inflected by race, class, language, and other identities that preserve the status quo. This means that
the ways literacy—or more specifically, writing—is conceived of and used by different groups of people are influenced by particular writing practices that depend on aspects of the social structures within a specific context. Writing instruction, and the teacher learning around it, is not just an individual teacher’s choice. Rather, it is layered with remnants of reform and intersecting discourses of power. Contradictory beliefs and practices may be enacted in complex ways. Yet, too often, the result is the same: the success of particular students as “writers” (and their teachers as “effective”) and the marginalization of particular students as “non-writers” (and their teachers as “ineffective”).

Each teacher-writer’s identity might, then, be conceived as a palimpsest, a text written and rewritten, practices reproduced and revised, always carrying traces of what has come before. Vinz (1996) and Britzman (1991) argued that teaching must be “reconceptualized as a struggle for voice and discursive practices amid a cacophony of past and present voices, lived experiences, and available practices. The tensions among what has preceded, what is confronted, and what one desires shape the contradictory realities of learning to teach” (Vinz, 1996, p. 63). Teachers work to compose their own teaching identities and practices, but they cannot start with a clean draft; they are revising the work of those who came before and yet working to bring it closer to their own intentions within the confines of their specific context. Teachers must negotiate the explicit mandates of external control as well as the practices and performances that “count” more in their given context, alongside their lived experiences of individual values and emotions. The external mandates, and even the dominant Discourses of “effectiveness” in the specific context of P.S. 999, privilege the teacher as the rational
agent, one who is calm, cool, and collected, able to make decisions and manage behaviors/bodies/curriculum/crises without any needs of his or her own; this is the “effective” performance teachers sought to give. However, as we will see throughout this chapter, there is an “unofficial” other life for teachers, one permeated by emotions. The powerful emotions inherent in the work of teaching—stress, guilt, frustration, love, hope, and more—cannot be contained or tamed. Instead, there are eruptions, moments when the emotional “unofficial” life of teachers bubble to the surface and interrupt the professional performance of effectiveness. I argue, then, that teachers’ emotional lives are in need of spaces to be explored, affirmed, and channeled into the work of teaching and learning. To do so, we must broaden the conceptions of who counts as a successful teacher as well as the ways in which professional learning opportunities can support that broader success.

**Explicit Forms of Control**

As Monaghan and Saul (1987) argued, the story of literacy curriculum in schools has been “in essence one of a struggle amongst various groups—professionals, textbook publishers, parents, teachers—for control” (p. 115). While Monaghan and Saul highlighted that society has historically focused on students as readers because it has been more interested in children as receptors than as producers of the written word, I argue that the same holds true for teachers. The proliferation of “teacher-proof” scripted curricular materials, seldom selected by the teachers who use them, alongside a system of mandates, standards, and accountability measures, work to deprive teachers systematically of control over much of their professional lives—from pedagogy to text selection to bulletin boards.
At P.S. 999, where this study took place, these constraints were felt particularly acutely. P.S. 999 was identified as a “focus school” by the state education department’s Office of Accountability. Focus schools are defined as “Title I schools that have the lowest subgroup achievement in meeting or exceeding the standard on English Language Arts and math state tests,” and designate the school for follow-up activities including “site visits, offering school choice for Title I students to attend schools in Good Standing in the [next] school year, and providing extra funding to schools and districts so that they can reorganize and begin to enact changes to improve their academic performance” (New York City Department of Education, 2018). This designation is tied to policies such as No Child Left Behind, the Common Core State Standards, corresponding high-stakes assessments, and stringent teacher evaluations. These policies, which emphasize instruction tied to increasing test scores, often build upon teacher preservice or training experiences that offer little guidance for teaching writing; what little guidance provided tends to focus on the product or the “autonomous” set of neutral and discrete skills required to create it, which can, presumably, be taught and learned regardless of context (Street & Street, 1995). Because these policies and professional learning experiences are so narrow, in schools and classrooms that do not trouble “schooled” literacies, teachers typically control and define texts, materials, and the organization of time and space (Street & Street, 1995), often at the expense of responsive curriculum. Thus, the dominant Discourses of the “focus school” animate external expertise, test preparation practices, and pedagogies that center teacher control with power, and “success” is positioned as compliance to mandates and measured by test scores. Through its inability
to meet those markers, the school was marked as a site in need of improvement, which meant a greater amount of external control was exerted on it and those within it.

At P.S. 999, superintendent visits to assess and give feedback for improvement spurred nerves and a flurry of activity, then resulted in a variety of recommended changes that teachers worked to implement. For example, following one visit, teachers were required to change all of their bulletin boards to tie more clearly the student work displayed to particular posted standards and outcomes. The notion of being a focus school and its impact on teaching and learning work arose often throughout group meetings and interviews. Valerie, for example, lamented the loss of time to work with teachers on going through the writing process and replacing that work with preparation for the high-stakes tests that determined the school’s status as a focus school.

So, it seems like it was all test-based related writing. Opportunities for teachers to go through the writing process, we really have never had that opportunity other than those half-day plannings. It’s not that [Joe]’s opposed to it, it’s just that there are so many mandates that come our way as a school because we’re a focus school, that are imposed on us in terms of, “Well, you need to do more work on student analysis and you need to make decisions on assessment,” and this, that, and the other. So that’s why our days are limited to what we can do to develop our own pedagogy, our own writing styles, or things like that. She cited “so many mandates,” and in particular directions to work on data-based analysis and assessment, which took over time for teacher writing and collaborative planning based on those experiences. The Discourses of accountability, manifested in data analysis and data-driven instruction, dominate and limit opportunities for, in Valerie’s words, “what we can do to develop our own pedagogy, our own writing styles, or things like that.” Like many of the current initiatives for teacher learning and development, including efforts to “improve” preservice teacher education, professional development for in-service teachers, and state and national certification policies, the shift
Valerie described to a professional development approach focused on data analysis and assessment is grounded in Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1999) image of knowledge-for-practice. Teachers must gain codified knowledge defined by external experts to move in a linear manner toward more effective practice. Valerie juxtaposed this type of teacher learning with the half-day planning sessions she ran previously, in which teachers could go through the writing process, developing their own pedagogy and writing styles. This process aligns with Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s image of knowledge-of-practice, which is grounded in the assumption that teachers across their professional lifespan “make problematic their own knowledge and practice as well as the knowledge and practice of others, and thus stand in a different relationship to knowledge” (p. 273). Teachers learn collaboratively in inquiry communities that involve joint participation of individuals who are differently positioned from one another, each bringing his or her own experiences and expertise to the group’s work. The most important element is that “all participants in these groups…function as fellow learners and researchers rather than experts” (p. 278). Valerie lamented the loss of this time to come together as group and the replacement of that work with one tied to compliance and accountability. In the latter form, the existing structures of power and privilege foster a procedural approach to achieve narrow goals that serve to regulate the identities teachers should or can perform.

Belle and Luis echoed Valerie’s concern for the ways in which being a focus school, and the testing emphasis that went along with it, was affecting the instruction and culture of the school. In a conversation spurred by Belle’s letter to the school district’s chancellor, in which one of her goals was to advocate for time for primary students to learn through play, Luis and Belle had the following exchange:
Luis: But I guess the push is...going back to what we were talking about. Yeah, the play is important. But we treat our kids differently here because they’re not...they’re not native English speakers.

Belle: I don’t think that’s why we treat them differently. I think we treat them differently because our scores suck. That’s why. If we were doing well, in other words, it’s not about the language that these kids speak. It’s about the fact that our scores are in the toilet.

In this conversation, Luis and Belle addressed some of the dominant Discourses shaping not only the instructional choices being made, but also the expectations and societal expectations for the school and its demographics. Belle did not hold back in her assessment of the role that test scores play in driving administrative decisions, implying that if the school’s test scores were not “in the toilet,” test preparation might not take up as much time and play might find a space in the curriculum. Luis, on the other hand, drew attention to the discrimination students with non-dominant language experiences encounter, appropriating the language of research that has indicated, for example, that the curriculum of low-performing schools is shaped by the culture of accountability and standardized testing (Finnigan, Bitter, & O’Day, 2009; Mintrop, 2004), or that students in high-poverty areas are most likely to be taught using mandated scripted curricula (MacGillivray, Ardell, Curwen, & Palma, 2004). Luis posited that the demographics of the school and the deficit perspectives of the school’s students determine the curriculum delivered to them. After a few moments, their conversation continued:

Luis: You know teachers often...I hear it from the teachers here, “I remember when we got to be...” Teachers also feel like their creativity is stifled. “I remember when we were able to do this. And this and this and this.” You know, it becomes the creativity of the profession itself is taken out.

Belle: Mhmm. Mhmm.
Luis: Because of the test. So not only are kids getting their creativity stifled. It’s also teachers as well that are getting...that feel...kind of like stunted. Right?

Belle: Yeah.

Luis: It creates this atmosphere of just, like, everybody’s miserable.

Belle: Mhmm.

Luis: Because teachers feel like they have to do this, this way. Kids are like “I have to get ready for the test.” Teachers are like “I have to get the kids ready for the test.” Like I have to take the test, whatever. It’s just this...

Belle: It’s a bad cycle.

Here, Belle and Luis explicitly identified the effects of the high-stakes test-driven culture of the school. Both teachers and students feel the pressure and both teachers and students have their “creativity stifled.” The language choices, such as “miserable” and “stunted,” indicated the significant ways in which both practices and emotional lives are impacted. The efforts of the administration, both at the school and district level, were intended to provide support and spur more effective teaching and learning for the students and faculty. However, the lived realities of the teachers inside the focus school indicated that it resulted in limiting professional learning, lowered morale, and a segregated curriculum for marginalized students. The Discourses of teacher “effectiveness” and accountability that permeated the school, communicated from district administration to school administration to faculty, manifested in tensions for teachers, who both sought to perform an “effective” idealized teacher identity that conformed to the demands of their context, and felt uncomfortable about the focus on test preparation and standardization being portrayed as ideal, and they sought to push back against it.
**External Forces Impact the Group**

The complications that school mandates and other explicit forms of control would bring to the group’s work became evident early on in the study, as we attempted to set a schedule for group meetings. In the district, Tuesday afternoons after the school day has ended are designated, through the teachers’ contract, as time for “parent engagement” and “collaboration and other professional work.” While they are required to be in the building, teachers are often given latitude in what they do during this time; they might, for example, meet with parents, plan together, or have team meetings. On Monday afternoons, the district sets aside time for professional learning, sometimes referred to as “training” and “other professional work.” This time, unlike the time on Tuesdays, is generally planned by administration and teachers have little choice in how it is used. The plans for these sessions are guided by the superintendent’s suggestions or directives based on focus school visits. In other words, Mondays were a time when teachers were asked to perform compliance, while on Tuesdays, they had more agency in determining their professional performance.

In the initial informational meeting for this study, which Joe, the principal, attended, he proposed Tuesday afternoons as the best meeting time for the group. However, this was perceived by teachers as “their time”; of course, utilizing the time for parent meetings, collaborative planning, or differentiating for particular student needs was not truly time that belonged to the teachers themselves, yet they clearly valued the autonomy to attend to those pressing needs. This language provided some insight into the performance of “effectiveness” in this context, however; teachers’ time was not considered their own, and an “effective” teacher was one who did not take time for
himself or herself. Rather, an “effective” teacher utilized any “free” time attending to the needs of parents, students, and colleagues.

Other days of the week were subsequently ruled out because some teachers worked after school to support students, while others were not able to stay later on those days due to transportation issues such as carpools with other staff members. Consequently, teachers countered with a request to use Monday afternoons for group meetings instead. This message was reiterated to me through text messages and emails from individual teachers over the weekend following the initial informational meeting.

For example, Kathy, the fifth-grade writing teacher, sent me an email that read:

I am really having a hard time thinking about giving up Tuesday’s for the research you are doing. I really have to meet with [co-teachers] tomorrow afternoon because we are launching the literary essay unit and we have to discuss the lessons for the week as well as small group work. I’m not sure if another time is available. Let me know if another time will work for you.

Kathy indicated the need to carve out time to collaborate with her colleagues in a context that did not prioritize this work. The tension in navigating how best to use the precious time on Tuesday afternoons, which was meant to address a variety of responsibilities—to colleagues, to parents, to one’s own professional learning—was clear in her first sentence, in which she named that she was “really having a hard time” giving up other priorities. Likely, my role in the building as an “expert” and Joe’s urging to join the group caused this decision to be more fraught for Kathy, making it clear that the block of time on Tuesdays was important enough to fight for.

The move to accommodate classroom teachers, however, was not Joe’s alone to make. It required approval from the superintendent, who was overseeing the professional learning plans for the school. As Valerie previously indicated, the time and space were
governed by the dominant Discourses of an audit culture (Apple, 2004) and an autonomous perspective of literacy (Street, 1984). Teacher learning, in this context, was a “schooled” version of “inquiry” into student work to consider how to implement practices that improved testing outcomes. The emails below chronicle the process, governed by forces outside of the school, to utilize professional learning time for the alternative work of the writing group.

Hey. We’ve received permission from [the superintendent] to break away from the straight inquiry model she asked us to follow until this point for the professional-learning Mondays. This gives us a lot more latitude on our use of Mondays and Tuesdays. Today, I meet with the school PLC to officially discuss our moves forward and the specific proposal I make to the Superintendent. Moving forward, we should be able to set a pretty solid schedule for this group’s work. Valerie and I will try to lay one out with you, Amy, taking consultations with all into account, so we won’t have to cobble going forward.

Hi, Amy. We got the okay from our Superintendent to modify our Monday afternoons. The P.S. 999 PLC met and okayed. We shared the general structure with the staff without kickback. Now that all of the boxes are checked, I’ve been working on a draft schedule. Valerie was at [professional development] yesterday. I’m at a [district] meeting today. Let us touch base on what’s in your email and a few points tomorrow. Valerie (probably, I’m in a nearly all-day math meeting tomorrow) will get back to you after we talk. Thanks for your patience on this.

These emails laid out some of the different forces that influence and constrain the decision-making process for teachers’ professional learning. Not only did the individuals involved need to choose to engage in the learning, but the choices needed to be approved by the school’s staff, school administration, and district administration as worthwhile. Official proposals must be made and approved, all in the midst of other professional learning obligations. Newkirk (1997) noted that, “according to Goffman (1959), the key element of a socially competent performance is the ability to maintain a situation definition consistent with that of the audience. In these cases, ‘honest’ can cue a
mutually-agreed upon kind of performance” (p. 5). In this school context, the oversight of
the superintendent and completing the work necessary to comply as a focus school were
essential in a “socially competent” performance; the perceived judgment of colleagues
and administrators in relation to these pervasive values shaped and constrained the
Discourses and identities available and accepted in the school spaces. Those working in
the service of the upper administration’s goal of raising test scores were “competent,”
while those working outside of the “approved” model (specifically here, our writing
group) needed to justify their work and how they were using their time. Ultimately, the
group agreed to alternate—one Monday meeting and one Tuesday meeting per month—
so that teachers and administration both gave up some of “their” time for the group’s
work, and everyone was able to maintain their performance of the balancing act of their
professional lives.

Of course, in practice, the solution was not that simple, and external factors
continued to impact the attendance of group members. Tuesday meetings remained
challenging for classroom teachers to make, given the multitude of other commitments
they often had to prioritize during that time. Kathy, the fifth-grade writing teacher, and
Tara, the fourth-grade writing teacher, sent me several emails explaining their conflicts
with Tuesday meetings, including the three below:

Hi Amy, I have 2 parent meetings (IEP meeting and social worker) with the
4th grade team. These were scheduled a few weeks ago. I’m sorry. If I can pop in,
I will.

Amy, I have a parent meeting that was set up by the school’s parent
coordinator. The parents called with XL concerns about their child and can only
meet this day. The meeting is at 3:00. I am really sorry. Tuesdays are really
difficult because we have parent engagement. I know the 4th grade team has also
scheduled some meetings for the next few Tuesdays as well due to promotion in
doubt.
Hi Amy, I am giving the [assessment] on Monday and I have to grade and sort the papers to make small groups for the unit. I planned on doing this with [my co-teacher] on the Monday PD. I’m really sorry that every time there is always something to take care of but we are very busy. I am here early every morning usually by 7:00 if you wanted to interview me but I am in a car pool after school so I leave right away.

Here, Kathy and Tara referred to the many obligations they must negotiate during the limited afterschool timeframe. With expectations that they address parent engagement, such as parents who are concerned about their students’ progress or Individualized Education Plan meetings to meet the needs of special education students, as well as collaboration such as grading assessments and planning differentiated instruction with colleagues, and professional learning such as our writing group, teachers were consistently trying to determine how best to use their time. Other factors that impacted attendance included grant-sponsored trips to take students to the movies, vertical curricular meetings, illnesses, and standardized test scoring. As the dates for group meetings continued to shift, so did the attendance of participants. Each member had to prioritize the work of the group amid the other obligations of their personal and professional identities and the Discourses or markers that enabled them to be viewed as successful within those roles.

Personally, I struggled with my own role in the decision-making process as well. Though external to the context of P.S. 999, my own complicated schedule was a factor, and I debated the extent to which I needed to place group meetings ahead of my other commitments. Pursuit of success as a researcher or writer conflicted directly with my identities as a proficient instructor or staff developer or wife. Racing from a writing group meeting, having missed a work meeting and running late to teach a class, I typed the following memo on my phone in a cab:
Knots in my stomach about being late to teach. Luckily, [my co-worker] was very understanding about me missing the meeting...I hope that holds true when my evaluations come in and mention how I’ve been late to class a few times. It’s hard to prioritize and know how to balance accommodating my participants’ schedules versus my own (which consequently impacts my students). I really hope that we’ll be able to stick to the upcoming schedule in April.

On another day, I wrote of my “rising sense of panic” as the minutes of writing time ticked by and I was distracted by my need to get across town. To engage in the work of the group, then, compromises and choices had to be made, and each member had to choose not to engage in other parts of his or her professional lives. With so many mandates exerting demands on teachers’ time, teachers’ autonomy lay in choosing which priority exerted the most pressure and immediate need, guided by the Discourses circulating in this context, which framed teacher learning in ways counter to the work of the writing group. In a site where “schooled” PLCs were the norm, the writing group had to work in and against the PLC model and the sense of how and for what professional learning spaces could be used.

**Hierarchy as Perpetuated by Administration**

Vinz (1996) argued that representation, resemblance, and repetition are all part of the Discourse of learning how to teach. Intersecting school Discourses work to perpetuate existing power structures and initiate teachers into taking up the “teacher” role. At P.S. 999, a hierarchical power structure was reinforced as a part of the broader climate of the school culture as articulated by the administration. Specifically, Joe, the principal, clearly delineated between teachers he privileged and granted autonomy to and those he saw the need to surveille and monitor compliance. I asked him about this tension directly during our interview.
Amy: Just thinking about your role as curriculum leadership, thinking about the last part you were saying about teachers being part of learning communities and things like that, how do you navigate that balance between teacher autonomy, in terms of how they’re teaching, and accountability and management of curriculum?

Joe: Yes, it’s tough. It’s something that I don’t think there’s a singular answer to it. It also depends on the teacher. I think certainly it’s a different school now than it was just a few years ago. They have a different staff. The most competent staff that we’ve had. That’s not to say, though, that we’re doing exactly what we need to do. And so, it depends on the individual. There are certain grades and teachers where we want them to hone much more closely to their curriculum. But I know certainly myself as a teacher, I did not want—I wouldn’t want to and I couldn’t follow a script. I don’t want cookie cutter.

We want people to be thinkers but to also work within certain confines. There’s many philosophies of learning and views of learning that I have that other people don’t necessarily share but that I see as the way that’s gonna help our kids best. There are certain people here that would not go that way if left to their own. And I’ve had discussions with people where, you can be a wonderful teacher but this school isn’t for you.

So, it’s always this balance to try to find because I don’t want to be—and I don’t know how successfully I’ve avoided this but I don’t want to be seen as someone who’s like, “You must do it this way.” Because I don’t value that. But within certain parameters you do need to follow. But within that you have a lot of latitude but you gotta bring something to the table. If I’m gonna give you latitude, you gotta do something with it. And if you’re not doing something with it, that’s where we’re gonna run into problems. Then, you’ve got a great guide. Go back to it. I don’t necessarily want to see people reading off their script. I mean, I know it’s a great script. But I want the essence of that. In your own voice.

Joe began by making distinctions between the teachers, explaining that though this was “the most competent staff [he’s] had,” he handled “certain grades and teachers” differently than others. He worked from his understanding of himself as a teacher and how he himself would not be able to “follow a script,” indicating that was not what he wanted from teachers in the building. However, he later hedged this statement by stating that he wanted teachers to be “thinkers but able to work within certain confines,”
implying there was an expectation that teachers adhere to the curriculum expectations or they should leave. As Joe continued, he once again stated his discomfort with mandating particular practices from teachers, tying it to his own values. Yet, he again contradicted this statement with the next, saying “But within that you have a lot of latitude but you gotta bring something to the table. If I’m gonna give you latitude, you gotta do something with it. And if you’re not doing something with it, that’s where we’re gonna run into problems.” This example illustrated the ways power circulates through the instructional practices advocated or mandated to teachers in ways that animated particular practices with power. Joe’s evaluation of each teacher’s practice has the power to position who is “successful” (and granted agency and autonomy) or “failing” (and in need of correction, coercion, or compliance).

Joe’s response, then, articulated two important aspects of the school context within which the writing group and its members were situated: the tension between autonomy and control over classroom pedagogy and curriculum, and the inequality inherent in how that autonomy and control are allocated across members of the faculty. Joe indicated that autonomy must be earned, that teachers must perform a particular type of “good teacher” identity to be granted flexibility within one’s classroom. This “good teacher” picked up the discourse of the writing workshop, but was able to appropriate the language with his or her “own voice.” Bakhtin (1981) described this process of making language one’s own as “only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (p. 293). Those who were unable to do so were redirected, very literally, to the language of others, the language of the teachers’ manual, which “exists in
other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions” (p. 294). The control exerted over the classroom created a rigidity of language and performance that marked the teacher as ineffective. On the other hand, once one was viewed as the “right” kind of teacher, it was assumed that this identity performance would continue and did not need as much oversight. In particular, this involved performing the practices and discourses valued by school administration, such as growth mindset and workshop practices. This reinforced the image of an “ideal” teacher, one who was effective enough to be granted autonomy in the midst of so many efforts to exert control. Joe articulated what this “ideal” was for the staff as follows:

It’s not about teaching our curriculum. Obviously, that’s part of it. Yes, we want kids to understand certain genre and structures. There are things that are specific to each unit. It’s about finding your voice. It’s about being a thinker. It’s about becoming a writer and seeing writing as just a way of being. A way of thinking. Of communicating. It’s a tool. It’s not teaching what’s in the book. Whether it’s reading, writing, math, that’s what a lot of people don’t understand. We’re not delivering content. That’s certainly part of it. We’re showing kids and we’re being explicit about certain things. It’s not about replication. It’s about seeing something and approximating. Finding your voice and struggling your way through it to find yourself.

That’s what a lot of people don’t get. It’s not specific to writing. It’s about everything. I think it’s about, are you a learner? Are you a thinker? I think most education still is about doing. To me it’s least about that.

Joe simultaneously valued adherence to and enactment of the fixed body of knowledge of the curriculum (delivering content is “certainly part of it,” “we’re being explicit,” “seeing something and approximating”), while also valuing teachers who are thinkers, learners, and “find [their] own voice”—likely those who would modify curriculum to make it their own. This alignment between pedagogical practices, enacting the curriculum, and “a way of being” must combine to mark a teacher as successful in this space. Much as Belle, in the previous chapter, described something “intangible” about successful writing, Joe
alluded to the intangibles of successful teaching here through phrases such as “approximating,” “finding your voice and struggling your way through it to find yourself,” or “it’s about everything.” In my own roles, I struggled with how to respond to this. As a staff developer, and even as a researcher recruiting participants for a study I believe in, I too have experienced resistance from the staff. I have experienced differences in how open teachers feel about their practice, their willingness to try new things or take risks, and their intellectual curiosity. I have been in their classrooms to experience their instruction, relationships with students, and classroom cultures. However, I also feared that the open discussion of these differences, without a plan to support teachers who were not identified as “learners” and “thinkers,” would likely foster a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Fessler (1995) argued, the “teacher career cycle responds to environmental conditions. A supportive, nurturing, reinforcing environment can assist a teacher in the pursuit of a rewarding, positive career progression. Environmental interference and pressures, on the other hand, can impact negatively on the career cycle” (p. 179). Being marked as “ineffective” by one’s administrator is likely demoralizing, and often positions teachers to receive additional mandates, oversight, and knowledge-for-practice experiences, perhaps causing them to miss out on opportunities for knowledge-of-practice, such as the writing group.

For some teachers, including Luis, the way of thinking/working/being valued by administration matched their own teaching identities. Luis described himself and his philosophical alignment with Joe as follows:

I take the work that I do seriously. I’m very passionate about education. I could see myself being a teacher but then I never realized how much passion I have for education until I was in it and as I learned more, I feel like it’s because of that. I’m able to learn more and I’ve been able to... Because of Joe, I’ve been able
to have the ability, the flexibility to engage and learn and experiment. A lot of it, I credit to him for allowing me to have those opportunities and not being judgmental about it or saying, “No, you have to do this.” If I’ve ever said to him, “I’ve been reading about this. I would love to try it.” He’s like, “Cool.”

Luis marked himself here as a particular kind of teacher, one who took the work “seriously” and was “very passionate about education.” This characterization implicitly contrasted to others who may not approach the work in the same way. Luis also aligned himself rhetorically with Joe, wanting to “credit” him for his own professional growth. Luis acknowledged the “flexibility” he has been afforded to “experiment,” which was a privilege Joe clearly explained he did not offer to all faculty equally. In bringing his reading and requests to Joe and positioning himself as a “thinker” and “learner,” Luis has proven himself (performed) a “good teacher” and his requests have been granted. For Luis and for others who earned the latitude Joe described by “bringing something to the table,” freedom and flexibility were the norm at P.S. 999. In the same way that others have written of the language and cultural practices of students’ homes aligning less or more with the practices of school (Heath, 1983; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), so too the practices of teachers align less or more with the discourses and values of the school’s culture. Moreover, when there is a misalignment, teachers may be told, “This isn’t the school for you”; their identities, if not performed in a way that aligns to the culture, may deny them access to the space. In this way, claims such as “I’m just not a writer,” or a refusal to perform a writing identity as defined by writing workshop, could have potentially serious consequences for teachers—or, in Joe’s terms, “we’re gonna have problems.”

The distinction between the way members of the group were framed in school discourse is, upon reflection, clear even in the ways in which different members came to
the writing group. While Luis and Valerie chose to join the group and Belle was invited by a peer, both Tara and Kathy were “invited” by Joe—a practice sometimes referred to as being “voluntold” by administration. Tara’s and Kathy’s different framing of the work of the group and their role within it was, then, understandable. In fact, their lack of attendance, then, may be seen as their own practice of agency and resistance. As they articulated, with so many different expectations and demands on their time, they felt unable to add another role to their professional lives, even if it did represent an opportunity to perform the professional learning identity valued by administration (as a “thinker” and a “learner” who “finds [their] own voice”), and might possibly earn them additional “latitude.” In discussing his goals for the group, Joe again fostered this dichotomy, specifically acknowledging the performance he hoped the group would foster—for some of its members.

Amy: What are some of the goals that you have for the work of the group? What are you hoping the people that are participating are going to take from it?

Joe: Two things. One is being engaged in the learning process. Being part of a learning community. The more learning communities that we participate in, the more we become learners. That’s what we want on our agenda here in this school. A couple of people in the group, they’re there. They pine for those opportunities. And there are other people, you know, for very understandable reasons, sometimes life is really busy. Whether it’s life inside of school or combined with life outside the school. One was to help nurture more learning communities and more learners here in this school. But I also think, like we’ve been discussing, the more we write and reflect on our own writing, whatever vein that is in, the better writers we become. And then the better teachers we become. And I know, like I said, I do writing all the time cause that’s a huge part of my job. And even writing teachers, I don’t think necessarily do.

So, the opportunity to write, and get feedback on the writing, and participate in learning opportunities where other people are involved in that same process. One, it forces people to write more. But, you’re also in
a safe place. Because even though in elementary schools, almost every
teacher teaches writing, they’re just like with mathematics I think, the
understandings aren’t that deep necessarily. The comfort level, while they
may be higher than mathematics, when you scratch the surface it’s not all
that high. I think that the understandings are very superficial, too. So, I
think it’s extremely valuable.

Joe once again cited the importance of teachers positioning themselves as learners, and
worked to distinguish between those who actively perform that identity (“[pining] for
those opportunities”) and those who do not (because “life is really busy”). By citing those
in the group who are already “there” in Joe’s eyes and the “writing teachers” who do not
write enough and whose content knowledge is not “that deep,” Joe narratively positioned
Kathy and Tara as sites in need of improvement, much in the same way the focus school
designation positions the school itself (yet, his planned intervention for improvement,
namely offering access to the writing group, failed to engage them and produce the
“improvement” he sought). Though he softened this assessment by indicating that there
were “very understandable reasons” certain teachers are not yet “there,” he also worked
to position himself, along with other members of the group, in contrast to these teachers.
He marked himself as someone who writes “all the time,” and, by punctuating his last
few sentences with “I think” repeatedly, positioned himself as outside of the “teachers’”
group and able to pass judgment on it. In the first paragraph, however, he positioned
himself within the learning community along with the others who were “there,” through
his use of the pronoun “we”: “The more learning communities we participate in, the more
we become learners. That’s what we want on our agenda here in this school.” Joe’s
repeated positioning of himself and others constructed a socially situated construction of
what it means to be an “effective” teacher, and how one must perform in order to be read
as such. This had the power to shape teachers’ views of themselves and their relations to
pedagogy and fostered a hierarchy within the building, exerting varying levels of control and permission according to an individual’s rank within that hierarchy.

In a later conversation, Luis shared a narrative with the group that provided a window into how these roles within the hierarchy were internalized and taken up by staff members to construct identities that were becoming laminated through repetition. Luis recounted the story to me again when it came up during our final interview:

Luis: It’s sad to say, unfortunately, and that’s been my lament for a few years now. The community that I teach in is not one that’s... They’re not engaged in the full thing of it. I get it. I know there’s life things and everything but even outside of that. Sometimes I feel like it’s hard to have a conversation with people about education. I can have that conversation with Belle. I can have that conversation with Valerie, with Joe. I really have a hard time with other people in the school. You talk about education and it’s like, you’re a real teacher. You know?

Amy: Yeah. Can you say a little bit more about that, just so...I feel like that was a really potent story and I’d love to have your words for it.

Luis: I went to Chicago for the weekend. When I go away to new towns and new cities, I like to go to the local bookstore. It’s my thing. I just love to see how they’re set up and what the vibe is and interesting books, interesting stationery, interesting things, stuff like that. My friends, we passed by one, and they’re like, “Oh, this is a really good bookstore. Do you want to go to the bookstore?” So, we went and like I was telling you, it’s a bookstore that it’s new and used books, mainly used books and some new stuff too as well, but all their proceeds from the books they sell go back into literacy programs. As a teacher, I’m like that’s wonderful that the schools get to have more money and especially knowing the struggles that people have in Chicago. Most of them there, it’s like I want to try to give back, so I went there, bought a tee shirt, some books.

When I came back to school that week, my coworker was asking me about my weekend, so I was just telling her. I told her how I went to that building, I had this shirt that I bought, some different books. I was telling her a little bit. My coworker was like, “Yeah, you know, my other coworker and I were talking about you and we realized that you’re like a real teacher.”

Amy: That’s so crazy to me.
Luis: I know. I was so shocked. Everybody I’ve told that to, like [Belle] and a few other people, what does that even mean, a real teacher?

Luis’s voice here seemed interanimated by Joe’s language. Luis began by making a distinction similar to Joe’s; his expression “engage in the full thing of it” ran parallel to Joe’s teachers “who are already there,” and his caveat that “there’s life things” mirrored Joe’s statement that “life is really busy.” Luis named particular colleagues (those from the writing group) that were “engaged” in the way he was, while others he “has a hard time with.” He then ventriloquated the phrase of a colleague, borrowing back to her initial comment (and referring to the story he had already told the group) to emphasize the tension both he and his colleague felt between their teaching identities.

In naming Luis as a “real” teacher, his co-workers worked to make a distinction between themselves and him (and likely, other colleagues, too). They also had picked up on the discourse of the hierarchy present within the building, and pointed out Luis’s membership in the “real” group, which Luis himself named as “engaged in the full thing of it” and Joe named as “already there.” Membership in this group is marked by actions (going to independent bookstores, donating to literacy charities, lending out books, asking to try new things in the classroom, sharing readings); language (“I want to try to give back,” “It’s my thing,” “see what the vibe is,” “finding their voice,” “broader conversations about education); and objects (t-shirts, books, writer’s notebooks)—a specific identity kit (Gee, 1996). However, to Luis and the other members of our group, myself admittedly included, this self-aware demarcation on the part of the co-worker was surprising. We struggled to make sense of the word choice; if Luis was a “real” teacher, how were his co-workers naming themselves? How were they conceiving their own professional learning? Ultimately, the voluntary nature of the group and the similar
learning stances of those involved in it fostered our success in meeting consistently and producing writing—and, frankly, enjoying ourselves throughout the process. However, we were ultimately unable to recruit any “others” ("fake" teachers? "unreal" teachers?) into the group, which perpetuated the hierarchy that already existed. Those who participated continued to perform “learners/thinkers/real teachers,” while those who did not participate continued to be read otherwise.

**Emotional Eruptions in Teacher Performances**

In the context of P.S. 999, teachers needed to negotiate the mandates of external control and the lived experiences of trying to meet the expectations for their “effective” performance. For those within the group, as well as those who did not feel they could access the autonomy of the group, the impact of the circulating Discourses, the pressure of the culture of accountability and evaluation, and their awareness of their place within the hierarchy of the school context sometimes resulted in “cracks” in their teacher performances. In these moments, the emotion—be it stress, guilt, frustration, or something else—of their lived experiences showed through.

The process of choosing among all of their professional commitments was laden with emotion for teachers. While many emotions were named, nervousness, guilt, and shame were the most commonly referenced, as evidenced in part by my own note on the memo about the “knots in my stomach.” This was particularly expressed by female teachers, a cohort historically constructed as caring nurturers of children, a historical narrative strengthened by repetition and aimed at universalization. Meiner (2002, as cited in Lensmire & Schick, 2017) referred to this narrative as the “White Lady Bountiful”
teacher trope, “the picture of the perfect maternal yet virginal presence, beneficently overseeing her charges, with infinite patience and caring, yet somehow able to remain neutral and detached, denying any expression of human emotion” (p. xix). The “ideal” teacher is one who is calm, cool, and collected; one who manages the multitude of mandates, roles, and responsibilities of teaching without being affected by pressure or stress. This teacher is a rational agent who does not express needs or even feelings. Rather, she is compliant and implements practices directed by administration smoothly and unquestioningly. The ability to enact this “autonomous” model of literacy frames more or less successful teachers. Despite the many identity positions each of us holds, the socially constructed role of teachers seems to demand an editing-out of the parts of us that do not align with the “White Lady Bountiful.”

The emotional experiences of teachers, then, both can and should be considered alongside the historical and current notions narratives of who teachers are and “should” be. Yet, as Lensmire and Schick (2017) argued, because

Western patriarchal culture centers the individual as knower, thinker, and doer, the emotional and embodied experiences of teachers easily become individualized, too. The dominant conception of mental health is of an individual’s journey, one that often holds us in a narrative of shame and self-blame rather than allowing us to disrupt, complicate, and expand our understanding of how and why we struggle” within “a collective entanglement of systems, histories, and narratives.” (p. xix)

The stress and blame teachers feel as they negotiate the priorities and demands of their job are framed as individual deficits, rather than as an ideological aspect of the dominant Discourses of who and what teachers are and the power dynamics between teachers’ official worlds (the world of rational, cognitive performances) and their unofficial worlds (the world of social, emotional relationships and interactions). “Ideal” teachers are
cognitively engaged (as “thinkers/learners”), engaged in “progressive” practices, yet they are expected to conceal human emotions or needs. An apt metaphor might be a robot—a “progressive” robot, but a robot nonetheless.

The themes identified in this section—the explicit control exerted on schools identified as in need of improvement, the negotiation of professional priorities, and the emotional experience involved in negotiating the two—came together in one of Kathy’s narratives. As soon as Kathy and I sat down for her initial interview, she began to apologize ardently for her lack of attendance to group meetings and describe the factors that got in the way of finding “free time” for the writing group, which she termed “the struggle.”

I feel like my responsibilities here come first. My responsibilities to the kids come first. Then my responsibilities with my colleagues that I don’t have time to plan with them. We’ll text over the weekend. We’ll talk about units. We’ll talk about plans. I’ll take pictures of stuff and send it to [my co-teacher], vice versa. She’s got two little ones. I can’t bother her all the time. We need the time in school. I get here at seven o’clock every day. [My co-teacher] tries, but I have a different lifestyle than she does. We know as teachers we’re going to work after hours. We know that. I feel like time here is so precious because she’s here and I’m here so we need to get together and collaborate. Especially with the class that we teach together, we need to talk about the kids and what we’re noticing.

How are we going to do this lesson? Is it going to be a parallel lesson? Are we going to do stations around the room? There’s so much to get to. Then you’re in the classroom and then you need to get your boards done and you need to get things up. I don’t have a title for my Jot Lot, which I still want to do. There are so many things in the course of the day. Then there are parent conferences. We had that huge snow storm which backed us up and I had to reschedule a lot of things. The free time idea, I don’t know who has it. I don’t. I feel like I don’t. And I don’t know how that gets fixed because I know that we can only have so much time during the course of the day that administration can give us. I don’t know the answers to that, but I just always feel like there’s never enough time.

Maybe if there weren’t so many expectations. There are just so many expectations and I don’t know if it’s because this year we’re especially feeling it as a focus school that we’ve got to up the ante. We have to really, like, get our stuff more organized. And I see that that’s happening, but I don’t know. It seems
like you finish one thing and there’s like two more things coming your way that have to get done. There’s only so much time that you’re going to go home and on Sunday afternoon read a hundred twenty papers, organize them on Google Drive, look at your small groups, look at your whole groups, get mentor pieces ready to go. It’s a lot. It’s a lot. So, yeah, this is my first priority here. If I had free time, I’d love to chat or write. We’re doing this at seven a.m. because I know like, later in the day I’ve got to talk to [my co-teacher] on our prep.

I have to talk to her about what I saw this weekend. I want her to look at the pieces. We need to organize it. How are we doing our groups then? Especially I never worked with another teacher. Since we’re departmentalized, now I have another teacher that I have to collaborate with. I don’t think it’s fair if I don’t. I can’t say, “These are just my kids and you just walk around.” It’s not the model that I want, nor should she feel that way. In order to feel like we’re a team, we need to have that collaboration and work together. Then she feels really bad if I take all the work home. I’m like, “I’m just going to do it because I have to. Because I can’t...unless we look at it together on our prep.” Then things happen during the prep. I don’t know what’s going to happen in the morning with my kids and things. You have to get on the phone with parents. I don’t know the answer to creating more time. I don’t know what the answer is for it.... That’s my struggle. Always.

Kathy initially explained that her responsibilities to the students “come first.” She articulated the many ways she worked with her co-teacher across time and space to work together to best meet the students’ needs. Next, she itemized all of the things that consistently filled her plate, from mandates about when bulletin boards must be changed to parent conferences and schedule interruptions like snow days. She positioned the work of the writing group as something for which she needed “free time,” and acknowledged that she “just always feels like there’s never enough time.” Acknowledging this stress and tension of wanting to do it all but not being able to find the time, Kathy named the changes that have come with being a focus school explicitly: “There are just so many expectations and I don’t know if it’s because this year we’re especially feeling it as a focus school that we’ve got to up the ante…. It seems like you finish one thing and there’s like two more things coming your way that have to get done.” The Discourse of
the ideal “effective” teacher, one who handles all of the challenges with a smile and does not feel stressed, was evident in Kathy’s narrative. However, it was also clear in this moment that there was an emotional life underneath that professional performance and it could not be wholly contained.

As she spoke, Kathy grew animated. Her speech sped up, her face flushed pink, and her hands gesticulated. By the end of her narrative, Kathy was visibly choked up. Her stress felt tangible as I sat across from her and told her that I understood: There were never enough hours in the day for all we want to get accomplished. While it was clear that Kathy felt the need to explain herself and her choices to me, it also seemed evident that she was willing to open up in this moment and reveal the emotion beneath her professional performance, her “unofficial world.” Aligning with the expectations of “White Lady Bountiful,” she centered her responsibilities to her students within the classroom (“my responsibilities to the kids come first”), which the work of the writing group was meant to center, too. However, Kathy elaborated on her own interpretation of the choices she needed to make to meet her primary responsibility to her students. She positioned herself as a part of “a team” that needed to collaborate, plan, assess, and make decisions together; alternatively, she positioned herself as taking on the work of the team herself to get it done, contrasting her “lifestyle” to that of her co-teacher who has young children. She described doing significant work on the weekend, outside of the “surveilling” eye of administration, as well as significant emotional management of the relationship with her colleague (“I can’t bother her all the time,” “I don’t think it’s fair if I don’t,” “It’s not the model I want, nor should she feel that way,” “She feels really bad if I take all the work home”). Yet, this emotional, relational work is not valued as a part of
“effective” teacher performance. Though Kathy was working incredibly hard and exhibited commitment and passion to her craft, she was not read the same way as Luis.

Each of these other obligations were held up against the “free time” of the writing group, perceived as time “to chat or write,” which was outside of the day-to-day immediate needs of her students and her classroom instruction; in contrast to these other priorities, it was almost positioned as selfish to take time for. While the work of the group was positioned as something desirable (“I’d love to”), it was also named as unattainable (“The free time idea, I don’t know who has it. I don’t. I feel like I don’t. And I don’t know how that gets fixed because I know that we can only have so much time during the course of the day that administration can give us. I don’t know the answers to that, but I just always feel like there’s never enough time.”). The tension of an unattainable aim manifested itself in cheeks that flushed, a voice that cracked, and eyes that brimmed with tears.

The changeability of teachers’ emotions is typically either ignored entirely or conscripted into rational frameworks where they can be planned and managed. Yet, the powerful emotions inherent in the work of teaching cannot be contained or tamed in this way; human emotions and passions assert themselves at the heart of teacher commitment and desire. Understanding the “emotional life of teachers, their feelings for and in their work, and attending to this emotional life in ways that positively cultivate it and avoid negatively damaging it” should be central to teacher learning (Hargreaves, 1995, p. 21). The attempt to ignore or suppress teachers’ emotions has only resulted in anxiety, frustration, and guilt for many teachers (as Kathy illustrated here), and cynicism and
burnout for others. Teachers’ emotional lives, then, are in need of spaces to be explored, affirmed, and channeled into the work of passionate teaching and learning.

**Writing Group as a Space of Relative Autonomy**

Kathy’s desire for the “free time” of the writing group hinted at a bigger theme. Within the regulated space of P.S. 999 as a whole, the writing group represented a space of relative autonomy. Given the support of administration, and likely based on the power of my role and my own history and relationships within the school, there was little oversight of the work of our group. It quickly became clear that neither Joe nor other administration would be attending the meetings or tracking the work closely; as “learners/thinkers/real teachers,” we were granted agency and freedom from surveillance. The administration’s primary involvement in the group was in supporting (and sometimes hindering) the process of scheduling the meetings.

**Co-Construction of Working Habits**

As discussed previously, it was my aim to disrupt the kind of didactic professional learning that typically took place in the time and space of Monday afternoons by sharing the agenda-setting with group members and co-creating the modes of working within the group. Structures, content, and materials for the group were fluid and flexible, to the best of my ability. I attempted to remain “aware of the power relations within the group, honestly acknowledge these issues of power, and remain conscious of them at all times” (Park, 2005, p. 154). My researcher journal is full of moments when I struggled with my ability (or lack thereof) to disrupt these taken-for-granted modes of working, or pondered how to offer new material or situations that challenged previously held beliefs about how
the work should go. I wondered about how much responsibility I should take in moving each individual’s work forward, equalizing participation, or bringing materials.

Participants often sought permission, asking if what they planned to bring to the group was “okay,” and most of the timekeeping was left to me to decide, for example, when we shifted from talking to writing, or writing to sharing. Inspired by Miller’s (1990) writing group, I took solace in Berthoff’s (1987, as cited in Miller, 1990) guidelines for “learning the uses of chaos” (p. 58): tolerating ambiguity and being patient with beginnings.

However, over time, the permission questions became less frequent (though not wholly absent) as those with consistent attendance (Luis, Belle, Valerie, and myself) dug into our own writing projects. Over time, other members of the group also initiated their own shifts during group meetings—responding to one another, bringing up topics on their own, or making requests about working style. Valerie, a self-proclaimed procrastinator, advocated for the deadlines she needed to hold herself accountable for accomplishing her writing. She began by asking, “Should we have a draft?” When I intentionally turned the decision back to her, she shifted into the role of agenda-setter and named a deadline as something she “needed” for her writing process, setting one for all of us. In another meeting, Luis suggested that we end our group meetings with a writing celebration when our pieces were done, and so we went out for a celebratory dinner. And Belle often took the lead in the conversation, changing topics or responding to others’ questions. My power as the convener of the group remained, but co-creation of our ways of working was evident in these moments of leadership by other members.
Accessibility to the Group

This space of relative autonomy, however, did not seem equally accessible to everyone. As Kathy pointed out, she yearned to access it, but could not find the time. Tara echoed Kathy’s sentiment, labeling her feeling as envy for the freedom to focus on something other than planning for instruction.

During the group, like I said before, I’m trying to use that time for me to do my modeling pieces. I’m pretty envious of the others that can just write about whatever and do their own personal writing. Like I said, if I could just sit down and do a memoir, that would just be my cup of tea. I would love that, but I sit there a lot and I struggle because I was doing short response or extensive response, and now historical fiction. I sit there trying to get ideas and trying to think of how my story’s going to go and I’m doing the constructive struggle that the kids are doing. My goal is just to continue doing what I’m doing.

When I go in there tomorrow, I’m going to be working on my piece, and when we go into the journalism unit, I’m hoping that I can get a head start before that where I can get a piece going, a few pieces because those are shorter, just some ideas. I don’t know. That’s my goal, just to try and use that time, and if I have questions, because you know the units, to ask you questions and have you help me if I have any problems.

Tara framed the work of the group differently than the consistent participants. For her, the group was not about the autonomy to choose her own writing project or to participate in collaborative inquiry with her colleagues. It was a chance to access the expertise of knowledgeable others such as myself and Valerie, while completing the professional work she would otherwise be engaging in alone. “Personal writing” is juxtaposed with “professional writing,” without a consideration of the ways in which job-related writing might be worthy of attention as well, and there may be ways to mobilize writing strategies across personal and professional texts. Those who attended the group found the freedom and autonomy within the space that my positioning within the school context made available. They found elasticity in their professional roles as they accessed and
picked up the materials for their identity kits within the group (Gee, 1996). However, for Tara and Kathy, their inability to access the relatively free space of the group only served to reify the existing forms of power and hierarchy that circulated in and through the school and staff. Their enactment of their professional roles reflected a rigidity produced by the collective entanglement of their individual experiences, histories, and narratives, as well as the Discourses the context made available to them.

One meeting that took place approximately two-thirds of the way through the study exemplified these divergent experiences. We had a meeting scheduled for a Monday afternoon. On the Friday afternoon prior to the meeting, the assistant principal sent an email out to the staff describing a mandated training that would happen in place of any other Professional Learning (PL) on Monday afternoon. The email read:

Dear Staff,

Joe just got word that we will have a mandatory crisis/de-escalation training this Monday. We apologize for the late notice, but wanted you to know as soon as we did. Therefore, there will be no PL this Monday afternoon. More details to follow…

Two group members responded at the end of the school day on Friday at almost exactly the same time. Tara forwarded the email to me so that I would be aware of the conflict. Belle, on the other hand, emailed Joe directly to ask, “Will those of us in the writing group be able go or do we have to be a part of the special PD?” Joe’s response, sent to all members of the group on the same email, read, “I won’t tell.” When I emailed over the weekend to follow up, Belle responded that we were “good to go.” Tara, however, explained that “I’ll be going to the mandatory suicide prevention training today. I’m sorry that they scheduled this on the same day as group. I think I need to be there.” Ultimately, both Tara and Kathy opted to attend the “mandatory” training, while both Belle and Luis
attended the writing group meeting. Despite the tacit permission from Joe, both Tara and Kathy felt the pressure of mandatory obligations as communicated to the whole staff and indicated that they were nervous about what they “should” do and what they might get “in trouble” for. Their language, interanimated by other voices, reflected the ways in which they have internalized the discourses of the school as a site in need of improvement and themselves as teachers in need of training. The idealized “effective” teacher is one who can manage a crisis, comply with mandates, and gain knowledge from an external expert; Kathy and Tara sought to perform and be read in this way. The ventriloquated Discourses placed constraints on their actions and performances, even when given an opportunity for flexibility. Belle and Luis, on the other hand, saw the tacit permission for flexibility and interpreted it as open to them. Whether through Belle’s professional position as a coach, Luis’s personal position as a male, or other aspects of their identities at work here, Belle and Luis felt entitled to view the initial whole-staff message as elastic, and felt they were able to exercise their own agency in the situation.

**Elasticity Across Identity Positions**

Within the space of the group, with whomever was in attendance at a given meeting, the roles that each individual moved fluidly through were flexible and shifting. As I referenced previously, I tried to disrupt, as much as I could, my role as leader and agenda-setter. This tension eased across time, though never fully disappeared. For example, in a meeting where only Luis, Belle, and I were in attendance, we took no time for writing. Luis and Belle animatedly engaged me in a conversation which began grounded in our pieces, then drifted to topics as varied as YouTube celebrities, mentor text “soulmates,” learning through play, favorite paintings, our own schooling
experiences, coded language, advocating for educational equity, and occasionally linking back to our writing or the work of our group. At the end of the group, they indicated an awareness that the meeting deviated from our “normal” ways of working; Belle referred to it as a “philosophy group” meeting rather than a “writing group,” and Luis announced, “Well, we got a lot—you got a lot, I feel like we covered a lot. This was nice!” They both teased me that it would be good fodder for my dissertation.

More often, though, our meetings integrated some talking time and some writing time. As we talked through, about, and around our writing, we took on the perspectives of writers, teachers, coaches, students, and administrators, moving through these flexibly. One of the most common moves was for one us to move from our role as writer to our role as teacher, naming an implication of our own writing work for the classroom. For example, in one of our later meetings, Luis reflected on his writing, moving fluidly back and forth from his position as a writer, thinking about what the experience of completing and sharing his piece was like for him, and as a teacher, thinking about how best to create conditions for students to feel the same success. Belle, responding to Luis, also took up the role of writer and teacher; however, she also moved into the role of writing partner, one who was excited to share in the successes of a fellow writer.

Belle: I think that, when I’m hearing you speak and you haven’t had a chance to do this and I’m hoping your feelings are the same, but when Valerie sort of changed her mind a million times, and then she had her piece, and I do know Valerie and Luis rather well, like I know what Valerie’s face looks like when she’s happy with something, and you can hear it in her voice, like: “I’m happy,” so the question is, if we, and I don’t think this has to transfer in terms of our thinking to kids, ‘cause I think this group is about us and our own road, but if we do want to think about kids, it’s sort of like, so the three of us are ultimately proud of what we did and that is probably what’s gonna keep us going on this, like you might have done it anyway, whatever, but your tone has changed today.
Luis: Right.

Belle: And so, how do we make these things happen and when they do, how do we like really capitalize on them? ‘Cause it changes things.

Amy: Absolutely.

Luis: It does.

Amy: I think, to me, part of it is what we’ve been talking about with the social relationships, like that when I’m with people that I trust, people that I like, people that have been on the journey with me, then I’m, like, more willing to put myself out there and I’m more willing to celebrate with those people, ‘cause we’ve been on the journey together. But I think some of it is just like time and space to acknowledge…. I think in our classrooms, because we’re on such a tight schedule and it’s like: “I have to get to this next thing, I have to cover this next thing,” I think we sort of sucked out some of the time for sharing and being excited and celebrating.

Luis: Right, I mean, I think that’s the most engaging part of it, right? And I used to often think about this in the past few years and it’s like, when you think about writer’s workshop right? That’s an interesting concept, for kids or even for adults, this idea of, it should be small groups, right? Where we’re kind of like, but again it’s like the time and the space, right, it’s like, it would be wonderful to have like, a group of kids being able to kind of do that same kind of work, reading, sharing, trusting each other, building that trust in their writing process.

Belle: And I think there’s a certain pleasure you get when your partners are pleased with themselves.

Belle here began as a partner. She was attuned to the emotions and body language of the other group members, and identified the “certain pleasure” of pride in a partner’s success. These emotions, the feeling of pride in both what she had accomplished and what her partners had, “change[d] things” for Belle. Moreover, it was this change, this success, even this feeling, that she wanted to bring to students. So, though she positioned herself as a writer, naming that the work of the group was ultimately “about us and our own road,” she was ultimately led through that identity position and into “if we do want to think about kids…how do we make these things happen?” I offer an insight from some of
the in-process analysis I had been thinking about and discussing, the importance of the
social relationships within our group, and Luis followed up, despite a caveat about
considerations of time and space, with a specific practice: placing students in small
groups for “reading, sharing, trusting each other, building that trust in their writing
process.”

As this example indicates, across the duration of the study, there were many
opportunities for each teacher-writer to connect his or her own process, or the process of
the group’s work, to the process their students are asked to go through in the school
context. This often led to reflections on pedagogy, but also sometimes led to cross-
curricular connections, particularly for Belle and Luis, whose professional roles focused
exclusively on math. For example, in reflecting on her own breakthrough with her
“Laundry Anxiety” essay, Belle moved from a teacher position to a writer position and
then connected her writing work to math, then back to a teacher perspective again.

I was also thinking about this whole...the way school works. You’ve got forty-
five minutes, and you need to do your writing. And in another forty-five minutes
you need to figure out your math problem. And in another forty-five minutes
you.... And it’s like, brains don’t work that way. They just don’t. I happen to have
this idea, or Luis. I don’t even know who had it. I thought about it on the train, I
sat down, and it worked out. I happened to just write it, while in between going up
and down to get my laundry and eating, in one sitting pretty much. But you know
the piece on [the chancellor] is taking me months and months and months. And
it’s not very good.

And then, like the same thing with math. You do a math problem, or like
you’re working on it. And you don’t get it. Like I play Set on the computer. I have
a system now so it’s not that hard. But like when I first started, you’re looking for
that sixth set and you can’t find it. And you look and look and look and look. And
then you get up. You go to the bathroom. You get you drink of water. And then
you come back and you go, “Oh there it is!”

It’s like, school doesn’t work that way. And it’s like, nope, do your own
demand now. Okay. You know, here’s our deadline. By this point we’ll be done
with our drafts. Now we’re revising. Now we’re pure editing. Whatever we’re
doing. And we’re publishing on this day. And I get in the real world that real writers do have publishing deadlines, but they still do get to work more at their own pace and in their own way than our kids do.

Belle began by thinking about herself as a student, faced with 45-minute blocks to divide her work and how that did not work for her because “brains don’t work that way.” Then, she shifted into considering herself as a writer, narrating her stream-of-consciousness writing process by saying, “I happened to just write it,” indicating that her writing did not come in a predesignated block. As she continued, she moved from her role as writer to a more common role for her, one as a mathematician. She began as a math coach, thinking about what “you”—an implied student—might do, but transitioned into an example of herself as a mathematician and her process for working through a problem, needing to get up and walk away and then come back to it. She concluded by tying her personal example and her math example back to writing pedagogy. She named out the linear steps of the writing process, and considered the messier, freer process of “real writers” (and, implicitly, herself) in comparison to the structured process enforced for students. It was evident here that Belle moved across these different identity positions quickly and automatically, and that the initial experience of reflecting on her own writing process led her to new thoughts and considerations for the enactment of writing pedagogy.

In moving through her different identity positions with elasticity within this one narrative turn, Belle drew on her own experiences as a writer and organically extrapolated implications for students across curricular areas. She was able to take the perspective of students, teachers, and “real writers” to reflect on teaching structures and practices, push back upon taken-for-granted norms, and question how teaching might be otherwise. In another group meeting, Luis also connected the writing work of the group
to his math classroom and Belle shifted to yet another identity: that of coach, planning professional learning experiences for the school’s staff.

Luis: I really love this. It’s really been a wonderful experience. As I was sitting, watching, I had this moment. I was like, “This is such a cool... “I wish I would do more workshopping like this. Then I was like, I wish kids really, like, understood the importance of having a workshop...you know.

Valerie: Being able to talk about the writing process.

Amy: Well, I think it’s about giving them opportunities to do that work, right?

Belle: But then maybe we should commit for next year to getting together and maybe for X amount of time it’s around writing, and maybe X amount of time it’s about whether it’s a book club or reading. And whoever wants to join us can join us. And maybe we can do some fun math. I think, that’s what I see Professional Monday learning times should be about. Not that we’re.... Like it should be connected to what we’re doing, the content and the pedagogy, but it should also be something that we’re getting some enjoyment or pleasure or something out of.

Luis began, similarly to Belle in the previous transcript, exhibiting emotion around the experience of sharing his writing and having others share their writing with him. Also like Belle, he quickly moved to making a connection to the classroom and thinking through the implications of his own experiences for students. Valerie and I followed up on his comment and agreed, while Belle brought the focus back to our own professional learning. She brought together both Joe’s concept of “thinkers/learners” and the emotional impact of our writing group, engaging in professional work we enjoyed and felt proud of. She named these two elements together as a new belief about how teacher learning can be positioned: “That’s what I see Professional Monday learning times should be about.”

Through these excerpts, it was evident that working through the writing process had implications that were not limited to writing instruction. While the connections and
implications for teaching writing were certainly plentiful, they were only the beginning. The teacher-writers in our group drew on their/our writing experiences to explore their/our own identities as writers, social relationships, cross-curricular practices, and professional learning communities. We were, at different times or even simultaneously, learners, writers, readers, mathematicians, teachers, students, parents, coaches, partners, and friends. It was, to borrow Joe’s terminology, not just about writing; it was about everything. The elasticity of these teacher-writers’ positions, as they moved in, across, and through them, tested the boundaries of what it meant to be “real.”

Conclusion

It is clear that spaces for teachers to carve out agency in times when the loss of professional control and increased pressure to teach to standardized curricula characterize the profession. The space to collaborate in a way that is simultaneously free from surveillance and valued by administration is productive for both teacher learning and their social and emotional lives. It is essential, however, to create space that all teachers have access to, and that they have the autonomy to co-construct it according to their interest and perceived needs. For example, classroom teachers such as Kathy and Tara would have the latitude to craft their mentor pieces for the classroom with support but without surveillance. Others, like Luis, Belle, and Valerie, can take up the writing projects of their choice. Yet, everyone could be in conversation with one another, engaged not only as learners and thinkers but connecting as colleagues. An emotional connection in a professional learning space allows for creativity, spontaneity, and the passions often at the heart of teacher commitment and desire. Teachers must negotiate the
explicit mandates of external control as well as the practices and performances that “count” more in their given context, alongside their lived experiences of individual values and emotions. An empathy for this work is critical in constructing a conception of teacher learning. It is necessary to push back on common perceptions of the work of teaching in an audit culture (Apple, 2004) and allow the “unofficial” emotional, relational world of teachers to integrate with the “official” cognitive, managerial world of teacher learning. Rather than trying to tame or contain teachers’ emotions, conceptions of and spaces for teacher learning can affirm and channel them, challenging and reinventing teacher development.
Chapter VI

WHAT WE DO AS OURSELVES IS WHAT WE PROVIDE OUR KIDS

I’m gonna say one more thing. When we sit together as teachers, whether or not you’re sitting with your grade groups, it’s always the conversation with… around what students are doing in their writing. ‘Cause we don’t see ourselves as being writers. Right?

And so when we sat together, our whole conversation was about us as writers. And that never was a questionable thing. It was just what we do as writers. When we sit with our grade teams, whether they’re combined or separate, ‘cause I think about my vertical team, that was K-5 and then some clusters…they always geared the conversation towards students. It was never about themselves as writers. And I think that’s just something that happens naturally because as teachers, we don’t see anything more than what we need to provide for kids, and oftentimes we don’t realize that what we do as ourselves, or as educators, is what we provide our kids. The knowledge base, right? The ability to understand what struggles they’re going through.

Something in this writing group where it was just like, “Let’s sit down and go through that uncomfortable moment where we think about what writing is about, and where we want to go with it,” is something that is worth bringing to the table with teachers so that…see where they go with it. See where they’re capable of, what they can accomplish. No sort of feeling that someone’s gonna be judging you or anything like that. It’s just to go through the motions because then you can feel and notice all the things that kids go through. Just in the process.

So it’s worth it. But then again, people would have to invest time outside of the classroom to be a part of that. And then that’s where we’re stumped again because who does that?

In her final interview, Valerie captured the work of our writing group and its implications—both for the professional development of teachers and for the classroom practice of students. She acknowledged the uncomfortable nature of engaging in writing
and sharing it with colleagues. Then, she pointed out that the discomfort of being in the process is worthwhile as an opportunity for teachers to see what they are capable of, what they can accomplish. She highlighted the value of creating a space free from judgment for teachers to immerse themselves in the work and see where it leads them. Yet, she also connected the power of engaging in the process as it connects to students. In writing for themselves, teachers bring that writing and that writerly identity to their classrooms and to their students: “What we do as ourselves, as educators, *is* what we provide our kids.” Valerie echoed Ruth Vinz’s (1996) argument that teachers “teach profoundly what we are, what we know, what we value, and what we believe” (p. 185); if the work of writing shifts, adds to, or rewrites their identities, knowledge, values, and beliefs, these materials also shift, add to, or rewrite their teaching. Ultimately, the writing group of the present study led me, alongside Valerie, to consider these two important domains: the ways in which writing for themselves can empower and sustain teacher-writers, and the ways in which it can also positively affect the writing lives of student-writers. Finally, Valerie challenged me to consider at the end of this excerpt from our final interview the questions: Who does this work? Who is given permission or access to it? Who is supported in it? If the answer is that not enough teachers are given the time and tools to do so, how might it be otherwise?

**Discussion**

Just as we storied and re-storied our identities as writers throughout the course of our time together, it is possible to re-story the identity of the group, as well. The way that I have constructed the narrative of this study – what I selected for analysis and what I chose not to analyze, or how I chose to interpret the data and represent it in writing – is
only one version of the story. Each member of the group has another version (or several versions) of their own; the group was likely a different kind of group for different members (and non-members). While, as I have previously stated, I tried to remain aware of the power circulating in and around the group and to attend to my own role(s) within it, it is necessary to acknowledge that there are ways in which I was not fully conscious of the ways that power worked and that the discourses of this context worked to constrain me/us.

In the specific context of P.S. 999, which was so steeped in audit culture and where there were so many intrusions on the work of teachers, there are ways in which the group itself was a part of those intrusions. Despite my intentions to disrupt the professional development practices of the school and the working processes of the group, my role as a staff developer in the building was never fully absent from the way in which the group was situated in the context of the school. Membership in the group, in a way, became a reification of roles individuals already held in the hierarchy of the school. The discourses that were available to teachers at P.S. 999 served to constrain the ways that they could narrate or position themselves in ways that I am likely not even aware of. While I have presented the experiences of both those teacher-writers who were able to access the group spaces and those who were unable to, I have only a partial insight into the experiences and identities of these individuals. There is a great deal that I might not have attended to, and it is not my aim to romanticize the group or to present a victory narrative of our time together.

Therefore, it is important for me to acknowledge that ultimately, the writing group was not fully what I wanted it to be for some of the participants. I was unable to craft the
space that I set out to for all of the teacher-writers. Tara and Kathy, in particular, exhibit the contested trajectory of the group. Bakhtin sees conflict as the basis of language, and this is clear in the ways that my language about the purpose and work of the group conveyed multiple meanings to different individuals about what was and was not valued or “allowed.” While I saw the work of the group as open, and attempted to invite in the kind of collaborative work they took up in other spaces or the work of crafting demonstration texts for the classroom, the space of the group was still viewed as separate from their own teaching work. There were Discourses at work that still reinforced an ideal type of writing (personally meaningful projects, often personal narratives or memoirs) and an ideal process. The sense of “community” that I felt within the group, then, is actually a contested terrain. While I viewed the group as an open space and viewed my own actions as fostering projects and processes that teacher-writers could shape however they wanted, it is clear that there are unresolved tensions and multiplicities that complicate my own experience of this “collaboration.” Kathy and Tara’s articulation of their envy of the teacher-writers who participated throughout the writing group and Luis’s co-workers’ positioning of “real” teachers in juxtaposition to themselves offer just a glimpse into the ways in which issues of power complicated the very notion of a “community” or “collaboration” within or across it. While my version of the group is represented here, the group itself was a polyphonic project, a “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices…a plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 6).
And while I consciously tried to pull back from directing the work of the group or imposing an ideal kind of writing (going so far as to bring in my own digital products to offer alternatives), I must acknowledge that it is possible that my previous training and the Discourses working on me caused me to, at times, ventriloquate the language of the writing curriculum or of my staff development role. This likely served to shape the expectations of the participants and whether or not they could find spaces for themselves within the group. The unconscious power of normalizing Discourses, ventriloquated by me (and likely by others throughout the school context, including within the group) worked to define what writing was within the group. In the end, we worked through a process that in many ways mirrored a writing workshop process and produced individual products that represented our personal experiences. While the differences in our process that I highlighted previously remain important to acknowledge and advocate for, those differences were ultimately not as immense as I had assumed they might be at the outset of this study. The ghosts of what we “should” be doing within a writing workshop space still haunted us.

Though I was often concerned about my own role within the group and tried to avoid imposing my ideas of working structures or the content of writing projects, upon reflection I realize that it is possible that my choice to sit back may have been what allowed the group to proceed in much the same manner as other writing workshop spaces. I am left to wonder, then, what would have happened if I had intervened more often? More forcefully? What if I had tried in more dramatic ways to de-school our meetings? If I had, for example, proposed writing a collaborative writing piece for which we all shared the authorship, how would our working process have changed? If I had
suggested that everyone try out a form of multimodal composing, could digital storytelling, graphic novels, or enacted skits have made their way into the group? If I had chosen to write demonstration texts alongside Tara and Kathy, or changed the meetings time of our group, or even offered to meet with them as a second group, could they have found their own spaces within the project? If we met at a coffee shop on a Saturday morning, would more people, identities, projects, and formats have found their way into being? Or would the unconscious power of normalizing discourses have overcome those interventions, as well?

For, while Bakhtin (1984b) highlighted carnival as an opportunity for playfulness and profanation, it is also important to remember that carnival was also a form of social control. While the established social order and official ideology was lifted in carnival, this was a temporary reprieve, one that served to keep the people happy – and under control. Profanation targeted the system of practices that oppress the people; yet, once carnival was over, these systems remained in place. In a similar way, our writing group offered a space of playfulness, or, at times, even profanation. Yet, the group remained situated in a context overwhelmed by the audit culture; its Discourses circulated and normalized particular practices and identities. We were able to laugh at ideas and practices that were supposed to be universal; in this way, carnival offers another way to see the normalizing power of Discourses.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, 2009) advocated for inquiry communities as a direction forward in advancing teacher learning grounded in inquiry-as-stance and knowledge-of-practice. Practitioner inquiry requires sufficient time and duration, discourse of rich, descriptive talk and writing, and a sense of purpose to make
consequential change. All of the work of an inquiry community is ultimately in service of a broader aim: “enhancing educators’ sense of social responsibility and social action in the service of a democratic society” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 58). Through explicit or implicit links to larger movements of social justice and change, practitioner inquiry works toward an equity agenda through a deep commitment to students’ learning, broadly defined. Our writing group was ultimately not able to completely disrupt the “schooled” nature of our inquiry. However, through the critical lens of carnival, we might be able to begin to see the “webs of social historical, cultural, and political significance” our inquiry is situated within and the normalizing power they exert (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 120).

**Implications**

This study has several implications that may inform both literacy research and literacy practice. More specifically, it has shed light not only on the writing process itself, but also on the ways in which teacher-writers experience that process. This may help literacy researchers and practitioners (re)conceptualize teacher learning and professional development in addition to writing process pedagogy as enacted in classrooms with students. However, as the data discussed in the previous chapters indicated, the value of this work lies not only in what it revealed about the “development” of specific “writing skills.” There are also implications here to consider about teachers’ emotional health and well-being as well. As Dawson (2017) described, we “write to have fun, to interact with each other, and to explore. We write to experience our lives in different ways, to work through ideas, and to play with language. We often are laughing as we talk together, and
there is, indeed, something healthy about that” (p. 5). Below, I discuss the implications this study has for practice, professional development, and research.

**Implications for Practice**

**Implications for classroom practice.** A primary finding of this study was that teachers consider their identities as writers and their writing process against that of an idealized writer. This idealized—albeit fictional—writer shapes and constrains teachers’ self-conceptions because the realities of their writing lives do not live up to the internalized ideal they encounter in discourses of teacher effectiveness and curriculum. Moreover, as Newkirk (2017) argued, “There is, after all, no gain to imposing standards that inhibit the act of writing—or that make us feel ashamed about what we are producing” (p. 140). Consequently, one implication of this study is that it is necessary to “rewrite” the writing process for teachers and in classrooms, building on what has come before and extending it to include the writing processes of more teachers and students. By working within and against writing process pedagogy, we can disrupt what writing is “supposed to be” and widen the range of available identities for both teachers and students.

In an idealized writing community, for example, each writer takes the “right” steps of “professional” writers to achieve a desired outcome. In a rewritten writing community, however, writers can engage in flexible steps that they find personally meaningful and effective. In an idealized writing community, writing is a predominantly pen-and-paper process that privileges the writer’s notebook. In a rewritten writing community, as Luis made clear with his iPad, we build identity kits across both digital and physical spaces, using digital and physical materials to craft texts and identities. In an
idealized writing group, writing is an individual pursuit. Ideas are generated and work is done alone, allowing sole authorship of a product. In a rewritten writing community, as in our writing group, stories are written with, by, and in community, as Belle made clear when she was not even sure who came up with the idea for her laundry anxiety essay. Writing is a collective activity done in conversation with co-authors and audiences. Finally, an idealized writing community privileges the mind and a rational, cognitive process proceeding in a predictable, linear progression that is replicable across pieces. In a rewritten writing community, on the other hand, emotion is a component of the process, incorporating a spontaneity that cannot be controlled for or replicated.

Enacting this rewritten writing process may help both teachers and students to (re)conceptualize what constitutes “good” writing pedagogy in classrooms. Rather than teachers who feel the need to perform a particular idealized writerly identity that does not feel authentic, teachers might be able to share their individual writing process in a way that opens up additional options to students. If we acknowledge that, as this study found, binary writing identities are just the beginning for teachers, we must reshape our corresponding understandings of who writers are and what they do. This entails problematizing the model of teacher as “idealized writer” and embracing the more complicated experiences of teacher-writers, then giving teachers space to bring these messy realities into classrooms and share them with their students. Johnston (2004) articulated the impact teachers’ stories and conversations with students can have in helping children build bridges between action and consequence and developing a sense of agency.

To solve the many problems I will encounter as a writer, and to persist through the many revisions I will face, I have to weave myself into a narrative in which I
am the kind of person who encounters and solves problems with text. I develop this belief through a history of conversation with others around my writing. (p. 30)

If teachers are able to share their nuanced writing identities and their whole writing process with their students, they open up new conversations and allow students to write new narratives for themselves. When teachers share difficulties, missteps, and deviations, or share examples of collaborative composing practices or the emotional aspects of their process, these potentials become possible for students as well. It also repositions teachers as members of the classroom writing community, not merely the facilitators or directors of it. In her seminal text *Rewriting the Basics: Literacy Learning in Children’s Cultures*, Anne Haas Dyson (2013) discussed the importance of giving students writing opportunities “with scope.” She argued that the “more restrictive the curriculum, the more opportunities children have to fail to conform” (p. 176). In contrast, writing events “with scope” allow participation in different ways with different resources. Rather than the discouragement that comes from not living up to the ideal, both teachers and students can find spaces for themselves and define for themselves what “successful” or “effective” writers are and do.

**Implications for professional learning and development.** As Dyson argued for students to engage in writing events “with scope,” I argue that it is important for teachers to engage in both writing events and professional development events “with scope.” Specifically, opportunities for choice and agency over their learning and professional lives will allow teachers to participate in different ways and with different resources as they inquire into their practice in ways that are meaningful to them. The role of emotion in teacher learning and the power of harnessing social connection and community were significant findings within this study. Thus, one implication that follows is restructuring
professional development experiences for teachers to consider the emotional dimensions of teaching, foster community, and value the work teachers can produce together when given an opportunity to engage as learners. Professional development can give teachers the authority to see their practice and themselves as perpetually changeable and enable teachers’ decision making about and participation in their own learning as an inherent part of their professional lives. This allows teachers to work with those they trust, to work as a team rather than proving individual competence, and to attend to feelings of discomfort and awkward initial attempts as teachers take on new work. Newkirk (2017) argued that any act of learning requires us to suspend our natural tendency to want to appear fully competent and that vulnerability “is the irreducible, unavoidable condition for learning” (p. 10). Emotion, then, will be present in any professional learning situation, and professional development must plan for that work.

First and foremost, I argue for teachers to be given protected time to engage in the writing process alongside their colleagues. Teachers have been given the message that they should write alongside their students and model the writing process and a writing identity in their classrooms. However, the message is often sent without teachers having the experiences to allow them to enact this authentically.

Protected time is essential to ensure that writing communities are able to meet. As evidenced by this study, negotiations around time are complicated and fraught between teachers and administrators; without a designated, consistent, and agreed-upon time for professional learning to happen, regular attendance is simply not possible. In addition, the group needs to disrupt a one-and-done model of professional development, meeting over a longer period of time so that teacher-writers are able to learn and revise in a messy,
non-linear process. As evidenced in our group, topics and projects took time to generate and revise, and group members found their voices across the meetings in different ways. It was also clear from this study that teacher agency in being able to choose to be a part of the group was important. The group members who remained with the group for the duration of the study were those who chose to be a part of it; attrition stemmed from those who were volunteered by administration. A low-stakes environment, one in which approximation and awkwardness are expected or even encouraged, and where evaluation and competition are absent, is also essential to the culture of the group. This study also made an argument for the invitation to the writing group to be extended to all members of the school community, not only those who explicitly teach writing. Our group was able to make cross-disciplinary connections that were powerful for both our writing and our teaching. By inviting in teachers from other disciplines, or even school staff such as custodians and nurses and specialists, not only is the writing community for adults expanded, but the opportunity is made available for students to see more writing practices and processes and view more of the adults in their community as writers.

Once teachers had the time and opportunity to meet together, this study found the value of engaging in the work of writing—talk, oral storytelling, planning, drafting, revising, offering feedback—for themselves before writing for their classrooms. Writing groups provide opportunities for collaborative inquiry, using writing to explore teaching and cultivating reflection. In our group conversations, we wrote in ways that helped us better understand what we teach, and we talked in ways that gave rise to practices to enact in the future. Teaching points for the classroom, ideas for how a lesson might be structured or how productive classroom conditions might be fostered, emerged
organically as we worked as writers. Connections to our teaching emerged from our process as writers, not as teachers. As writers, we sought out resources like memes and tweets from others who had similar writing experiences, digital and physical composing tools, or conversations with one another and thought about crafting our own pieces in new ways. We expanded the repertoire of materials, experiences, and responses we could bring to students. How we engaged in writing became the starting point, so that our process could transfer into the classroom and students could see personal writing practices and our lives as writers.

These organically emerging teaching points, then, were not just academic understandings about content and craft, or the techniques used to achieve writerly goals within our pieces (though these were certainly a part of work). There was also a significant emotional component to this work, and the ways in which teacher-writers’ emotional experiences led to consideration of the students’ emotional experiences. As teacher-writers learn to take risks and make themselves vulnerable, the way they see their students’ writing can change. They may begin to develop empathy for risk-taking and vulnerability in their classrooms and begin to consider the ways in which they can support their students’ emotional lives as writers. As Kittle (2017) highlighted, writing “allows us to be broken or angry or despairing as well as giddy and grateful and simply astonished by the beauty of this world and our small portion of it” (p. 43). Bringing these emotions to collaborative colleague relationships can fundamentally change them, and sharing the process with others in a low-stakes community can make writing less scary and less binary. For example, Luis was able to make visible the anxieties beneath the enthusiasm, while Belle was able to find a sense of success amid her self-doubt.
Professional development experiences of engaging in writing can do this for teachers: make writing less scary and less serious and less about judgment, and more about discovery and connection and confidence. “Teachers are, first, mentors of passion—of why anyone would spend time reading and writing when you don’t have to,” Kittle argued (p. 43). Engaging in the writing, experiencing the difficulties and the rewards, I argue, are necessary to figure out why and how one writes—and then to communicate all that to students.

In addition, discussion and collaborative construction of the working process of the group fosters an elasticity of roles and authority. Establishing shared ownership of professional learning, where teacher-writers share the power to shape their work rather than being assigned to and dictated for them, creates a space where the hierarchy of the broader school culture can be disrupted. This elasticity is fostered by the social connection of individuals as stories are shared and relationships become grounded in multiple identities. No longer able to view one another solely as colleagues, trust and risk-taking can increase only if a sense of community is built—or, as Belle put it, we are made to “care more.” Connecting across multiple identity positions, as we did within our writing group, allowed us to story and re-story our identities in fluid ways throughout our work together. The social practices of the group, and the ability of each member to take control of the work of the group at different times, indicate the potential for teacher-writers to capitalize on this autonomy and claim a sense of authority in shaping what we know about writing instruction. Rather than being consumers or recipients of knowledge, teacher-writers have the potential power to become creators of it.
Implications for teacher preparation. Many of the implications for professional development of in-service teachers also apply to preservice teachers. As discussed in Chapter I, many preservice courses and experiences fold writing under the umbrella of literacy, which heavily emphasizes reading. It is essential that preservice teachers participate in courses that focus specifically on writing, and that those courses offer opportunities for students to learn about writing pedagogy in addition to engaging in their own writing. Engaging in writing can help novice teacher-writers develop insights and opportunities that, without engaging in their own writing, would be unavailable to them. This provides material for their teaching and writing identities, material they can use as examples to illustrate concepts and strategies to students. Engaging in and learning from their writing processes can also help preservice teacher-writers clarify their instructional goals as well as interrogate their assumptions about writing and learning to write. Participation in the (re)written writing process may juxtapose its practices with that of the “idealized” writing community, allowing the latter’s practices to be questioned or challenged. Experiencing the carnivalesque qualities for themselves may develop an understanding of the ways in which students might engage playfully with writing in classrooms. Preservice teacher-writers learning their own process will help them to demonstrate that process and guide students to finding their own. As preservice teacher-writers inquire into how writing works, they have the potential to call into questions static assumptions about what writing is for and what the practices of writers are, possibly expanding conceptions of the kinds of writing identities that are valued in school.

Preservice teacher-writers should also have the opportunity to develop writing communities, ones that attend to both academic and emotional elements of writing. The
social setting of a writing group can foster conversations that help preservice teacher-writers articulate their instructional goals to one another and explore the most useful ways to respond to writing. Writing, collaborating, and connecting together may provide a professional support network as well. Sharing stories and teaching experiences in such a setting may also support novice teacher-writers in a way that makes no only their conception of writing more collaborative, but their conception of the teaching profession as well.

“Limitations” and dissonances. By implementing a qualitative case study, in which I participated alongside teacher-writers within the writing group, conducted interviews, and gathered documents such as their writing and emails, it is inevitable that my own positionality and lenses influenced the data. As mentioned previously, this study was conducted in a school in which I had previously established relationships through my staff development work, and there was no way to separate that history, positioning, and power dynamic from the current work. My identity as a staff developer, a teacher, and a researcher influenced the data and my interpretation of those data. This is a site of dissonance because, though I was aware of these aspects of my identity and actively worked to disrupt them within the group, I was also aware that I was never able to escape these identities and their power dynamics entirely (nor can any study escape power relations, even if I were not a participant). This meant that I was not able to follow teachers into the classroom to explore the ways the work of the group may or may not have entered their practice; my role as a staff developer in the building positioned me in such a way that my presence in classrooms could be perceived as evaluative, or reifying particular performances of curriculum. I did, however, try to attend to the power
circulating within the group and the ways in which roles and agenda setting were taken up, both by myself and others, as I analyzed the data. I considered myself an active participant in the study and sought to interrogate my own role within it.

It is also important to note that I studied one writing group at one school site. While this was inherent in the case study design of this project, this study was about specific teachers at a specific school and the findings are centered on a particular phenomenon—specifically, the way teachers discuss and enact their identities as writers. It informed the way we understand how teachers narrate their own writing process and engage in collaborative learning. The cases of these three participants, as well as the three participants who withdrew from the group, illustrate how teachers write and understand their writing identities through detailed description of their stories and their interactions. The benefit of focusing my study on one writing group at one school site was that I was able to develop a deeper understanding of the individuals, the group’s work together, and the school context by spending a significant amount of time in conversation with group members across a 6-month period. I was able to cultivate relationships with each participant, establishing trust and connection, through ongoing formal and informal conversations.

However, a possible limitation to this study was that the participants who currently serve as classroom writing teachers did not remain in the group for the duration of the study. While there was much to be learned from this, as discussed in Chapter V, and much to be learned from the participants who did remain with the group, as discussed in Chapter IV and Chapter V, the initial aim of this work was to learn more about teachers of writing in order to ultimately affect the practice of teachers of writing.
Attrition of the classroom writing teachers limited the information this study was able to gather on their experience of the full writing process, as well as the possibility for this experience to transfer directly into writing pedagogy in the classroom.

**Implications for Research**

This study addressed the ways in which teachers narrate and enact their writing identities. It can help us to reconsider the ways in which we research the teaching of writing and teachers of writing, seeking not to categorize but to understand their lived experiences. As discussed at the outset of this dissertation, this study fills a gap in the literature in terms of attention to teachers as writers, particularly for those teachers whose curriculum privileges their writing identities as essential to successful curricular enactment. However, this study attended to teachers as writers not only to consider the implications for teacher practice, but also as a site of practice to learn about teacher learning and literacies, and how these may shape teachers’ roles in the classroom.

**Future research.** A next step in advancing our understanding of teacher-writers should be a larger longitudinal study of teacher-writers, considering a larger number of participants across a longer period of time. Specifically, a future study could offer additional consideration of the role digital space and social media play in shaping teachers’ literate identities and provide materials for teachers’ conceptions of classroom spaces and literacy teaching and learning. Such studies could explore, on one hand, the ways that social media and digital spaces shape and constrain teachers’ understandings of “good teaching” or “good writing” and, on the other hand, how they provide opportunities for teachers as writers and constructors of knowledge to share what they know with an audience outside of their classroom. Tweets, blogs, and podcasts, along
with an ever-evolving landscape of digital and social media tools, allow teachers to share their experiences and beliefs in new ways, to find a sense of community and shared purpose with others engaged in the same work across distances. Future research should attend to this rich and complicated aspect of teaching lives, both for in-service and preservice teachers.

Additionally, a study that takes on the next step of bringing the writing that teacher-writers produce within the writing group into their classrooms would be able to consider the implications of this work for writing process pedagogy in more explicit ways. The present study only began to scratch the surface of understanding how teacher-writers’ experiences in a writing group impact pedagogy and the writing lives of students in classrooms. Future work could focus on the personal writing practices teachers bring to their classrooms, considering both the academic benefits as students learn writing craft and the social-emotional benefits as teachers open up and take risks alongside their students, acknowledging the emotional components of writing. Future studies could explore studying the “rewritten” writing process as it is enacted with student writers in classrooms. Disrupting the linear, cognitive model often presented in classrooms would provide opportunities for students to work in more flexible and collaborative ways. Additionally, research could explore how teachers work creatively with curricular materials, in and against writing process pedagogy, to enact writing instruction that more authentically aligns with their own writing process and writing identity. Studies that explore these conditions in classrooms would allow us to see the implications that a broader conception of who writers are and what they do can have for students, as well as teachers, when put into practice.
EPILOGUE

Throughout this dissertation, I have discussed the writing process and writing identities of teacher-writers. It is fitting, then, to leave you with the writing that the group members created in and through our collaboration. In Appendix A, each group member’s work is presented in the font and style that he or she selected.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Group Member Writing

Flavor of the Party
Valerie

The sounds of tambores and roaring laughter poured out the windows and through the door with every arrival announcing to the neighborhood- it’s party time.

Well past the average dinner time, the smell of home roasted lechona, arepa, bunelos, and natilla brewed through the air of my grandmothers two story party haven. It was a well-known fact at these parties that no one could touch any of the food until Tio Luis made his announcement, “Familia, this year I have worked extra hard to ensure that we can say goodbye to the year before us and welcome the year in front of us with full and satisfied bellies.” This was his welcoming toast for all to dig in. Funny thing was, he never had anything to do with the preparation or cost of any of the food! Lucky we loved him nonetheless.

Lechona is the staple dish in any Colombian family party. Something about the combination of roasted pork mixed with vegetables and rice stuffed into a baby pig and roasted for hours upon hours was just the right balance for a party like ours.

Let’s not forget the sancocho for the hangovers. Oh, yes! This is the most important recipe for curing someone in a drunken state-usually my uncles and cousins, who for this one night pretended to be all grown up, drank to their heart’s content and were the first on line to get a bowl of hot steaming hangover cure.

There’s nothing like my grandmother’s cooking. She’d spend 24 hours, leading to the party, preparing all the food; tasting every step of the way for just the right mix. My aunts did the prep work, chopping, washing, and blending away. Some might think it gross, but a quick dip and lick of the finger was the perfect taste tester. My grandmother would say, “A happy belly makes for a good party.” and she was spot on- after everyone ate the party got even better.

Of course we had to build up an appetite for the feast. Tia Maria, the life of the party, prided herself in making sure everyone made their party-goer contributions. She, slyly, moved around the room pulling people out of their seats and away from their conversations to dance with her in a sort of conga style fashion. Even the shyest of all couldn’t resist her tempting tug! After she got everyone up and dancing, she’d disappear. Rumor had it that she snuck away to get first dibs at a hot plate but it was never confirmed.
I usually got away with being pulled into the mix by assisting my cousin Marlon with shots. Here’s where the real fun happened. Marlon wore a cowboy hat and a whistle around his neck. He carried a leather alcohol bota (native Colombian liquor boot) and shot glass. I carried the lime and salt for those with the acquired taste for bitterness or to flush the taste of strong licorice. With every shot came a strong blow of a whistle, some people clapped, others yelled, “Feliz Ano!” The shot taker, victim to the cowboys’ urgency, courageously swallowed without puking- most of the time. I remember trying it once, I was 12. I hid behind the grandfather clock with my cousin Melissa. We counted to 3, closed our eyes and gulped the shot of fire! That night, we threw up while running up and down the stairs like maniacs. No one even noticed. It must be years of experience that helps one build the tolerance for these shots. My family drinks them like water. No wonder the sancocho is gone by the end of the night or should I say by dawn.

I always wondered what an outsider would think of our family parties. These loud, late night Spanish people with their smelly roast pork and occasional brawls. No one ever came to complain—maybe because they did the same thing—just West Indian style.

In the corner of the living room stood a wooden bench, reserved for my uncle Cesar. He brought music to life with his instruments. The oddest of all was the raspero. Picture a comb running through sand paper- alone- a screeching sound, but combined with the beat of the tambore and pounding mini-drums- salsa came alive. He always wore a straw and lured his brothers into the mix with a tug of the elbow. They looked like true performers. This was the pivotal moment of the night, the moment when the rhythm of the instruments rushed through everyone’s bodies calling them to the dance floor. It was with every, in sync, step that moved us all to salsa. Everyone danced, no exceptions. Kids plopped onto their parents’ feet to learn the rhythm as their parents danced. Hours seemed like minutes. We sang along with the tunes of home, of comfort, of all we know to be true in the lives of our parents. The steps flowed like drops of rain in synchrony, spoke our culture, and released our inhibitions. Time stopped long enough for all to be worry free, love each other, and enjoy good company and food.

The flavor the party was a combination of my grandmother’s cooking, my aunts coaxing all to dance, my cousin coercing all to drink, and my uncle making the music come to life. Its been years since we’ve had one of these parties. Time and circumstance have taken their toll on our family. Our party haven echoes the sounds and smells of the good ol’ days. My grandmother used to say, “Nothing in life is guaranteed, but unity, coming together, is what gives us the drive to keep moving forward.” She was one wise woman, my grandmother.

Those words reside in each of us, the new generation of party flavors and we will do it justice.

Que viva la salsa!
Traveling with Misconceptions

Luis

Amsterdam wasn’t my first choice for our yearly summer vacation. Had I been given the sole responsibility of choosing, I would have preferred to go back to Berlin or cruise through the Swedish Archipelago. However, I’ve learned that compromise is an important key to any successful relationship, which isn’t really a quality exhibited by most only children.

My image of Amsterdam was formed mainly through its’ numerous stereotypes. When mentioning the word “Amsterdam” to people, most typically have the same image in their head: A pot-smelling, sex-positive hedonistic pansexual playground.

I pictured women popping out of windows and doorways luring men into a lair like a spider coaxing its’ unsuspecting prey into a web.

I also imagined streets lined with hazy coffee shops full of hippies. The last remnants of Grateful Dead fans.

I envisioned gaggles of backpackers drawn to the city like sailors drawn to the distant sound of sirens. 20-year-olds college graduates on a walkabout of epic proportions. Most looking for a hostel, others a soul mate. For some, perhaps both at the same time.

After much discussion, my partner and I decided to dedicate a few days of our annual European vacation to Amsterdam. The plan: 4 days. Just enough time to say that we’d been there and done that. Some souvenirs in tow. Then, vaarwel! On to our next destination.

Our first few critical moments in Amsterdam were met with apprehension. The directions from our AirBnB Host involved traveling a more scenic route to our rental property.

My brain immediately started to overthink with all of my preconceived notions. *Why are we going a different route than what I had originally planned? Why would he want us to avoid the central station? Druggies? Prostitutes? Tourist trap?* One terrible thought after the other. My anxiety level kicked into overdrive. I wanted these next few days to zoom by quickly. A mere footnote in our travels.

We approached the city center as the city was waking up for the day. People slowly trickled out of their apartments preparing for the usual workday routine. My first thoughts: *typical European city.* Very similar to some of our previous destinations. Nothing sketchy or out of the ordinary, just yet.
As we approached our tram stop, I prepared myself for a barrage of bare women. Instead, we were greeted with quaint Row Houses. Rows upon rows of skinny houses lined along cozy little canals. The houses looking like they had spent the past few years deciding they needed to go on a collective diet. Their slim appearance... the result of old city law that taxed people by on a house’s width. A few bending over ever so slightly, greeting us into their city.

The canals themselves were very enchanting. Glistening lanes of water intersected by small footbridges. A few small boats cruising down it. A Dutch flag attached to the back. Picturesque. At that moment, a small leak in the dike of my expectations of Amsterdam.

Instead of a plague of backpackers searching for a high, we were greeted by a hoard of bicycles. They began to join our commute into the city. Some stopped on a street corner waiting for the light to change. Others traveled along their own designated bike paths. No honking. No complaints. Just bicycles serving their purpose and being treated equally with their motorized brethren. A sight rarely seen in most U.S. cities.

My expectation of a backpacker infestation was replaced with a cyclists’ heaven. Numerous bicycles zoomed alongside the tram. Some bikes were saddled down with bags or baskets allowing the Dutch to carry all their personal belongs, groceries, or bouquets of flowers with them. A few bikes had huge baskets in the front meant to carry a parent’s most precious belonging. Their children. The leak in the dike became a stream.

As we entered our rental home for the stay, we encountered the steepest flight of stairs imaginable. Winded, we expected a squatters den or low-scale hostel. Instead, a painter’s loft. A balcony overlooking the canals of Jordaan, which used to be considered the working-class neighborhood in Amsterdam. But as in most modern cities, its’ been transformed into one of the upscale locations in the city. Home to Anne Frank’s house and resting place of Amsterdam’s most famous son, Rembrandt.

Instead of coffee shops on every corner, we were greeted with small cafes, antique stores, and cheese shops. The Dutch do love their cheese! Over the footbridges waited the De Negen Straatjes (Dutch for “the nine little streets”). Each of the nine little streets named after a type of work that was carried out over the centuries. Towering over the rest of the Jordaan with a watchful eye, the ornately decorated spiral of the Westerkerk. A father watching over his children.

Every now and then, a coffee shop would pop-up. Intermixing with the typical lives of the people of Amsterdam. But they were not a sprawling nuisance enveloping the rest of the city, as one might imagine. Their frequency only increased as we approached the touristy area of Amsterdam of the Damrak, an avenue and partially
filled in canal located in the middle of Amsterdam. Next to the central station. Conveniently marked by the Madame Tussaud’s wax museum and the Dungeon of Amsterdam. It was the outlier. The black sheep. The Time Square of New York City.

And I forgot to mention the stag parties...a traveling mob of drunk Englishmen celebrating the groom’s last few days of the solo life. Boisterous men making their way to the smaller than expected Red Light District. That stream became a torrent.

Minute after minute, we began to fall in love with this city that I had avoided like the plague. With each passing day, it continued to invited us into its’ everyday life. It started to hypnotize us with its’ utter charm and coziness.

Canals, shops, food, bicycles and crooked canal houses! Big glass windows with the curtains drawn opened that allowed us to see inside the heart of what makes Amsterdam quintessentially Dutch. Gezellig. The untranslatable Dutch word that basically means “cozy”. The torrent became a flood sweeping away all misconceptions that I had about it.

Since “the flood”, I’ve been fortunate to travel back to Amsterdam three other times. Each return trip reconstructing the dike with new clay and piles. New experiences. New understandings of Dutch culture and life. Solid fortifications keeping the sea of misconceptions at bay.
I am anxiety prone, a nervous nellie, a worrywart, the kind of girl who always has butterflies in her stomach. And yes, I hear you, that is one of the pervasive laments of our culture: worry over the job, the presentation for the new client, the health of a family member. There are endless commercials for meds for anxiety disorders. So true. But my brand is rather unique. I have a huge case of LAUNDRY ANXIETY. Joking—I am not. Here’s the deal. My greatest wish is to have my own little washer/dryer in my apartment. I’d happily get rid of my refrigerator to make it fit. However, I live in a NYC coop. And, unlike condos around the rest of the country coops have crazy strict rules. And when they say no washers or dryers in the apartments you know they mean it.

So, on a weekly basis I have to trudge down to the basement laundry room to do my 2 loads of laundry. Which reminds me—I’m actually getting better. I used to have to do laundry twice a week. Not because I actually had more than I do now but just because.

Anyway, I digress. In order for you to really understand what I am up against see artist rendering of laundry room below. Full disclosure: I’d like to be able to say that artist is 6 year old neighbor. However, it’s me.

Those middle 3 washers are smaller than the others and cost more. So in my book they cannot be used. Of the other 6, one is usually out of order. That is bad enough. But now look at the dryers. The 8 up and down dryers are ineffective. By the time your laundry is dry you’ve used up a week’s pay.
And even worse, when you open them up the lint in the filter flies all over your previously clean clothing. What to do? Allow some nasty lint to remain on my unmentionables? But rewash? Cannot even go there. So, those dryers cannot be used. That leaves 3 efficient dryers. And I really do prefer to use the washers directly across from those dryers.

Did I mention that my building has 14 floors? (Really 13 but we don’t have a 13th floor.) I imagine that almost everyone has to wash their clothes at some point. And many people do not know how to behave in a laundering community. They leave their laundry in the washers for hours and then just 2 minutes before I need one of the good dryers they decide to come downstairs and fill them with their now crumbled up mess of clothes. The right way to do it is to hit the start button on the washer, look at your watch and come down exactly 42.5 minutes later. The machines set themselves for 36 minutes but unless you are new to the building you should know that that they stop at 42.5. That is what I always do. Once, I was about a minute late and someone had already started to remove my CLEAN clothes. Getting down on time is so important and stressful. (For a while there we had an elevator out. I had to start down to the laundry room 10 minutes in advance to make sure I got there on time.)

Back to the idea of a laundering community. We have a slew of laundry carts on wheels. People use them to transport their wet wash from the washer to the dryer. They also empty their dryer clean clothes into them before folding them on communal folding tables. These folks are nuts. I’ve seen people put their toddlers into those carts, dirty shoes and all and give them rides. Some people put packages into the carts. No, no. Once again, the right way to do it is carry your laundry by hand from the washer to the dryer taking care that you do not accidentally drop anything on the floor, (Need I go into what happens then?) And when everything is dry, you place your laundry basket into the cart and fold in the air. In this way your clean clothes do not get re-contaminated by other peoples yuck. There is a woman who lines the cart with dry cleaning bags. That too is an acceptable method. However, I save mine for movie theater seats-story for another time.

Laundry room crowdedness varies by day. Weekends are the worst. Mondays, nannies and housekeepers do the laundry from the weekend. For
some reason, Tuesday evenings seem to be the quietest. They have, therefore, become laundry night and that is sacred time. So, no I do not go out on laundry night! I go straight home from work and pick up my laundry basket which has been prepared in the morning (bed is stripped, detergent already measured out, purse with laundry card in the basket) and head straight downstairs. However, inevitably there are circumstances that get in the way of the above-mentioned routine. For example, I am a teacher and just the other day we had parent conferences on a Tuesday night. Panic? Not necessarily. Laundry can be done in the morning before work. I usually leave the house at 6:30. So if I start the laundry routine at 4:30 and nothing goes wrong then I am good to go and can get to work right on time. (I just may not sleep at all the night before.) That is 1 hour and 10 minutes before I actually have to be there. Fact: The laundry room is empty at 4:30 a.m.

Have I mentioned that I have a fair amount of laundry? As a teacher, nothing I wear can ever be put back in the closet. If you've ever worked (or visited) an elementary school you probably have some idea about the gross factor. Well the gross factor directly correlates to the amount of laundry that accumulates over the course of the week. (btw-I'm a math teacher.)

Now let's review all that can go wrong. My washers can be in use. My dryers can be in use. On a really bad week I can have more than 2 loads of laundry. If I am even a second late someone might touch my laundry with what are most likely dirty hands and even worse dump it into one of those befouled carts. And worst of all and what I haven't yet mentioned-the washer can break with my clothes in it. That falls under the heading of catastrophic.

By now you should have realized that my laundry anxiety is really quite warranted. And while this disorder is not an official subcategory in the DSM-5, I'm hopeful that it will gain its rightful place when the DSM-6 comes out.
I am not a pet lover. When I was little I may have wanted a kitten. I'm not sure that I realized that kittens turn into cats. And puppies are always cute to look at on T.V. and in pet store windows. Growing up we did have tropical fish for a while and a canary named Zip. He died on Passover because my dad made us feed him matzoh soaked in egg. I guess his little digestive system (like most people's) did not take well to a matzoh diet.

Anyway, sometime during my first year of teaching my principal decided that I was to have land snails in my classroom. Snails are vile creatures. But as a first-year teacher I was not about to say no. I handled it by taking responsibility for the lettuce that the snails ate and by relying on my kindergarten and first grade students to clean the tank. This, all in the days before everyone used rubber gloves and Purelled at every opportunity.

The snails, were, preferable to the other option. Hatching chicks. Chicks are cute for about 3 days and then all they do is poop and get ugly. And there is the issue of chicks who have birth defects. Back then the common wisdom was "kill 'em". The whole chick experience was not one for me in my classroom. I sent my students to the teacher next door to look at her chicks.

The teacher across the hall, Amy, suggested that we each get a Siamese Fighting Fish. That, I thought, was a good idea. So one Friday afternoon I volunteered to go to the pet store and pick up a fish for each of our classrooms. The two fish lived with me over the weekend but by Monday morning one of them was looking, as they say in Yiddish, a little shvach. So being a good friend and colleague I gave Amy the healthier of the fish and kept the sickly one for my classroom. I don't remember what we named him but he never really showed himself to be in vigorous health. One morning I walked into my classroom and found him on his side. Slightly disturbing even for me, the non-lover of critters. So back downstairs to the office I went. Mr. Willens, the theater teacher, was always in at the crack of dawn answering all the crazy early morning calls that come in to an elementary school. "Arnold" I said, "my fish is dead and I don't have the nerve to flush him on my own." We took the bowl into the boys' bathroom. Let's just
remember that I taught K and 1 and that most of the floor was filled with 5 and 6 year olds. Now imagine that bathroom. Just as we were about to pour the fish into the toilet bowl, he, like Lazarus, arose from the dead. We quickly uprighted the fish bowl. So, you’re now thinking all’s well that ends well. True. But let’s imagine for a moment that our Siamese Fighting Fish did actually land in the bowl and only then came back from the dead. That would have caused quite the dilemma. Scoop him out of an elementary school toilet bowl? Not a chance. So what would we have done? Put a sign on the door that said: Don’t Use. Live fish in toilet. (Let’s remember that not all kids that age can read.) And then go in and drop the fish food in the toilet once a week? Luckily it didn’t come to that. And our fish made it to the end of the school year.

So now we move ahead a few years. I’ve got some experience under my belt. (Enough to know that classroom pets are just not worth the grief.) The first grade team is doing some unit planning for the following year and all the other teachers on the grade want to do an animal study. Oh, no! That requires having a live animal in the classroom. I gave in. So now the big question... What animal requires the least amount of work and is not too disgusting? I wasn’t going with fish again. Kids lose interest in them pretty quickly.

Guinea pigs and hamsters seem cute. But cleaning their cages is nasty work and we pretty much abandoned them as pets in my school because the mice came out at night to eat the food in the cage.

Reptiles were in the running. Not a snake. But maybe a lizard? That seemed to work. So sometime in October off we went to Petland. All 28 first graders along with Danner’s mother who volunteered to buy our lizard and all of its accompanying paraphernalia. The kids chose a Western Fence lizard. (One of the more expensive lizards in the store.) And, Danner’s mom bought us his tank, his heat rock and his vitamins (Yes, lizard vitamins. It comes in what looks like a container of garlic powder and you sprinkle it on the lizard food.) Oh and what comprises lizard food? You want to know what lizards eat? Either meal worms that come in a can or live crickets that have to be bought weekly. I chose the crickets. I just could not stomach the meal worms. When you go to the store to buy crickets, the pet store worker blows air into a plastic bag and somehow corrals the crickets into the
bag. Then in order to feed your lizard you have to somehow get the crickets into the tank without having a cricket mishap; that is crickets who make it out of the bag but do not make it into the tank. On top of that I was supposed to add vitamins to the bag of crickets. I was not up for doing this on my own and frankly did not trust the first graders to get it right. So, in times of pet crisis I once again found a friend and colleague to help. Gary taught second grade and I knew he could handle this. He managed to get the vitamins into the cricket bag without a mishap and “shake and bake” them with vitamins before pouring all the crickets neatly into the tank. Impressive, no?

Time went on and though I still had to make the annoying weekly trip to the pet store to buy crickets, I no longer relied on Gary to feed our lizard. I now got the kids to do it.

Fast forward a few months. I walk into my classroom one morning (is this scenario sounding familiar) and I notice that the lizard, (clearly I once again have no idea of the animal’s name) is on his heat rock and not moving. I take a closer look and notice that his eyes seem to be gone. I was puzzled for a moment and then, oh dear, he must have fallen asleep on his heat rock and burnt himself to death. I bet you know my next move. Upstairs to Gary’s room I went. “The lizard is dead and I’m not touching him!” Gary kindly threw him in the garbage for me. Now, how to tell first graders that their class pet has died. Just a few years before, I counseled a new kindergarten teacher on just that matter. She had a guinea pig (before we swore them off) named Rosie. (Weird that I remember the name of the pet in another class.) One morning Rosie was dead. I told the teacher, Jen to just tell the kids that Rosie ran away. Big mistake! These poor little kindergartners spent time making lost guinea pig posters and hanging them up all over the school. Eventually Jen had to tell them that Rosie died.

So, having learned my lesson, I planned to bite the bullet and tell the kids the truth. The lizard is dead. I also planned to hide my glee at no more weekly pet shop trips. Here’s a bit of info you need to know. School began at 8:40 and students along with their parents trickled up anytime between then and 9:00. So, I had to mention that our lizard was dead multiple times. If I remember correctly, most kids were not very fazed and our day went on as usual. About 2 hours later… Surprise! There stood Sarah’s mother with
a replacement lizard. He wasn't our high end Western Fence Lizard. He was just a simple Anole. Really? As an adult, who seemed to like me, how could Sarah's mom do this? But I was brought up to be polite and say thank you so I did. And my weekly trips to Petland to purchase crickets continued until the end of the year.
When you enter Mrs. Arlingdale’s second grade classroom, the first word likely to enter your mind would be cozy. Bright colors, artwork covering the walls, a rug ringed by bean bag chairs, or a whole library of books might catch your eye. But what stood out the most was the plants. Lush green ferns, shiny leaves, and tall stems poked up out of giant pots or reached down from hanging baskets. “Plants give us oxygen. That helps keep us healthy! Plants are helpers, just like each of you.” Mrs. Arlingdale would say cheerfully.

To Lola, crossing through the doorway felt like entering the rainforest and it was her favorite thing about second grade. She was always, always the first to volunteer to take care of the plants. Lola loved the brightly colored watering cans that could drench the rich soil and the spray bottles that created a cool mist. She loved watching the plants grow and bloom and change. She didn’t even mind trading some recess time to tend to all the plants the right way.

And that was exactly how Lola happened to be there, watering her rainforest, on the crisp winter afternoon she spotted the toad.

Spritzing the Boston fern in the hanging basket with her favorite yellow spray bottle, Lola glanced toward the big elephant ear plant perched on the windowsill and she saw them: two big eyes peering over the lip of the pot.

“Aaaahhh!” Lola yelped, startled.

“Aaaaahhh!” the toad yelped back.

“What are you doing here?” Lola whispered, looking around to see if anyone else was nearby to witness the small reptile’s sudden appearance. Mrs. Arlingdale had gone to make copies of the afternoon’s math worksheet, and Lola could see all her classmates out on the playground. She was alone with the toad.

“Me? I live here!” the toad replied indignantly.

“What do you mean, live here?” Lola said. “Here, in the classroom? Since when?”

“The whole school year. I’m trapped here, if you must know. And I could sure use some help.” And the whole story came tumbling out...

Fred, the toad, had been living a perfectly normal life in Mrs. Arlingdale’s backyard. He chased flies, practiced jumping, and enjoyed burrowing with his family.
One day, he leaped into the plant’s pot to chase a particularly tasty fly. The next thing he knew, the plant was being lifted up and loaded into Mrs. Arlingdale’s minivan. Fred tried to escape, but it was too late. So, he did what any toad might do – he burrowed into the ground and hoped for the best.

When the dust settled, Fred had poked his head over the edge of the pot and seen the classroom. With the plants and bright colors and laughter, it didn’t seem so bad. He’d settled in and learned about subtraction and some of the Spanish Senora Ramirez taught. He loved listening to the stories Mrs. Arlingdale read aloud. Plus the plant was right by the window, so it was a great spot for a nap in the afternoon sun once the classroom emptied out.

Lola couldn’t believe her ears. “You’ve been living here ALL year?”

“Yes,” Fred replied.

“But...but...how?” Lola stuttered, trying to understand. “What did you eat? How has no one seen you?”

Fred blinked up at her. “Toads can be quiet quiet, you know. It’s not all croaks and ribbits!” Lola tried not to giggle. “As for food, there’ve been some stray flies and spiders that come in with you from recess. There’s always snack crumbs on the floor. And one week, I got really lucky and a bunch of crickets escaped from the science lab. What a feast!” Fred hopped at the happy memory.

“But...” he continued, with a longing glance outside, “I’m stuck here. I can’t escape and get back outside. I’m afraid of getting squished by kids running out to recess or being swept up and thrown away by Mr. Petransky.” Lola shuddered at the name of the janitor, a hulking giant of man who was always lurking in the halls, waiting for someone to yell at. Lola had even seen him make kindergarteners cry.

Fred looked right at Lola, and his big, round eyes looked sad. “I miss the other toads. I miss the fresh air. I miss the fresh flies! Can you help me escape?”

Lola had no idea how to sneak a toad out of the school. And worse, it seemed like something that could definitely get her in trouble. Lola was a rule-follower, and there was nothing she disliked more than getting in trouble. If Mr. Petranksky saw her, she’d get sent to the principal’s office for sure! But when she looked down at Fred’s big, blinking eyes, she thought, How can I say no? Lola took a deep breath and nodded firmly. “Okay,” she said, “I’ll help you. But we have to be careful!”

“Careful with what? Lola, who are you talking to?” said a voice from the doorway.
Fred dove back into his burrow as Lola spun around. She faced her classmate, Li, and asked, “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to know you’re up to something!” Li said. “What’s going on?” She walked through the door and up to Lola, peering around her to look for clues.

Lola thought quickly. As the best kickball player in class, Min was tough and maybe a little scary. But she was also smart, and Lola didn’t know how much she had overheard. Min had a pet dog, and she wrote her last information book on some cool snakes, so Lola figured she liked animals. And, when it came down to it, she couldn’t think of a lie to get out of this situation anyway...at least not one Min would believe. “Well...” Lola said slowly, “I’m trying to help Fred.”

“Fred? Who’s Fred?” Min asked, looking around the room.

Fred popped up from his burrow. “That’s me. Pleased to meet you,” he said.

“Aaaahhh!” Min yelped.

“Yeah, I said that, too,” Lola laughed. “We don’t have time for me to explain everything just now, but Fred needs our help. He’s been trapped here for months, and we’ve got to help him escape before Mr. Petransky finds him. Recess will be over soon, and Mrs. Arlingdale could be back any minute.”

Min took this in quietly, then nodded. “Okay, let’s do this!” Min grabbed a plastic container of markers from the art center. She dumped out the markers and passed the plastic container to Lola. “Get Fred in there, and we’ll carry him outside. I’ll keep watch for Mr. Petransky.”

Min headed back toward the door, but Lola hesitated. Min glanced back, whispering urgently, “Lola, come on, let’s go!”

“I don’t want to get warts.” Lola said quietly, avoiding Fred’s eyes.

“Hey! That’s a myth, you know. You won’t get warts from touching me any more than kissing me will turn me into a prince.” Fred flicked his tongue out quickly in annoyance. “Here, bring that thing closer. I can hop right in.”

Lola held the bright orange cup right up to the lip of the elephant ear pot. Fred bent his hind legs and – boing! – hopped right over the lip of the pot and landed in the container. His feet caught the side and hung on. “Let’s get you out of here!” Lola said. She rushed to Min’s side, clutching the orange container carefully.
Maybe Min could tell she was nervous from the glances she kept throwing over her shoulder. Maybe it was how white her knuckles were gripping the cup. Either way, Min took charge. “Straight outside and to the back of the playground. We’ll let Fred go by the edge of woods. There’s a pond not too far from there.”

“Okay,” Lola agreed. “Do you think anyone will notice...” her voice trailed off as they both her the jangle of keys and some heavy footsteps behind them.

“Hey! You two! Why aren’t you outside with your class?” Mr. Petransky called, hustling down the hallway to reach them.

They froze. Min recovered first. “Go. Save Fred. I’ll handle Mr. Petransky.” Min said, hands on her hips. “Hurry! It’s the only way.”

Lola hesitated just a moment, then nodded and began to run. With one last glance over her shoulder, she mouthed “thank you!” to Min and made it to the stairwell. Lola burst through the door and bounded down the stairs, Mr. Petransky’s bellowing fading behind her.

“Hey, take it easy!” Fred scolded. “I’m going to be too dizzy to get away.”

“Sorry,” Lola said as they made it to the edge of the playground. A quick scan gave Lola the lay of the land. “Okay, the teachers are helping referee the kickball game, and the boys most likely to knock into us are playing four-square on the pavement. We’ll have to take the long way around, but we can make it.” Lola tried to sound more confident than she felt. Slowly, trying not to attract any attention to herself (and to keep Fred safe), Lola made her way around the edge of the playground.

As she neared the edge of the woods, she asked Fred, ‘What do you think you’ll do? Will you try to make it back home? Or start a new life here, at the pond?’

“I haven’t decided,” Fred told her. “To tell you the truth, I thought I’d be trapped in that classroom forever. That maybe I’d get caught and put into one of those awful glass boxes, like the crickets. I didn’t plan on getting out. I didn’t think I’d find a friend like you.”

They’d reached the woods undetected. Lola bent down and gently placed the container on the ground. She reached in to help Fred out. “I’m glad I found you, Fred. If you stay in the pond, will you come visit me sometimes at recess?” Lola asked.

“We’ll meet right here,” said Fred. “Thanks for saving me, Lola.” Fred hopped away, and Lola could hear his happy ribbits as he disappeared.
“Lola, you’re not supposed to be near the woods!” Mrs. Penningsly called as she made her way across the playground. Lola turned to see Min crossing the playground, too.

Min came to stand by her side. “Sorry, Mrs. Penningsly. I asked Lola to get a ball I’d thrown too hard.” Behind her back, Min passed Lola a high-bounce ball.

Lola showed it to Mrs. Penningsly. “Got it!”

“Okay, just be careful. You never know what creatures you could run into over here,” Mrs. Penningsly said.

Lola and Min’s eyes met and they both burst into giggles. Min grabbed Lola’s hand, and they ran off to play for the last few moments of what had been the most memorable recess ever.
Dear Chancellor,

I am a 25-year teacher with the Department of Education. This is my fourth-year teaching in a focus school in [New York City]: PS 999. The first 21 years of my teaching career was in various schools in District X, first as a classroom teacher and then as a mathematics staff developer.

Our students at 999 come from various backgrounds. Many of them are first generation Americans and many are immigrants themselves. Their home lives are very different than many of the students I worked with at PS AAA, BBB and even CCC. Our students come to school with their own unique experiences. Often, they have not had many outside of school opportunities for learning. Thus, the opportunities within school become even more important. And, added to these circumstances, there are inequities within the school system that exacerbate what is already a difficult situation.

**Breakfast in the Classroom:**
Although I’ve been told that all schools will eventually have breakfast in the classroom, to the best of my knowledge that has not yet happened. And, though I can certainly agree that all kids should be able to eat breakfast, the time taken away from teaching and learning adds up. Fifteen minutes a day (and often it is more than that) is 1 hour and 15 minutes per week. We have 10 months in the school year so, accounting for time off that is at least 35 hours of lost teaching and learning time per year. And again, while all schools may eventually be in the same boat, at present some schools are still getting more teaching time in.

**Outdoor Recess:**
Joseph Lee, the father of the playground movement says “Play seen from the inside, as the child sees it, is the most serious thing in life... Play builds the child... Play is thus the essential part of education.”

As educators we know and believe in the importance of play. However, the structural realities of PS 182 prohibit this important part of our students’ education. Our school is housed in 2 buildings. Our main building is grades 2-5 and our annex, also known as “Parsons”, is just down the block in a church. While the school yard in the main building is small, each class does go outside for lunchtime recess once a week. Our special education classes get more time outside. However, in the annex there is no outdoor space. This means that during their formative years in the public school system these students never, ever have the opportunity to play outdoors. During the 50 minute lunch period they sit at their lunch tables in a basement cafeteria.

When I have joined the students in the cafeteria at lunch time some students sit and color and chat with other students who are seated adjacent to them or directly across from them. The setup is such that they cannot chat or hang out with whomever they
wish. After a while, many of these K and 1 students get antsy and want to get up and move. They can ask to go to the restroom but that is the sum total of movement during what should be recess time.

Having worked in “middle class” schools, I know that this would never be countenanced. There is so much research out there that proves that physical activity supports academic achievement. Yet, our little ones are deprived of that.

The American Association of Pediatrics policy statement on the role of recess cites four critical benefits to recess: greater levels of physical activity and fitness, improved attentiveness in class, improved cognition and learning and practice of peer to peer social and emotional skills. (American Educator, Spring 2017)

In this era of high stakes testing, working in a Focus school is stressful for all. If the tests are to be trusted, at least to some extent, then our students are failing and will not leave with the critical skills they need to succeed in middle school and possibly later on in life as well. They begin their formative education at PS 182 having not had the experience of students elsewhere. We are told we need to “catch them up.” Yet it seems as though we are working against ourselves. The benefits of recess as cited by the AAP make that clear.

So, how is it that the Department of Education allows approximately 250 kindergarten and first grade students to go to school in a space where they are unable to reap the benefits of recess?

Belle
Appendix B

Interview Questions

This interview will ask you about your role at P.S. 999, and some of the specific activities that you do as an educator and a writer. The interview will last approximately 40-45 minutes. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to stop the interview at any time, and there will be no adverse effects to you. What you say in this interview is confidential and other parties or stakeholders (including parents, administrators, etc.) in the project will not find out what you said.

Do you agree to be audiotaped for this interview?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Teaching Writing Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself as a teacher.

2. Can you tell me about your approach to teaching writing?
   - What do you mean when you call writing “an essential skill”?
   - You mentioned you want children to love writing. Can you give any specific examples of how you try to foster a love of writing?

3. Can you explain what makes writing instruction “challenging” or “tricky” (or “fun, enjoyable”)?

4. What resources do you draw upon to plan and teach?
   - Can you explain what “modeling” means to you?
   - Can you describe what “using mentor texts” involves?
5. How do you make decisions about teaching writing?
   - Can you give me an example of how you go about planning a writing lesson?

6. What are other goals you have for your writing instruction?
   - You mentioned getting students ready for the state test. What role does testing play in your instruction?

7. How much control do you feel that you have over the writing instruction in your classroom?
   - Has the amount of control you have over writing instruction and curriculum changed over the course of your career? If so, how?

8. Tell me a story about yourself as a writing teacher.
   - Can you give me an example of a particular instance when you felt like your writing instruction was particularly effective?
   - Can you give me an example of a particular instance when you felt like your writing instruction was ineffective?

9. Is there a difference between how you teach writing now and when you first started teaching writing? If so, what are the differences?
   - How does your teaching change from year to year?

10. Are there differences between your practice of teaching writing and the practices of other teachers? If so, what are they?

11. Can you explain what professional support you’re given as a teacher of writing?
Writing Questions

1. Can you tell me about yourself as a writer?
   o What kinds of writing do you do?
   o Can you explain what you mean by writing “for yourself”?
   o How does writing make you feel?

2. What do you remember about learning how to write?

3. Can you tell me about any particular people who have influenced you as a writer?

4. Tell me a story about a time when writing went well for you.

5. Tell me a story about a time when writing did not go well for you.
Appendix C

Informed Consent

Title: Teachers as Writers: A Case Study Inquiry of a Teacher Writing Group
Researcher: Amy Tondreau, Teachers College, 401-578-9470

INTRODUCTION:

You are being invited to participate in this research study called “Teachers as Writers: A Case Study Inquiry of a Teacher Writing Group.” You qualify to take part in this research study due to your position as a teacher or administrator in a school that implements a writing workshop. Approximately 5-6 educators are being invited to participate in this study and it will last for approximately a semester (6 months).

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

This study is being done to explore the ways in which teachers understand and discuss their identities as writers and teachers of writing. I will also be investigating the possible implications of a co-created teachers writing group as a space for inquiry and/or professional development.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

If you decide to participate, you will participate in a bi-monthly writing group at your school site. I will attend and participate in the writing group alongside you. Throughout the group meetings, we will engage in the writing process, share our writing, and discuss classroom writing instruction. The group meetings will be audio-recorded. After the audio recording is written down the audio recording will be deleted. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will not be able to participate. In addition, writing that you agree to share will be photocopied. Each meeting will last approximately an hour and a half.

Additionally, I will interview you three times (approximately once every other month). During the interview, you will be asked to discuss your beliefs about and practices of writing and writing instruction. These interviews will be audio-recorded. After the audio recording is written down the audio recording will be deleted. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will not be able to participate. You will be given a pseudonym in order to keep your identity confidential. Each interview will last for approximately 45 minutes, and will take place in the setting of your choosing.
WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that you may experience are not greater than you would ordinarily encounter in your daily life. However, there are some risks to consider:

There is a risk that you may feel uncomfortable with the questions in the interview. However, you do not have to answer any questions or divulge anything you don’t want to talk about, and I will stop the interview if you become uncomfortable. You have the right to refuse to participate in any aspect of the study or to withdraw at any time without penalty. I will take extended silence as a cue to skip that question and will ask you if you want to keep going or if you would prefer to stop.

You might feel uncomfortable sharing your writing and/or reflections on your teaching practice within the writing group. However, no part of the study is evaluative, and will not be shared with other members of the school community.

You may have a potential loss of confidentiality, as I will be sharing my findings with other educators and university faculty. However, the name of you, other participants, and your school will not be identified.

The researcher will minimize risks to this study by:

The researcher will take precautions to keep your information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing your identity, such as using a pseudonym instead of your name and keeping all information on a password protected computer and locked in a file drawer.

You may stop the interviews or turn off the recorder at any time. You may also ask the researcher to delete certain sections of an interview recording. You do not have to answer any questions or divulge anything you don’t want to talk about. You can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty.

WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. Participation may benefit the field of teacher education or professional development to better understand effective ways to prepare or support teachers of writing.

WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?

You will not be paid to participate in this study. There are no costs to you for taking part in this study.
WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?

The study is over when you have completed the three interviews and you have participated in bi-monthly sessions of the writing group, lasting for approximately 6 months. However, you can leave the study at any time even if you haven’t finished.

PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY:

The researcher will keep all written materials locked in a desk drawer in a locked office. Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the audio recording will be written down and the audio recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your real name with your pseudonym. Regulations require that research data be kept for at least three years.

HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?

The results of this study will be published in journals and presented at academic conferences. Your name or any identifying information about you will not be published. This study is being conducted as part of the dissertation of the researcher.

CONSENT FOR AUDIO RECORDING:

Audio recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission to be recorded. If you decide that you don’t wish to be recorded, you will not be able to participate in this study.

I give my consent to be recorded ____________________________________________________________

Signature

I do not consent to be recorded _____________________________________________________________

Signature

WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY

I consent to allow written and audio taped materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College ______________________________________________

Signature

I do not consent to allow written and audio taped materials viewed outside of Teachers College Columbia University ______________________________________________

Signature
OPTIONAL CONSENT FOR FUTURE CONTACT

The researcher may wish to contact you in the future. Please initial the appropriate statements to indicate whether or not you give permission for future contact.

I give permission to be contacted in the future for research purposes:

Yes ________________________   No_______________________
Initial                                                  Initial

I give permission to be contacted in the future for information relating to this study:

Yes ________________________   No_______________________
Initial                                                  Initial

WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

If you have any questions about taking part in this research study, you should contact the researcher, Amy Tondreau, at 401-578-9470 or at alt2150@tc.columbia.edu.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu. Or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 1002. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College, Columbia University.
PARTICIPANT’S RIGHTS

● I have read and discussed the informed consent with the researcher. I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.

● I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty.

● The researcher may withdraw me from the research at her professional discretion.

● If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my participation, the investigator will provide this information to me.

● Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.

● I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent document.

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study.

Print name: _____________________________ Date: ______________

Signature: ________________________________