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"My heart was like, write about this. There's no other way.": Strengthening and Deepening Literacy Skills of Adults in a High School Equivalency Program through Creative Writing

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Approvals

In the judgement of the following signatories, this dissertation meets the academic standards that have been established for the Doctor of Philosophy degree.

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STRENGTHENING LITERACY SKILLS

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the students I have ever had the privilege of teaching. I have been driven to do this work by my deep love and respect for the determined people who enter adult education programs to earn high school equivalency diplomas. As long as I live and teach, I promise to help students reach their goals and build a love of literacy that I know will take them anywhere they want to go.

Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how creative writing plays a role in strengthening and deepening literacy skills of adults in community-based high school equivalency diploma programs, which are operated under the publicly funded, adult basic education umbrella. Specifically, the study explores two sub-questions: How can creative writing processes support adult high school equivalency students' achievement of personal and/or academic goals? How does a curricular focus on individual storytelling build students' literacy confidence and/or their sense of student agency? Data sources includes pre- and post-surveys, pre- and post-interviews, field notes, and student work based on a curriculum designed using best practices in writing instruction, critical literacy, and adult learning. Informed by student work, interviews and field notes, three narrative case studies were written to describe each student and his/her individual contexts in order for this research to paint a full picture of the findings.

The findings support what we already know about effective writing instruction from experts such as Applebee & Langer (2013), Calkins (2006), Emig (1971), Galda (Galda & Beach, 2001), Gallagher (2006), Graham and Perrin (2007), Graham (2019), Graves (2003), Newkirk (2004), and Shaughnessy (1971), and contribute to the limited research on effective writing strategies for adults in high school equivalency programs pursuing General Education Development (GED) or High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) diplomas. The study suggests that creative writing is a viable and effective tool to promote literacy acquisition, build student voice, and support student agency and ownership of their own ideas and identities.

Keywords: adult basic education, agency, creative writing, critical literacy, GED, HiSET, high school equivalency, literacy, narrative, storytelling and writing instruction.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF APPENDICES

> Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.
>
> *– Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture, December 7, 1993*

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND STUDY AIMS

Introduction

Nobel laureate Toni Morrison said the words in the opening epigraph in her 1993 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, and they imply that narrative can help us to create our sense of self. I share this belief, and have always wondered about the role storytelling and narrative writing might have in the development of an individual, a community, or a society.

Recently, one of my high school equivalency students shared with me that she never felt as though she belonged in school. The messages she received from school personnel confirmed her negative self-image, causing her to leave high school before completing. She returned to school, however, because she felt as though she had more to achieve and she wanted to prove to herself and others that she did belong in school. In our writing class, she worked on a memoir that outlined many of the challenges she faced, such as being homeless and becoming a single mother at age ?. Yet she continued to believe that it was within her sole power to excel in school and that somehow she had failed. For her, writing her story allowed her to see that the reasons she felt she couldn't succeed and therefore left high school were far from simple. Writing allowed her to document what had happened to her and to critically interrogate the forces that made it feel impossible for her to finish school. This understanding began to free her of self-doubt and shame, which were obstructing her full participation in academic pursuits.

The anthropologist and poet, Michael Jackson (2013) seemed to be commenting on these sorts of personal revelations when he wrote about storytelling in general: "To reconstitute the events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both

in dialogue with others and in one's own imagination" (p. 34). The word "active" is important here. Jackson goes on to describe the meaning of "action" as it occurs in the process of storytelling. The storyteller is now the creator of the story, the conveyor of personal memories, and an active participant in crafting her own history. Jackson also describes another important aspect of storytelling: the reworking that happens in dialogue with others, pointing to the need for the "storyteller" to have readers and responders.

In reflecting on the power of stories, I have come to realize that it is rare for many students, especially those whose families are struggling financially, students of color, immigrants, indigenous peoples, or other marginalized groups, to experience in their formal education a process of learning that engages their full identity and honors their realities, without judgment or privileging one way of being over others. This type of learning can be liberatory and deeply fulfilling. Literacy skills such as those involved in reading and writing are complex, multi-faceted accomplishments that can support liberatory educational experiences when students are given spaces to tell their stories. I have spent my teaching career trying to create safe classrooms that allow for all narratives to be shared, listened to, and valued, and have found that the more I open up these spaces successfully, the more I understand the nature of power, truth and liberation, as well as the ways in which stories do, in fact, matter. As researcher Jeffrey Tangonan Acido (2016) leader of *Nakem Pedagogy* (a liberatory style of education that focuses on the soul of an individual) says:

> Stories are not just stories; they are more than a retelling of events, more than merely anecdotes. When stories are entwined with other stories and strung together, they make up narratives that shape and give meaning to our lives—past and present (p. 50).

Students who leave middle or high school without graduating often feel the negative narrative around being labeled a dropout, blaming themselves for not trying hard enough to succeed. That sense of failure was highlighted in the book, *Why We Drop Out* (Feldman, Smith, & Waxman, 2017). The authors interviewed over 50 students who had what they termed "disengaged", and noted that many blamed themselves and deeply regretted the actions that led to them dropping out.

The reality is that students opt to leave school for a complex array of reasons, many of which are beyond the their control. According to the Center for Promise (2015), the research arm of the non-profit organization America's Promise Alliance, whose mission it is to create the educational conditions for success for all America's young people, the following factors interrupt a young person's ability to complete school or leverage her academic achievements positively:

1. Individual factors such as academic performance and engagement, taking on adult responsibilities, or engaging in maladaptive behaviors such as truancy and drug use;

2. Family factors such as family structure, family resources and parental attitudes, expectations and involvement in a child's life;

3. School-level factors such as a culture of low expectations, exclusionary policies and practices, and an unsafe school climate; and

4. Peer factors such as having friends who engage in deviant actions and drop out of school (p. 4).

Golden, Kist, Trehan, & Padak (2005) interviewed adults who had disengaged from high school and found that in nearly every case, negative experiences involving organizational barriers, teachers, guidance counselors, curriculum practices, or instructional approaches seem to have played a role. They wrote:

Moreover, these tales were related with strong emotion and vivid recollection of specific

events involving high school educators and administrators, which, in some cases,

happened decades in the past. These events had a profound impact on students' lives. (p.

312)

High school equivalency (HSE) instruction is uniquely poised to help students re-build

self-confidence as learners and a sense of pride as human beings, especially if disconnecting

from school has taken a toll on their sense of self-worth (Rose, 2019; Promise, 2016). However,

these qualities can only be fulfilled with intentional curriculum design that supports students'

reading and writing development through the use of relevant texts and through the use of

multiple stories that can be strung together, as Acido noted in the quote used above, to create

meaning.

In my qualitative study I've investigated whether the intentional integration of creative

writing into an HSE writing curriculum contributed to students' sense of academic confidence,

strengthened and deepened their writing skills, and provided a vehicle for student-defined agency

through the use of student-generated narratives and student-selected mentor texts. To ground the

study in a common understanding of creative writing, I reviewed a definitions of the term. Since

there is no one common definition of creative writing, I describe it as the act of creating

moments, situations and worlds through the use of the written word. The most pertinent

description of creative writing process comes from the description of their mission and history on

the web site of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs:

Many students feel that the world is not of their making, and not theirs to form or to

reform. Writing classes often demonstrate the efficacy of the human will—that human

experience can be shaped and directed for the good: aesthetically, socially, and

politically. In creative writing classes, students learn about elements of literature from

inside their own work, rather than from outside a text. This has motivated many to gain

greater command of rhetoric and communication skills in general. In creative writing

classes, students also analyze psychology and motives, the dynamics of social classes and

individual, regional, and national beliefs. Students shape experiences into stories and

poems. They order their lives and their world. (n.d., para 9)

Having looked at course catalogs and descriptions across Bachelor of Fine Arts or

Masters of Fine Arts in creative writing programs at Emerson College, Bloomsburg University,

and Yale University (Emerson, 2016; Bloomsburg, 2016; Yale, 2016), I would also include a

practical description of creative writing as the writing of poetry, playwriting, short and long

fiction, and narrative nonfiction that is written using creative writing techniques. Along with that

definition, I add that inherent in the creative writing process is a personal choice the writer

makes in how to express herself.

Statement of the Problem

No student sets out hoping to under-achieve or leave school before earning a diploma.

When a student does leave school before completing, there are usually warning signs that make

their disengagement predictable (DePaoli et al., 2015, 2018; Promise, 2014; Rights, 2013;

McMurrey, 2014). Students who leave high school reading or writing below their grade level

understand how this affects their capacity to earn a living and take care of themselves and their

families. When students return to school to earn a credential or brush up on skills they did not

acquire through traditional means, they do so with great hope. What is often challenging for

these determined people is that many still face barriers that impede success (Promise, 2015).

Unfortunately, high school equivalency (HSE) instruction is typically focused on the skills

needed to pass the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) or the General Educational

Development (GED) exam (Promise, 2016).

      The majority of HSE instruction happens within the adult education system. According

to World Education (2018), this system encompasses programs across the U.S. that offer

instruction ranging from basic literacy and numeracy to HSE instruction and college and career

readiness. One in six adults (18+) have low literacy skills (OECD, 2013), including 20% of

adults with a high school diploma (Larson, 2018). The U.S. ranked 21st in numeracy and 16th in

literacy out of 24 countries in a recent assessment of adults' skills (OECD, 2013).   Yet, the

publicly funded adult education system is able to serve around 2 million young and older adults

per year, which means in all 50 states waiting lists for classes are common (World Ed., 2018).

      This scarcity is one of the reasons that instruction at HSE programs focuses on the skills

needed to pass the HSE exam in order to move students out quickly to make room for those

waiting. Unfortunately, fewer than 5% of HSE graduates go on to enroll in college or other adult

education programs where they can earn much needed credentials (Rutschow & Crary-Ross,

2014). These statistics speak to an urgent need to change the way instruction in adult education

programs is delivered. This is, however, a larger problem and not one that is specific to the adult

education system. Students who struggle academically in middle or high school are more likely

to drop out of school later. About 55% of adults at the lowest literacy levels did not graduate

from high school and have no high school equivalency diploma (NAEP, 2018). In a 2014 report

published by MDRC on writing instruction in adult education classrooms in the United States

(Manno, Yang, & Bangser, 2015), the authors noted that at that time there were more than two

million adults enrolled in adult education and HSE courses, and incoming assessment data

collected showed that more than half were are at an eighth grade writing level or below (Manno et al., 2015).

Graduation rates give us insight into who is leaving school before completing a diploma. According to the latest *Building a Grad Nation* report (DePaoli et al., 2018), half of all states reported high school graduation rates of 85% or more, but a substantial number of states are still graduating less than 80% of students in four years, and several others have graduation rates between 80-85% (DePaoli et al., 2018). These statistics disproportionately affect Black and Latino/x students, English language learners, and students with disabilities, making this a clear social justice issue (Balfanz, McPartland, & Shaw, 2002; Graham & Perin, 2007; Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Le, 2010; Walberg, 2010).

At work, employees are expected to produce written documentation, visual presentations, detailed reports, and legible e-mails. The ability to write well is often the basis for further employment and promotion (Commission, 2003). Despite the importance of writing, too many of our students do not learn to write well enough to meet these demands. According to the most recent findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2017), only 79% of 12th graders are at or above basic proficiency in writing. Likewise, college instructors estimated that 5% of high school graduates are not prepared for college-level writing demands (Achieve, 2005), whereas American businesses spend $3.1 billion annually for writing remediation (Commission, 2003).

Adult education programs are expected not only to get students ready for the high school equivalency exam (namely HiSET or GED exams), but also provide pathways into college and career. Given the low literacy levels plaguing students who left secondary education before graduation, the problem is clear. Students need more and better literacy instruction to support

any college and career goals and to support their overall economic well-being.

Significance of the Study

I developed this study in order to investigate whether the intentional integration of

creative writing into an HSE writing curriculum contributed to students' academic confidence,

strengthened and deepened writing skills, and provided a vehicle for student-defined agency

through the use of student-generated narratives and student-selected mentor texts. I also

considered the attitudes subjects have toward their own creativity, voice, and literacy skills. The

population I focused on were adults (18+) who have enrolled in an adult education program to

earn an HSE diploma. The students volunteered to take part in this study because they wanted to

focus on the much-needed writing skills necessary to complete their high school equivalency

studies, which is how I presented the course to students during an initial visit to the site.

This study has the potential to make an important contribution. Much of the existing

literature describes the challenges adults face and provides ideas for how to address these

challenges. There are, however, very few studies focused on creative writing as a tool to support

writing skills acquisition in adults who are returning to school after choosing or needing to

disconnect from traditional educational settings. The most relevant study, titled *Adult Basic and*

Literacy Education as Storytelling: A Reading/Writing Project (Wardrop, 1994), is now over 25

years old. It describes a study where the project team designed, conducted, evaluated, and

published the results of a curriculum development project focused on students in an adult

education program. The curriculum emphasized adults' experiences and visions for themselves

and their families through the writing and sharing of stories. The results were promising and the

researchers asked the adult education community to build on the promising findings by

conducting other research (Wardrop, 1994). Unfortunately, I could find nothing that continued the line of inquiry they started.

Rutschow and Crary-Ross (2014) did a study of disconnected youth returning to school, and determined that "innovative techniques" were needed to support older youth with low literacy skills. Rutschow, Beal and Johnson (2019) recently released a report recommending that adult education programs in California move beyond basic instruction and toward college and workforce readiness skills. The study was not focused on narrative storytelling as a tool to support college readiness.

Siegel (2007) describes the success in building a sense of belonging and rigor in her classroom using authentic storytelling and project-based learning. She did not, however, discuss literacy acqusition or the effects of the curriculum on skills attainment. Of those studies that do discuss the power of creative writing specifically to transform literacy skills, most focused on students who were in prison (Appleman, 2013; Greenberg, Dunleavy & Kutner, 2007). While there is some overlap in methodology between these studies and my own, prison populations are vastly different than the typical adult entering voluntarily into an adult education program.

This study explores the role creative writing has as an instructional tool due to its flexible structure and its capacity to offer students the freedom to write about whatever they would like. While the structure of creative writing does allow for more student self-expression, the skills needed to write creatively, such as understanding audience and theme, developing a point of view, focusing on paragraph flow or mastering subject and verb agreement, are also the same skills needed to write academically. This holds promise for the transfer of skills to academic contexts with an appropriate curriculum that intentionally makes those connections for students and allows for practice and revision.

Theoretical framework

In this subsection, I describe the theoretical frameworks that are the foundation of this study. I focus first on constructivism then secondly on situated learning theory. As writing teachers, whether creative or academic, our goal is for our students to build skill with each new writing activity and experience. This means that as teachers we must consider how students best learn writing and how we can create conditions in our classroom where learning can optimally take place. Two theories frame evidence-based writing instruction as it relates to building stories and collective meaning.

Constructivism

Constructivism posits that students construct knowledge (Bodrova, Leong, Davidson, & Davidson, 1994). Learning is not about mirroring what is presented, but about learners creating or constructing their own representation of new information. Learning is the construction of meaning from experience (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Constructivism is a foundational learning theory attributed to Jean Piaget (1936) with direct ties to John Dewey (1938). Dewey believed that a good education should serve a purpose in society and for the individual student. In his classic work, *The Child and The Curriculum*, Dewey noted that "Learning is active. It involves reaching out of the mind. It involves organic assimilation starting from within" (1902, p. 108). Dewey emphasized the importance of inquiry as an instructional approach and has become associated with student-centered learning and progressive teaching approaches.

Building on the foundation Dewey set, Piaget's theory of constructivism argues that people develop knowledge and build meaning from their experiences. Two of the key elements that create the construction of an individual's new knowledge are *accommodation* and *assimilation* (Piaget, 1936). Simply put, assimilation causes an individual to incorporate new

experiences into old ones weaving together concepts to create knowledge. Accommodation is when a current understanding or schema does not work and a reframing needs to happen to accommodate a fresh understanding. This theory informs instruction because constructivist teaching requires teachers to become more facilitators of learning than teacher/lecturers to allow for assimilating and accommodating to occur. Instruction becomes active with students doing all of the thinking, building, and *constructing* of knowledge.

Another well-known theorist who is considered a constructivist is Lev Vygotsky (1976). Vygotsky's main relevance to constructivism comes from his theories about language, thought, and their use by individuals in a society. He drew attention to the pivotal role of the sociocultural context in how students construct meaning from experience, noting that the process of constructing meaning is a social one, facilitated through the culture's symbols and language (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). The National Council of Teachers of English describes writing as something that is produced by people in specific situations and contexts. In their organizational material (2018), they write: "Writing is thus social—it is intended to speak to audiences for particular purposes. Even when a writer writes 'for themselves' (e.g., in a personal blog or diary), they are their own audience" (p. 2). By design and application, writing is aligned to constructivism through its construction of knowledge and ideas in a visual form using the symbols and language of one's culture.

Situated Learning Theory

Situated learning theory (SLT) is a constructivist view of learning attributed to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1990) that focuses on meaning, practice, community and identity. Student experiences develop meaning through practical application within a community of learners. From this practical application, students develop an identity within their social context and bring

learning from formal environments into informal ones. By following this line of thinking, students make meaning through their interactions with the texts they encounter. They use writing to engage in learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). According to this approach, teachers should develop authentic activities, like creative writing, that can reinforce concepts in a real world context (Blankenship & Margarella, 2014).

These theoretical underpinnings lead us to an examination of writing instruction and its relationship to constructivist world views. After a thorough review of the literature, MacArthur, Graham and Fitzgerald (2016) commented that:

> A socio-cultural theory of writing instruction includes attention to contexts, positions and power relations people navigate as they learn to write and teach writing. Context both surrounds and is weaved into every act of writing, which is regulated by structures and dynamics of power. While students engage in a process of designing texts, they simultaneously locate, or position, themselves within a given context relative to the structures of power in place. (p. 266)

This study centers the type of writing instruction that situates learning in a context and supports students as co-creators of their own learning. This locating and positioning of oneself within a context is of particular importance to this study because, as noted previously, when students are allowed to create and share their own stories, they contribute to a societal understanding of their worth, while simultaneously attaining literacy skills that allow for a deeper understanding of individual and community contexts.

Research Aims

The primary aim of my research is to investigate how creative writing processes strengthen and deepen the literacy skills of adult students in high school equivalency programs.

This research provides understanding into the ways in which creative writing instruction supports student achievement of personal and academic goals and how a focus on storytelling supports academic confidence and student agency. Through interviews, pre- and post- writing samples, and student work, the study also offers a needed addition to the small body of literature on writing instruction within adult education/HSE programs.

Research Questions

I organize my study around the following understudied question: how can creative writing strengthen and deepen the literacy skills of adult students in high school equivalency programs? Within this broad frame, I organize my research around the following secondary questions:

- How can creative writing processes support students' achievement of personal and/or academic goals?

- How does a curricular focus on individual storytelling build literacy confidence and/or student agency?

I pose these research questions in order to gain insight into using creative writing techniques in the adult high school equivalency classroom. In order to do this, it is necessary to investigate students' personal and academic goals since adults, in particular, pursue education that will be responsive to their lives (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Purcell-Gates et al., 2002; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). It is also necessary to explore the ways in which creative writing instructional techniques could positively affect students' academic confidence and personal agency, which are important to explore, especially if students pursuing an HSE diploma did not have positive school experiences in more traditional settings.

Summary

Chapter one introduced the study beginning with the statement of the problem and gave an overview of the power of narratives and storytelling to support the deepening and building of reading and writing skills in students pursuing high school equivalency diplomas. Chapter two offers a literature review of writing and writing instruction, as well as some of the challenges of teaching writing effectively at the secondary level. These challenges present themselves in high school equivalency classes where adults are returning to school to further their education. Chapter two also offers a literature review related to adult basic education and the promise creative writing holds in adult literacy classrooms. Chapter three explains the methodology used in this study. Chapter four reports the results and findings, and chapter five discusses conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

One in six adults (18+) have low literacy skills (OECD, 2013), including 20% of adults who already have a high school diploma (Larson, 2018). Yet the publicly funded adult education system is able to serve around 2 million young and older adults per year, which means waiting lists for classes in all 50 states are common (World Ed., 2018). The majority of High School Equivalency (HSE) instruction happens within the adult education system. According to World Education (2018), this system encompasses programs across the U.S. that offer instruction ranging from basic literacy and numeracy to HSE instruction, to college and career readiness. As described in chapter one, HSE instruction is uniquely poised to help students strengthen and deepen the literacy skills that are needed to matriculate to college and earn a family-sustaining wage.

Improved literacy can only happen with intentional curriculum design that supports students' reading and writing development. For the purposes of this study, I am most interested in writing instruction that situates learning in a context where students are supported as co-creators of their own learning. This has not always been educators' approach to teaching writing, especially with adult students in HSE programs.

Writing instruction has undergone a historical evolution, specifically with respect to socio-cultural contexts that affect the way writing is taught. In this literature review, I examine the history of writing instruction in order to highlight its historical evolution and how we arrived at present day secondary and HSE instruction. Based on that context, I will closely examine adult education and HSE instructional practices along with what the literature says about the best practices for adult learning and literacy.

Through an investigation of the literature in writing instruction, HSE instruction, and in adult education, we can identify the characteristics of a highly effective learning environment for this population. Having identified these elements, we can in turn suggest strategies by which education in the United States could grow in ways that suit all learners, especially those only marginally served at this time. This literature review concludes with a discussion of how creative writing can be leveraged to serve adult students in publicly funded programs.

History of Writing Instruction

While all societies have either an oral tradition relying on memory to communicate the history of their people such as with indigenous tribes of the Americas or written traditions where symbols were used to pass legacy on to the next generation as with Egyptian hieroglyphs (Gelb, 1974; Sifuna & Otiende, 2005), my focus here is on the history of Greek and Roman writing instruction. Of particular interest is their foundational development of pedagogies that form the basis of current writing instruction in American education. Greek and Roman cultures also provided the original concept of school as it looks today in westernized societies (Murphy & Wiese, 2015).

Tracing the roots of American writing instruction takes us to ancient Greece, and the development of a writing system that did more than label things or serve as a memory aid. Ancient Greeks realized that writing could also function as a tool of discourse and for refining patterns of thinking (Murphy, 2012). The Greek development of the alphabet was the last important step in the history of writing (Gelb, 1974).

The advancement of writing instruction as a practice in ancient Greece came with Isocrates (436-338 BCE) and his School of Rhetoric. Isocrates believed that education could build moral character, so it needed to be socially and broadly-based (Marsh, 2001). In his work *Antidosis*, Isocrates described an education system that included group instruction of students

with a master technician or teacher who focused on oral and written rhetoric as well as poetry,

science and astronomy (Marsh, 2010). By contrast, Plato had argued that alphabetic writing

would negatively affect society and its search for truth. He wrote about this concern in 360 BCE

in his work titled *Phaedrus* (Plato, 1952). He worried that instead of internalizing and truly

understanding things, students would rely on writing to do their thinking. Isocrates ideas appear

to have proven more influential. Although Plato wanted to preserve the oral traditions of elite

thinkers and rhetoricians, the need to document and share is something we discovered is

necessary as scholarly pursuits became more available to the general public.

Roman Advancements

The Romans built upon the foundation set by Isocrates. The Roman educator Marcus

Fabius Quintilianus (also known as Quintilian) in particular took Greek ideas to a more

comprehensive level in 95 CE, when he constructed a system for the teaching of composition and

rhetoric where sequencing and scaffolding of instruction is key (Murphy & Wiese, 2015; Sifuna

& Otiende, 2005). In *Writing Instruction from Ancient Greece to Contemporary America*,

Murphy notes:

> Quintilian would probably say that the way to train an architect is to start him as a boy on
>
> building bricks; the child need not know what a wall is, when he begins to make bricks,
>
> but later he can be taught how to make small brick piles, then walls, then houses, then
>
> palaces, and then even cities (2012, p. 73).

Within the Roman system of language training, children, before they even knew what a word

was or the symbols that made up a word, would trace letters with a stylus (Murphy, 2012).

These instructional ideas became a fixture in Roman times and lasted through the Renaissance of

the 16th century.

Coming to America

In America, the Roman system of language was brought through early European settlers and eventually taught in English grammar schools (Taylor, 2001). This European system began to dominate schools and instructional methodologies. However, the only subject that was taught with any consistency in the grammar schools was Latin grammar and literature. During the 16th and early 17th century, the aim of the schools was mostly to prepare students for entry to the church (Gillard, 2018).

In the midst of European colonialism, a Cherokee named Sequoyah invented a writing system to represent the language of his people. Like most Cherokee in the late 1700s, he could not read, write, or speak any English. Sequoyah was driven by the idea that if the Cherokee people could read and write their own language, then they could better communicate and protect their rights (Gilbertson, 2012). Some of the characters in his system took their shapes from the Roman alphabet, though there was no connection between the sounds and values from one system to another (Harvey & Rivett, 2017). Regardless, Sequoyah understood the power the written word could have in protecting the rights of his people.

The expansion of public education and rapid industrialization went hand in hand in the 18th and 19th centuries. Before the industrial age, formal schooling was scarce and only available to the white men who could afford the tuition and fees, but rapid industrialization created a need for more educated people (Carl, 2009). According to Carl:

> Precise relationships between industrialization and the rise of public education are
> difficult to pin down, however. If we take as our unit of analysis the long nineteenth
> century that stretches from the dawn of the industrial revolution to the eve of World

War I, then we discern a general correspondence between the spread of industry and the

rise of mass schooling. (2009, p. 53).

Along with these shifts came quick economic growth, activism, and reforms that

reshaped the realms of power. These changes increased the demand for education (Murphy,

2012). At this point, writing instruction began to shift. Three key figures in that shift were Hugh

Blair, George Campbell, and Richard Whately (Berlin, 1984; Whately, 1855). Of the three

figures, Whately had been especially interested in composition instruction as a tutor at Oriel

College, Oxford, and as Archbishop of Dublin. In his religious role, he worried about cultivating

new generations of ministers (Murphy, 2012). Although he assumed that written rhetoric was

the script for spoken rhetoric, his work and those it inspired, formed the basis of much 19th-

century writing instruction. Whately's work, the *Elements of Logic* (1855) was used for almost

100 years after it was published (Berlin, 1984; Murphy, 2012) and gave an impetus to the study

of logic in the United States of America. An important point for our purposes here is that

Whately advocated for a more authentic curriculum. A curriculum that encouraged students to

use critical reasoning and thinking skills (Murphy, 2012). His pedagogy was also student-

centered; for example, he reminded teachers to assign relevant writing topics that engage the

learner (Whately, 1855).

In the 18th and 19th centuries, writing instruction was offered to religious students or

those who had wealth and power (Berlin, 1984). However writing instruction had begun to

trickle into the lives of working people, on the basis that it helped workers become better

workers (Murphy, 2012). In 1861, the *Newcastle Report* highlighted deficiencies in mass

education (Gillard, 2018; Murphy, 2012) commenting that the costs of improvement to the state

would be high. The *Revised Code* of 1861 released in England set six standards that included

writing. Notably, it introduced a new "Payment by Results" system that required elementary

students to take Her Majesty's Inspectors' end of year examinations (Marcham, 1981). Teachers'

pay was partially funded by student pass rates. This is important because it shows that even in

1861, standardized testing affected writing instruction in a similar fashion as it does today, a

point which we will return to in the following pages.

The Industrial Revolution

      The Industrial Revolution affected the teaching of writing, not only by making paper

more available, but also by expanding the need for specialized knowledge in American

classrooms (Brown, 1989). While in earlier years, the goal of writing had been to document

rhetoric, in particular the type of oration that would be necessary in the pulpit or a court, the new

model asked students to demonstrate original contributions (Brown, 1989) based on research,

opinion and logic, which sets up a need for writing instruction to be more student and societal

centered.

      In the second half of the 19th century, the impact of the availability of pen and paper

began to influence American colleges in a variety of different ways. People recognized the

power of writing because it became more accessible through mass printing. This increased

demand for instruction. The growing population of the United States ensured that colleges were

inundated by people who wanted an education (Russell, 1991). To satisfy the demand, new

schools appeared on the landscape, including large institutions that began educating thousands.

Composition courses offered a means to teach larger numbers of students at once, assessing their

success by measuring their adherence to prescribed standards (Berlin, 1987). Freshman

composition classes focused on training students from a wide range of backgrounds and abilities

in the fundamentals of writing (Berlin, 1987; Murphy, 2012).

These new opportunities were, again, mostly available to white men, but others also began to access education. The percentage of women among all college students more than doubled from 21% to 47% in the years between 1870 to 1920 (Murphy, 2012). This is partly due to the development of women's colleges, especially in the Northeast. The Seven Sister Colleges were chartered in the late 1800s, including Mount Holyoke, Vassar, Wellesley, Smith, Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe, and Barnard. These colleges were founded to provide broader educational opportunities to women in particular those who wanted to pursue a liberal arts education (Murphy, 2012).

Black Americans also saw new educational opportunities. Formal opportunities prior to this period were almost non-existent because many Southern laws forbade writing instruction for them. As a result, many Black Americans learned to read and write at schools in Northern states (Murphy, 2012). The first historically Black Colleges and Universities were established to serve the needs of Black American students between 1840 and 1865 (Sawyer, 2016).

The modern high school and comprehensive university took shape during a period of societal shift. For most of the 19th century, higher education had served to prepare a specific, elite group for leadership, but there was a growing demand for education and a demand for English and writing instruction in particular. With this demand, came recommendations and guidance around what that instruction should look like. The authors of a 1917 report, *Reorganization of English in Secondary Schools*, sponsored by a joint committee of the National Endowment of the Arts and the National Council of Teachers of English, argued that English courses should emphasize personal and social needs of students and society rather than college requirements (Hosic, 1917). Most intriguingly, they noted that there had to be a progression from *creative* and individual writing activities at the lower grades to social and more practical

activities at the upper levels (Hosic, 1917). They argued that students in the 7th, 8th and 9th

grades should engage in creative writing, such as stories about their experiences, descriptions of

sights and sounds, accounts of imaginary journeys, and fictional conversations. In the upper

grades, writing should be functional – growing out of the experiences of students, but focusing

on social situations based on the working world students being trained to join (Murphy, 2012).

Expressive Writing

The idea of creativity and expressive writing took hold especially in the years following

World War I. Composition instruction became focused on expressive writing about personal

experience, and occasionally creative writing. There were those who argued against expressive

writing because it seemed to favor the white middle class (Berlin, 1987). These critics had a

point: systemic racism in part dictated whose stories got published and printed. Berlin also

critiqued creative writing's individual nature or what he terms its "subjectivist epistemology",

privileging the private and personal vision of the author at the expense of the public and the

social (1988).

But expressive writing also had its champions, amongst which was John Dewey (1938).

Earlier, I discussed Dewey and his role in constructivism, but Dewey was an education reformist

who believed, like many before him, that writing was a social act, but he took that further by

highlighting writing's complex performance of interaction between writer, audience, subject, and

language (Murphy, 2012). His beliefs and theories appeared at colleges in almost every

geographical region (Berlin, 1987).

The mid-century saw an enormous expansion of education with both high school and

college enrollments, roughly doubling between 1930 and 1950 (Murphy, 2012). English

instructors were asked to take an increasing role in preparing students for modern life, but also

needed to do more and better writing instruction. In 1968, the National Council of Teachers of English survey, *High School English Instruction Today* (Squire & Applebee, 1968), discovered that while students assigned to the "advanced" track at school were doing some writing, students in "terminal" tracks were writing very little. In fact, these authors noted that across all tracks, virtually no actual writing instruction was taking place (Squire & Applebee, 1968). Something needed to be done, and three movements paved the way for massive changes in writing instruction.

Three Significant Initiatives in Writing Instruction

Three significant initiatives changed the discussion around writing instruction. The first was the Dartmouth Seminar. From August 20 to September 15 in 1966, more than fifty teachers from Britain, Canada, and the United States convened to answer the question, "What is English?" at the Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching of English. This meeting became known as the Dartmouth Seminar. It was here that the traditional view of English shifted from something one learns to something that is more process-oriented and tactical (NCTE, 1966). Shortly after in 1974, the National Writing Project was organized as the Bay Area Writing Project (Robbins & Dyer, 2005). The NWP established teacher training centers to improve writing pedagogy at schools in virtually every state. These efforts were almost exclusively conducted by schoolteachers.

The second was the teacher as researcher phenomenon. Its proponents worked to return control of the classroom to the teacher. Partly an attempt to resist strict, narrowly defined curricular mandates at the state level, this approach to pedagogy encouraged teachers to study the unique features of their students in order to design appropriate teaching strategies (Goswami & Stillman, 1987). The movement to reimagine writing teachers as researchers included

pioneers such as Lucy Calkins, Janet Emig, Mary Ellen Giacobbe and Donald Graves, who introduced process writing (Calkins, 2006; Emig, 1971; Giacobbe, 1978; Graves, 2003). Process writing involves a heavy scaffolding of writing skills through extensive pre-writing activities, the sharing of work with partners or small groups, and of careful attention paid to grammar and the conventions of Standard English before final presentation to others. Janet Emig's *Composing Processes* (1971) popularized what we now call the process approach to writing instruction (e.g. generating ideas, drafting, etc.), adding significantly to the momentum of examining the production of written texts, not just the texts themselves. Building off of and in conjunction with process writing, Donald Graves developed the Writer's Workshop in the 1980s (Calkins, 1994). This method of instruction focuses heavily on the consistent use of process writing, asking students to focus on their own lives in their writing, fostering independence in writing and developing students' sense of being lifelong learners.

The third major initiative was the spread of whole language approaches in English and literacy instruction. Whole language theory is derived from an analysis of how students learn to read and write. It presupposes that individuals learn to read and write under conditions similar to those in which they learn to speak, which implies that learning is contextual (White & Norton, 1991). It is built on constructivist theory in that it is centered on the belief that learning is constructing schemata for the world (Goodman, 1989).

In a whole language approach, reading, writing and oral language are taught in an integrated way. The approach champions student choice and learning through topics of interest for the student. According to White and Norton, "whole language education is learner-centered. Students are viewed as capable people with experience and knowledge. Differences in culture, language, value systems, interests and learning style are expected and respected" (1991, p. 10).

This movement was closely related to the teacher as researcher movement, in that a number of the same research methods and techniques were used. Whole language teachers, however, were often more interested in the social nature of learning (Newman, 1985).

Whole language teaching was criticized by advocates for back-to-basics methods such as phonics or traditional grammar instruction (Murphy, 2012). But, according to Goodman, debates about whole language versus phonics are not as straightforward as simple debates about instruction. He notes:

Education is a social political institution. So conflict within education reflect and are strongly influenced by political conflicts in the country. Since the founding of the United States as a country, a conflict has existed around who should be educated (Goodman, p. 190).

Goodman raises an important point about who is afforded education in this country. Reading and writing teachers must be trained in multiple, complimentary methods to support a balanced approach to literacy instruction that engages *all* students. But, the debate between phonics and whole language approaches persist and we are continually rethinking literacy instruction and the role of writing within it. In a recent report published by the International Reading Association titled, *Children Experiencing Reading Difficulties: What We Know and What We Can Do*, they describe what appropriate reading instruction looks like. They note:

Effective reading instruction is comprehensive. It addresses all the dimensions of reading and is responsive to the strengths and needs of individual students, which include intentional instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics. However, a comprehensive instructional approach also involves oral language development, writing and spelling, and a focus on comprehension (2019, p. 4).

As debates around the best way to teach literacy skills carry on, Goodman's point around who is afforded an education in this country is one that is explored further. Other researchers and educational leaders have brought to the forefront concepts like critical pedagogy and critical literacy, which address education systems that are often not neutral.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy was born out of a belief that all people should be educated, so that they might use their education to make change in society (Freire, 2000). Freire is acknowledged as the father of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000), which is foundational to critical literacy. Others, such as bell hooks, Ira Shor, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Barbara Sizemore (hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Shor, 1992; Sizemore, 1973), to name a few, have built upon and extended Freire's theories of critical pedagogy and literacy. Through his conception of critical pedagogy, Freire re-introduces the Greek term *praxis* to modern educational settings, defining it as people's reflection and action upon the world in order transform it (Freire, 2000). He argues that there is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education is either an instrument to introduce the younger generation to the logic of the present system and support conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which citizens critically and creatively evaluate reality, and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. Freire advocated a problem-posing cognitive approach to literacy—one that deepened the consciousness of all people, but most particularly those marginalized by dominant culture and ideologies, enabling them to apprehend oppression as a historical reality susceptible to transformation through thought and action.

Critical pedagogy is an instructional approach by which social injustices are investigated and critiqued. The framework requires that instructors be intentional about addressing unjust dominant themes and practices within our society via reflective and action-oriented instruction.

One of the critiques of critical pedagogy is that it does not specifically address bias and oppression based on race and class (McKay, 2010). Critical race theory (CRT) emerged to address specific social, political, educational, and economic concerns of race in particular (Bell Jr., 1987; Ladson-Billings, 1997). According to McKay (2010), "when critical pedagogy and critical race theory act in concert, adult education gives stage to the voice of the learner" (p. 26).

My interest in pursuing creative writing as a technique to support strengthening and deepening literacy came from the belief that it supports transformation through the building of writing skills in a socially situated context. One of the tenets of CRT is the development of counter narratives (Hiraldo, 2010). Counter narrative is a framework that legitimizes the racial experiences, in particular, of minoritized and marginalized groups (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1997). This counter narrative goes hand and hand with an examination of the dominant ideologies that affect self-worth. CRT begins with the notion that racism is "normal, not aberrant, in American Society", p. xiv), and because it is so integrated into our society, it appears both normal and natural to its citizens. As Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998), one of the founders of CRT, notes, "…the (educational?) strategy becomes one of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations" (p. 12).

Moving into Present Day Writing Instruction

By the end of the 1980s, scholars and teachers had a great deal of history and knowledge to inform their instructional approaches and political beliefs in the function of an education system. The field of rhetoric and writing instruction had also evolved, and we had amassed key understandings of the role of writing and how to teach it most effectively. Among these discoveries was the idea that composition is a recursive process in which students are shifting from planning to drafting to revising (Flower, 1979). This is aligned with another key

understanding, namely that teachers should intentionally teach specific writing strategies such as

planning, revising and editing, while cultivating a safe and supportive writing environment

(MacArthur et al., 2016). Expressivists like Elbow (1973) advocated for a pedagogy that

supported the personal, original, authentic and unique voice of the writer. According to Elbow,

this can only happen if the curriculum supports the authenticity of all of its students and the

identities they bring to a classroom at any one given time.

Quality Writing Instruction at the Secondary Level

For students to access creative writing as a tool for literacy development, they must first

be equipped with the language, tools, and knowledge to learn the mechanics of writing, then

translate those skills into meaningful expression. There are a number of best practices in the

teaching of writing that can be reviewed and described. Of particular interest is the work of

Applebee & Langer (2013), Calkins (2006), Emig (1971), Galda (Galda & Beach, 2001),

Gallagher (2006), Graham and Perrin (2007), Graham (2019), Graves (2003), Newkirk (2004),

and Shaughnessy (1971). These researchers and scholars are the most commonly cited on best

practices in writing pedagogy for secondary schools and their ideas move us into the 21st century.

In 2007 and in 2017, The Carnegie Corporation and the Federal government respectively

released two key reports that describe effective writing instruction. They were *Writing Next:*

Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High School (Graham &

Perrin, 2007), and *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively* (Graham et al., 2017). Each

report was based on meta-analysis techniques, which allow researchers to look across findings

that show the effects of instructional practices on student writing quality, and then highlight

those practices that hold the most promise. The recommendations from these two reports align

with the movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s related to process writing, but extend the thinking by specifying key instructional practices that improve student writing quality.

Writing Next (Graham & Perrin, 2007), was commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation in response to the problem that American students today are not meeting basic writing standards. The report identifies 11 elements of effective writing instruction for helping adolescent students learn to write well. These include process writing specific strategies such as planning and pre-writing, revising, editing and establishing a workshop-type environment that "stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing." (Graham & Perrin, 2007, pp. 3-4). Other elements include explicitly instructing students in how to establish specific, reachable goals for their writing; support students in analyzing data to help them develop ideas; combine basic sentences into complex expressions; engage in collaborative writing with classmates; summarize texts, which requires students to be able to fully understand their content in order to strip that content down to a summary form; provide students with exemplars to study; and use writing as a tool for learning in the content areas. (Graham & Perrin, 2007).

Grammar instruction is absent from this list of elements, which notable because it has typically been an integral part of writing instruction (Graham & Perrin, 2007). The authors did find an effect for grammar instruction for students across all writing abilities, but the effect was negative. Graham & Perrin note:

> Such findings raise serious questions about some educators' enthusiasm for traditional
>
> grammar instruction as a focus of writing instruction for adolescents. However, other
>
> instructional methods, such as sentence combining, provide an effective alternative to

traditional grammar instruction, as this approach improves students' writing quality while

at the same time enhancing syntactic skills (2007, p. 21).

The authors of *Writing Next* also make special mention of the use of different genres in

writing. They note that in the early grades, writing tends to focus on storytelling and other kinds

of narratives. However, in the secondary school years, writing assignments focus on expository

tasks, such as reporting and expressing an opinion with the support of evidence. They argue that

expository writing tasks tend to be favored in college classrooms, so it's clear why expository

writing is favored in high school as a preparatory tool (Graham & Perrin, 2007).

In a report prepared for the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional

Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, under the What Works Clearinghouse initiative, the

authors of *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively* (Graham et al, 2017) offer a meta-

analysis of the literature focused on studies published between 1995 and 2015. The report begins

with a definition of effective writing, then follows with recommendations for instruction.

According to the report, effective writing "achieves the writer's goals; is appropriate for the

intended audience and context; presents ideas in a way that clearly communicates the writer's

intended meaning and content; and elicits the intended response from the reader" (2017, p. 1).

Having established a baseline definition of effective writing, the authors could then move

to their recommendations for instruction. Similar to the authors of *Writing Next*, Graham et al.

recommend explicitly teaching process writing strategies for planning, goal setting, drafting,

evaluating, revising, editing, and writing with audience and purpose in mind. They also

recommend teachers teach the similar strategies, skills, and knowledge both readers and writers

employ to create meaning and use a variety of written exemplars (Graham et al., 2017).

The authors make two other final recommendations. First, they argue that teachers should use a "Model-Practice-Reflect instructional cycle to teach writing strategies" (p. 2). This cycle starts with the teacher modeling the specific strategy, then providing an opportunity for students to practice the strategy, and, finally, allowing space for students to assess and reflect on both their writing and the writing of their peers (Graham et al., 2017).

Second, the authors specifically discuss the role assessments of student writing play in informing instruction and feedback. Included in this recommendation are assessing students' strengths and areas for improvement before teaching a new skill, tailoring feedback to specific student skills, and monitoring progress against strategies and skills taught (Graham et al., 2017).

Disciplinary Literacy

Both reports highlight the need for writing to occur in every discipline. In most of the nation's high schools, instruction is organized by subject or discipline (Graham, 2007). Teachers are typically organized into departments by their subject matter specialty (i.e. English, mathematics, science, and history). Most discipline-specific teachers spend each day independently teaching topics in one content area to classes of twenty-five to thirty-five students for forty-five to sixty minutes at a time (Corcoran & Silander, 2009). These norms have reinforced an isolated and independent approach to teaching in high school classrooms (Corcoran & Silander, 2009). According to Graham et al.:

> Writing spans classrooms and discipline areas. Writing is a key component of English language arts classrooms, and secondary students on average write more for their English classes than they do for any other class. However, students write more for other disciplines combined than they do for English language arts (2017, p. 9).

With the realization that students write more in other disciplines than they do in the

English classroom, there has been a great push for disciplinary writing, which, simply put, is to

intentionally teach writing in other disciplines. While most educators would agree that each of

the disciplines present opportunities for high school students to write, perspectives diverge when

it comes to what literacy instruction should look like in content-area classrooms, and whether

content teachers like science teachers or math teachers should be teaching writing at all (Moje,

2007). Some of the specific questions that have arisen, for example, include whether there are

discipline-specific literacy strategies that educators should teach or whether content area teachers

should apply general reading strategies to content goals, and whether teachers should engage

students in subject-specific experiences that involve reading and writing (Gabriel & Wenz, 2017)

There are many debates, stances and foci when it comes to disciplinary literacy (Moje,

2007), which are beyond the scope of this review. Sharing these questions, however, does

provide some insight into the challenges educators face when it comes to meaningfully

integrating literacy across disciplines. Implementing quality writing instruction in the English

secondary classroom and in the high school equivalency classroom has its own challenges, which

I will explore next.

Challenges to Effectively Teaching Writing

In the previous section I reviewed what effective writing and writing instruction looks

like at the secondary level. Here I offer an account of the current landscape of writing

instruction in American high schools. First, it is helpful to describe some key things that are *not*

currently happening. Gallagher (2006) provides some "writing wrongs" in secondary school that

helps frame this section. Here are some highlights:

Students are not writing enough, writing is assigned not taught, below grade level writers

are asked to write less than others versus more than others, grammar instruction is

ineffective or ignored, writing topics are often mandated with little thought about the

prior knowledge or interest of the students, and teachers are doing too much of the work.

Students are doing very little of the work (p. 9).

The list above aligns with accumulated knowledge on best writing instruction practices.

For example, writing has to be explicitly taught, students have to be interested in what they are

writing, and there has to be time built into the schedule for writing practice. Writing is a

complex task and needs adequate instructional time to master; however, despite its importance,

writing does not receive enough attention in contemporary schools (Graham, 2008). According

to Graham (2019), a typical teacher at the secondary level devotes significantly less than an hour

a day to teaching writing, which is not enough time to provide students with the skills needed to

write and write well.

In a report commissioned by *Renaissance Learning*, Graham asked a random sample of

high school teachers from across the United States to talk about writing instruction in their

classrooms. His analysis determined:

The most common writing activities that their students engaged in were writing short

answer responses to homework, responding to material read, completing worksheets,

summarizing material read, writing journal entries, and making lists. Together, these

activities involved little extended analysis, interpretation, or writing. In fact, one half of

the most common assignments were basically writing without composing (short answers,

worksheets, and lists). (Graham, 2008, p. 1)

The "writing wrongs" discussed by Gallagher and elaborated on by Graham are

commonplace in writing classrooms at the secondary level and very aligned with what we know

to be best practices in writing instruction. The way writing is taught impacts students' abilities

to achieve. According to the most recent findings from the National Assessment of Educational

Progress (2017), only 79% of 12th graders are at or above basic proficiency in writing. Likewise,

college instructors estimated that 50% of high school graduates are not prepared for college-level

writing demands (Achieve, 2005), whereas American businesses spend $3.1 billion annually for

writing remediation (Commission, 2003).

Students who struggle academically, are also at risk for disengaging or dropping out of

high school (APA, 2013). About 55% of adults at the lowest literacy levels did not graduate

from high school and have no high school equivalency diploma (NAEP, 2018). The authors of a

2014 report published by MDRC on writing instruction in adult education classrooms in the

United States noted that there were more than two million adults enrolled in adult education and

HSE courses, and incoming assessment data collected showed that more than half of them were

are at an eighth grade writing level or below (Manno, Yang, & Bangser, 2015).

If we know what quality writing instruction looks like and we are aware of the

ramifications of low quality instruction, then why are we not, for the most part, implementing

best practices? I have already described some of the challenges, such as the lack of dedicated

time in a school schedule that can be devoted to writing, and confusion around how disciplinary

literacy can and should be implemented. There are two other challenges I'd like to explore. The

first is teacher education and how certain practices are prioritized. The second is the mounting

focus on standardized testing and the ways in which teaching to the test has caused specific

writing instruction to be preferred.

Teacher Education

Many of the best practices that have been described lend themselves to a teaching that has the potential to give all students the literacy skills needed to thrive. There is a disconnect, however, and many of those practices are not being implemented. One reason for the disconnect that I'd like to explore is whether teachers are adequately prepared to teach writing in the ways described.

In a survey of more than 360 non-discipline specific high school teachers, Graham & Kiuhara found that many of the teachers did not feel adequately prepared to teach writing:

> Seventy-one percent of all teachers indicated that they received minimal to no preparation to teach writing during college (preservice preparation), and 44% continued to report the same low level of preparation following college (in-service preparation). When we just asked about their preparation to teach writing within their content area or discipline, less than one half (47%) of the teachers agreed to some extent that they had received adequate preservice preparation, whereas 58% agreed to some extent that they had received adequate in-service preparation (Graham & Kiuhara, 2009, p. 148).

Such preparation is vital because classroom writing practices are influenced by teachers' beliefs and knowledge (Graham & Kiuhara 2009). If a teacher feels more confident in their capabilities to teach writing, they will devote more time, energy and attention to it. They will also be more likely to reflect on their instructional practices when students are struggling with a concept (Graham, 2009).

A focus on teacher education could impact the quality of writing instruction, but changing classroom writing practices involves more than changing teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010). There are other factors that contribute to how writing is taught that go well beyond the

classroom and teacher education (Graham, 2019). For instance, the amount of time devoted to

writing in a typical school schedule and the number and type of students in a classroom are each

related to national, state, district, and school policies (Graham & Kiuhara 2009). The type of

instruction students have been getting is dictated not only by national and state policies, but also

by national standards. Just as in 1861 England, concerns continue to arise about the role

standardized testing plays in instruction. The interplay between the standardized test

environment and the writing process will be explored in more depth in the next section, but on a

practical level, standardized tests often dictate the amount of time devoted to writing instruction

in a secondary school schedule and the type of writing instruction most often seen in secondary

school classrooms. In other words, teachers teach to the test and focus on writing only as much

as is required to pass it.

In 2003, a report published by the National Commission on Writing titled *The Neglected*

R: The Need for a Writing Revolution makes a strong case for writing to go from being

undervalued in a standard school day to being an integral part of what it means to learn. They

note:

> In the minds of policymakers learning improvement focuses largely on facts, discrete
>
> areas of curriculum, and educational institutions. In this Commission's view, the concept
>
> of educational reform must be expanded to include ideas; the ability of students to think,
>
> reason and communicate; and broad community and societal support for the goals of
>
> learning (2003, p. 9).

They go on to note, "In short, if students are to learn, they must write" (2003, p.9).

Writing remains neglected, however, and the focus on standardized testing is one of the

main reasons for that.

Standardized Testing

On a historical and social level, standardized tests were originally developed to measure intelligence in order to identify the individuals who were worthiest of a college experience (Lemann, 2000). In theory, standardized tests, like the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), are supposed to be neutral assessments of a student's scholastic ability. The idea is that the students who work hardest will earn higher scores, and scores on tests like the SAT in particular will give them an upper hand in the college admissions process. But there is a growing concern that standardized tests are better at revealing things like household income, race, and level of parental education than they are at predicting college success (Guinier, 2015; Lemann, 2000). This, then, begs the question: what is the real purpose of these tests and how have they come to dictate how writing is currently being taught? The next section reviews the standardized testing movement and how standardized testing has been influential in 21st century education including writing instruction.

A Brief Overview of the Standardized Testing Movement

To understand how we have arrived at our current state of writing instruction, we need to review changes at the federal level that affect school systems and the teachers who operate within them. Testing to determine grade level and knowledge gained has been around since the 19th century (Gallagher, 2003). In 1983, the authors of *A Nation at Risk* laid the foundation for our current testing climate with this warning:

> Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors from throughout the world... the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people (National

Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5).

By 1989, 47 states had responded to the report's recommendations by adopting policies that expanded statewide testing programs (Gallagher, 2003). This rising sense that we need to have a better picture of how students are performing against the growing threat of mediocrity described in *A Nation at Risk* continued, and, in 1994, Goals 2000: Educate America Act was signed into law by President Clinton. Educators who supported this Act believed that it clarified what was expected of students on standardized tests and what instructional strategies teachers should employ to contribute to higher achievement scores (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). This need to better understand student achievement in order to be globally competitive continued into the twentieth century. President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) with bipartisan legislative support in 2002.

Standardized Testing Takes off Under NCLB

While the NCLB was not the first major advancement in the standardized testing movement, it is the one that has had the deepest implications for 21st century education. Under the NCLB law, states must test students in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school. States must report the results for all students, including particular types of students, including English language learners, special education students, racially diverse students, and children from low-income families (Gallagher, 2003). The Act's main purposes were education reform (Heubert & Hauser, 1999) and the development of a competitive workforce. Schools needed to be held accountable for these goals. Gallagher (2003) describes some of the organizing principles of the Act and the accountability measures it emphasized:

By 2005, content and performance standards will be assessed in reading and math, and by 2007, science will be included. By 2014, these assessments will evaluate statewide progress toward nationally established proficiency goals. States must also implement an

accountability system, with attached incentives, to ensure that all districts are

demonstrating adequate yearly progress in achievement. Low-performing schools may

face "corrective action," such as mandatory tutoring, replacement of school staff, or

school restructuring p. 94.

Schools and districts were encouraged to increase student performance through a variety

of accountability measures; school leadership seeking to achieve these performance goals

became hyper-focused on making sure that students did well on the tests. Schools and teachers,

under the scrutiny of NCLB, focused on test-taking strategies and content that is presented on the

tests. In many cases, the previously described best practices in writing instruction were dropped

from the curriculum, because the writing skills needed to excel on the tests is minimal. The most

writing a student is required to do for a standardized test consists of the five-paragraph essay;

therefore, current writing instruction, for the most part, has been whittled down to teaching that

particular skill (Graham & Perrin, 2007). A singular focus on this type of writing does not allow

exposure to varied writing methods that lead the way to deeper expertise in students (Gallagher,

2006).

To put writing in the context of NCLB, it's important to understand the legacy of its

requirements. NCLB required that 95% of students in grades 3 through 8 and once in high

school be assessed through standardized tests aligned with standards in math, reading and

science. Even though writing had not been specifically called out, some stated opted to include a

writing assessment as well. For example, the New England Common Assessment Program

(NECAP) was a collaboration among New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont to build a set

of assessments to meet the requirements of NCLB, which included a writing assessment. They

started administering writing assessments in 2005 and in 2009, Maine joined the collaboration

(NECAP, 2012).

States must also permit the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a

national assessment organization founded in the 1960s, to administer standardized tests to a

sample of students so that students can be compared across states. Many schools and districts

feel the pressure to ensure their students are proficient in the tested subject areas. Although

teachers mostly seem to understand what good writing instruction looks like, they often do not

follow best practices in favor of focusing on standardized test preparation (Applebee & Langer,

2009).

<div style="text-align:center">Common Core State Standards</div>

In 2009, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were developed by state leaders,

including governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states and two territories

through their membership in the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and

the Council of Chief State School Officers. As previously mentioned, state standards have been

around since the early 1990s, so in the early to mid-2000s, every state had adopted its own

standards that describe what students in grades 3-8 and high school should be able to do. Along

with standards, states also had their own definition of proficiency, which is the level students

need to master to move from grade-to-grade or to graduate. This lack of standardization was one

reason why the CCSS were developed (CCSSO, 2010).

Under NCLB, tests were still required but the argument for having a national set of

common standards was to level the educational playing field because each state had its own

expectations for student achievement. In the absence of this and with NCLB enacted, states were

setting low standards (Whitman, 2015). Whitman notes:

When the Obama administration took office in 2009, 35 states had set proficiency levels

for fourth grade reading at below "basic" levels, benchmarked against the National

Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In some states, students could score below

the tenth percentile nationally and still be considered "proficient." Seven states required

eighth grade students to only have the equivalent of a D or D+ to be deemed proficient in

mathematics (2015, p. 3).

The arrival of the CCSS did not change the requirements of NCLB. It just changed the

nature of the work, offering new standards which necessitated new tests. The CCSS is not a

curriculum, but a clear set of shared goals and expectations that describe student success. They

were developed with teachers and aligned to the skills needed to be successful in college and

career. With the CCSS, there is scaffolded learning from first grade to 12th so if you are a state

that has adopted CCSS, students will get exposed to a connected set of goals developed to build

skills over time (CCSSO, n.d.).

Writing is a major focus of the CCSS. The standards focus on three types of writing,

argument, informational or explanatory, and narrative (CCSSO, 2010). For the purposes of this

study, it's important to note that the CCSS does make mention of creative writing under narrative

writing. The CCSSO note, "The narrative category does not include all of the possible forms of

creative writing, such as many types of poetry. The standards leave the inclusion and evaluation

of other such forms to teacher discretion" (2010, p. 23).

The narrative category of the CCSS does provide autonomy to teacher and schools in

figuring out how to meet the standards. For example, according to the CCSS web site, by the

10th grade, students should be able to, "write narratives to develop real or imagined

experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured

event sequences" ("Read the Standards," 2010). Teachers can use their discretion and use creative writing as a means to teach complex writing skills.

The standards also establish guidelines for literacy in all disciplines because, according to the CCSS web site, "students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas, the standards promote the literacy skills and concepts required for college and career readiness in multiple disciplines" ("Read the Standards," 2010).

While the CCSS provide a level of transparency, some observers are concerned that they may not be able to achieve that goal because they are covering too much ground without adequate depth in any one area (Strauss, 2016). There is also concern about how these standards get implemented. In a survey of districts operating under CCSS, Song, Yang & Garet (2019) found there were many challenges in instituting the standards including inadequate funding, professional development and curriculum materials. They note the following:

> In addition to inadequate funding, the majority of the states participating in the 2013 CEP state survey also reported challenges such as developing educator evaluation systems that hold educators accountable for student mastery of the CCSS (32 states) and identifying and/or developing curriculum materials needed for implementing the new standards (26 states). The majority of the states also reported major challenges in the area of professional development. For example, 37 states considered it a challenge to provide sufficient high-quality professional development to help teachers implement the new standards, and 33 states felt it challenging to provide all principals with state sponsored professional services on the CCSS (Song, et al., 2009, p. 6).

In lieu of having adequate curricular and professional development resources to implement standards like the Common Core, teachers are left to determine the appropriate

instructional strategies to teach the standards. While teachers should be given autonomy in how

to construct lessons that meet the needs of their students, without proper professional

development, they may struggle. A study released in April of 2018 (Song, 2018) showed that the

states that have adopted the Common Core do not outpace other states on federal NAEP

exams. In 2017, the standards appeared to have produced modest *declines* in fourth grade

reading and eighth-grade math scores (Song, Yang & Garet 2019).

A singular focus on standardized tests has not shown to serve all students well especially

struggling or marginalized students. As of 2017, 35 states have adopted the Common Core State

Standards, 11 have adopted them but plan substantive re-writes, four never adopted them, and

one state has only adopted them in English Language Arts (Ujifusa, 2017). More research needs

to done in determining how to implement standards that have the potential to make education

accessible and transparent for all. While we continue to struggle with the consequences of

standardized testing, federal mandates continue to shape our educational system, as seen with the

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), discussed below.

Every Student Succeeds Act

The NCLB was replaced with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed with

bipartisan support and signed by President Obama in December 2015. The ESSA moves away

from federal oversight of educational practices and requires states and districts to ensure that all

students, including children with disabilities, English learners, and other historically underserved

groups, graduate high school ready for college or a career (CCSSO, 2016). Even though we

have moved away from the NCLB Act, ESSA still maintains a requirement that states administer

annual statewide assessments in reading/language arts in grades 3, 8 and once in high school

(CCSSO, 2016). This Act officially launched in the 2017-2018 school year, so state and local

educational agencies are currently in various stages of implementing ESSA. According to *ESSA Implementation Timeline: A Guide to Key State and Local Processes*, which outlines the timeline for implementation of and accountability to ESSA from 2017 through 2021, a majority of ESSA state plans have already been approved and moving forward (CCSSO, 2018).

With the continued focus on standardized testing, how can writing instructors teach writing in quality ways that centers the learning and learner context and allows students to construct their own compositions based on their interests? Turning to the needs of students who left high school before graduating, what kinds of special considerations do students pursuing high school equivalency options have? The next section reviews writing instruction through the lens of high school equivalency programs.

Writing Instruction and the High School Equivalency Exam

As discussed, high school was designed to serve as a prerequisite to college or to work, but for a variety of reasons, many students do not follow the traditional track to finish high school. Adult education programs that provide high school equivalency (HSE) exams provide an opportunity for adults to earn a high school diploma that helps them to achieve their goals. The GED (General Education Development) program was the first established HSE program and exam. It was designed in the 1940s to accommodate returning World War II veterans, but in 1947 the state of New York decided to allow civilians to sit for the GED test as well (Quinn, 2003). By 1970, all 50 states were making use of the GED program (GTS, 2018).

In 2013, the Office of Vocational and Adult Education released the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) for Adults (Pimental, 2013). The CCRS were specifically developed to identify critical knowledge and skills that adults need to thrive in the workforce. Previously, earning a GED was not a guarantee that an individual could enter college or a well-

paying, entry-level job (Rutschow, Grossman, & Cullinan, 2014). The CCRS demystified what

knowledge was necessary to achieve a student's long-term goals. Shortly after the release of the

CCRS, an updated version of the GED was developed to align to the new standards. Other

organizations capitalized on these changes and developed high school equivalency exams to

compete with the GED.

In 2014, the Educational Testing Service released the High School Equivalency Test

(HiSET), and McGraw Hill Education released the Test Assessing Secondary Completion

(TASC). Both the HiSET and TASC are equal to the GED in that they are recognized high

school equivalency diplomas and are available nationally. Table 1 illustrates the adoption of

each standardized test by state. In some cases, states adopted one test, all three tests, or a

combination of tests (Zinth, 2015).

Table 1

State Adoption of High School Equivalency Exams

Standardized Tests	State Adoption
GED Only	Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, Washington D.C., and Wisconsin
HiSET Only	Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, and Tennessee
TASC Only	Indiana, New York State, and West Virginia
GED and HiSET	Hawaii, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania
GED and TASC	South Carolina
GED, HiSET and TASC	California, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, Wyoming

Massachusetts adopted the HiSET, but continues to also offer the GED, so students have a choice. Both the GED and HiSET exams take over seven hours to complete and they both consist of subtests in the content areas of mathematics, reading, science, social studies, and writing (MADESE, 2018a). Typically, HSE students tend to struggle most with writing and math (Gopalakrishnan, 2008). In order to pass the GED, a student must take a standardized, proctored exam at an official testing center. Students may go directly to a test center and sign up

for the battery of tests that make up the HSEs, or sign up for classes to support their completion of the credential (MADESE, 2018b).

Because of differing state requirements and the wide range of programs available, no consistent standard exists for GED test preparation and instruction (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). Students can prepare for the exam in a number of ways. In Massachusetts, GED and HiSET instruction is offered through adult education programs that are operated by school districts, community colleges, municipalities, multi-services centers, libraries, faith-based organizations, housing developments, workplaces, and unions (Hotline, 2017). In these types of programs, the instructors work part time and may not have had training in adult education methods (Smith, Hofer, Gillespie, Solomon, & Rowe, 2003). The majority of states do not require credentials to teach in adult education, although individual programs may require a college degree or a K-12 teaching certificate (World Ed., 2018). Because of this and the need to move students through to test-taking quickly, instruction is often limited to building the skills necessary to pass the exam (Martin & Broadus, 2013).

Changing Needs of High School Equivalency Instruction

Nearly 80% of students who enter ABE and ASE programs have skills below the ninth-grade level, with over 40% entering with skills below the sixth-grade level (Pimental, 2013). Students who have not been successful in school because of academic, familial or societal issues need especially strong supports to develop the necessary skills for college success, including intentionally building self-confidence and supporting growth in maturity (Wahl, Kleinbard, & Reilly, 2013). Teaching and instruction in HSE programs need to represent the needs of the student body, but teachers and programs are struggling. While there have been some advances, according to Rutschow and Crary-Ross, "adult education is still in critical need of reform across

a number of areas if the field is to see larger-scale improvements in academic success among

high school dropouts" (2014, p. 8).

Community colleges also offer HSE instruction and are a popular choice for returning

adult students. They face different but similar challenges to community based HSE programs.

In a careful study of community college instruction (Boner et al., 2013), the authors point out

that 60% of students attending community colleges need remediation classes, which are a

sequence of tuition-based developmental English (and math) courses that do not count toward

the general education requirements of most certificate, diploma, or degree programs (Zafft,

Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006). In other words, many HSE students who earn a HiSET or GED

end up in these remedial courses because they need more preparation in academic reading and

writing. These courses cost money, yet are not eligible for financial aid because they offer no

college credit. Such courses are yet another barrier for HSE students who want to earn a college

degree, and many do not persevere (Chen & Simone, 2016).

Standards such as the ones outlined in the CCRS (Pimental, 2013), were intended to

provide all adult students with the opportunity to be prepared for postsecondary training without

needing remediation, but we still have a ways to go. There have, however, been a few promising

practices in overhauling HSE instruction that are worth noting. For example, HSE-to-college

bridge programs are showing promise (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). These programs

demystify the skills needed for specific pathways, as in the case of LaGuardia Community

College's bridge program, which focuses on business and health careers (Martin & Broadus,

2013). The curriculum is contextualized, meaning skills needed to matriculate into those

programs at the community college are embedded into HSE instruction. Some of these types of

bridge programs offer concurrent enrollment into community college programs while still in a

partner HSE program. This allows students to earn transferable college credits (Rutschow &

Crary-Ross, 2014). By design, this model requires instruction to be more rigorous because

students are working on building the needed skills to move beyond developmental education

courses at community colleges (Bragg, Harmon, Kirby, & Kim, 2010; Jensen & Yohalem, 2010;

Martin & Broadus, 2013). Unfortunately, much more research needs to be done. Rutschow and

Crary-Ross (2014) warn, "while these positive trends are encouraging, they should be

approached with caution as they do not employ comparison groups or statistical controls that can

account for factors such as background characteristics or motivation of students" (p. 30).

Ultimately, earning a GED or HiSET diploma is not a guarantee that students will be

ready for the reading and writing skills needed for college and career. Much of this has to do

with the type of instruction offered and the focus on short-term goals such as simply earning an

HSE diploma. Literacy instruction needs to be better aligned with what we know about how

learn adults best. The next section will provide an overview of research in adult learning and

literacy education.

Adult Learning and Literacy Education

Adults who have previously disengaged from traditional school settings and want to

return to earn an HSE diploma usually enroll in classes at either community-based, adult

education programs, or at community college programs (Council, 2012a). In both of these

settings, the goal is to support adults in their acquisition of a HSE diploma in order for them to

move toward their next goal in life, which is usually tied to higher education or workforce

outcomes (Chen & Simone, 2016). Unfortunately, there is little research regarding how adults

actually acquire literacy skills. In fact, most of what we know comes from research with K-12

students and general research on how people learn (Council, 2012b).

Researchers such as Paulo Freire, Jack Mezirow, Malcolm Knowles, Robert Gagné, Victoria Purcell-Gates, Raymond Wlodkowski, and Christine Smith do offer some insight into adult education and literacy learning (Freire, 1998, 2000; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Mezirow, 1990; Mezirow and Taylor, 2009; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015; Gagné, 1985; Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2002; Smith et al., 2003; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017). The most common belief is that adult literacy instruction should be collaborative, dialogic, and responsive to the lives and needs of the learners (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Purcell-Gates et al., 2002; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). This is aligned with the constructivist viewpoints and situated learning theory described earlier. There is other research, however, about younger populations that can guide the development of instructional approaches for adults if modified to account for differences between age groups. For example, adults may experience age-related neurocognitive declines that affect reading and writing processes and speed of learning (Council, 2012a). Also, adults bring varied life experiences, knowledge, and motivations for learning that need attention in the design of literacy instruction for them (Purcell-Gates, Degener, & Jacobson, 2001; Fernandez, Peyton & Schaetzel, 2017). Compared with children, adults may have more knowledge and possess some literacy skills while still needing to fill gaps, acquire content knowledge, and develop the level of literacy needed for education, work, and practical life (Council, 2012b).

Knowles

Research in adult education in general has focused on the considerations and conditions that allow adults to learn. Andragogy, the adult version of pedagogy, was introduced by Malcolm Knowles, and describes the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles et al., 2015). Both pedagogy and andragogy involve six key assumptions. They are the need to know,

the learner's self-concept, the role of experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation (Knowles et al., 2015). While we can make these assumptions about both adult and children, they are discussed very differently. For example, adults may want to know why they need to learn something before agreeing to learn it, whereas children will most likely be able move forward with the lesson without knowing how it applies to their lives (Knowles et al., 2015; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017). Another example relates to a learner's self-concept. The andragogical model states that adults are responsible for the decisions that they make for their own lives. Adults and children differ in this area because adults walk into an education setting with a sense of self and the need to be responsible for their lives, whereas children are more dependent on the teacher and their family structures (Knowles et al., 2015).

National Research Council

In alignment with Knowles' and others' contributions on adult learning, the National Research Council of the National Academies have published two reports that focus on adult literacy. They are *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Options for Research and Practice* and *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Supporting Learning and Motivation* (Council, 2012a, 2012b). These studies underscore the importance of adult learners' active engagement with what they read and generate using their own language (both spoken and written), in addition to reasoning and content. Learning is enhanced when students have to organize the information themselves and exert cognitive effort to acquire or retrieve it. According to Council:

> Simply put, it is the student who should be doing the acting, thinking, talking, reading, and writing in order to learn. Encouraging learners to engage in deeper levels of thinking and reasoning is especially helpful to adults, who need to develop these skills for education, work, and other purposes involving complex materials and tasks (2012b, p. 6).

Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Supporting Learning and Motivation further emphasizes that literacy skills must be practiced to become automatic, and that this practice is achieved in out-of-school contexts through the reading materials students choose, and by writing a wide array of different types of texts (Council, 2012b). Given the needed in- and out-of-school practice needed to develop literacy skills alongside competing demands in adults' lives, instruction should proceed as efficiently as possible and be based, as much as possible, on everyday activities.

Mezirow

Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1990) is another important theory because it is also focused on adult education. The theory posits that adults have acquired frames of reference such as associations, concepts, values, feelings, and conditioned responses that define their world. We understand our experiences through our frames of reference. Teaching that focuses on examining, questioning, validating, and revising frames of reference can transform adult learners' perceptions. This transformation is when learning occurs.

Critical Pedagogy

Mezirow's work has been influenced by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who has also been known to discuss adult learning as transformative (2000). Freire, who I have already mentioned earlier, is acknowledged as the father of critical pedagogy, which is foundational to critical literacy. One of the critiques of critical pedagogy is that it does not specifically address bias and oppression based on race and class (McKay, 2010). Critical race theory (CRT) emerged to address specific social, political, educational, and economic concerns of race in particular (Bell Jr., 1987; Ladson-Billings, 1997). According to McKay (2010), "when critical pedagogy

and critical race theory act in concert, adult education gives stage to the voice of the learner" (p. 26).

My interest in pursuing creative writing as a technique to support literacy acquisition came from the belief that it supports transformation through the building of writing skills in a socially situated context. One of the tenets of CRT is the development of counter narratives (Hiraldo, 2010). Counter narrative is a framework that legitimizes the racial experiences, in particular, of minoritized and marginalized groups (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1997). This counter narrative goes hand and hand with an examination of the dominant ideologies that affect self-worth. CRT begins with the notion that racism is "normal, not aberrant, in American society" (Delgado, 1995,p. xiv), and because it is so integrated into our society, it appears both normal and natural to its citizens. As Gloria Ladson-Billings, one of the founders of CRT, notes, "thus, the (educational?) strategy becomes one of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations" (1998, p. 12).

Traditional school and instructional practices that focus strictly on test taking do not provide opportunities for students who have been marginalized and "othered" or who have lost self-esteem due to dropping out, to build self-confidence. Freire and Macedo (1987) question the traditional school practice of maintaining the status quo through the use of educational tools, methods and assessments that privilege career or subject specialization over a student-centered, critical literacy that examines the inter-relations of the world. A focus on creative writing allows students to bring prior knowledge into classroom spaces, take ownership over their own learning, practice much needed pre-writing, development of counter narratives and revision while honoring and uplifting their deep sense of self, which is aligned with what we know about the

best practices of adult learning. Creative writing has the opportunity to develop classroom space where, historically, certain students may have felt silenced (Camangian, 2008).

Creative Writing as a Tool to Support Literacy Acquisition in Adults

Many educators and researchers have delved into the use of creative writing and literature to promote student voices and promote literacy skills in adolescents, which provides some insight into adult learning. For example, Morrell's work on critical English education encourages, "practitioners to draw upon the everyday language and literacy practices of adolescents to make connections with academic literacies and to work toward empowered identity development and social transformation" (2002, p. 313). Tatum's study (2000) of disenfranchised African American readers demonstrates that racial experiences are highly relevant to their reading lives. One of his participants says, "We are not used to reading and writing. It's like we are starting over in eighth grade" (p. 55). Tatum cites problems with comprehension and strategy that affected the students' reading abilities, in addition to fear of embarrassment, which prevented students from academic risk taking.

Graves (2003) describes how personal narratives are an easy way to get students interested in writing right away and offers a concrete first step toward confidence in telling their own stories. He points out how difficult it can sometimes be to break bad instructional habits through more student-centered writing (Graves, 2003). He writes, "children who are fed topics, story starters, lead sentences, even opening paragraphs as a steady diet for three or four years, rightfully panic when topics have to come from them" (p. 21). He also points out the importance of students being taught the art of topic choice, in order to foster a link between voice and subject.

Other research has emphasized the extent to which writing is socially situated and context

specific (Graves, 2003; Newkirk, 2004). Newkirk, in particular, provides concrete ways for writing to be taught across the curriculum through the use of narratives taking what Graves describes as an initial way in for students. Newkirk encourages all content area teachers to use narrative writing in their instruction. He writes, "as teachers, we can help students unlock the dramatic structure of ideas and information – and they can exploit this drama in their writing" (2004, p. 39).

Tatum writes that "if students struggle, we should first examine our own instruction, very often, the problem is not a struggling reader and writer but a student who lacks engagement in the materials he's being asked to read and write" (2013, p. 116). Tatum acknowledges that educators need to take responsibility when students are not engaged in the material we are presenting or the instruction we are providing. This reflection is more challenging when you are also not well versed in what you are teaching. Power dynamics and explicit and implicit biases at play in a classroom make it unsafe for students to fully engage. Lea & Street (1998) note the conflicting ways in which student writing is viewed that may not consider issues of identity and the institutional relationships of power and authority often inherent in diverse student writing practices. To extend this idea of power and authority in instruction, Delpit outlined the five aspects of a "culture of power" inherent in the classroom:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.

2. There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a "culture of power."

3. The rules of that culture of power reflect the rules of the culture of those who have power.

4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the

rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.

5. Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its

existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence (1988, p. 282).

Educators need to acknowledge classroom dynamics and how they affect students. There

is always a context in which the stories of our lives are formed, and as we learned from the

history of writing instruction, context matters. Context goes into the interpretations and

meanings that we give to events. The context of gender, class, race, culture and orientation are

all powerful contributors to the stories by which we live. A curriculum and instruction that

focuses on allowing students to tell stories to learn about themselves and their histories will

support the building not only of literacy skills, but also self-esteem through understanding of

context as a problem outside of students.

All of the above speak to intentional methods and approaches to writing instruction that

are imperative to help all students learn writing and see themselves as writers. Creative writing

can be used as a tool to not only support the mechanics of writing and literacy acceleration but

also foster the crucial building of self-worth. Educators and researchers look at the connection

between the arts and cognition. Research demonstrates the connection between art and learning.

Multisensory learning such as theatre arts, visual art, writing, dancing, and singing in

combination with the study of a challenging literary text can provide a developmentally

appropriate means of engaging students with new ideas, with their own creativity, and with one

another (Landay & Wootton, 2012). Through writing we can build community. According to

Landay and Wootton, "when students feel they are in a supportive community – filled with what

we refer to with the Portuguese word *alegria* – they are willing to focus, work hard and take

risks" (2002, p. 19).

Educator Linda Christensen shared her experiences in building community with students who have been "othered" or marginalized, writing:

> To become a community, students need more than an upbeat, supportive teacher. They need to understand the parallels of hurt, struggle, and joy across race, class, gender, and cultural lines; they need to uncover the roots of inequality in our society and to work together for change (2017, p. 5).

The connection between literacy and identity must be acknowledged. Academics and researchers like Lesley Bartlett, James Gee, Elizabeth Moje, Allan Luke, Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell offer insight into this relationship (Bartlett, 2004; Burnett, Merchant, Pahl, & Rowsell, 2014; James P. Gee, 2006; Moje & Luke, 2009; Moje & Tysvaer, 2010). For example, Gee (2004) discusses the idea of *performing* identities. In other words, the way we think, behave, believe, speak and write are examples of performing particular identities. This was also highlighted by Moje and Luke (2009), who noted that, "when a language learner writes a poem, a letter, or an academic essay, he/she considers not only the demands of the task but how much of his/her history will be considered relevant to this literacy act" (p. 415).

The use of creative writing as a tool to accelerate literacy in adults is aligned with the best practices in adult learning and is a central tenet of situated learning theory, which is a constructivist view of learning that focuses on meaning, practice, community and identity. Language learning, in particular writing, engages the identities of learners because language itself is not only a linguistic system of symbols, but also a complex social practice in which the value and meaning given to words (both written and spoken), are determined in part by the person using the words (Moje & Luke, 2009). Kole explored identity work and student narrative

development in an adult literacy classroom (2018). She focused on discussion, interviews and written assignments using fairy tales as the medium, and found that:

> After completing the literacy programme, participants were able to identify generic themes in texts, analyse symbolic meaning, improve linguistic, cognitive and affective skills through writing tasks within the context of fairy tale genre. Indicators of success also included, gaining greater confidence in writing creatively … (p. 385).

In order to pass the reading and writing portions of the HiSET, one must be able to identify themes, as well as analyze symbolic meaning, and works of fiction. Yet, Kole's study show that those skills are not being taught in a literal way. They are being taught in a context of creative works that students can engage with, choose and develop on their own, which is respectful to the ways in which adults learn and allows for student ownership over their learning.

Alfred Tatum (2013) shared an approach to teaching he used with African American adolescents through a summer program he designed called *The African American Male Summer Literacy Institute*, where there was a strong focus on writing, student voice and critical consciousness. Tatum describes surrounding students with *enabling texts,* books or stories that are meaningful to young people. This opens up pathways in the student's mind to other ideas, opportunities and understandings. Texts need to resonate with all students, so they all see themselves represented. According to Tatum, "Few students – particularly those that are already suspicious of school – are going to spend their time with a text that doesn't speak to them" (p. 116). Tatum also discusses the idea of *raw writing*, which means allowing students the opportunity to write whatever comes to their minds or whatever is in their hearts. Allowing students the freedom of *raw writing* gives them confidence in their own voices. Surrounding students with enabling texts that resonate with their culture and identity supports them in

defining themselves and building a sense of much needed belonging (DeCuir & Dixson 2004; Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003).

In chapter two, I reviewed the history of writing instruction in order to show how writing instruction has evolved. A perennial focus on standardized testing has marginalized students who have not been able to learn in the ways highlighted. There are a few exceptions, however, such as Writer's Workshop and critical literacy instruction, which centers students and allows for the creation of writing products that allow students to consider their identity in relation to their contexts. Students who have dropped out of middle or high school return with the desire to earn an HSE diploma that they can use as a steppingstone to college or better career opportunities. The reality is that many of the challenges they faced in traditional educational circumstances follow them into adult education programs. Creative writing holds promise because it provides an avenue for students to gain the literacy skills they need quickly and re-engage in educational pursuits in ways that resonate with their goals. This can only happen with a focus on constructivist teaching methods that situate context, history, critical pedagogy and build students' self-worth as learners.

Chapter three describes the research study. Specifically, I discuss the design of the study, which seeks to explore issues in literacy instruction for returning adult learners hoping to earn a high school equivalency diploma.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine whether integrating creative writing techniques into a high school equivalency (HSE) classroom could be an effective tool to strengthen and deepen literacy skills. Through my analysis of interviews, pre- and post-writing surveys, lesson plans, student work based on 12 weeks of creative writing instruction, and detailed field notes, I intend my study to add to the minimal body of literature concerning the instructional practices of writing teachers within adult basic education/HSE programs. Chapter three explains the setting, my role as researcher, the research design and rationale, and the biases and assumptions I carried into the setting and tried to temper as well as possible in the course of my research.

Setting

I chose Strive Education (Strive) in Boston (pseudonym) for three reasons. First, Strive has a longstanding history of serving adults (18+). Founded in 2000, the organization's mission is to make high school completion, post-secondary study, and sustainable career paths more accessible to underserved communities in Greater Boston. Being in a local community of a major city ensured that there would be a diversity of perspectives and a variety of instructional needs to strengthen the analysis.

Second, Strive serves a large population in relation to other nearby programs. My goal for this study was to have 3-5 consistent participants and to work with a program offering a wider array of instructional options. In a given year, Strive works with more than 300 HSE and college transition students, as well as more than 200 youth seeking improved careers (Strive, 2019).

Third, Strive personnel expressed a willingness to learn from this process. They were able to make space in their program and in their schedule to allow for a researcher to teach a creative writing class in their school. They helped to advertise the opportunity and they encouraged students whom they identified as needing extra support with writing to join the class that would serve as my research site (see Appendix A for student flyer).

Role of the Researcher

In September 2019, I started teaching a 12-week creative writing course at Strive that served as the basis of this research. The course met once a week on Thursdays for two and a half hours. The course was designed to introduce creative writing, assign students writing projects based on their interests, instruct them in creative writing techniques, monitor their learning of techniques, and provide specific feedback based on individual student work.

At the beginning, students engaged in a pre-writing survey (see Appendix B for survey questions) to give me a baseline of where they were with their writing skills at the outset of the course. At the end of the course, I did a post-writing survey so see where skills may have been enhanced. I also did individual interviews with each student. After each instructional interaction, I took detailed descriptive field notes (Merriam, 2016) in order to keep my impressions fresh after each interaction, and to preserve a nuanced memory of encounters amongst students and with me one-on-one. I utilized these notes to inform future lesson plans and, eventually, contribute to my analyses and conclusions.

I was a doctoral student during the time I engaged in this research. While not a current practitioner, I brought with me over 20 years of experience in the field of adult basic education and HSE instruction. I have taught basic literacy, English for newcomers, the writing, reading, science and social studies portions of both the HiSET and GED exams, and creative writing to

both high school students and adult education students. I also wrote the writing curriculum for the GED publisher, Paxen Learning (cite it?).

In 2013, I led the curriculum component of RoxMAPP, a City of Boston initiative to provide Madison Park High School students with opportunities to earn college credit at Roxbury Community College (RCC), while still in high school. The curriculum component involved creating a curriculum map that would allow teachers at the high school to prepare students for direct matriculation into college English courses at RCC in their senior year of high school. In other words, they would be dually enrolled in high school and college English courses in order to accelerate the process of their earning an Associate's Degree. For this program to be successful, there had to be a direct correlation between the high school and college curricula. This year-long project culminated in the creation of a 5-year curriculum map and lesson plans that would, in theory, ensure that these high school students were college-ready.

The experience of developing a 5-year curriculum road map and accompanying lesson plans allowed me insight into both the reading and writing skills needed to be ready for college English courses at the community college level. I was able to leverage that knowledge into the development of a pilot curriculum that I taught at RCC. RCC also offers semester-long HiSET/GED courses, and I taught two semesters' worth of reading and writing courses piloting the use of creative writing techniques to prepare adult students for the HiSET and GED exams and for matriculation into RCC. I incorporated all of the refinements I made to the curriculum based on that pilot into this study.

Finally, I was a former GED student myself, who earned a GED in the City of Boston. While my practical experiences provided knowledge related to adult learning, curriculum design, creative writing instruction, and writing instruction related to preparedness for college English,

my personal experience gave me a deep appreciation of the community and social context in which the research was conducted.

Participants

In late August of 2019, I came to an open meeting at Strive where I was able to present information about myself and the creative writing class I was planning to teach in September of the same year. Students were able to meet one-on-one with me if they expressed interest in the class, so that I could explain the requirements. In case I missed anyone at that meeting, I provided recruitment flyers, which the education director distributed at the school. He also identified individuals from the school who were on a waiting list for Strive's writing class and needed writing support in order to pass the HiSET exam or to pass college entrance exams. Recruitment for this study ultimately relied on student volunteers who expressed interest and students who were selected by the education director.

Three students signed up and stayed with the class for the whole three-month duration. Participants ranged from the ages of 20 to 77. Students within this range comprise the typical age of adult education students in the United States (Council, 2012a).

Research Design and Rationale

I conducted this study using a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is an umbrella term for a wide set of varied approaches and methods that emphasize a search for understanding multiple realities (Maxwell, 2013; Saldana, 2011). Through qualitative methods, researchers strive to understand how participants interpret their experiences related to particular situations or series of events (Glesne, 2011). In order to arrive at this interpretation, qualitative researchers aim to employ a logical, inductive process through which themes, patterns, and understanding are identified and studied through the lens of the data that have been collected

(Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glesne, 2011). The information or data collected within qualitative research typically consists of textual materials such as interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents, and/or visual materials such as artifacts, photographs, video recordings, and Web sites that document human experiences (Saldana, 2011).

The specific approach I took to the design and analysis followed constructivist grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Constructivist grounded theory is a contemporary version of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss's (1967) original presentation. The constructivist version prioritizes asking probing questions about the data and scrutinizing the researcher and the research process (Charmaz, 2017). Constructivist grounded theory utilizes methodological strategies such as coding, memo-writing, and theoretical sampling. However, it also elevates critical and ongoing inquiry of the data and the theoretical frameworks that inform the analysis and data collection process from the beginning to the end.

Research Questions

To address needed research in this area, as stated earlier, I explored the following central question: How can creative writing techniques strengthen and deepen the literacy skills of adult students in high school equivalency programs? I focused particularly on the following sub-questions: how can creative writing processes support students' achievement of personal and/or academic goals? Further, how does a curricular focus on individual storytelling build literacy confidence and/or student agency?

The questions I posed are well-suited for qualitative research methods, since multiple data types allow for capturing the nuance and complexity of learning, storytelling and self-expression, which are important areas for this study. By conducting this study within the natural setting of the classroom, the data revealed ways in which students see themselves as writers and

how those self-reflections played into their academic confidence. Pre- and post-writing assessments allowed for growth to be captured and analyzed.

These research questions were intended to guide the purpose of this study, which was to gain insight into using creative writing techniques in the adult high school equivalency classroom. In order to do this, it was necessary to investigate students' personal and academic goals because adults pursue education that will be responsive to their lives (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Purcell-Gates et al., 2002; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). It was also necessary to investigate the ways in which creative writing instructional techniques could positively affect students' academic confidence and personal agency, which are important particularly if students pursuing a high school equivalency diploma did not have positive experiences in more traditional educational settings.

Data Collection

The data I collected to inform my research questions align with the larger goals of the study. According to Maxwell (year):

> The research questions are not the starting point or controlling piece of the design, to which all other components must conform. Instead, they are at the center of the design; they are the heart, or hub, of the model, the component that connects most directly to all of the other components. (p. 5)

I analyzed the questions and determined the most appropriate data sources to support understanding of them, as Table 2 illustrates.

Table 2

Alignment Between Research Questions and Data Collection Sources

Central Question	Data Source
How can creative writing techniques strengthen and deepen the literacy skills of adult students in high school equivalency programs?	1. Pre- and post-writing surveys 2. Analysis of pre-surveys to inform instruction 3. Interviews 4. Field notes 5. Documents
Sub-Questions	
How can creative writing processes support students' achievement of personal and/or academic goals?	1. Pre- and post-writing surveys 2. Analysis of pre-surveys to inform instruction 3. Interviews 4. Field notes 5. Documents
How does a curricular focus on individual storytelling build literacy confidence and/or student agency?	1. Interviews 2. Field notes 3. Documents

Pre-writing Surveys

All students did a pre-writing survey, which served as a preliminary writing sample that I

could analyze at the outset. These helped me determine a baseline for the students' writing

abilities before we started working on creative writing projects (see Appendix B for survey

questions). The pre-writing survey was intentionally informal in order to give students a low-

stakes writing experience that centered on their voices and hopefully didn't intimidate them, especially if they had not had previous positive experiences with writing.

Analysis of Surveys

I used the 6+1 Traits Writing Rubric (Education Northwest, 2017) to analyze the pre-writing surveys and determine writing strengths and weaknesses in key areas. The rubric covered six traits (plus an additional trait, *presentation*, which I did not use in my analysis) that helped to define levels of writing proficiency. The six traits were ideas, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and voice (Education Northwest, 2017). A collective and individual understanding of students' skills allowed me to plan instruction at the most appropriate level.

Interviews. Interviews served as guided conversations with participants. Interviews provided a window into students' personal narratives and helped me to take note of their authentic speaking voices. Giving students a mechanism to tell their own stories is also a process of meaning-making (Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, & Silverman, 2004). From a research design perspective, the process of being interviewed supported a multi-layered approach to inquiry.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format (Seidman, 2013), with a pre-determined number of questions prepared beforehand. Interviews happened one-on-one and in private, and an interview protocol was followed during interview sessions (see Appendix C for interview protocol). The interviews were conducted at the start of the study and took place within a two-week time period. Each interview took about 15 minutes, were conducted at a time convenient for participants, and took place at Strive. All participants granted permission to be recorded before starting the interviews, which allowed me to gain an accurate record of

participants' responses. I used a hand-held recorder, and saved and stored files in a password

protected location. I created a secure account at an online transcription service, Rev.com, and

their personnel transcribed the interviews, ensuring confidentiality.

Post-interviews were also conducted at the end of our class and took place on the last day

of class. Students were asked the same questions as they were in the pre-interviews. This

approach allowed me to isolate whether there were changes in their perceptions of their literacy

skills based on the class.

Documents. Documents refer to any existing or created material, in written, visual,

digital, or physical form, that is relevant to the research being conducted (Stake, 2010). In this

study, I collected lesson plans and student work as sources of evidence. Any supporting

documents, such as handouts or graphic organizers, were considered a component of the lesson

plan and were collected along with it. Student work were the most collected documents because

creative writing projects were assigned and monitored over the course of 12 weeks. All writing

drafts were either collected or photocopied after each class.

Field notes. Field notes are a research tool to help record observations, behaviors,

activities, events and other features of the setting being observed. According to Merriam (2016),

some key areas to observe and document include the participants, the setting, conversations,

activities and interactions among participants and researcher. Field notes are meant to be read

and used by the researcher to produce a rich portrait of the culture, social situation or

phenomenon being studied.

After each class, I spent at least ten minutes writing everything I had observed that

seemed relevant to my research questions. I also jotted down my own observations and

preliminary analyses of various happenings during class and at the school. I later took those notes and fleshed them out in more, legible detail in order to analyze them later.

Post-writing surveys. After instruction, I gave out post writing surveys, mimicking the pre-writing surveys to gauge if there were changes as a result of class instruction and creative writing project work. I later analyzed post-writing surveys using the same six writing traits from the 6+1 Traits Writing Rubric (Education Northwest, 2017). These surveys helped to provide a more nuanced picture of the growth that occurred from beginning to end of the course. I will explain in greater detail the manner in which the rubric was used in the data analysis section.

Data Storage

I organized and stored all pre- and post-survey results, lesson plans, field notes, analytic memos and all student work in a locked filing cabinet. I stored interview transcripts in a primary file on my computer in a password protected location, and hard copies were also stored in the locked filing cabinet. I was the only person who had physical access to this data in order to ensure the protection of participants' identity and maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis

As noted above, I collected data from multiple sources, including pre- and post-writing surveys, student writing and interviews. I interviewed students one-on-one and asked them questions relating to their personal and academic goals and interest in creative writing, in order to understand their beliefs around literacy and their perceived identity as writers. With their permission, I recorded the interviews, then transcribed the notes to use in analysis. All of these data that were collected allowed for me to engage in deep synthesis and analysis. The sub-sections below describe the approach I took with each type of data that I collected.

Pre- and Post-writing Surveys

As noted earlier, post-writing survey questions were identical to the pre-writing surveys, in order to gauge any changes in responses over three months. Any changes that were recorded could be attributed to class instruction and creative writing project work. In chapter four, I share more details regarding what the analysis of the pre- and post-writing surveys yielded.

Interviews

After the recording of the pre interviews were transcribed, I analyzed the transcriptions to identify the main themes that emerged. I used constructivist grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1965; Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to drive my analysis. As stated earlier, grounded theorists analyze data using comparative methods from the beginning to the end of the research process. Early analyses is used to identify what subsequent analysis and further data collection should entail. In turn, these data help develop theories, frameworks and understandings. In other words, grounded theory data evolve throughout the study (Charmaz, 2019). Constructivist grounded theorists, in particular, view data as co-constructed between researchers and research participants and locate these data within their social, historical, and situational conditions of production (Charmaz 2019).

Grounded theory allows for multiple coding methods and is based upon three levels of analysis that allow the researcher to gather a complete picture of the information obtained during the data collection process. The three levels of analysis are open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). During open coding, I compared data and continually asked questions to make connections among data. In the axial coding stage, I connected data in new ways, continually asking questions while using deductive reasoning to move and develop

categories. The continued asking of questions and further making of comparisons is the main

feature of the axial coding stage (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Finally, in selective coding, I defined and chose a core category, systematically

connecting it to all of the other identified categories. The concepts and relationships that are

developed through the coding process help guide the data collection and analysis processes and

is referred to as theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Although, constructivist

grounded theory is often used to develop a theory or identify a theoretical framework, that's not

always the case. According to Charmaz, "Grounded theorists can conduct compelling research

without constructing theory" (2020, p. 173).

Throughout data collection, I continually revisited previously identified categories to be

more open to what the data presented. At the end of the class, I conducted post-interviews with

participants, transcribed the recordings then further analyzed the data to bolster an understanding

of previously identified categories or to add nuance to what had emerged.

Documents. The majority of the documents I collected were student work. Because

students worked for 12 weeks on a creative writing project, the documents I collected were

narrative in nature and, in the case of the two students who were assigned memoirs, personal. I

did analyze student writing for themes using a similar process to grounded theory; however, the

content caused me to explore narrative research methods. Although I had not set out to do

narrative inquiry, the student work I collected lent itself well to this approach. According to Kim

(2016),

> Metaphorically speaking, each narrative inquiry is a quilt, made out of pieces of personal
>
> and social stories that may be collected from any walk of life. The quilt is a reflection of
>
> the part of the world in which we live. Methodologically speaking, narrative inquiry is

an interdisciplinary, qualitative research that pursues a narrative way of knowing by

exploring the narratives or stories of participants (p. 9).

The *narrative way of knowing* Kim describes is predicated on the belief that the story

participants are telling is true and meaningful to their experience, that we are able to take the

story at face value (Kim, 2016). As a researcher, I integrated students' creative writing

assignments into my analysis because I believed them to be a valid source of data.

Field notes. Throughout the data colletction process, I reviewed and analyzed field notes

to support the collection of further data or the zeroing in on a particular concept. In my final

analysis, I looked for the most prevalent themes across each data type to identify emergent

themes and used triangulation to substantiate any conclusions I drew. Triangulation is a

technique that supports accuracy in the interpretation of data by using multiple methods of data

collection (Glens, 2011). Field notes were instrumental to my analysis. I used them to remind

myself of moments from the classroom that helped bolster the emergence of particular themes or

conclusions I formed based on themes.

Based on the research questions I posed, pre- and post- assessments, interviews and field

notes are not enough to paint a nuanced and complex picture of writer identities, awareness of

social constructs and the power of individual voice. Case studies, including cross-case analysis,

provides a final method of analysis. According to Stake (2006), a case study is both a process

and product of inquiry. The case study acts as a summary of what has been done to get answers

to the research questions posed. By selecting the case study research method, I was able to

qualitatively interrogate how literacy skills can be strengthened, deepened and accelerated based

on the individual contexts of the three adults participating in the study. Case studies allowed for

some assertions to be made based on each case, but cross-case analysis provides another level of depth to continue to make assertions with confidence (Stake, 2006).

Bias and Assumptions

Researchers conducting qualitative research collect data that is subject to interpretation and is shaped by individual experiences, backgrounds, and understandings (Creswell, 2009). While my personal and practical experiences did bring important insight to the research, it is also possible that they contributed to biases in my interpretation and findings. In order to enhance credibility, qualitative researchers should point out the biases and assumptions that may influence interpretation of the data and any conclusions that are drawn (Maxwell, 2013). As someone who has been in the field or connected to the field of adult education for over 20 years, I believe that adult students who are learning to write at a higher literacy level need high quality instruction that acknowledges their life experiences and provides avenues for self-expression. I believe this because I have experienced cases in which the opposite has occurred, and adult students have not academically progressed in ways that are meaningful to them. Allowing students to define what is meaningful to them is an important aspect to my teaching. I believe that student-centered writing instruction is the key to strengthening and deepening the development of literacy skills not only to be successful in taking an HSE exam, but also in building confidence as a learner who can tackle a variety of educational or work-related pursuits.

I formed these beliefs over my lifetime, but most acutely when I left high school at the age of 16 and went on to earn a high school equivalency diploma, specifically a GED. During this time, creative writing became an outlet for expressing the struggles I had with finding academic confidence as I re-connected with school and work. Because of my deep desire for self-expression, I was driven to learn how to write. I went on to college and eventually

graduated with a BFA in creative writing. I identify as a writer and that identity shapes my

approaches to living and learning. I hold a bias that creative writing can and will support others

the way it has supported me.

In stating these assumptions, my goal is to provide insight into how my experience,

knowledge and beliefs may have shaped the research. In addition, awareness of these

assumptions raises the importance of recognizing that there are varying perspectives.

Challenging all assumptions about the research topic is vital in helping to reduce bias within a

study (Glesne, 2011).

Chapter Summary

This study focused on utilizing creative writing techniques to strengthen and deepen the

literacy skills of adult students pursuing high school equivalency diplomas. The research project

included the collection and analysis interview data, pre-and post-writing surveys, student work

based on creative writing instruction and field notes. In this chapter, I covered the general

aspects of the study's design, the role of the researcher, my potential biases, setting and

participants, data collection, and data analysis procedure. In the data collection and data analysis

sections, I covered how I approached data analysis using grounded theory and, where

appropriate, utilized a narrative inquiry lens. Case studies including cross-case analysis provided

the final method of analysis in the research study.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of the study is to investigate whether the intentional integration of creative writing into a high school equivalency (HSE) writing curriculum contributes to students' confidence in their literacy skills, strengthen and deepen writing skills, and provides a vehicle for student-defined agency through the use of student-generated stories and student-selected mentor texts. In order to address the needed research in this area, this study explores the following central question:

- How can creative writing processes strengthen and deepen the literacy skills of adult students in high school equivalency programs?

Sub-questions include:

- How can creative writing processes support students' achievement of personal and/or academic goals?

- How does a curricular focus on individual storytelling build literacy confidence and/or student agency?

Chapter four is organized in a manner that presents data and findings but simultaneously reveals the analytical processes I engaged in to consider the data. I first describe the participants in the study. There were three students who enrolled in the 12-week course I taught titled *Creative Writing and the HiSET*. Since the study is built on teaching creative writing processes, the chapter continues with an overview of the curriculum. A description of a typical HiSET curriculum is provided along with a description of the curriculum used to teach the *Creative Writing and the HiSET* course. These curricula are analyzed and compared.

Narrative case studies of each student follows. Writing narrative case studies allowed for an authentic look at individual students within the context of the class and program. Through case studies, I share details from their lives I learned through interviews, first-hand interactions, and field notes. The details I chose to include are connected to the role creative writing played in relation to the central and sub-research questions.

I structure the discussion of the analysis under the two sub-research questions, which taken together, helped me to consider my central research question. A detailed discussion of the analytical process and themes that emerged related to the two sub-research questions follows the case studies. This approach provides an opportunity to do a cross case analysis based on all of the data collected. The chapter ends with a summary that concludes the section.

Participant Overview

Three students identifying as female participated in this study. They ranged in ages from 24 to 77. Two of the students earned a High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) diploma early in 2019, but both needed to pass college entrance exams to matriculate directly into college-level, credit bearing courses. Neither was ready for those entrance exams, so they enrolled in a college bridge program at Strive Education (Strive). The third student passed the reading, science and social studies tests within the body of tests that make up the HiSET. She needed to pass both the writing and math tests to complete her high school equivalency diploma. All names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

Ruth

Ruth is 77 years old and earned a HiSET diploma in early 2019. It took her seven years to complete the diploma and, for her efforts, she was chosen to be Strive's class of 2019's valedictorian. While she is able to write well enough to pass the HiSET writing test, which is

comprised of writing an expository essay in response to a prompt in the time allotted, she is not yet able to pass the college entrance exams to matriculate into college. She remains at Strive in their college bridge program further developing her reading and writing skills. Ruth is originally from Jamaica and migrated to Boston 10 years ago with the dream of earning a college degree. She has five grown children: one in Boston and four still in Jamaica.

Judy

Judy is in her mid-50s and is a cancer survivor. She migrated from St. Martin three years ago after a hurricane destroyed her home. Judy and her daughter traveled to Massachusetts, so she could get cancer treatment and they could both rebuild their lives after losing everything in St. Martin. Judy's sister, who lives in a suburb of Boston, MA, welcomed her and her daughter into her home. Once Judy completed cancer treatment, she enrolled at Strive to earn a HiSET in order for her to then go on to college. She passed the science, social studies and reading tests, but not the math and writing. She is in an intensive math class at Strive, and the education coordinator thought she would be a perfect candidate for my creative writing class because she needs more writing practice. Judy has one daughter, Julia, who is also a student in the creative writing class.

Julia

Julia is 24 years old and migrated with her mother, Judy, from St, Martin three years ago. Julia earned a HiSET diploma early in 2019 and continues at Strive in the college bridge program because she wants to go to college and earn a degree. She is an artist and wants to pursue a degree in art or illustration. She is also interested in computer programming and expressed interest in degree programs that focused on graphic design or interface design. Julia enrolled at Strive with her mother, Judy, and the two of them attend their classes together.

The Curriculum

Before class began, I developed a curriculum that I followed for 12-weeks. The curriculum took into consideration what the HiSET exam expects students to know and be able to do along with the key competencies students need to exhibit in order to write effectively. This section is organized first by what the HiSET requires and a typical curriculum sequence used to prepare students for the exam. I then share an overview of the curriculum I developed for the 12-week class highlighting the similarities and differences to content and approach.

Typical HiSET Curriculum

The writing portion of the HiSET exam has two parts. Part one is a multiple-choice test that measures editing and revising skills. It provides drafts of texts, such as letters, articles, or reports. Potential problem areas or mistakes are underlined in each draft. Students must identify and correct errors or make improvements to the text from a multiple list of choices.

Part two is the essay. The student is asked to write an essay in response to a specific situation or scenario. A purpose and audience is given along with data to help students support their response. The essay is scored based on development of ideas, organization, language use, and writing conventions.

Educational Testing Service, the developers of the HiSET, provides resources and supports for educators preparing students for the test. From their curriculum guide, *HiSET Curriculum Blueprint* (Gevero & McGlade, 2015), they focus their writing curriculum in the areas of the development and organization of ideas, language facility, and writing conventions. Within those broad categories, they recommend specific curricular approaches. For writing, they recommend using a textbook called *Essential Writing and Language Skills: Preparation for High School Equivalency Tests* (Goonen & Shelter, 2014). The textbook follows a curricular sequence

of planning, drafting and evaluating to help students with the writing process. These categories align with best practices in writing instruction such as what Graham laid out in *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively* (Graham et al, 2017) that is to explicitly teach process writing strategies for planning, goal setting, drafting, evaluating, revising, editing, and writing with audience and purpose in mind.

The textbook is presented with the HiSET student as the user and is written in a way that students could directly interact with it. Here's an excerpt from *Essential Writing and Language Skills: Preparation for High School Equivalency Tests:*

Imagine you need to make a recommendation to your boss about which printer to purchase for the office. You work in a busy office that prints up to 1,000 pages per day. Examine the table and write a recommendation, including your reasoning.

	Price	Speed (Pages per Minute)	Monthly Workload	Ink Cost (Cents per Page)
Printer A	$459	24 ppm	70,000 pages	4.2
Printer B	$624	28 ppm	50,000 pages	2.3

Plan: First, examine your task. What is your purpose? Who is your audience? Is this a formal or informal task? What do you need to read and understand? What do you want to say?

Draft: Draft a response with a beginning, middle, and ending to recommend a printer.

Evaluate: All writing can be improved. During and after writing, evaluate your work and make changes (2014, p. 9).

The excerpt here shows a sample of what students will encounter on the HiSET exam. They are being asked to plan, draft and evaluate, but in a specific context. This lesson pre-supposes students have specific knowledge around workplace norms. What is an appropriate tone for making formal recommendations? Even if students have an understanding of workplace norms, they may not fully understand the factors they would need to consider to make a valid recommendation about appropriate printer purchases. Students would have to use mathematical and reasoning skills that they may or may not have. To use this lesson, a teacher would have to do pre-planning with students to scaffold skills needed to attack this scenario and write a response that has an appropriate beginning, middle and ending.

Creative Writing Curriculum

To begin the curriculum design process for the study, I took the broad categories of organization of ideas, language facility, and writing conventions emphasized in the HiSET and analyzed the big ideas within those categories of interpreting prose, understanding themes, making predictions, determining point of view, figurative language, word usage, and discovering author's purpose to name a few (ETS, 2016). I developed lessons that either were directly connected to a big idea or scaffolded learning toward the eventual connection to a big idea.

Using the big ideas as a guide, I then developed learning outcomes for the entire course. Working backward from there, I focused on each individual lesson. This is in line with backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), an approach to curriculum design where the designer starts with the end in mind. I also used the curriculum design philosophy outlined by Gagné (1985) that describes a series of events that follow a systematic instructional design process focusing on the outcomes or behaviors of instruction. It starts with gaining the attention of learners, building on their prior knowledge by helping them recall prior learning, presenting

new content, having them apply the new learning then providing feedback. This approach works

well for adults who do have previous knowledge, but may have gaps in learning.

Within that structure, I developed activities that led with literature and creative writing

including a deep look at different genres of literature based on students interacting with

culturally-relevant texts in the classroom. Students were immediately asked to analyze texts to

begin to get comfortable with making predictions about texts. They were asked to choose a

genre such as memoir or graphic novels that they would like to write themselves over the course

of the twelve weeks. When I introduced lessons, I made sure to be transparent about how what

they would be learning in the class would support their academic goals because these

connections were not always obvious. Appendix D provides a detailed overview of the

curriculum.

At the outset of the class, students participated in a lesson on literary genres and the

different types of creative writing that exists. In the interest of time, I focused on the genres of

memoir, poetry, short story, fiction, non-fiction and graphic novel. I brought to class roughly

five books per genre representing diverse characters and storylines, and asked students to interact

with all of the books until they found one that resonated with them. Each student did a short

presentation about the book they chose based on reading the description and a few pages of the

book. We then discussed as a group different genres. This allowed them to identify a genre of

interest to them and work with me one-on-one to outline a creative writing project they would

work on throughout the 12-week course. They were also asked to choose a book in their chosen

genre from the books they had all perused. This book was to serve as a mentor text throughout

the course. Mentor texts are pieces of literature (e.g. works of fiction and nonfiction, poetry,

articles, etc.) that are to be studied and imitated (NWP, 2013). Students would not only read the

book, but also use the book as an example of what writing in their genre looks like.

Student choices. Student genre choices became a key component of the curriculum and

an important part of the data collection.

Ruth. Ruth chose to write a memoir and was given *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by

Maya Angelou (Angelou, 1969) to use as a mentor text. She is writing about her life in order to

support other women who have struggled through abuse and are feeling as though they can't

accomplish their goals. At the age of 70, Ruth returned to school to earn a high school

equivalency diploma and she felt strongly that if she could do it then other women could.

Judy. Judy chose to write a memoir and was given *The Other Wes Moore* by Wes Moore

(Moore, 2010) to use as a mentor text. Judy is a cancer survivor and wants to share her

experiences of being sick then becoming healthy. She also wants to discuss her choice to move

from St. Martin to Massachusetts in order to seek treatment.

Julia. Julia is an artist and illustrator. While she has no formal training in drawing and

illustration, she has natural talent. She chose to write and illustrate a graphic novel and was

given the graphic novel *Snow White* (Phelan, 2016). She is interested in creating a science

fiction and fantasy story while she develops skills as an illustrator.

In alignment with the best practices in the teaching of writing, I led students through pre-

writing activities within their chose genres. I asked them to brainstorm ideas and not censor

themselves. As we reviewed their brainstormed list of ideas together as a class, students shared

with each other what resonated with them as the audience for the writing.

Once students identified the topics of their writing, I instructed them on how to outline.

Using guiding questions, I asked each student to develop an outline of their stories. From there,

we began to draft sections of their work and set goals for our writing. Based on what students had outlined, I asked them to set a target for what they hoped to accomplish within the class time we had. Ruth set a target of writing one full chapter of her memoir. Judy decided to write detailed outlines of all of her chapters, and Julia wanted to complete one chapter along with draft illustrations that would accompany that chapter.

Class was structured in a consistent way. The first 30 minutes was devoted to a group check in allowing each student to share what they have written in the last week and any successes or challenges they wanted to share. The next 30-45 minutes was devoted to a lesson related to a specific aspect of writing. For example, I did a lesson on how to grab a reader's attention with the opening line. Students engaged in practice with me in class. Once the lesson was complete, students would spend the remainder of the class writing. They could choose to edit their writing based on the lesson content or simply continue to write whatever they wanted to write. At the end of class, I would copy all writing and use what they accomplished in class to determine the lesson for the following week.

Similarities and Differences in Curricular Approaches

Generally speaking, a typical HiSET curriculum is focused on what students will encounter on the test. The tests were developed with college and career readiness standards in mind, but the mechanism by which those standards are tested are through multiple choice test questions and writing an expository essay. This understanding of what is expected on the exam often results in instruction that is aligned to being able to answer multiple choice questions *about* effective writing versus having students write themselves. Except when it comes to a standard expository essay because students have to be able to write an essay to pass the HiSET. What

creative writing approaches can do, though, is provide students authentic and engaging ways to practice writing that can then be applied to what they need to know to pass the HiSET.

The next section provides brief, narrative case studies of each student then an analysis of the individual themes that emerged from the data collection. Each case study provides a narrative overview of the participant to situate them in the context of the adult learning center providing insight into their interactions with me and others.

What follows the narrative overview is an analysis of the themes that emerged from interviews, personal interactions, field notes, pre- and post-surveys and student work. These analytical details are necessary for a discussion of the emerged themes and their relationship to the central and sub-research questions.

Case Study: Ruth

Narrative Overview

"What happened?" I ask when I walk into the kitchen area of Strive Education, an adult education program located in Boston. One of my students, Ruth, is dabbing her eyes with a tissue while the program manager, Maria, comforts her by rubbing her shoulders. My question floats in the air and I wonder whether I should walk back out of the kitchen that serves as my classroom.

After a time, Ruth responds, "I will never let anyone take away my right to go to school," she says then adds, "Never," for emphasis, "especially a man."

"I agree," Maria says supportively. "I hate seeing you cry. You are always so strong and poised."

My eyes dart between Maria and Ruth realizing they are speaking of something that happened recently in my class. Two weeks ago, after my creative writing class, Ruth turned to

another classmate and said to her, "You make me very uncomfortable because you are doing better than I am in this class."

I don't know how Ruth made the assessment that another student was doing better than she was, but she did make that claim and the other student was unhappy with how Ruth had approached her. I know this because last week when I came to class, the math teacher, Johnny, joined me in the kitchen to tell me that Judy and Julia, my two other students, may not be coming back to class. Johnny is not only the math teacher, but also the person at Strive Education that the majority of students go to when they are having problems or need additional support. Johnny is the eyes and ears at Strive and after the incident, Judy and Julia went to him to tell him that they would not be coming back to my class because they didn't want to be in the same room with Ruth.

During my conversation with Johnny, Judy and Julia walked in and shared their side of the story with me directly. They shared that they were fed up with Ruth's behavior. Apparently, Ruth had been making, according to them, snide comments about how she is better than they are in some way. I have not seen this side of Ruth in my interactions with her. To me, she is nothing short of a friendly, driven woman who is determined to reach her goals. In fact, she is the 2019 class valedictorian at Strive Education earning a HiSET diploma at the age of 77. It took her 7 years to pass the HiSET and she is determined to go to college. She remains at Strive Education in their college prep course because she wants to earn a bachelor's degree in business administration. She shared the following with me during her initial interview:

> "Me coming back to school is filling a two-way purpose I have. I am fulfilling my dream
>
> of going to college by God's help, and I want a home for battered women and children.

But I want to know the business side of things, so if I get somebody to do my books, I'll know what is being done."

Ruth immigrated to Boston from Jamaica over 10 years ago and found her way to Strive Education because she has unmet goals and deep passion for women and children. She experienced abuse at the hands of her husband and didn't want her children to experience what she had experienced. She shared:

"The day when he left was the biggest favor he did me. I won't go into that, but I was an abused woman. Abused, and he started to abuse the children, and that was what broke the camel's back."

And Ruth did do it. She returned to high school in Jamaica when she was 40. Ruth wanted to finish what she started in traditional high school, so signed herself up, paid the tuition herself through dressmaking and tending chickens, sewed her own uniform and joined students more than half her age in high school classes. This experience taught her that she can do anything if she puts her mind to it, which is why she now finds herself at 77 continuing to pursue her goals.

All of this is going through my mind as I sit across from Ruth and Maria at the round, well-used, kitchen table.

"What man is trying to take your education, Ruth?" I ask her in response to her statement.

"Johnny told me that he would kick me out if I continued to behave badly." Ruth starts to tear up again, "Can you believe it? I could be his grandmother and he telling me how to behave?" Maria shakes her head as if she couldn't believe it herself even though she worked alongside Johnny.

I didn't respond right away because I had also heard Judy's and Julia's versions of this story and according to them, Ruth did make Julia uncomfortable with her statement. I was able to convince Judy and Julia to stay with the class and to focus on their goals. I couldn't take a side, so I decide to do the same with Ruth, help her bring her attention back to her goals and our creative writing class.

"Ruth, I know you will not allow anyone to take anything from you ever again. You have so much to share and are such an inspiration! Focus on writing your memoir and don't get caught up in all of this." I wave my hand dismissively showing that "all of this" was like evaporating smoke.

Both Ruth and Maria smiled. Sensing the energy shifting, Maria said, "I can't wait to read your memoir. You are amazing."

"I want to finish my memoir," Ruth shared. "No one can take my story."

Strengthening and Deepening Literacy

Ruth completed the HiSET diploma earlier in 2019, but she continues at Strive Education in their bridge to college program. While Ruth had enough writing skill to write an essay worthy of passing the HiSET exam, she was not able to fully express herself in writing and knew she would struggle in college English classes, which was the main reason she found her way to me. She wanted to take advantage of every opportunity she could get to learn and excel.

Writing traits: pre-survey. The writing Ruth did for the writing pre-survey was analyzed against the 6+1 Traits Writing Rubric (Education Northwest, 2017). It showed that Ruth still needed work in a few specific areas of the rubric. Table 3 shows how I rated Ruth's writing against the traits. While she was able to convey ideas, organize her thoughts into written

form, and share a confident writing voice, she needed support in word choice, sentence use and

conventions.

Table 3

Pre-Survey Rating: Ruth

Trait	Rating
Ideas	Experienced
Organization	Experienced
Voice	Experienced
Word Choice	Capable
Sentence	Capable
Conventions	Developing

Based on the rubric (Education Northwest, 2017), an experienced rating denotes

proficiency with a specific writing trait. My analysis of Ruth's pre-writing survey responses led

me to rate her as *experienced* in three areas: ideas, organization and voice. With ideas, Ruth was

able to develop a clear, focused and somewhat complex main idea. With organization, she was

able to establish a clear purpose, and write a logical beginning, middle and ending. And, she has

an experienced voice that uses a consistent tone and demonstrates a commitment to the topic.

Where I rated her *capable* was in word choice and sentence fluency. In the area of word

choice, Ruth was mostly able to use clear, correct vocabulary, but has limited knowledge of

imagery and figurative language. With sentence fluency, Ruth was capable of using smooth,

correct sentence structure and has a rhythm and flow to her writing. Finally, I rated her

developing in the area of conventions. Ruth struggled with spelling mistakes and grammar

issues, which caused me to rate her as developing this trait.

Student work. After the first class, I not only analyzed the writing based on the 6+1

Traits Writing Rubric (Education Northwest, 2017) to determine areas of strength and growth,

but also reviewed the content of what students wrote in their pre-writing surveys about their

interests and goals. Ruth has such rich life experiences and speaks eloquently about how she

hopes other women will learn from her life that I assigned her a memoir as a creative writing

project. I also brought in a number of published memoirs for students to peruse. The purpose

was for them to choose a published text in their chosen genre that would serve as a mentor text.

Ruth chose the book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou (Angelou, 1969).

By the end of the class, Ruth's individual goals were to read as much of the mentor text

as she could, to outline the full memoir and to write a complete draft of one chapter by the end of

our time together. In class, we worked on her areas of growth related to her specific needs such

as adding more details to her prose and adding more of her observations to give depth to her

writing. These areas were enhanced over the time we were together. Examples follow below.

In the pre-writing survey, I asked students to describe their relationship to reading and

writing. Ruth responded:

"I am an avid reader. I read everything with words from my bible to the

newspaper. I also enjoy doing crossword puzzles, which also includes writing. Both

reading and doing puzzles increases my writing and reading skills."

After three months of working together, Ruth's response was richer and more specific

about the ways in which reading and writing have affected her life for the better.

"From my early childhood, I have enjoyed reading of every printed materials that

I could put my hands on. Reading opens my knowledge of the world where I might not

have the opportunity to see with my naked eyes. Being able to write about what I have

read, helped me describe the scene as if I had been there."

Because of the memoir, she had been reflecting on how reading and writing had always

been a part of her life. This idea showed up in her post-writing survey as well as in her creative

writing. As she was writing her memoir, I asked her to write a prologue to give her readers a glimpse into who she was as an adult before she began telling her childhood story in Jamaica. This is what she wrote:

"From my early childhood, I have always had a desire for a good education. I was not satisfied with only being able to read and write, but to have a college education. I would read every printed material I could put my hands on and my dad had always encouraged me. He would bring home the daily newspaper every evening and hand them to me. 'I know you like to read,' he would say.

There is so much in the world to know that reading put me in the spotlight of world's events. So many places to see that I may not have the opportunity to visit, but reading about those places, for instance, the ruin of the pharaohs, help me to paint an image and see it through my imaginative eyes.

Throughout my life, I have been an avid reader. That has helped me to read well. I read from my bible, to fiction and nonfiction novels, also the daily papers. Literature writings are my favorite. Shakespeare plays are both fun and educational to read. They tell me about the early Anglo-Saxon era and the language they spoke, which is not the typical English language of our day."

This excerpt from the prologue of her memoir shows how her ability to articulate why reading and writing were of importance to her throughout her life. These reflections became a part of her memoir as well as a part of the post-writing survey she completed. Her responses and her creative writing work were showing the evolution of her identity as a writer.

Growth in storytelling. Ruth's ability to tell a story improved in the class. I asked the students in their pre writing surveys to tell me a story. I gave no parameters on length or style. I

did encourage students to have fun with it. The story Ruth told on the first day of class is as

follows:

"There was once a little girl called Mary. Her mother owed her neighbor some

money, but she did not have it to repay. She saw the woman coming up the driveway, so

she told Mary to tell the neighbor that she was not at home. Mary opened the door and

said, 'My mom said to tell you that she is not at home.'"

On the last day of class, I asked the same question and this is what Ruth shared:

"Jamie was a new student who came to America with his mom and dad from Africa. On

his first day at his new school, he felt out of place. He did not speak English very well

and he had no friends. He had left all of his friends back in Sierra Leone. 'Oh! How I

wish I was back in my native home,' Jamie spoke his thoughts aloud.

'What did you say?' the boy sitting next to him asked. Jamie hung his head and

started crying.

The bell rang and it was recess time. Jamie sat quietly without turning his head.

'Don't you want to go for recess?' The same boy asked him. 'Come. Let's go,'

the boy said. 'I am Jack. What's your name?'

'Jamie.'

'Where are you from?'

'Africa,' Jamie's answer was just one word.

The two boys walked slowly outside. 'Let's play ball. Hey guys. This is Jamie

our new class mate.'

'Let's play ball!' They all bellowed.

Jack threw the ball in the air and the boys rushed to catch it. Jamie caught the

ball. He forgot how lonely he had felt just a few minutes ago. He felt as though he had

known the boys long ago.

It is always good to be kind to others especially when they are all alone."

While the first story is amusing, it doesn't have the complexity of the second story.

There is confidence in the second story that was not there in the first because Ruth felt more

comfortable in testing out a longer story.

Creative writing project. In terms of her memoir, Ruth was able to finish a first draft of

the first chapter of her memoir. Because Ruth was methodical about writing, she would write

one page, review then re-write, we focused on revising short sections at a time. One of the first

sections she submitted looked like this:

"Who am I? I am this scrawny, back of the class, little girl with a mane like that

of a horse and as coarse and curly as steel wool. So coarse and long that my mother

could not comb it every day. Sunday was my 'mane combing' day, which was an ordeal

in and of itself both or mom as well as for me. I was so afraid to have my mane washed

and combed that I wish Sunday would never come. I wished the week would stop at

Saturday, and begin again on Monday that would skip my ordeal, but that was just

wishful thinking."

As we worked together in class, I asked Ruth to put together an outline of her memoir, so

she had a sense of where she was going with the project. She knew she wanted to write about

her childhood and how the desire to be educated permeated her life. As she began to draft the

memoir, I further instructed her to vary sentence style and length, add more details, and add in

other, more poignant memories that gives personal writing depth. She spoke about how she

never came to terms with the idea that her mother loved her brother more than she loved her. I

told her not to be afraid of sharing the information about her relationship with her mother and her

brother. There would be no judgement about anything she chose to share. Her next revision

looked like this:

"Childhood memories are the most cherished in a person's life, whether they were

good or not so good. Looking back, my childhood days were both good and not so good.

I can remember my mother who was just four feet two, but a little spitfire and my dad,

ten feet four, but a gentle giant, and my brother, as mean as a star apple tree. You see,

the star apple would not fall from the tree, regardless of how ripe it is. If you do not pick

it, it would stay on the tree and dry out into nothing.

So who am I? I was this shy, scrawny, back of the class, little girl with a head of

hair like that of a horse's mane, and a texture as curly and rough like steel wool. It was

so long and coarse that my mother could not comb it every day. Sunday was my 'mane

combing' day, which was an ordeal in and of itself both for mom as well as for me. I was

so afraid to have my hair washed and combed that I wish Sunday would never come. I

wished the week would stop at Saturday, and begin again on Monday that would skip my

ordeal, but that was just wishful thinking.

Mom would wash my hair every Sunday, oil, and twist each part and twist them

into each other. She would tie my head at night with a scarf and brush it up every

morning. Mom would say, 'Why ain't you a boy so I could cut this thing off your head?'

Not only my hair was a problem, but she really wanted me to be a boy because she

preferred boys to girls. But who is it that said we have freedom of choice? If we really

was free to choose, I would have chosen to be a boy just to please my mother then I would get some of the love she showered on my brother."

While she fleshed out memories, she was also using many of the writing techniques we studied in class. For example, we talked about jotting down specific memories from her childhood to help jog her memory. Many memories from that exercise found their way into later drafts of her work. We talked about the use of quotes and I provided examples where quotes and dialogue enhanced a story then more of that technique made their way into later drafts.

Another example of this was when I asked Ruth to recall a memory from her childhood she hadn't wrote about before. She shared that she used to wash and iron her father's suits and it was quite a process. I asked her to write about that in order to practice writing the step-by-step details of that experience. I assured her that this activity would help her academically because teachers and professors want students to add a little of themselves in their writing making comparisons between something in their lives or from their past to the question being posed. We talked about that with the HiSET essay. A good essay included the writer sharing something about themselves that relates to the essay prompt. It showed that you were able to apply the topic to your life in some way, which provides a depth to the response. Ruth wrote this passage:

"Girls were trained to be future house wives. I remember being trained to wash and iron my father's white drill suit, he being a Moravian Deacon whose uniform was a white suit, white shirt and tie and black shoes.

I was just eight years old when my wash and iron training began. On that eventful Thursday, mother kept me home from school. 'You are going to wash and iron daddy's suit today,' said mother. The water is boiling for the starch. We did not know

anything about can starch. We would use the Yoka starch to starch clothes. She gave me the starch, 'Go and mix it and if you make it lumpy, I am going to whip you.'"

Writing traits: post-survey. The writing samples here show Ruth's growth as a writer over the time we worked together. As a result of this work and the analysis of pre- to post-writing surveys, I rated Ruth higher in the areas of word choice, sentence and conventions than I did during my analysis of her pre writing survey. Table 4 shows the progression based on the writing Ruth submitted in class and the final post writing survey.

Table 4

Post-Survey Rating: Ruth

Trait	Pre-Survey Rating	Post-Survey Rating
Ideas	Experienced	Experienced
Organization	Experienced	Experienced
Voice	Experienced	Experienced
Word Choice	Capable	Experienced
Sentence	Capable	Experienced
Conventions	Developing	Capable

Based on my analysis, I rated Ruth *experienced* (a proficient rating) in two areas: word choice and sentence fluency. With word choice, her work showed a marked progression in her use of imagery and varied vocabulary. She conveyed a more pronounced rhythmic sentence sense, which led me to rate her higher with sentence fluency. I also rated her higher with conventions, from *developing* to *capable*. While she still needs work with her spelling, grammar usage improved some.

Writing samples, pre- and post-writing surveys, teaching and classroom observations were just a few ways I was able to write a case about Ruth. I also did pre- and post-interviews with all three students, which allowed insight into their own growth and understanding by giving

each student the opportunity to share their own thoughts. The next section describes the themes that emerged from an analysis of transcripts from interviews.

Ruth: Emerged Themes

       Motivated by children. Ruth is motivated by her children. She has 5 children and wanted to be able to help them with their homework. She went back to school in Jamaica at the age of 40 and sat in class with high-school-aged students because she wanted to learn and earn a diploma, but she also wanted to be able to support her children. This drove her to achieve and succeed. Here is a quote from her interview to support this theme:

> "My children's education was more important than going to college. My children needed food, they needed everything. I had to be the mother, the father, the washer woman, the housekeeper, you name it, for them. So I didn't get to go through college. I stopped."

       For Ruth, she was initially motivated by her children and taking care of them. This drive turned into a deep drive to succeed to be a role model for her children and give them a better life. Ruth did not allow her age or her situation deter her from earning an education. That education was meant to support the best future her children could have.

       Purpose. Ruth was already driven to succeed by the time she entered Strive Education. She was focused and determined to earn a diploma that had value in the US since she earned a high school diploma in Jamaica. She had already had success with returning to school at 40 in Jamaica to earn a high school diploma. She brought that experience with her seven years ago when she signed up at Strive Education at the age of 70. It took her seven years to earn a HiSET diploma, but when she did, she graduated as the class valedictorian. This was a proud moment for Ruth and it validated what she had already learned, and that was that hard work and dedication paid off. She applied those same principles to her focus and perseverance through

bridge to college class, which will serve her well as she pursues opening a home for battered women and children. Here are some quotes from her interview to support this theme:

"I don't think my husband liked it. I said, I prefer going to high school. He said, you big married woman, what about your husband? I said, I don't care, as long as I achieve what I want."

"Of course I didn't have to pay to sew them, because I sewed them myself. I sewed my uniforms."

"I decided I'm going to raise some chickens. Three months my chicken will mature and I will sell them, get that money to pay my school, and that's what I did."

"Ever since I was a child, I have had a desire for a good education. I was not satisfied with just being able to read and write, but I also wanted to graduate from a higher institute of learning."

Without ambition, persistence and a strong sense of resiliency, Ruth would not have persevered. She has a strong sense of purpose and focus that she brought with her when she entered the program at Strive. This strong sense of purpose is what will drive her to achieve regardless of age and any obstacles she may face.

Faith. Faith was a pervasive theme throughout Ruth's work and interviews. She attributed much of her successes in life, whether personal or academic, to God and divine intervention. Here are quotes that support this theme:

"God has been good to me. From all through my life, God has been good to me."

"I vowed that by the time I am 50 I must finish school for my children. With God's help, single-handed I did it."

"So eventually, God took him out of my life. ... It makes me a stronger person. Thank

God I have not become bitter."

For Ruth, when bad things happened, God was testing her in some way. God knew she

had the strength to deal with whatever *He* threw her way. When good things happened it was

because God intervened. Like in the case of Ruth's husband leaving. He was an abusive man,

according to her, and when he left, she thanked God for making that happen. This faith supports

the resilience Ruth has as another external factor driving her to succeed.

Awareness of age. Because Ruth did things when she was older, there was a deep

awareness of her age. She was aware that women of a certain age range or who were of a certain

status (married), weren't expected to do certain things like go back to high school at the age of

40 then again at the age of 70. She wears this as a badge of honor. She knows it's not common

and she loves this about herself. It makes her unique and special and shows how driven she is.

Pride. Ruth was driven by pride in her accomplishments. It felt good to her to be

praised for her hard work. There was a sense of deep self-worth that came from these

accomplishments as if they proved something to her, something that she had always known deep

inside of her and that was that she was destined for greatness. Here are some quotes that

illustrate this theme:

"I did the test, and when I did the test I got a perfect A. She look at me differently."

"On the last Friday, which was graduation, I was asked to be the valedictorian."

Ruth exhibited great pride in her learning and welcomed praise for her hard work. In

reflecting on the incident between her and Judy in the class, it all stemmed from Ruth's pride.

She was bothered that she had not gotten the most praise that day in class and lashed out at Judy

for it. While it was not an appropriate reaction, it did speak to a deep pride she has in herself and how hard she is on herself.

Unlock knowledge. The term, "unlock" came from a quote from Ruth. The term resonated because it speaks to mental doors opening and spaces being shared. She said this during her post interview:

"I feel like something's been unlocked like I know the structure of the memoir I want to write and I just need to work on it. It's a good project for me as I finish college because it will remind me of why I want to open a nonprofit business for women."

Ruth was strategic in how she thought about the memoir in relation to her long-term goals. As a result, when she learned something new and made a connection to her what she is most passionate about, she was effusive. She would say things like, *"Oh my God, I get this now. I get what I'm supposed to be doing."* Or, *"I know how I'm going to use this in my college prep courses and for my business."* When I would probe, she would share details like she did with an activity commonly termed, *Explode the Moment* (NCTE, 2008). This activity takes one moment and asks the writer to "explode" it by describing what one feels, thinks, sees, hears, does and sees. The point is to get the writer to use as many descriptive details as they can to bring the reader into the moment. I asked the students to take one experience they had had and share that experience without naming all of the details. Tell me what it sounded like, looked like, tasted like, etc. This is exploding that moment, so the reader will feel and see the scene. Ruth did this activity and wrote about her graduation. The following is an excerpt:

"It was graduation day. I was asked to be the valedictorian for the graduating class. Each graduate was dressed in blue caps and gowns. The attendees wore different

colors of pink and blue, yellow and white, purple and green, all sitting in a hall decked

with balloons and ribbons, the color of the rainbow.

As speaker after speaker gave their brief speeches, the people chanted, giving the

atmosphere a festive mood. The air was filled with different fragrances, which I could

not identify a particular smell. It was as though my nostrils were being tickled.

As I sat there, my muscles all knotted. I kept folding and unfolding my fists,

which I tucked into each other. I could hear the people mumbling, just a little above a

whisper, almost like the hum of a bee hive. They were eagerly waiting in anticipation of

what I would say.

As my name was called to give the farewell speech and as I was walking to the

podium, everyone began chanting, "Go Ms. Ruth, go Ms. Ruth." The atmosphere was

once again electrified.

As I opened my book, my hands trembled. I made eye contact with my friend,

then I said something funny and the audience laughed. I became so composed that I was

able to give my speech without stuttering."

Ruth was proud of this piece and couldn't wait to show it to me. She said when she read

this description of her graduation experience, it felt to her like a *real* author wrote it. The details

and descriptions made her feel like she had potential to be a writer because now I had given her

the tools to write what she saw, felt, heard in a way no one had asked her to do prior.

Case Study: Judy

Narrative Overview

Judy and Julia slowly make their way into the kitchen area of Strive Education where I

teach a creative writing class. They take small, quiet steps almost as if they are walking in

secret. They go as far as to twitch when I greet them as if they did not expect anyone would

notice them.

They respond tentatively to my greeting, smiling, but not speaking. I watch as they

organize their backpacks on a small table in the back of the kitchen. They methodically and

mechanically remove their coats and place them on chairs in the back of the room. They pull out

their notebooks and writing utensils and place them gently on the table as they rummage through

their bags for other needed materials.

I am struck by how alike they move. Yes, they are mother and daughter and they share

similar looks and mannerisms, but they also have a similar hunch to their bodies that keeps their

heads bowed as if in constant prayer. I get why they seem even more silent than normal. They

have become homeless over the course of the class.

Judy and Julia came to this country from St. Martin because Judy had been deathly ill.

Her sister, who lives in Brockton, MA, encouraged her to come to the states to get treatment.

Judy and her daughter Julia came together. At the time, Judy was in her 50s and Julia was in her

very early 20s. It turned out that Judy had cancer and without treatment, would have most

certainly died. In the states, she got chemotherapy and radiation treatment and is now in

remission.

She and Julia stayed in Massachusetts to earn high school diplomas and go to college in

order to earn self-sustaining wages. Julia passed the HiSET exam earlier that year and is now in

a bridge to college course. Judy is still striving to get a high school equivalency diploma and has

never missed a single day at Strive Education in the two years she has been attending.

A few weeks ago, Johnny, a math teacher at Strive and a confidante to students, shared

with me that Judy's sister had come to Strive to tell all of the teachers and administrators that

they should not allow Judy or Julia back to the school. She shared her opinion that they were ungrateful and didn't deserve an education. I was shocked that the same woman who had taken them in was now kicking them out. Johnny thought something happened at their home that had to do with Julia. Apparently, people thought Julia was strange and Judy's sister had had enough of them living with her without contributing to the household. According to Johnny's re-telling of the conversation he had with Judy's sister, she wanted Judy and Julia to get a job and pay rent. If that were not possible, then she wanted them to do all of the cooking and cleaning. As Johnny was sharing this with me, Judy and Julia walked into the kitchen where we were talking with luggage and garbage bags filled with their possessions.

Judy was adamant that she was never going back to stay with her sister and she was going to go back to St. Martin. Johnny asked her how she planned to get there and she said she had to call family members in Holland to send her money. In the meantime, she and Julia would have to go to a homeless shelter. Johnny took the women and all of their stuff into the main office to sort out this situation. I later learned that both women were undocumented, so there was difficulty in finding a shelter that would not only take them, but also keep them together. The mother and daughter duo did not want to be separated and this was causing even more difficulty in placing them in a shelter.

I remembered leaving that day not knowing what would happen, but the next week when I came to Strive, they were there. I was happy to see them and asked them if things worked out at home. Judy repeated that when she said she was never going back to her sister's house and never speaking to her again, she meant it. Another student at Strive, Dolores, took her and Julia in and the two women have been staying with her. I was in awe at how kind and generous people could be and thrilled that Judy and Julia didn't have to be separated.

Judy and Julia finally join me at the kitchen table ready to get started. I notice Judy holds a full, plastic bag and I ask her what is in it.

"I wanted to show you the writing I did when I was younger," she said beaming with pride. She mentioned that she used to write when she was younger especially when she was feeling discouraged. Writing made her feel happy. It might have something to do with the fact that she won a poetry contest when she was a child and this event gave her the sense that she had potential to be a great writer. She looked for ways to practice writing and wrote children's books for Julia when Julia was younger.

"Remember how I told you my books were almost destroyed during a hurricane and I went back to my home to find them?" Judy asks.

I nod remembering the story and am reminded that Judy and Julia had been homeless at least once before because of a hurricane.

"Well, I told you I found them and saved them. Here they are." Judy gingerly retrieves a few notebooks from the plastic bag and hands them to me. I take one of them, holding it in my hand, feeling its history. The notebook is warped from water damage. It has a thicker cover, which saved it from complete destruction, but when I open it, the once white sheets are brown from water damage and the colored ink has bled into the pages. It is a physical reminder of how fragile possessions are in the wake of disasters, in this case a natural one.

Even with the almost ruined pages of the notebook and difficulty in deciphering the pictures and words because of the bleeding colored ink, I see the makings of a wonderful children's book. The first concept is about a lost chicken who tries to find his way home. I can't make out very much of the story, but it has a pronounced beginning, middle and ending along with detailed illustrations of the farm this chicken lived on and the area in which it got lost.

The second notebook looks similar to the first, but this one contains a story called *The Cat Detective*. It is about a cat on a farm who helps the other animals investigate mysteries. I can see how this story would appeal to children and told Judy how incredible I think the concepts, story, and illustrations are.

"I'm so happy you like them," she exclaims. "I have not shown these to anyone other than Julia because they are a mess. I hope to one day copy them into a better notebook when I get some money to get some new notebooks."

"You absolutely should," I encourage making a mental note to ask Johnny if they have extra notebooks at Strive that he could give Judy for this task. "Now I see where Julia gets her talent for illustrations," I continue making Judy smile. She is proud of her daughter's drawing abilities and loves the thought that she contributed to her gifts.

"Well, I'm not at talented as Julia, but I used to love to tell stories. I even wrote this notebook full of conversations I had with God," she shares retrieving a notebook from her pile of damaged notebooks and handing it to me.

As I look through the makeshift dialogue journal, she narrates. "You see," she starts, "When I was down and out trying to make it, I would ask God questions like why me? Or, why do these bad things always happen to me? I would then pretend I was God listening to my questions and responding."

I read through some of the "conversation" and am impressed by the language she used. She has "God" respond in a voice that is almost biblical like *"My child. You may not understand things now, but as you become wiser, your path will unfold before you."* It's clear to me as a writing instructor that she understands voice and changing voice depending on character.

From a personal point of view, I imagine that the words she wrote in "God's" manner would be comforting to her as she is trying to make out her fate. Judy's life has not been an easy one. She shared that as a young woman she had a penchant for life and loved to explore. While she did not like school and was never a good student, she loved to write and observe people. She loved to be out in the world, which is why she travelled from her home island of Dominica to St. Martin to go to university. While she dropped out of college, she did stay in St. Martin to build a life. It seemed that things did not go well for her there. She met someone who was abusive to her and left after learning that she was pregnant with Julia.

She tried to make it on her own as a single parent, but seemed to encounter obstacle after obstacle. She had a number of abusive relationships with men the last culminating with her getting robbed by one of her boyfriends. He left her unable to pay the rent, so she was evicted and sued by her landlord. The hurricane happened and she became homeless then she became deathly ill. This is not a woman that has had the easiest of lives, so reading through this dialogue with God felt invasive as her teacher and confusing as a researcher. She has laid out her deepest, darkest worries and fears, yet is looking for validation from me that the writing has merit.

I quickly hand the notebook back to her and quietly say, "You should continue. It is a beautiful piece of work."

She vigorously nods and assures me that she not only plans to continue this dialogue, but she is going to copy her children's books and complete the memoir we are working on in class. With this, I am back in my element.

"Do you plan to finish the memoir?" I ask.

"Oh yes," she says. "I feel like the doors opened up for me and I have been wanting to write again. You unlocked the door with this class, so I am going to finish."

Strengthening and Deepening Literacy

Judy is specifically enrolled at Strive to earn a HiSET diploma. She has passed the science, social studies and reading portions of the HISET, but continues to work on her writing and math skills. Because she is enrolled in a math class already, she wants and needs extra help with writing. Judy has shared that she enjoys creative writing, but not academic writing.

Writing traits: pre-survey. The pre writing survey and the analysis of writing against The 6+1 Traits Writing Rubric (Education Northwest, 2017), showed that Judy still needed work in all of six of the writing traits identified in the rubric (excluding presentation, which I did not analyze). Table 5 shows how I rated Judy's writing against the traits.

Table 5

Pre-Survey Rating: Judy

Trait	Rating
Ideas	Developing
Organization	Developing
Voice	Developing
Word Choice	Developing
Sentence	Capable
Conventions	Capable

I rated her as *developing* in four of the areas: ideas, organization, voice and word choice. For sentence fluency and conventions, I rated her as *capable*. Based on the rubric (Education Northwest, 2017), a developing rating denotes that the writer is not proficient and has skills that are developing. A capable rating is higher than developing, but is not yet proficient. With ideas, Judy's main idea was still unclear and the details provided lacked specificity. With organization, she was not able to establish a clear purpose or write a logical beginning, middle and ending. She also needed to continue to develop her voice and choice of words because she wasn't writing with commitment in her voice and she was either using basic or incorrect vocabulary.

Where I rated her *capable* was in sentence fluency and conventions. She was able to use correct sentence structure and correct grammar.

Student work. After the first class, I not only analyzed the writing based on the 6+1 Traits Writing Rubric (Education Northwest, 2017) to determine areas of strength and growth, but also reviewed the content of what students wrote in their pre-writing surveys about their interests and goals. Based on Judy's pre writing survey, it was hard to glean what she might be interested in working on in class. She had mentioned poetry and children's books in her responses, so I brought a few ideas to her such as writing a short book of poems or the beginnings of a children's book. She didn't seem enthusiastic about those ideas, but she showed great interest in memoir when she overheard me describing it to Ruth. As a result, I assigned her a memoir project. I also brought in a number of published memoirs for students to peruse. The purpose was for them to choose a published text in their chosen genre that would serve as a mentor text. Judy chose the book, *The Other Wes Moore* (Moore, 2010)

By the end of the class, Judy's individual goals were to read as much of the mentor text as she could, to outline the full memoir and write a complete draft of one chapter by the end of our time together. In class, we worked on her some areas of growth related to her specific needs such as being more focused in her writing and adding more details to her prose. These areas were enhanced over the time we were together. Examples follow below.

In a pre-writing survey, I asked students to write an essay, to the best of their ability, in response to this prompt: *What is one important goal you would like to achieve in the next few years?* Judy responded:

> "My goal is to one day being able to help as many people as I can. Writing books
> for children is a good start. I know it takes a lot of work and commitment and I'm

willing to learn all I can to achieve that goal. I want to be able to help as many children

with learning to read."

After we worked on our creative projects, I did a lesson on essays to show the

relationship between the writing skills needed to write an essay and the skills needed to write

creatively. For example, as in the rubric I used to analyze writing traits, areas like sentence

fluency, conventions, voice, and word choice are needed in both academic and creative writing.

Judy didn't fully understand the structure of the essay and noted that she had some

anxiety around taking the writing portion of the HiSET because she didn't think she would ever

be able to write a good essay. Because I knew Judy was driven by her daughter, I asked her to

instead write about the most important person in her life. I gave her a graphic organizer where I

asked to name three things about that person and to add a few examples based on those three

things. Judy found it easy to writing about her daughter and find examples about why she is the

most important person in her life. Once she finished the graphic organizer, I taught her how to

turn it into an essay and she wrote this:

> "The person I respect the most is my daughter Julia. She has a beautiful
>
> personality, very quiet, but has a lot of reasoning. She is easy to talk with on any topic
>
> and is also a friend as well as a daughter. She will assist you no matter what she is doing.
>
> That is why Julia is a great person to be around. She is easy to communicate with and is
>
> always there for me. I'm glad she's in my life.

> Julia has a beautiful personality. I love going shopping and watching T.V. with
>
> her. We discuss T.V. shows and movies together. She is quiet, but has a lot of good
>
> reasoning. She is easy to talk with on things you couldn't discuss with other persons.
>
> She is also honest that makes it easier for me to speak what's on my mind.

She is a friend in need and in deed. She will assist you no matter what she is going through. There is nothing too much for me to do in return for her. I'm blessed to have her in my life. She has a lot of patience and is willing to learn.

In conclusion, my daughter is the person I'm glad to be around because she has a great personality and is easy to communicate with."

Given where she started and given that this is her first attempt at an essay, she progressed. She is starting to understand the structure of the basic expository essay. She took to this because she was able to apply the structure of a basic essay to something that meant a lot to her, her daughter.

Growth in storytelling. An early draft of Judy' began as follows:

"In Dominica, this is another island paradise. It is mountainous because of all of the volcanoes. It has a boiling lake and lots of other sites to enjoy.

Dominica like all of the other Caribbean islands has carnival. It is held in the early part of the year just before lent. Dominica exchanged hands in its early days with the French, Spanish and British, but the British is the one who ended up owning it at the end. There is still a French presence on the island and it is reflected in the people and its culture. English is spoken everywhere on the island, but we also speak Creole, which is said to be broken French.

There are a lot of other activities on the island besides carnival. Independence Day is celebrated on November 3rd every year. Lots to see and do. Sampling the native dishes is a big part of the culture."

I asked Judy to reflect on why she wanted to write a memoir and she noted that she wants to inspire others who are battling with loss and health issues, like she did with cancer. I asked

her to start her memoir then with something about herself in order to add some depth and build

her voice as a writer. After a revision, she wrote:

>"As a child growing up in a little village called Loubiere was not where I wanted
>to see myself as a grown person. I wanted to travel, meet other people and learn their
>history.
>
>I left Domenica at an early age to St. Marten, which was my home until I came to
>America because I was ill. It's a different place completely. The culture, the people,
>everything was so different."

Judy did add in more of herself, but I worked with her to continue to flesh out details and

provide more of a plot. We did a lesson on *hooks* and I encouraged Judy to start her memoir

with a hook that draws the reader in and lets them know right away a little more about the

general plot. I suggested she start off with something that would draw the reader in. Her next

draft is as follows:

>"I can't believe they told me I have cancer. I was told as I lay in a hospital bed. A
>pain stabbed my heart. I knew right at that moment that the almighty had given me a
>second chance at life and I was going to use it wisely.
>
>It was a confusing moment for me. I now know what was making me so sick.
>Happy to know I was not pretending, but at the same time sad because I could die from it
>because of the length of time it had already been in my body.
>
>I was underweight, so at that moment I couldn't take any chemo. I stayed in the
>hospital for quite some time. Thank God I was able to begin chemo after some time, but
>I had to be out of the hospital to get it. My first appointment for chemo, I got so sick I
>had to be rushed back to the hospital. I stayed there for almost two weeks. The next

chemo appointment was cancelled. It was like my body was rejecting the treatment, but it wasn't. It was just the process that my body had to go through. It wasn't a pretty one. Lots of pain, I mean lots of pain and hair dropping. I didn't care about that because I was too happy to be alive. Knowing that tomorrow will be a better day just gave me more strength in getting better."

Creative writing project. As Judy began to get more confident as a writer, she was also starting to build in more compelling details to keep the reader engaged. I encouraged Judy to keep working on the opening of her memoir building new details and adding more nuance. The following is a further revision of chapter one:

"As a child growing up in a little village in Domenica called Loubiere was not where I wanted to see myself as a grown person. I wanted to travel, meet other people. I wanted to explore.

I went to school in the capital or you can say the city. It is named Roseau. Every day I would have to walk the three miles from the south to attend school. My family consisted of my mother, father, three brothers and three sisters. I am the middle child. Going to school was a big task for me. I didn't really like school. Sometimes I could not tell you the lessons I learned because I was daydreaming most of the time. I got through days that way just being thankful when that bell rang.

School was from 9:00 in the morning until 3:30 in the afternoon with two breaks for recess and a break for lunch. I looked forward to those breaks. In the old school learning system, if you were a slow learner, you would certainly be left out. The teachers of those days didn't care much about you. They put the smart children to one side of the class and the stupid children to the other side and you know the smart children got all of

the attention. They left us to ourselves most of the day. The only time we got noticed by

these old school teachers was what we were working on."

The writing samples here show Judy's growth as a writer over the time we worked

together. She iss a hard worker and wants to be a better writer. As a result, I saw growth in her

writing abilities over the 12-week course.

Writing traits: post-survey. Based on an analysis of student work and pre- to post-

writing surveys, I rated Judy higher in the areas of ideas, organization and voice than I did during

my analysis of her pre-writing survey. Table 6 shows the progression:

Table 6

Post-Survey Rating: Judy

Trait	Pre-Survey Rating	Post-Survey Rating
Ideas	Developing	Capable
Organization	Developing	Capable
Voice	Developing	Capable
Word Choice	Developing	Developing
Sentence	Capable	Developing
Conventions	Capable	Developing

With ideas, her work showed a marked progression in her use of details to describe a

main idea and her focus on a specific topic. With organization, she was better able to establish a

clear beginning, middle and ending, and add in paragraph breaks in appropriate places. And with

voice, she was able to express her personality and convey a tone that supported the purpose of

the writing. As the class went on, Judy became motivated to write more than any other students

and wrote over five chapters of first draft materials, which was extremely impressive given that

she was unable to write a complete essay when we began our work together.

Writing samples, pre and post writing surveys, teaching and classroom observations were just a few ways I was able to write a case about Judy. I also did pre and post interviews with all three students, which allowed insight into their own growth and understanding by giving each student the opportunity to share their own thoughts. The next section describes the themes that emerged from an analysis of transcripts from interviews.

Judy: Emerged Themes

Purpose. Judy, it seems, didn't have an easy life. She moved from Domenica to St. Marten to build a new life, but lost everything in a hurricane. She then discovered she had cancer. According to her, she was near death when her family encouraged her to come to Massachusetts to get treatment, which she did. She went through chemotherapy and radiation treatment and is now in remission. She started at Strive to earn a HiSET. She is eager to achieve and be self-sufficient. Here are some quotes that illustrate this theme:

"I was looking to go into medical coding. Trying to be self-sustainable. Trying to maintain myself."

"I got a second chance in life. And that's why I'm trying to absorb and learn everything"

Judy wants to learn and grow and sees education as the way she will be successful. When asked about her goals, she noted, "I got to Strive Education to educate myself because education is the key." This strong sense of purpose is what drives Judy so succeed.

Unlock knowledge. Judy has always liked to write. She got some positive reinforcement as a child when she won a poetry contest. It made her feel good and made her feel as though she had talent. With her abilities being reinforced so young, it motivated her to write without being prompted, but writing wasn't something that she had done in a long while. Being

STRENGTHENING LITERACY SKILLS

in the class, re-ignited a desire to both read and write. She shared that the class "unlocked" something inside of her. Here are some quotes that demonstrates these themes:

"Like, see, like you're writing, it will help me, it will and bring all the brains, gives me more. It'll open up my brains a little more, then I can learn."

"I'm taking writing here because you have to write a story or an essay in the HiSET and the different paragraph of this and that I cannot get myself connected to figure out how I must go about writing."

"The more reading you do, the better you expand your mind."

Judy never missed a day of class at Strive and when she is there, she works hard and is focused. In my class, she was the student who wrote and read the most. She finished her mentor text and studied diligently to look for connections in the text to her own work.

Motivated by children. It was a somewhat unusual situation to have both mother and daughter in one class, but Judy and her daughter Julia supported each other in and out of class. Judy specifically named her grown daughter as her motivation to succeed. At first, in class, I thought their relationship would be a problem. Judy would sometimes speak for her daughter or not allow her daughter to respond to specific questions about her understanding of instructional material. At one point, I had to say that I would prefer that Julia answer for herself, which was awkward to do especially for a 24-year-old woman. But, as time went on, I realized that they have a special bond and this bond was understandable given the situation they left behind and the situation they found themselves in while in the class.

Judy had so much against her in that she was not able to provide for her and her daughter. She came to this country to get treatment and her daughter came with her. They were living with Judy's sister who was not a positive influence on them. Judy felt indebted to her sister for all she

was doing for them, but her sister also said mean-spirited things, according to Judy and Julia. Judy's daughter Julia was holding back a lot of feelings and emotions that came out in her writing, but also prompted her mother to want to protect her. This came out in class when I asked a hard question or pushed Julia, her mother would intervene. I understood that later, but at the beginning it was a challenge.

Pride. Judy had a lot of pride in her writing ability because she had won a poetry contest when she was a child. It left a positive mark on her sense of self and her identity as a writer. She also used writing to help her get through dark periods of her life. As a result, she was in touch with a positive writerly identity. She kept all of the writing she ever did and even went as far as to rescue her writing notebooks after her home was destroyed in a hurricane. Here are some quotes to illustrate this theme.

"So they had a poetry contest and I wrote a poem and I got first prize."

"And that's when I think, Oh, I can write. But after that, I never really take it on, I never really continued writing. Until Julia was born. I started some dog days in my life, so I started writing little stories."

"So then I make sure I saved these stories. I don't know how they happened to be saved. I got them and when I got them they were all wet and I took them and I put them for them to dry. Yeah. But then they were in such a mess that I tried to rewrite them."

Judy was proud of her work and proud of the progress she had made not only as a writer, but also as a healthy human being. She wants to succeed in order to become self-sufficient and economically strong. She is close to completing the HiSET diploma and closer to making independence a reality.

Case Study: Julia

Narrative Overview

"Can I see your latest drawing?" I ask Julia as she sits at the kitchen table where I teach at Strive Education. Her mother, Judy, also a student in my class, is taking care of paperwork in the main office, so I have Julia to myself for a few minutes, which is rare.

Julia hesitates in her usual, timid way and says, "sure, but it's not much. I only did some doodles," she says referring to her illustrations. And, as per usual, when I look at her "doodles" I am in awe of her talent and how much she has been able to accomplish in such a short time.

"Julia," I say shaking my head. "These are amazing!"

Julia lowers her head, but I could see the smile forming from her profile.

In class, I assigned each student a genre of creative writing to explore and, because of Julia's interest and ability in illustration, she was assigned a graphic novel. She came up with an idea during her brainstorming session of a young, withdrawn woman who has made a robot into the likeness of a ferret, a pet her character had always wanted, but couldn't get permission to have because she lived with her parents. One day, her protagonist comes home to her robot destroyed and the story goes from there.

"I see you've added different colors to your ferret character," I say noticing some new color techniques that she used.

She nods, "I saw a YouTube video on color theory and wanted to try some new things."

I take in her handiwork silently. For someone who taught herself how to draw using books from the library and YouTube, she has clear natural talent and a great eye. I can't help but wonder what she can accomplish with the proper training and experience.

"What about the written part of your story?" I ask. "We are close to the end of our time in the class. Do you feel you are ready to add words to your illustrations?"

Julia quietly nods. She has never been a talker, but in the last two weeks, I have heard her use her voice more than in the previous 8 weeks combined.

"I am ready," she says. "I feel free to express more of myself especially now that I'm out of that hell."

I wait for her to continue, but she doesn't. I don't need to hear much more since I already know what "hell" she is referring to. She and her mother had been living with her mother's sister in a cramped house. They tried their best to keep out of everyone's way, but, according to Julia, she and her mother felt like interlopers. Julia's aunt made many comments about how ungrateful they were and accused them of being *freeloaders*, a term that made Julia angry. Julia shared that the snide comments and accusations were building up inside of her because she was not allowed to defend herself.

Two weeks ago, it blew up for Julia and her mother. Julia's aunt went as far to call Julia a sociopath and said she was not comfortable being alone with Julia because of what she called mental instability. Julia's mother Judy finally let her anger come to the surface and defended her daughter. Julia also defended herself and there was a huge family argument. Judy and Julia left that home with all of their belongings, which then meant they were homeless. They showed up at Strive Education with luggage and garbage bags filled with their possessions asking for help to find a shelter for the both of them. There was an issue however. The duo refused to be separated, and the shelters that were available only had room for one. Upon hearing these struggles, another student, Dolores, took them into her home and there they have been staying for the last two weeks.

Even with the uncertainty of her situation, Julia is the happiest I have ever seen her. Once all of the details of her home life came to light, her story of a lonely young woman whose only friend was a robot ferret began to make sense. In the graphic novel, the main character rebuilds her robot and programs it to retaliate. It's a dark and moody story that comes even more alive with an understanding of the "hell" Julia feels like she was in and how she is able to create this story to express the repressed feelings she has.

"I hope you finish your novel," I say. "It's a unique story told from a unique point of view. I don't think I know of another story starring a robot ferret."

Julia smiles and says, "Oh, I'm still nervous about the whole thing. It was a roller coaster for me, but thank you for helping me out on how to express that. Maybe something was trying to tell me to write this about this, because that was the only story I could think of. I'm not sure, but my heart was like, write about this. There's no other way."

Strengthening and Deepening Literacy

Julia had completed the HiSET diploma earlier in 2019, but she continues at Strive Education in their bridge to college program. Julia shared that she struggled with writing and went as far as to say she hated it. She avoided the HiSET writing prep class and when her mother joined my class, she followed.

Writing traits: pre-survey. The pre writing survey and the analysis of writing against The 6+1 Traits Writing Rubric (Education Northwest, 2017), showed that Julia still needed work in all of six of the writing traits identified in the rubric (excluding presentation, which I did not analyze). In fact, of the three students, I rated Julia's writing at almost the lowest level. Table 7 shows how I rated Julia's writing against the traits.

Table 7

Pre-Survey Rating: Julia

Trait	Rating
Ideas	Developing
Organization	Emerging
Voice	Emerging
Word Choice	Emerging
Sentence	Emerging
Conventions	Emerging

I rated her as *emerging* in four out of five areas: organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency and conventions. I rated her *developing* in the idea trait. This lower rating had most to do with the fact that she had only written a few words and sentences in response to the pre writing survey questions. I didn't have much to assess. Based on the rubric, an *emerging* rating denotes that the writer is not proficient and that learning specific skills is emerging. A *developing* rating is higher than *emerging*, but is not yet proficient. The *developing* rating simply means the writer has been applying learning and those skills are developing (Education Northwest, 2017).

With ideas, Julia suggested main ideas in her responses, but the direction remained unclear. In the other areas, she only wrote basic and simple responses to the prompt, which led me to rate her as emerging in all other areas.

Student work. After the first class, I not only analyzed the writing based on the 6+1 Traits Writing Rubric (Education Northwest, 2017) to determine areas of strength and growth, but also reviewed the content of what students wrote in their pre-writing surveys about their interests and goals. Based on Julia's pre-writing survey, she wrote that she did not like to read or write, but she did love to draw and she loved comic books. As a result, I assigned her a graphic novel project. I also brought in a number of published graphic novels for students to peruse.

The purpose was for them to choose a published text in their chosen genre that would serve as a mentor text. Julia chose a graphic portrayal of the classic *Snow White* (Phelan, 2016).

By the end of the class, Julia's individual goals were to interact with the mentor text, taking notes of how the story progressed through illustration, and illustrate one event in the graphic story. In class, we worked on her some areas of growth related to her specific needs such as adding more details to her prose and thoroughly responding to questions in writing. These areas were enhanced over the time we were together. Examples follow below.

In a pre-writing survey, I asked students to describe their relationship to reading and writing. Julia responded:

"My relationship with reading and writing would be described as in between. Reading is ok with me, but writing is something I can do only if necessary. I like comic books, but I think it's mostly the visual than what they are saying sometimes."

When I assigned a graphic novel to Julia, she was perplexed. She didn't know what a graphic novel was. She was familiar with comic books, so we discussed the differences between the two styles. I laid out before her three different graphic novels for her to choose one that resonated with her and she chose a graphic novel version of the classic fairy tale *Snow White* (Phelan, 2016). Once she saw the book and began to leaf through it, she seemed to understand why she was assigned this genre as a project. She immediately began outlining a story that she could work on and that had meaning for her. Here is the outline she submitted early in our class:

"A young woman in her late 20s reflects on her life in her apartment while it is raining after work. She has flashbacks of her childhood and parents.

1. Not a sociable person and keeps to themselves often

2. Neat and tidy type of person

3. Questions their mental health because of the flashbacks

4. Often says they're fine and has trust issues

5. Maybe has a pet (like a cat, dog or ferret)

6. Doesn't have many friends, but trusted a few"

As I worked with Julia, I could see that she was hesitant to add many details to her writing, which is what caused her to get a lower rating based on the pre-writing survey.

Growth in storytelling. I gave Julia a graphic organizer that asked writers to describe the beginning, middle and ending of their writing projects. Before she started writing things down, I talked with her about her story and asked her to share what she saw in her mind about the character and setting. After some discussion, I asked her to write down what she shared verbally. The next version of her outline is as follows:

"Beginning

- She's commuting to home from work having a bad day and just wants to cuddle with her pet ferret and be alone.

- She arrives home and heads straight into her room seeing no point to greeting her parents only to find the room open (or too quiet) for her liking. Familiar hum, or squeaks from her pet.

Middle

- She finds her room in a mess, mostly destroyed belongings she made in fairs or for fun, but in the middle of the destroyed area was her dear pet ferret, broken.

  o She has a robot pet ferret because her parents wouldn't allow a real one

- She has a mental breakdown? Silently trying to put a front.

- Crying over her broken friend fearing it may be irreparable (dies, or shut down, dismantled in the middle of the room).

- Silently fumes and takes what she thought was valuable and still functional and starts packing (also takes her important documents with her all originals – in the middle of the night or early morning). Leaves without a trace.

- Moves into her backup apartment as she saw it coming (for a couple of months maybe or it was getting too much dealing with her parents) on the other side of the city.

- Silently crying for real after settling down.

- Thankful it was the weekend.

- Starts drawing designs of her guardian friend.

End

- Gets rediscovered by her parents making her life miserable and kicks them out.

- Also gets tired of getting bullied from her workplace and plans her revenge on those who did her wrong.

- Sets her pet ferret (robot) on her parents to beat them up. They report to the police but don't believe them because ferrets can't do that much damage.

- Leaves the city for the next with her two friends to be at peace.

Creative writing project. What was most impressive to me was her ability to illustrate. She started playing with the accompanying illustrations to her story. Figures 1 and 2 are two early drafts Julia worked on for the accompanying illustrations:

Figure 1

Julia's First Draft Illustration

Figure 2

Julia's Second Draft Illustration

As Julia worked on the concept and writing, she fleshed out her story using a graphic organizer I had given her specifically for graphic novels, which focused on the events that would correspond to illustrations. Here is the final draft:

"Events and outlines

Intro

Event 1: <u>The travel "home"</u> The young girl just walks out of the building of her work to the introduction of heavy rain (at night). Reaches the bus stop and recollects her thoughts of the bad day and through the train travel (on edge).

Event 2: <u>Hateful surprise</u> As the young girl arrives "home" of her parents, she hears her parents in the living room down the hall to the left. She ignores them and goes up the stairs to her room instead. As she gets closer to her room to the right side of the hall, she notices two things. 1) The familiar little quiet hum in her room and 2) her room door is open where it was supposed to be locked. She knew because she locked it this morning when she left for work. Quickly she gets to her doorway, turns on the light only to find her room the only place to find peace in the house wrecked. But that was the least of her worries.

Event 3: <u>The Breakdown</u> There in the middle of her damaged room was her beloved robotic pet ferret laying there motionless. Upon a closer inspection, she sees splits, scratches and dents were everywhere along its body along with front left leg was completely torn off. She suddenly felt like her legs were jelly and stomach was in tons of knots. She closed her door and was about to lock her door when she saw how her parents got in (who else could it be?) was picked. She locked it again, picked up her friend and pieces of him and placed him in a special bag then starts to clean and salvage what she had left in her room. As she was cleaning, she heard footsteps. Her parents, she guessed, wanted to hear her sobs and cries. She made the illusion of being mad. They laughed and walked away. Once out of earshot, she got to her computer, powered it on and separated any

bills left in her name to her parents, packed the rest of her things and waited. In the middles of the middle of the night, when she knew her parents were asleep, she checked and re-checked if she had everything, took her important documents (original) and left her parent's house for the last time as quietly as possible. With bitter tears slipping out of her face. With her apartment keys with her.

Event 3: <u>The Breakdown, Continued</u> The young adult unlocks the door to her new apartment/condo place fully furnished that she paid for months before. Honestly, she saw it coming from her parent's nonsense, but tonight was the last straw was them destroying her room and her best friend. She choked a sob keeping it together a bit longer. Shaking, she locked her apartment door and went into the living room, lowered the rest of her belongings except the bag holding her friend and went to her room, but couldn't make it to her bed fast enough and let it all out and shakily reached the rest of the way to her bed and cried to sleep.

Middle

Event 4: <u>The Start of a New Life</u> or <u>Picking up the Pieces</u> The next morning or afternoon, the young adult, hugging the bag that had her best friend's pieces inside, decides to get up and fix her friend. As she takes out her friend, she realizes he has more damage than she thought last night. Realizing this brought a few bitter tears, but she wiped them away set up her things and started her repairs. While she was doing this, she thought of ways to secure herself so the same thing doesn't repeat itself to her friend. So she draws up a guardian for them with learning AI for companion purposes.

Figures 3 and 4 show later illustrations:

Figure 3

Julia's Third Draft Illustration

Figure 4

Julia's Fourth Draft Illustration

Writing traits: post-survey. The writing samples show Julia's growth as a writer over the time we worked together. As a result of this work and the analysis of pre- to post-writing surveys, I rated Julia higher in all areas in the rubric than I did during my analysis of her pre-

writing survey. Table 8 shows the progression based on the writing Julia submitted in class and the final post writing survey.

Table 8

Post-Survey Rating: Julia

Trait	Pre-Survey Rating	Post-Survey Rating
Ideas	Developing	Capable
Organization	Emerging	Capable
Voice	Emerging	Capable
Word Choice	Emerging	Capable
Sentence	Emerging	Capable
Conventions	Emerging	Capable

With ideas, her work showed a marked progression in the development of details to support a main idea. Based on her work with the graphic novel, I rated organization and voice *capable*. She showed that she could organize her ideas into a coherent story and her individual voice was confident. In terms of word choice, sentence fluency and conventions, I rated her as *capable* simply because I was better able over time to see what she was able to do. The work on the graphic novel allowed me to see her skill in these specific areas.

Writing samples, pre-and post-writing surveys, teaching and classroom observations were just a few ways I was able to write a case about Julia. I also did pre-and post- interviews with all three students, which allowed insight into their own growth and understanding by giving each student the opportunity to share their own thoughts. The next section describes the themes that emerged from an analysis of transcripts from interviews.

Julia: Emerged Themes

Purpose. Julia has goals she would like to achieve and is working as hard as she can to make her dreams a reality. She has struggled with self-doubt and being misunderstood by her family because she is a quiet, artistic person. She also had setbacks such as becoming homeless

during the time she participated in the creative writing class. Through all this, she continued to

pursue her goals. She is eager to achieve and be self-sufficient. Here are some quotes that

illustrate this theme:

> "I have a high school diploma from St. Marten, so I came here and got a HiSET and now
>
> I want to go to college."
>
> "Writing is a part of it [achieving my goals]. There is only so much you can convey in
>
> pictures alone."
>
> "You have to have something to better your life. So I just to say, 'Hey, let me just go to
>
> school and see from there.' You know?"

Julia, more than the other students, knew exactly what it was going to take for her to

succeed and she was acutely aware of her limitations – not just her limitations skills wise, but

financial and environmental. Julia felt very strongly that she needed to attend college to achieve

her goals. She had already earned a HiSET diploma, but she knew that in order to achieve her

goal of a career in computer coding, graphic design or illustration, she needed more education.

Julia methodically and systematically worked at her craft without any external factors

pushing her to do so. She was intrinsically driven to learn more about illustration including

reading anatomy books at the library and watching YouTube videos to help her with technique.

Here are some quotes that go along with this theme:

> "I know I need to be pushed out of my comfort zone. I don't read for pleasure, but I read
>
> to learn things like how to draw humans, things like that."
>
> "There's so much I want to do like coding/computer programming, art and I have no clue
>
> how to put these together. I study videos of people so I can learn graphic design and
>
> colors."

Julia talked about teaching herself the things she needed to know. She was patient in that she knew it would take some time to sort out going to college because she had incredible financial barriers. She was also plagued with self-doubt, which I speak to next.

Self-doubt. Julia seemed to live with constant self-doubt. From my observation and from what she shared, she seemed to have pushed her skills as far as they can go with self-directed learning and she needed formal training. Without the formal training, she didn't truly know if she truly had the talent and skills needed to succeed. Here are some quotes that speak to this theme:

"I get nervous. You think you're not good enough. I'm still trying to figure out my purpose in life."

"Overthinking and my nervousness. I also have trouble putting thoughts into words."

"Yeah. I know how to write, but I try to avoid it. Since high school, I didn't like writing. I just don't like doing it especially essays."

"Just trying to figure out what I'm going to write. Like, here's a prompt now write 5 pages. How do you expect me to do 5 pages? If you don't do 5 pages then you fail. What if I don't have 5 pages in me? I don't know how to do it."

Julia had mentioned to me that she didn't want to be embarrassed in an art-type school and be told she didn't have talent. She was also interested in computers and coding, but had no idea what she needed to do to be ready for coding or graphic design programs. I often marveled at her work assuring her she was talented and simply needed instruction in order to hone her talent. She had not heard that before from anyone other than her mother, so was overwhelmed by the praise. She worked hard to earn the praise. In other words, if I gave her praise where it felt to her that she did not work very hard for it, she would doubt its validity. But, if she put her

all into an assignment, took risks and presented the work to me and I praised it, she was effervescent.

Separation of academic and creative. Part of why Julia did not like writing was because she seemed to only have had experience with academic or professional writing. Creative writing for her was new and many times she expressed that she did not know what she was doing or what even a graphic novel was. Here are some quotes that speak to this:

"Since high school, I didn't like writing. I just don't like doing it especially essays."

"I never did that much creative writing. Only professional writing."

She most certainly didn't see writing as a way to achieve her dreams of going to college or pursuing a career in art or computers. She didn't see the value of writing until she started working on the graphic novel. It became clear to her just how much the graphic novel would support her learning about the craft of writing and how that would relate to her future dreams.

Self-expression. One of the most profound moments for me during my time with this class was when I understood the personal factors in Julia's life that drove her to want to write the story she conceptualized. Part of why she was so proud of the story was due to the fact that she listened to her heart and wrote the story that she needed to write to deal with a true life situation. In other words, in real life, she was in a home with people who treated her poorly and she could not express her anger in any other way. If she expressed her unhappiness with her situation to her mother, she was told to keep quiet because they had nowhere else to go. The graphic novel for Julia became a way for her to process and deal with a very real situation and she was able to recognize that over time and with some reflection. This quote from Julia describes this in more detail:

"It was a roller coaster for me, but thank you for helping me out on how to express that. Maybe it will change a little. Maybe it won't. Who knows? Maybe that was something that was trying to tell me, write this about this, because that was the only story I could think of. So probably it was telling me about my life. Probably not. I'm not sure, but it just seemed, write about this. My heart was like, write about this, write about this. There's no other way."

Julia reflected and shared how different writing became for her once she was able to connect it to something she enjoyed. Once that connection happened, she was able to see the potential of writing to meet her goals and to express herself. These quotes illustrate this thinking:

"I think if you connect something that you like with it, probably you get more enjoyment out of it. That's why. That's probably, from my case, that I connected something that I liked with it. Now this is the graphic novel you show me and pretty much like fantasy. I can't do reality. I like fantasy."

"Probably I'll just look for books like fantasy or other-again, closer to what I like."

Unlock knowledge. Julia shared how much she disliked writing, but what she really disliked is how she felt she was not a good writer. She mentioned how much she was challenged by writing essays in the past and how after our time together, writing seemed so much easier to her. Here are some quotes to illustrate this point:

"But now when you get it to show you here, it's like, "Oh. Well that's easier. Why is it easier all of a sudden?" Now everything's a little easier. You write a little story, and it didn't take you much time at all. You read something and it didn't take you much time. I'm like, "What happened?"

"But essays, I think it helped it, because the structure you gave me seems easier to understand. Whereas when they have to tell you about essays, they told you about it like that. But at the same time it's like, I still don't get it. I still don't understand, and I don't like it. But when you say it, it's like, Okay, that's easier. Okay. All right, I understand this. And then you do it, boom, boom, boom, you finish."

"Well, generally everything you teach me, it was like I'd say epiphany. Like, "Oh everything. When you teach it, everything looks better." Like, "Okay, okay. That's easy. So why I was having so much trouble before?" So I'm really grateful for that."

Julia had the biggest transformation in class in the sense that both Judy and Ruth liked writing and had some skill with writing they had already brought to class. Julia disliked writing and thought she had no skill with it, so didn't try. The fact that she wanted to finish the graphic novel and that she felt she understood the role writing could play in achieving her goals speaks to the way in which she was taught. She even notes that with the following quote:

"I think my relationship with reading and writing has been better than before. I don't dislike the subject the subject as much as I did because I have a nicer understanding of it and it also connected me with something I like."

Julia spoke often about how working on a graphic novel really opened her mind to the potential writing had for her to not only meet her goals, but also share something of herself. This last quote describes how she connected the work in the class to herself:

"Basically, you talk to everybody on probably the same level. Everybody has their own pace and you accommodate them to everybody's pace, and we actually appreciate that. You accommodate to what their likes and dislikes are and all the little evaluations of who they are and what they do and what's their passion in life."

Case Study Summary

The purpose of these narrative case studies is to investigate how creative writing processes strengthens and deepens the literacy skills of adult students in high school equivalency programs. The case studies present a full picture of the work students and I did in a 12-week creative writing course. The following section provides a cross case analysis in order to address the sub-research questions specifically.

Sub-Research Question One

The first sub-research question I explored was how can creative writing processes support students' achievement of personal and/or academic goals? There are a host of reasons adults opt to return to school. There are students that need to earn a credential quickly in order to get a job, get a better job, or matriculate into college to earn a degree that would sent them on a path to a long-term career. Students have shared with me their concerns over focusing solely on creative writing to meet their academic or personal goals because they are not sure how creative writing can help them to earn a HiSET diploma. The aim of this research question is to identify the goals these three students had for returning to school then analyzing the data to determine whether the goals they identified were being supported or met through instruction founded on creative writing.

This section provides an overview of how the data was analyzed then categorized using grounded theory. Grounded theory allows for multiple coding methods and is based upon three levels of analysis that allow the researcher to gather a complete picture of the information obtained during the data collection process. The three levels of analysis are open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). As mentioned previously, during open coding, I compared data and continually asked questions to make connections among data. In

the axial coding stage, I connected data in new ways, continually asking questions while using

deductive reasoning to move and develop categories. Finally, in selective coding, I defined and

chose a core category, systematically connecting it to all of the other identified categories. I then

provide an analysis of the data related to the categories that have emerged then summarize the

key themes and their relationship to the research questions.

Themes

In order to analyze research question one, I first extrapolated from the data the personal

and academic reasons the participants had for returning to school. From pre-surveys and early

interviews, three themes emerged and they were 1) college and career readiness, 2) motivation to

achieve, and 3) awareness of skills. Those themes were further categorized as to whether they

were personal, academic or both. For the purposes of my work, I define academic goals as the

goals students described as needing more education to achieve. Personal goals were anything

else students said they wanted to accomplish. The table below shows the breakdown.

Table 9

Personal and Academic Reasons Participants Had for Returning to School

Personal Themes	Academic Themes
College and career readiness	College and career readiness
Motivation to achieve	Awareness of skills

College and career readiness emerged as both a personal and academic goal because

students discussed their desire to go to college and enter a career as a dream they had since

childhood, which speaks to personal motivations. They also described it as something practical

that would be needed to get a better job in the future, which speak to academics. In other words,

they shared their understanding that they could not achieve their personal dreams without the academic knowledge they could only get in college.

The next step was to review the themes in relation to the creative writing processes students experienced in class. For this step, I analyzed the post-class survey, post-class interview data and student writing to look for how personal and academic goals were supported through creative writing processes taught in class. From that analysis, two further themes emerged and they were 1) self-expression and 2) application of skills in a context. All of these emergent themes are analyzed in more detail in the next section.

Personal reasons students enroll in a HiSET program. There are two major themes that emerged related to the personal reasons these students want to return to school and they are college and career readiness and motivation to achieve. In analyzing the data, college and career readiness goals are less complex than goals related to motivation. Below I describe college and career readiness goals in one sub-section and goals related to motivation to achieve in another sub-section. The theme *motivation to achieve* was further broken down into sub-themes.

College and career readiness. All three students set personal goals for themselves related to their desire to go to college and their desire to have a career. Ruth returned to school at the age of 70 to earn a HiSET diploma. She earned a high school diploma in Jamaica at the age of 50, but when she came to the United States, according to her, it is less complicated for her to earn a high school equivalency diploma in the U.S. than it is for her to try to get the high school credits earned in Jamaica transferred to the U.S. Going to college is a long-time dream of Ruth's. She shares, "Ever since I was a child, I have had a desire for a good education. I was not satisfied with just being able to read and write, but I also wanted to graduate from a higher institute of learning." At the time Ruth enters the creative writing class, she is 77. She notes,

"At 77 I earned a HiSET and now I am in the college prep class." She wants to be clear that she

is not stopping in her pursuit of this lifelong dream.

Both Ruth and Julia are in the college prep class. Julia earned a HiSET earlier in 2019,

but has a lifelong love of drawing and art. She considers herself an artist and wants to pursue

illustration and computer programming. Julia is unique from the other two students in class

because she does not like writing or academics. She shares, "Since high school, I didn't like

writing. I just don't like doing it especially essays." What seems to drive her is her love of

illustration and the distinct desire to pursue something she loves as a career. She knows she

cannot fulfill her dreams without further education.

Judy became interested in medical coding, but her career goals are tied to her personal

goals. When I ask her why she wants to return to school to earn a HiSET, she shares, "I said to

myself, let me go back then and try to get a certificate that I can bring myself more forward in

life." Judy doesn't want to "waste" this second chance she feels she received in life after battling

cancer and is determined to earn the credentials she needs to achieve.

Motivation to achieve. Connected to the personal goals set by each student are the

motivations each has to succeed. Motivation comes from multiple places and Ruth, Judy and

Julia have identified personal motivations that are both similar and different. The goals that are

similar are the ones I identified and explored. The motivations they have to achieve are due to 1)

overcoming obstacles, 2) a desire to be productive citizens, 3) their children and 4) a desire to

help others.

Overcoming obstacles. All three students have overcome incredible obstacles including

suffering through cancer, domestic violence, loss of home due to a hurricane and estrangement

from family. Ruth, for example, has been deeply affected by the abuse she suffered at the hands

of her ex-husband and this motivates her to achieve. She shares, "Me coming back to school is filling a two-way purpose. I am fulfilling my dream of going to college by God's help, and I want a home for battered women and children." She believes the reason she was able to get out of an abusive relationship is to help other women and this motivation to achieve moves her to act.

Judy also has overcome obstacles. First, she had been diagnosed with cancer and feels she would have died had she not come to the United States for treatment. She is grateful for what she terms as a "second chance at life," and she doesn't want to waste this opportunity. She shared, "I got a second chance in life. And that's why I'm trying to absorb and learn everything." Second, she lost her home in St. Martin due to a hurricane in 2017. Both the cancer and the hurricane forced her to come to the United states to build her health and start a new life.

Julia is Judy's daughter and left St. Martin with her mother. She has also lost her home in St. Martin and speaks often of feeling displaced. She talks about feeling like a stranger in her aunt's home, where she and her mother were staying while in Massachusetts. Her drive to achieve is related to her need to find a home for herself and her mother.

Being productive. The students in the creative writing class are motivated by wanting to do more with their lives whether it is related to overcoming obstacles or having a sense of purpose. Julia, who is at 24 the youngest of the three students, speaks most eloquently about wanting to be productive. She notes, "You have to have something to do better in your life. So I just to say, 'Hey, let me just go to school and see from there.' You know?"

Ruth and Judy both describe how the act of attending classes supports their motivation. Neither of them are employed, so being a student provides them with a sense of being productive human beings on the road to achieving their goals.

Motivated by children. Ruth and Judy were the two mothers in the class and both are

motivated by their children. Ruth has five grown children, but when they were children, Ruth

spoke of wanting to be able to help them with their homework. This desire to help her children,

created a deep drive to return to school, and, at the age of 40, she enrolled in traditional high

school in Jamaica where she sat in class with high-school-aged students because she wanted to

learn and support her children. Ruth speaks about this experience proudly because it is the

beginning of finding her own personal strength. She tells the story like this: "I said, I prefer

going to high school. He said, you big, married woman, what about your husband? I said, I

don't care, as long as I achieved what I want. I don't think my husband liked it."

Ruth continues to share that not only did her husband not support her decision to return to

school, he actively sabotaged her. Ruth was a seamstress and one of the wealthier women in her

community offered to pay the school fees so Ruth could return to school. Ruth's husband found

out and put a stop to it. Without external financial help to go back to school, Ruth was left to her

own devices. She proudly recants how she paid for school herself, "I decided I'm going to raise

some chickens. In three months, my chickens will mature and I will sell them, get that money to

pay my school, and that's what I did."

This situation left an indelible mark on Ruth and she learned that nothing will keep her

from achieving her goals especially if they are going to benefit her beloved children.

It was a somewhat unusual situation to have both mother and daughter in one class based

on my previous experiences teaching similar classes, but Judy and her daughter Julia were in the

class together. Judy specifically names her daughter Julia as her motivation to succeed. At first,

in class, I thought their relationship might be a problem. Judy sometimes spoke for her daughter

or didn't allow her daughter to respond to specific questions about her understanding of a

creative writing technique. At one point, I had to say that I preferred that Julia answer for herself, which was awkward to do especially on behalf of a 24-year old woman. But, as time went on, I realized that they have a special bond. The bond was sealed when they left St. Martin after a hurricane that destroyed their home and after Judy was diagnosed with cancer. I have learned over the course of the class that Judy being motivated by her daughter is a good thing. They need each other to support their individual goals and have no desire to be separated.

Desire to help others. Judy and Ruth, specifically, spoke to their strong desire to help others. This is related to the obstacles they had to overcome. They both make the connection that they have survived so much strife and challenge in their lives that they feel compelled to support others so they will not have to suffer in the same ways. They want to use what they have learned, the pain they had to endure, for good.

Judy's (and Julia's) home was destroyed in a hurricane in 2017. Judy shared, "And I was just thinking of them in St. Martin, the library destroyed, all the books destroyed, and they're wondering where the kid's going to go. And if I had money, I would just tear down the whole building because it had already been dilapidated and the hurricane just finished it off. I would just settle that whole thing, and just build a whole new thing, modernize it. Give them computers."

Judy spoke lovingly and fondly of her home in St. Martin. In fact, when she started her memoir project, it was specifically focused on her time in St. Martin. She spoke of her desire to help the people of St. Martin thrive and build again.

Ruth's desire to help others stemmed from the trauma she experienced at the hands of her ex-husband. She is passionate when she describes why she wants to help other women. She

says, "So eventually, God took him out of my life. It makes me a stronger person. It makes me

want to help women who are in the place that I was."

Analyzing the themes that emerged through motivation to achieve, there is connection

among them and an inter-relatedness that supports the complexities around what motivates

people to do anything and in these cases, the personal goals that drive the attainment of the

HiSET. The themes of college and career readiness and motivation to achieve were the themes

that emerged when analyzing student data for the personal goals that drive them to earn a HiSET

diploma. The next section delves into the academic goals that students also expressed.

The academic reasons students enroll in a HiSET program. There were two major

themes that emerged related to the academic reasons these particular students wanted to return to

school and they were college and career readiness and an awareness of skills.

College and career readiness. Julia earned a HiSET earlier in 2019, but knows she needs

more help to reach her career goals. She shares, "There's so much I want to do like coding and

computer programming, art and I have no clue how to put these together. I study videos of

people so I can learn graphic design and colors." Julia is specific about what she wants to study

and what she needs to learn in order to achieve her personal goals around her pursuing a career in

art and computer programming.

Ruth talks about wanting to open a non-profit organization for battered women. She is

clear that she wants to be college ready in order to get into business school and non-profit

management. She notes, "I want to know the business side of things, so if I get somebody to do

my books, I'll know what is being done." It is important to Ruth to understand all of the nuances

of business in order to run an effective non-profit program.

The students understand the academic skills they need to achieve their goals. They all are acutely aware of their lack of college education and how going to college will prepare them for their chosen careers. This understanding connects to the next theme that emerged and that is awareness of skills.

Awareness of skills. During interviews and pre-surveys, Julia, Judy and Ruth each share where they thought they need to grow and the academic skills they need to achieve their goals. Julia seems the most aware of her limited academic skills. In regard to drawing, she shares, "I have lots of imagination, but I need an eye for color and access to references." She is painfully aware that she doesn't have the right drawing tools or the right understanding of the human figure to grow as an artist. She is also aware of some of the challenges she has with writing. She notes, "I also have trouble putting thoughts into words." Because Julia is interested in illustration and computer programming, she knows she does not have enough knowledge to be hired anywhere and this is a concern for her. She also feels the pressure of her age. "I'm 24 and still don't know what I want to do," she shares solemnly.

Judy is aware that she needs help with writing. She is the only student in the class that does not have a high school equivalency diploma. She has passed three out of five tests to earn the HiSET (she has passed the science, social studies and reading portions of the test). The tests she still needs to pass are writing and math. One of the reasons she was eager to be in my class is because she feels she needs as much writing help as she can get. She notes, "I'm taking writing here because you have to write an essay in the HiSET and I cannot get myself connected to figure out how I must go about writing."

Ruth is more focused in what she wants to do and therefore more specific in what skills she wants to develop. She talks about matriculating to college to earn a business degree in order

to open a non-profit organization. She is eager to learn everything she can about non-profit management, but knows she has to be a better writer, which is why she is in a college prep class at Strive and why she signed up for the creative writing class. She is also slow and steady in that she has been with Strive for seven years and she is not going to stop until she has a college degree. She says, "It's been seven years that I am in this facility, I come back to school, and through all the ups and downs: back surgery, eye surgery ... I was almost blind last year. last year June, I was almost blind. I did it."

There are as many reasons why students return to school to earn high school equivalency diplomas as there are students in adult education programs, but the three students who participated in this study had similar personal and academic goals like the desire to go to college and start careers or start their own organizations. The students in the study shared specific goals related to the skills they need to grow like in the case of Julia, she knows she needs foundational learning in drawing and computer programming. The next section describes how these students' personal and academic goals were supported by creative writing instruction.

Creative writing in relation to personal and academic goals. In order to identify the role creative writing instruction plays in supporting achievement of students' specific persona and academic goals, I analyzed student writing, field notes, post-writing surveys and post-interviews and looked for data describing a correlation between stated goals and the creative writing processes and techniques that students experienced and learned. From my analysis emerged two themes and they are *self-expression* and *application of skills in a context*. Below I describe these two themes in detail.

Self-expression. One of the major ways creative writing supports these students is not only in their ability to express themselves, but also in their understanding of the potential self-

expression has in supporting achievement. Each student has unique and detailed experiences

with self-expression that is important to capture; therefore, the next sub-sections detail each

student and their experience with self-expression.

Judy. Judy has a lot of pride in her writing ability because she had won a poetry contest

when she was a child. It left a positive mark on her sense of self and her identity as a writer.

She also uses writing to help her get through dark periods of her life. As a result, she is proud of

her writing. She keeps all of the writing she has ever done and even went as far as to rescue her

writing notebooks after her home was destroyed in the hurricane. At the end of our time

together, she is able to produce the saved notebooks in class because they held special meaning

for her. The notebooks are also symbolic reminders of the hurricane she had endured. They are

water-marked and warped from damage, but they still hold tremendous pride for Judy. She

shares, "I don't know how they happened to be saved. When I got them they were all wet and I

took them and I put them to dry. But then they were in such a mess that I tried to rewrite them."

Judy shares that writing a memoir in class re-awakened the need she has to express

herself. During class, she is compelled to find these weather-beaten notebooks to remind herself

of how much she used to love to write and this motivates her to write her memoir. When I ask

her if she will continue to work on her memoir, she responds, "I would like to really, even

though it doesn't become a best seller, but people can read and relate to it and see this was me

when I was small. It brings back memories. It makes me think what was happening to me."

Judy was the only student who read her mentor text and applied what she was reading to

her own writing and to her own understanding of who she is as a person. She used the reading to

help her reflect on her life circumstances and was very articulate about the connections between

the mentor text and her life. As a result, it caused her to look at her own writing as having the

potential to relate to others and to express her own feelings in a way the author of the mentor text has done.

Ruth. During Ruth's final interview, she shares how writing academically and expressing more of herself can work together. She notes, "Once I learned how to write an essay, I knew I would be ok academically, but learning how to write a memoir helped me express myself. I have an outlet to tell my story, which is going to help me in my business."

Ruth sees herself as a role model and writing gives her the ability to share her story more widely. She sees it as an interim step to her opening her own non-profit. She imagines herself as writing a memoir that will get her story out to the masses. This would then make the opening of her non-profit organization serving women who are victims of domestic violence make sense. People will have the context of her life through a memoir. She understands how valuable a memoir would be in achieving her goal of supporting other women.

Ruth also wants to inspire. She wants to be sure her life story and all she has gone through in life would account for something. She says, "I want to finish my memoir so other women know that you can achieve your dreams no matter what you have been through and no matter how old you are."

Julia. Julia's own experience with self-expression during the class was profound. She was living with her mother and her aunt. She and her mother had come to the U.S. in order for her mother to get cancer treatment. After the treatment was over, Julia and her mother felt like unwelcome guests. Julia, in particular, felt stifled. Her mother had asked her to "keep quiet" when her aunt said unpleasant things because they both had to show their gratitude for the fact that they had a place to stay. Since Julia was unable to share her true feelings about the situation at home, she poured herself into the graphic novel she was working on.

The novel is about a woman in her early 20s who wants to be alone in her room with her pet robot ferret. The protagonist's parents are abusive people who don't respect her privacy. One day, she comes home from work to find her beloved robot destroyed. She finally moves out of her parents' house and rebuilds her robot ferret to be bigger and meaner than before. She programs the robot to exact revenge on her parents.

It is a fantastical story and I have wondered if it is directed at her mother in some way, but I later learned it isn't. Julia and Judy were asked to leave the house they were staying in and became homeless during the time they were in the class. Julia shares with me that she has been holding back so much living with her aunt, but now that they are out of that house, she feels free. I ask Julia if the story she is writing about the robot ferret is a way for her to express what she felt forced to hold back, she says, "Maybe. Maybe there was something that was trying to tell me, write this about this, because that was the only story I could think of. My heart was like, write about this, write about this. There's no other way."

Julia, Ruth and Judy all find the process of creative writing helpful in their own self-expression. They each have something to say, yet different reasons for wanting to use their voice. Ruth wants to inspire and use her memoir as a means to share her story and help others in similar situations as she had been. Judy finds the process of writing a memoir helpful to her in reflecting on her life and unleashing previous motivations she had to write. And, Julia writes what she needed to express. What is in her heart. Each woman is able to make the connection from creative writing to their lives in meaningful ways.

Application of skills in a context. Related to academic goals, each student speaks to how creative writing helps them apply the processes they are learning to a specific context. Julia shared at the outset of our time together how much she disliked writing and how she believed she

was not good at it. As we worked together in class, I observed that she was writing a lot and writing well according to the guidelines I had given her. When probed, she identified creative writing as having a positive effect on her attitude toward writing. She shares, "I think it [creative writing] helped it [my writing skills], because the structure you gave me seems easier to understand. Whereas when they have to tell you about essays, they told you about it like that. But at the same time it's like, 'I still don't get it. I still don't understand, and I don't like it.' But when you say it, it's like, okay, that's easier. I understand this."

The structure of creative writing helps Julia apply skills like understanding point of view or characterization, which makes it easier for her to write. At the end of the course, Julia had written out a full outline of her graphic novel and a character profile. She marvels at how much she has written noting that she really didn't like to write, but she enjoys the graphic novel project.

Ruth also feels as though she is able to apply the skills she is learning in class to a concrete project or situation. Early in 2019, she was selected as class valedictorian and it was much deserved. She had persevered at Strive Education for seven years and earned a HiSET diploma at the age of 77, which made her the top of her class. In class, she gave me her speech and asked for feedback on it as a piece of writing. Her speech was wonderful and I had little feedback on it. I did, however, decide to use it to teach an activity called *Explode the Moment* (NCTE, 2008). This activity takes one moment and asks the writer to "explode" it by describing what one feels, thinks, sees, hears, does and sees. The point is to get the writer to use as many descriptive details as they can to bring the reader into the moment.

Ruth took to this activity well and updated her speech using this technique. She is thrilled with the result and tells me that the activity made her feel like a "real writer." At the end

of the course, I ask her which writing activity she is proudest of accomplishing and she says, "I remember the activity where you told us to write about something but not to name that thing… That made me be able to take the moment of graduation and describe everything happening that day including how I felt and what it felt like and looked like. I felt like I was able to express myself as a writer for the first time."

The experience Ruth had of providing detail to an existing piece of writing allowed her to relieve a moment in her life that she is extremely proud of and to re-live the details of that moment. She took the writing skills she learned and applied it to the context of the graduation event, which gave her writing depth–a depth she felt she had not achieved prior.

All three women are able to write in a context that makes sense for them, which supports their learning. They are also able to make connections from what they are learning to their personal and academic goals.

Summary of Sub-Research Question One

The sub-research question that led this analysis was how can creative writing processes support students' achievement of personal and/or academic goals? First, I extrapolated the personal and academic goals the students identified in their pre-surveys and interviews then categorized them as personal versus academic. Based on the categories that emerged of college and career readiness and motivation to achieve, I further analyzed the data to determine other sub-themes. Within motivation to achieve, there were four sub-themes of overcoming obstacles, desire to help others, children and being productive.

As I continued the analysis to determine how creative writing processes supported these goals, I found two themes and they were self-expression and application of skills in a context. Based on data, student participants shared that the ability to express themselves through their

individual creative writing projects gave them an opportunity to see how creative writing supported their overall goals. They each had stories to share that directly connected to why they decided to return to school. For Judy and Ruth, writing a memoir showed them the potential that writing about their life stories had on their college and career readiness goals. Ruth believed the memoir was now a stepping stone to building her non-profit organization. She needed to be able to tell her story to make her passion for women make sense.

Judy had forgotten how much writing had meant to her and having that love re-awakened made her see the writing she needed to do on the HiSET more doable. And Julia didn't have an outlet for the feelings that were plaguing her, causing her to hide her voice.

This is all intertwined with their motivation to achieve. Judy remembered how important telling stories was to her raising of her daughter. Ruth saw her memoir as a method for helping others. Julia desperately wanted to be a productive citizen who had an aim in life. Writing a science fiction style graphic story about a robot allowed her to share her lifelong goals of being a computer programmer and art.

Each student expressed their personal goals and creative writing became deeply intertwined with their motivation to achieve. Based on the stated academic goals, students felt as though creative writing helped them to apply the skills they learned in a context, which gave them more practice and an added depth to their understanding of writing.

Sub-Research Question Two

The second sub-research question I investigate is how does a curricular focus on individual storytelling build literacy confidence and/or student agency? The first sub-research question explored the reasons why students return to school and the ways in which creative writing supports personal and academic goals. The second sub-research question focuses on the

curriculum and the role it plays in building confidence and agency. As discussed previously, adults who return to school to earn a high school equivalency diploma may have internalized this reality as a shortcoming and see their previous challenges in school as personal failures. The aim of question two is to understand the role creative writing has in re-building confidence in literacy then, further, how creative writing supports student agency. Agency in this context is defined through Freire's critical pedagogy. As discussed in the review of literature, Freire advocated a problem-posing cognitive approach to literacy—one that deepened the consciousness of all people, but most particularly those marginalized by dominant culture and ideologies, enabling them to apprehend oppression as a historical reality susceptible to transformation through thought and action (Freire, 2000).

This section provides an overview of how the data was analyzed then categorized using grounded theory similar to the analysis of research question one. I provide an analysis of the data related to the categories that have emerged then summarize the key themes and their relationship to this specific research question.

Themes

To investigate sub-research question two, I extrapolated data from field notes, documents, pre/post-survey and pre/post-interviews and looked for emergent themes. I then categorized those themes under literacy confidence and student agency. For literacy confidence, I focused on how much writing students had done, pre- and post- writing surveys, field notes, individual feedback, and responses from students describing their own perception of whether their confidence with writing has changed. For student agency, I analyzed field notes, documents, pre/post-survey, pre/post-interviews and specifically looked for student descriptions of their own agency and personal transformation.

The table below shows the breakdown of the emergent themes within literacy confidence and student agency.

Table 10

Themes Related to Literacy Confidence and Student Agency

Literacy confidence	Student agency
Instruction	Connecting to self and others
Sense of accomplishment	

For literacy confidence, instruction and sense of accomplishment are heavily intertwined. I separated the two themes because instruction pertained to what I was doing at the teacher and how the students were experiencing the instruction. Sense of accomplishment described how students were feeling about what they were doing. In the creative writing class, there was a clear overlap between instruction and how the instruction made students feel.

For student agency, the most common theme that emerged was connecting to self and others. Students spoke often about how meaningful the class was in helping them awaken something in themselves or connect to others either through the mentor text they were assigned or through making the connection from their own work to the greater good.

Literacy Confidence: Instruction. All three students in the study expressed appreciation for the instruction they experienced in the creative writing class. Post-writing surveys and post interviews gave room for students to describe the instruction they felt was effective and where they felt it needed more help. Judy describes what she learned, "I learned know how to break down essay. I learned how to write a memoir. I learned the ins and outs of creative writing. I did not know that when I came in and know I'm going out with it."

The most common themes that emerged in relation to instruction were related to the clarity and simplicity of the instruction. Students finally, according to them, felt like they understood writing in a way they didn't before. And, that understanding led to an "unlocking" of knowledge that students felt they already had within them.

Clarity and simplicity. In a discussion with Ruth, she shared, "With you, writing is easy." I asked her to describe why she thought writing with me was easier. She responded that she appreciated that I taught one aspect of writing like how to write a strong opening or how to describe a scene using metaphors then asked her to apply it immediately. She shared, "You gave me the tools. I did all of the work, but you gave me the information I needed to do the work well." Ruth appreciated the clarity and simplicity of the instruction and how that supported her needs and style. Ruth is the only student to share what she wished the curriculum offered. She hoped there would have been more of a focus on grammar and spelling. According to Ruth, she wants her writing to be perfect and she feels as though she needed more work in those areas.

Julia took more chances with her writing and overall became more comfortable with the writing process as the class progressed. She implies that writing shorter creative works built her confidence in writing in general. She shares, "Now everything's a little easier. You write a little story, and it didn't take you much time at all. You read something and it didn't take you much time. I'm like, 'What happened?'"

Judy was the only student in class who did not already have a HiSET diploma. She struggled with writing an essay and found writing a memoir much easier. Understanding that Judy's biggest motivation is her daughter Julia, I asked Judy to write an essay about her daughter. I gave her a graphic organizer that showed the structure of a five-paragraph essay, the type of essay that's given on the HiSET, and she wrote her first essay. She appreciated having a

clear organizer to follow and a topic to write about that is near and dear to her, her daughter.

The clarity and simplicity of the instruction supported students in producing more pages of writing than they felt they had been able to produce in other classrooms. They all said that the class "unlocked" knowledge that they realized that had inside of them all along.

Unlock knowledge. The word "unlock" was used by Ruth to describe how she felt about her writing project. She said, "I feel like something's been *unlocked* like I know the structure of the memoir I want to write and I just need to work on it." Unlocking knowledge became a prevalent theme in this study. All three students made comments about how writing became "easy" when I taught it, which then made them feel as though their abilities and skills were allowed to flourish. Ruth was specific when she named an activity we did in class called, *Explode the Moment* (NCTE, 2008) that helped her unlock her writing potential. I mentioned this quote previously, but it is relevant here as well. She notes, "I didn't know how to put my thoughts in order. What should the structure be and why? I remember the activity where you told us to write about something but not to name that thing… That made me be able to take the moment of graduation and describe everything happening that day including how I felt and what it felt like and looked like. I felt like I was able to express myself as a writer for the first time."

Judy made connections from writing a memoir to remembering experiences she had forgotten. She shared, "Let's say you take your memoir. You start with you as a child growing up, it brings back memories. It refreshes what you've learned as a child. And as an adult, it was great for me to be able to do that and put it into perspective." For Judy, the memoir unlocked memories from her childhood and caused her to reflect on the ways in which her childhood affected who she is today. Writing a memoir unlocked hidden memories and knowledge that she remembered having.

Judy was the only student that embraced the mentor text she was assigned, reading it fully and reflecting on the ways its content mirrored her own life experiences. The process of having and utilizing a mentor text also unlocked something for Judy. She noted, "It opened up my eyes. It opened up my way of thinking. It opened up the way that I would read a book. Now, I read a book and I would say, 'Oh, it's not that she shouldn't put this in the book.' I can criticize."

Julia had the most to share specifically about the instruction unlocking knowledge for her. She was the only student that started the class not liking to write. Her focus had been on her artistry and illustrations in particular, so she didn't see the point of writing. She shared, "I know how to write, but I try to avoid it. Since high school, I didn't like writing. I just don't like doing it especially essays."

As time progressed in the class, Julia began to see the potential writing a graphic novel had for her in achieving her academic goals. She shared, "Everybody has their own pace and you accommodate them to everybody's pace. I know that. And it really helped, because I didn't know I was going to learn to do a graphic novel. So it was a little shocking. I'm like, "What am I doing here?"

Julia shared how much in awe she was at how much I was able to pull from her. When I asked her if there were specific assignments that helped her push forward, she shared, "Well, generally everything you teach me, it was like I'd say epiphany. Like, that's easy. So why I was having so much trouble before? So I'm really grateful for that."

The examples and sentiments that students shared had come from them feeling as though they finally understood something that they didn't before or that they struggled to understand

before. Those feelings led to a powerful sense of accomplishment, which is another theme that emerged.

Literacy Confidence: Sense of accomplishment. Julia didn't know how to get started with writing and found the blank page daunting. She was incredulous that anyone could craft multiple pages of text based on a prompt. When asked about why she disliked writing so much, Julia shared, "Just trying to figure out what I'm going to write. Like, here's a prompt now write 5 pages. How do you expect me to do 5 pages? If you don't do 5 pages then you fail. What if I don't have 5 pages in me? I don't know how to do it."

She noted that having quick wins with writing helped her. She shared that all of the sudden, she was working on an outline for a graphic novel, "And then you do it, boom, boom, boom, and you finish." This sense of accomplishment helped make that daunting feeling Julia described less overwhelming.

Judy had positive experiences with writing in the past because she had won a poetry contest when she was a child and had done some writing as a teenager and young adult. As she got older and as her life became more complicated, she abandoned writing for pleasure. Writing her memoir gave her a sense of accomplishment, as if she were now able to tackle other types of writing. She shared, "It made me feel good. It makes me feel good. When I started [back to school] sometimes I would read the question, and I just couldn't understand what they were telling me. So, now I understand a little more with this creative writing and new reading that I am doing. I'm not there yet, but I still understand it."

Ruth was effusive every time she learned a new skill. She would say things like, "Oh my God, I get this now. I get what I'm supposed to be doing." Or, "I know how I'm going to use this in my college prep courses and for my business." She was so focused on her goals that any

new skills learned, any accomplishment made, she would connect them to her larger purpose.

The sense of accomplishment Ruth felt in her work in the class caused her to get giddy at times.

She would thank God for allowing her to make another step toward her longer-term goals.

Instruction is a big theme that emerged. There was a relationship between how clear and

simple, yet intentional, instruction focused on specific skills (i.e. creative writing) unlocked

knowledge in students, which then allowed students to feel a sense of accomplishment. Next we

will look at the theme student agency.

Student Agency: Connecting to self and others. Sub-research question two asks how a

curricular focus on individual storytelling builds literacy confidence and/or student agency? One

clear theme that emerged under the category of agency was around students feeling connected to

themselves and others in a way that they hadn't felt before. These connections came about

through their own writing and feeling as though they tapped into something within themselves

that they had not been able to access previously, through connecting with their mentor text and

learning about someone else's circumstance, or through the sharing of their work with others.

All three students shared details about how their writing projects allowed them to connect to

something within themselves that had either been dormant or unavailable.

As a young woman, Judy was an avid writer.   Being a writer was a part of her identity

that she had put to the side because of life circumstances that kept her from pursuing writing as a

hobby or even a career.   But, writing had been such a part of her life that when a 2017 hurricane

in St. Martin destroyed her home, she purposefully went back to the rubble that was once her

home to salvage her writing notebooks. She had managed to gather most of them. Let them dry

and packed them away in plastic bags for safe keeping. Judy had shared with me that writing a

memoir in the creative writing class had reminded her how much she used to love writing for

fun, reminded her how much writing fed her soul.

On the last day of class, Judy came in with a plastic bag. In the bag were the notebooks

that held her stories that she wrote in St. Martin. As she removed them from the bag, they were

warped from water damage, the effects of the hurricane on the table in front of us. She had

written children's books. One was about a happy chicken based on the animals she cared for on

her farm. One was about a cat who was a detective on the farm. She had illustrations of each of

her characters, but they were hard to make out because some of the color had run from where it

had been sitting in water.

As Judy walked through each notebook, I could feel from her shaking hands and her

eager smile how much these notebooks meant to her. One of the final notebooks she shared with

me contained a dialogue series between her and God. She challenged God with questions around

why *He* chose to put her in the situations he did. "Why did I lose my home?" and "Why do I

have cancer?" As I read through, I reflected on how much solace this type of journaling must

have had for someone like Judy who had been through so much in her life. But, more than

therapeutic, the act of sharing them with me, showed that she was making connections to her old

self through the class and she was connecting to me as she shared these personal artifacts.

Both Judy and Julia connected with the genre they selected to write and with their mentor

texts. Julia mentioned how connected she felt to the project. When I asked Julia to describe in

her own words why she felt this way, she responded, "I think if you connect to something that

you like, you probably get more enjoyment out of it. Now this is the graphic novel you show me

and pretty much like fantasy. I can't do reality. I like fantasy." Giving Julia the option to work

on a fantasy story of her choice allowed her to express what she felt she could not express

otherwise. Writing a fantastical story about a robot ferret who is able to exact revenge on people who hurt her gave her power. She described it as something she had been driven to write about. She noted, "My heart was like write about this."

Judy felt deep connections with her mentor text and the story of *The Other Wes Moore* (Moore, 2010) She shared, "It showed me that no matter what part of the world that you were born in, you don't have a choice where you are born, but you have a choice where you want to die. And seeing how Wes Moore battled through life at every age, seeing his mother struggle, you know it brings back memories. He just had to give up on learning. And it's something like me. I went to school, and I just didn't want to learn anymore. I just didn't want to be in that situation. So that's where the comparison hit me with him."

Reflecting on her connections with her mentor text, Judy took it once step further. She imagined herself finishing her memoir because she wanted people reading her memoir to feel the same way she did reading *The Other Wes Moore*. When I asked her if she planned to finish the memoir, she replied, "I would like to really, even though it doesn't become a best seller, but people can read and relate to it and see this was me when I was small."

Once Ruth realized that the memoir she was writing could be a steppingstone to her business, she understood its power. Coming into the class, Ruth was focused. She shared, "Me coming back to school is filling a two-way purpose… going to college and I want to help the battered women and children." She never wavered on these goals and, any time she learned something new, she immediately identified the connection to her accomplishment back to her goals. In the case of writing a memoir, she saw the value of sharing her own story of being a battered woman as a way to help other women not feel alone. This was directly connected to her

opening a non-profit organization in service of battered women. She felt the memoir would be a

perfect next step in her journey to go to college and support other women.

Students in the creative writing class found utility in what they were doing with class to

support their agency in particular in creating linkages to other human beings. They understood

the power of the written word could not only be used to understand themselves better, but also to

connect to others.

Summary of Sub-Research Question Two

Sub-research question two asked how a curricular focus on individual storytelling builds

literacy confidence and/or student agency? First, I extrapolated the themes that emerged within

the categories of literacy confidence and agency. Within literacy confidence, the themes of

instruction and sense of accomplishment emerged. These themes are inter-related in that clear

and simple instruction allows for the unlocking of knowledge to happen which then leads to

students feeling a sense of accomplishment.

With agency, students expressed how creative writing allowed them to connect to

themselves and others. These connections opened their eyes to the potential within themselves

and the potential of using the written word to inspire others.

Final Summary

In *Multiple Case Study Analysis*, Stake acknowledges that when a research study is done,

questions may not be fully answered, but assertions can be made. He notes, "the case study

report is a study of what has been done to try and get answers, what assertions can be made with

some confidence, and what more needs to be studied" (2006, p. 14). The purpose of these

narrative case studies was to investigate the central and sub-research questions. The central

question is how does creative writing processes strengthen and deepen the literacy skills of adult

students in high school equivalency programs? Pre- and post-writing surveys, interviews, field notes, and documents were collected and analyzed to further address the sub-research questions: how does creative writing processes support students' achievement of personal and/or academic goals? And, how does a curricular focus on individual storytelling builds literacy confidence and/or student agency?

Similarities among the three participants emerged during data collection and analysis. Students came into class able to articulate both their personal and academic goals. Personal and academic goals ranged from wanted to go to college to preparing for a career to wanting to be productive human beings. Creative writing supported these goals by providing a vehicle for self-expression to allowing students a mechanism to apply the skills they learned in a context.

Literacy confidence was bolstered by intentional instruction that was clear and simple, which, using a student's own words, unlocked knowledge. This "unlocking" of knowledge gave students a feeling of accomplishment that supported confidence in their literacy skills.

Student agency was identified as a product of connecting to themselves and to others. Students were able to define the ways in which the written word supported their growth through writing what they felt compelled to write about and through linkages to other people.

In chapter five, I will discuss the findings of each research question and place them in context of previous research in the field. I will proceed by sharing the specific contributions of this study to the field of writing instruction within high school equivalency programs, limitations of the study, conclusions, recommendations for policy, and further research.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND

CONCLUSION

Introduction

Nearly 80 percent of the students who enroll and enter adult education programs are

below the ninth-grade level in their overall academic skills (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). In

terms of literacy, a 2015 report published by MDRC on writing instruction in adult education

classrooms in the United States (Manno, Yang, & Bangser, 2015) noted that there were more

than two million adults enrolled in adult education and high school equivalency (HSE) courses,

and incoming assessment data collected showed that more than half of them were are at an eighth

grade writing level or below (Manno et al., 2015).

Data and statistics paint a particular picture of the landscape of adult education. Yet,

adult education programs face similar challenges to secondary schools in the teaching of writing.

Both systems need support in not only teaching writing effectively, but also in teaching in ways

that cultivate student voice. Building and strengthening student voices is vital given that

students, in particular those students who have been marginalized and minoritized, don't have

many academic mechanisms by which to develop voice, share narrative and tell authentic stories.

Adults returning to a publicly-funded adult education program to earn an equivalency diploma

need support in building confidence in themselves as literate, academically capable students in

order to achieve goals beyond a basic diploma.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate whether the intentional integration

of creative writing into an HSE writing curriculum contributed to students' academic confidence,

strengthened and deepened writing skills, and provided a vehicle for student-defined agency

through the use of student-generated narratives and student-selected mentor texts. The

population I focused on were adults who enrolled at Strive Education in Boston to earn a HSE

diploma. Strive is one of a few publicly funded adult education programs in the City of Boston

focusing on HSE instruction and college preparation courses. Students volunteered to take part

in this study because they wanted to focus on the writing skills necessary to matriculate into

higher education, into a new job or better job at their current place of employ.

Three students participated in 12-weeks of creative writing instruction that supported

their work to either earn an HSE diploma or matriculate into college. At the outset of the study,

students participated in writing pre-surveys and interviews to gage baseline and their descriptions

of themselves as writers. Based on results, students engaged creative writing instruction. At the

end of the 12 weeks, a post-writing survey and a final interview was conducted to determine

growth in literacy and writerly identity.

The overarching research question was: How can creative writing techniques strengthen

and deepen the literacy skills of adult students in high school equivalency programs? There were

two sub-questions that also guided the study and they were 1) how can creative writing processes

support students' achievement of personal and/or academic goals? And 2) how does a curricular

focus on individual storytelling build literacy confidence and/or student agency?

Guided by Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach, I analyzed data to

generate a collection of explanations that respond to the main research question and the two sub-

research questions. For sub-research question one: I first extrapolated from the data the personal

and academic reasons the participants had for returning to school. From pre-surveys and early

interviews, three themes emerged and they were 1) college and career readiness, 2) motivation to

achieve, and 3) awareness of skills. The next step was to review the themes in relation to the

creative writing processes students experienced in class. For this step, I analyzed the post-class

survey, post-class interview data and student writing to look for how personal and academic goals were supported through creative writing processes taught in class. From that analysis, two further themes emerged and they were 1) self-expression and 2) application of skills in a context.

For sub-research question two, I separated literacy confidence from student agency. For literacy confidence, instruction and sense of accomplishment were themes that emerged. In the creative writing class, there was a clear overlap between instruction and how the instruction made students feel a sense of accomplishment.

For student agency, the most common theme that emerged was connecting to self and others. Students spoke often about how meaningful the class was to them in helping them awaken something in themselves or connect to others either through the text they were assigned or through making the connection from their own work to the greater good.

In this concluding chapter, I streamline the findings of this study into a coherent discussion. First, I share my position as the researcher to be transparent about the lens with which I view this work. I then detail the implications of these results. Since the findings fell into the broad category of *student centered learning*, I follow-up the implications with recommendations for teachers, scholars, and policymakers. I discuss the limitations of this particular study, give my final reflections on the topic, and conclude with an emphasis on the importance of further work in this area and the urgency with which the education field must move forward.

My Position as the Researcher

As a researcher, I worked diligently to minimize my own personal bias and its effect on the study. Despite constantly maintaining focus on the research questions, the data and the analytical process of triangulation and saturation, I'd be remiss not to discuss my personal

background in relation to the study. I had spent the entirety of my adult life grappling with

questions around my own personal and professional growth. I was among many in my

community who had disengaged from high school before completing, yet I had gone on to

college and gone into a teaching career after earning a high school equivalency diploma.

Academically speaking, my love of creative writing and my identity as a writer were two of the

key things that made my situation different.

I am deeply committed to my community and in centering voices and contexts in as much

of an authentic way as possible. To that end, I teach in a way that honors individual and

collective realities with an aim of instilling a love of writing and self-expression in the process.

The deep desire to share what I had been gifted propels me to teach and to conduct research. I

must know whether love of writing could be cultivated in others and, further, if that love of

writing could lead to success in HSE programs and beyond.

Findings

The central research question is how does creative writing techniques strengthen and

deepen the literacy skills of adult students in high school equivalency programs? This

overarching question was analyzed through two sub-research questions in order to provide more

nuanced findings. The first sub-research question explored broad concepts regarding

participants' goals: Can creative writing processes support students' achievement of personal

and/or academic goals? Through an examination of students' stated goals and what they reported

as their experiences in the class, two main ideas emerged. Creative writing processes supported

students' achievement of their goals by (1) providing them opportunity to express themselves (2)

giving them space to apply what they learned in a context. While the first sub-research question

explored students' motivation for being in an HSE program and the role creative writing played

in supporting goals, the second sub-research question focused on what happened in class that built upon their achievements: Does a curricular focus on individual storytelling build literacy confidence and/or student agency? Students reported that the instruction helped to "unlock" knowledge, which gave them a sense of accomplishment. This sense of accomplishment contributed to confidence in their writing abilities.

Student-Centered Learning

The majority of the findings can be discussed under the broad heading of *student-centered learning*. The Nellie Mae Foundation released a tool called the *Student-Centered Learning Continuum,* which gives a succinct definition of student centered learning. They share:

> Student-centered learning engages students in their own success and incorporates their interests and skills into the learning process. Rather than having educators hand down information, students can engage with teachers and their peers in real-time, preparing them to participate in a skilled workforce later in life (2019, p. 2).

Students in many secondary schools and adult education environments have become accustomed to passive learning such as lessons based on only lecture or instruction based on pre-determined texts and worksheets. These learning practices are, as Lampert describes in the report, *Deeper Teaching*, "intellectually shallow" (2015, p. 1). If students are expected to meet college and career readiness expectations such as critical thinking, their everyday experiences in the classroom will have to look different.

Placing students at the center of a class and revolving instruction around their interests and needs emerged as a major factor in this study. In the creative class, students were exposed to different genres of writing, some for the first time in their lives, and were able to choose a genre that resonated with them. They were then able to express themselves, with guided instruction

and individualized support, within their chosen genres. Students' ability to own their words and share the stories they chose, gave them control over their own learning. They decided how far and how deep they wanted to go within the confines of a particular lesson. Self-expression allowed students to build confidence in their voices, which then led to them taking more risks and trying new things. For adults who may have had interrupted or gaps in literacy knowledge, a student centered approach supports individual growth and a sense of accomplishment.

The relationship between teacher/student in student-centered learning environments is aligned with the relationship between researcher/participant in constructivist grounded theory (CGT). CGT allows researchers to concentrate on what is happening in the moment, acknowledge their place in the research, remain flexible and open, follow the data, and attend to language and meaning (Charmaz, 2019). According to Charmaz, "Constructivist grounded theory calls for studying the meanings of participants' terms in scrutinizing the discourses they invoke" (2020, p. 169). To that end, participants, through the data, exposed themes across their collective learning and participation that have implications for the field.

Unlocking knowledge. Students in the study reported that the instruction "unlocked" something from within them. Ruth specifically used the word "unlock" to describe how it felt for her to apply what she was learning in a context. Julia and Judy spoke to how writing became "easier" for them and how they now actually feel as though they could tackle writing for the first time in their academic career. It became clear that there was a relationship between how student centered instruction that is clear and simple, yet intentional, unlocked knowledge and gave students a sense of their own abilities. This belief that they already had the knowledge within, allowed for a deep sense of accomplishment when the knowledge was finally *unlocked*.
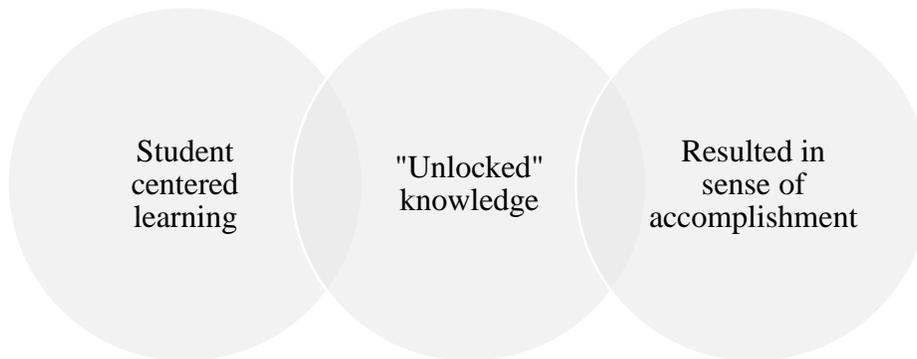
Effective Writing Instruction. The student centered nature of the class connected to the earlier review of effective writing instruction. *Writing Next* (Graham & Perrin), identified 11 elements of effective writing instruction for adolescents including planning and pre-writing, revising, editing and establishing a workshop-type environment that, "stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing" (2007, p. 3-4). Another element included explicitly instructing students in how to establish specific, reachable goals for their writing. These elements align to how the *Creative Writing and the HiSET* class was organized. Students chose a genre to write then planned their story through the use of an outline. After determining the basic structure of their story and the beginning, middle and ending, they engaged in instruction that supported writing specific sections. For example, there was a lesson on writing a compelling opening and students practiced writing the opening of their writing project. We then "workshopped" their openings in class. Students read their openings, asked for reactions and feedback, then updated accordingly. We also spent time identifying reachable goals for their projects within the time we had together. Because students were in control of their writing goals, they set ambitious goals that all of them met.

In terms of adult literacy instruction, this study connected to the work of Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson and Soler (2002) who argued that literacy skills must be practiced to become automatic, and that this practice is achieved in out-of-school contexts through the reading materials students choose to read and by writing different types of texts in addition to those already commonly written and read. Given the needed in school and out of school practice needed to develop literacy skills and the competing demands in adults' lives, instruction should be designed to proceed as efficiently as possible and be based, as much as possible on everyday activities (Purcell-Gates et al., 2002).

To the central research question of how can creative writing techniques strengthen and deepen the literacy skills of adult students in high school equivalency programs? Creative writing techniques strengthen and deepen literacy skills through writing instruction that situates learning in a context and supports students as co-creators of their own learning. This locating and positioning of oneself within a context is of particular importance because, as noted previously, when students are allowed to create and share their own stories, they contribute to a societal understanding of their worth, while simultaneously attaining literacy skills, that allow for a deeper understanding of individual and community contexts. The figure below visual shows these relationships.

Figure 5

Relationship of Instruction to Student Sense of Accomplishment

Student centered learning

"Unlocked" knowledge

Resulted in sense of accomplishment

The figure shows the interrelatedness of the instruction and students' sense of accomplishment in particular. This sense of accomplishment built literacy confidence in students within this study and shows great promise for the field. In the next section, I offer recommendations for teacher, researchers and policymakers in how to interpret and integrate these findings into their work.

Implications

Teachers and students do not operate in a vacuum. They operate within an ecosystem that includes principals, district administration, state and federal policymakers, researchers, families and community members. The implications of this study are relevant to many, but this section discusses the implications for teachers, researchers and policymakers in particular. The section is organized by relevant stakeholder and provides considerations based on the study and findings. For teachers, I highlight three implications including designing programs that meet the needs of adults in HSE programs, applying the best practices in writing instruction, and developing lessons that speak to students' hearts and souls. For researchers, we need to build upon previous inquiry and implement more rigorous, longitudinal research designs that show the relationship of a creative writing curriculum to college and career readiness. Finally, for policymakers, I highlight two implications. First, we need to review and re-think standardized tests and the role they play in dictating instructional practices and, second, we need to develop teacher education programs that train teachers in broader student-centered methodologies.

Implications for teachers

Given the literacy needs of adults described earlier, the first implication for teachers is that we must build programs that effectively address the needs of adults in HSE programs. This starts with appropriate instruction that does not prioritize teaching to the test, but preferences authentic instructional experiences. The students in the study shared that the creative writing class was the first time they felt like they were learning how to write versus just getting the techniques needed to pass the HiSET. One student said she always had trouble writing essays and simply didn't get it. At the end of our time together, she noted that she had been reflecting

on why she all of the sudden, "got it" and only came to the conclusion that with me it was simply "easier."

I intentionally gave students tools to apply writing in a real-life context, a context they fully understood and could own. Students were given free reign within an intentional curriculum to choose what and how much they wanted to write. Students were also motivated to write because they could see the connection their creative writing projects had toward achieving their personal and academic goals. Effective practices in instructional and curriculum design call for a deep understanding of our audience (Gagné, 1985). Whether we are teaching children, adolescents, or adults, understanding who they are, their interests and needs, supports learning. All of the students in the study all spoke to idea that the instruction aligned with what they were interested in learning and doing, so writing then became easier and enjoyable.

A second implication for teachers is that we need to understand and apply the best practices in effective writing instruction. This includes building curriculum that allows for pre-planning, outlining, drafting, revising and workshopping, which aligns to what we know to be effective from reports such as *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High School* (Graham & Perrin, 2007), and *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively* (Graham et al., 2017).

While it may seem perfectly reasonable to teach writing in ways that mimic the tests students need to pass, the problem with that approach is that students aren't learning the critical thinking skills complex writing requires. They run the risk of not matriculating seamlessly into college because they are unable to write well enough to pass college English courses or disconnecting from college altogether because they are challenged in ways they hadn't been before in writing courses. Students need exposure to the writing process and need to practice

writing in order to become truly proficient. The students in the study all shared that they had

written more in the creative writing class then they had in other classes they had taken.

        A final implication for teachers is that we must not be afraid to teach in ways that support

students in expressing what's in their heart and soul. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks

notes, "to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we

are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin"

(1994, p. 13). Creative writing provides an avenue to not only support the strengthening and

deepening of literacy through a focus on the writing process, but creative as well as narrative

writing also have other benefits for students who have negative views of themselves as students.

For example, therapists have been using narrative therapy to help people make sense of their

experiences and assist them in changing their relationship with problems affecting their lives

(White & Epston, 1990). While teachers are not therapists and I am not recommending that

teachers become therapists, the process of allowing students to tell their own story has

therapeutic value. Narrative therapy is sometimes known as re-authoring or re-storying

conversations (Morgan, 2000). With narrative therapy, writers turn dominant narratives on their

heads and create narratives that are necessary for healing. For example, one student in the study

created a fantastical universe where a young woman much like herself was able to gain power

over her oppressors and re-build her life. When I asked her why she chose that story, she said,

"My heart was like, write about this. There's no other way."

Implications for researchers

        In the course of this investigation, I found one like study that laid the foundation for more

creative and appropriate teaching practices to occur at the adult education level. The report,

Adult Basic and Literacy Education as Storytelling: A Reading/Writing Project (Wardrop, 1994),

describes a study where the project team designed, conducted, evaluated, and published the

results of a curriculum development project focused on adults in an adult education program.

The curriculum emphasized adults' experiences and visions for themselves and their families

through the writing and sharing of stories. The results were promising and the researchers asked

the adult education community to build on the promising findings by conducting other research

(Wardrop, 1994). I did not find any other studies that built upon this initial work. The idea that

25 years have passed between this study and the Wardrop study is unfortunate.

Future research to replicate the results of my study or the Wardrop study is worthwhile

particularly in the event that the sample increases giving the results even greater validity. A

replication study with a more varied participant pool would also be beneficial. At the outset of

my study, I had done an open call with students at Strive because I didn't want to target a

specific type of student. It was important that I work with whomever was enrolled in the

program to be as authentic to the experience as possible. When I reviewed the demographics and

literacy levels of the three students who agreed to participate in a study, I realized they were

similar in literacy level although very different in age, background and context. Since they all

had the ability to write fully formed paragraphs with complete sentences and beginnings, middles

and endings, it was fairly smooth to move into the creative writing projects. Each student was

able to quickly grasp what needed to be done and was also able to write extensive drafts from

almost the first day of class. It would be beneficial to continue this investigation with students

who write below an 8th grade level in order to determine the applicability across literacy levels

and the scaffolding needed to get to detailed drafts.

Second, there is potential for a mixed methods, longitudinal study to be employed to

investigate whether students who participated in creative writing instruction in HSE programs

not only passed the HiSET or GED exams, but also matriculated into credit-bearing college

courses. The students in my study all want to attend college and stated that creative writing will

help them academically. It would be helpful to investigate whether creative writing instruction

actually does support college success with more traditional writing. As seen with disciplinary

literacy and how it is prioritized in the Common Core State Standards, students need to write

across disciplines. A longitudinal study focus on the translation of writing skills from creative to

other subject areas should also be explored.

There are a few ways this could be researched. One that comes to my mind is a

longitudinal study following students from the HSE program to college to determine readiness

and the translation of writing from creative to other disciplines. The study could include

interviews, pre and post exams and a collection of documents over time. This type of study

could bolster the validity of findings from this study and the Wardrop study published in 1994.

Implications for policymakers

In chapter one, I establish a statement of the problem. In chapter two, I present a review

of the literature. Based on the foundation laid in those two chapters, I share the design of a study

focusing on creative writing instruction in an adult education program, which I describe in

chapter three. The findings from that study showed that when students are in the center of the

curriculum, knowledge is unlocked and students feel pride in their accomplishments. Based on

all of the previous work, recommendations for policymakers are clear. First, we need to review

and re-think the role standardized tests play in dictating instructional practices. Second, we need

to develop teacher education programs that train all teachers in disciplinary literacy practices and

broader student centered methodologies.

Re-thinking standardized testing. Under the Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA), we move away from federal oversight of educational practices. ESSA now requires states and districts to ensure that all students, including children with disabilities, English learners, and other historically underserved groups, graduate high school ready for college or a career (CCSSO, 2016). Even though we have moved away from federal oversight of standardized testing, ESSA still maintains a requirement that states administer annual statewide assessments in reading/language arts in grades 3, 8 and once in high school (CCSSO, 2016).

Under ESSA, states are rethinking accountability (Patrick, Worthen, & Truong, 2019). This provides an opportunity for school systems to do what is best for students. New accountability models can drive quality, equity and excellence, while taking into consideration the needs of students, teachers and administration. While there has been tremendous work in building out standards of quality under initiatives like the Common Core State Standards, implementation has been challenging for educators. In lieu of having appropriate training and guidance, teachers focus with what's on the test. Policymakers have the ability to propose policies that not only support accountability, but can also demand the accompanying training and continuous improvement models that allow for innovations to occur.

Developing teachers of the future. Teacher education programs have a unique opportunity to support the development of effective reading and writing teachers at all levels. Given the incoming assessment data showing that more than half of the two million adults in adult education and HSE programs are at an eighth grade writing level or below (Manno et al., 2015), there is a disconnect. In a survey of more than 360 non-discipline specific high school teachers, Graham & Kiuhara found that many of the teachers did not feel adequately prepared to teach writing (2009). Such preparation is vital because classroom writing practices are

influenced by teachers' beliefs and knowledge (Graham & Kiuhara 2009). If a teacher feels

more confident in their capabilities to teach writing, they will devote more time, energy and

attention to it. A focus on teacher education could impact the quality of writing instruction, but

we need policies that support this. While changes to teacher preparation are predominantly

overseen by institutions of higher education and boards of regents, they can be influenced by

policymakers at the state level.

Teachers, researchers and policymakers are uniquely poised to strengthen, deepen and

extend the findings of this qualitative study. If teachers are able to teach in ways that transgress

and take into account the best practices of writing instruction and of teaching adults in HSE

programs, they can have even more impact on learning. Researchers can build upon the findings

to extend them enhancing the study's validity. Policymakers can introduce policies that support

accountability systems and continuous improvement models that allow for excellence for all.

The next section describes the theoretical implications of this study and the ways in which the

findings align with and support theoretical frameworks.

Theoretical Implications

In the previous section, I described how the study results connect to the best practices in

writing instruction and the ways in which teachers, researchers and policymakers can build on or

extend the findings. The study also connects to three main theories that help to further illuminate

the results. First, constructivism, a learning theory attributed to Jean Piaget (Piaget, 1936).

Constructivism posits that students construct knowledge (Bodrova, Leong, Davidson, &

Davidson, 1994) and learning is not about mirroring what is presented, but about learners

creating or constructing their own representation of new information. Vygotsky built upon

Piaget's ideas by adding a sociocultural dimension to how students construct meaning from

experience (Vygotsky, Hanfmann & Vakar, 1962). Second, situated learning theory (SLT) is a

constructivist view of learning attributed to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1990) that focuses

on meaning, practice, community and identity. Student experiences develop meaning through

practical application within a community of learners. Last, Malcolm Knowles (1975) work

around andragogy and the principles that separate adult learning (andragogy) from how children

and adolescents learn (pedagogy) holds wisdom for how to interpret the results. The findings of

this study revealed that adults in HSE programs benefit from instruction that allows them to

construct new knowledge based on previous understandings or experiences, build that knowledge

in community with others and apply that knowledge in ways that are relevant to their lives.

Piaget's and Vygotsky's Constructivism

It may seem obvious to say that constructivism is about constructing something. At its

core, constructivism posits that students construct knowledge (Bodrova, Leong, Davidson, &

Davidson, 1994). Learning is the construction of meaning from experience (Piaget, 1936;

Merriam & Bierema, 2013). The basic idea that constructivism is constructing meaning from

experience aligns well with creative writing. The Association of Writers and Writing Programs

describe creative writing as a way for students to own the worlds of their making. They note: "In

creative writing classes, students learn about elements of literature from inside their own work,

rather than from outside a text" (n.d., para. 9). In this way, students are constructing their own

knowledge through the making of their worlds or in choosing what they want to present in their

writing.

Many times during the interview process or during class, students talked about how

creative writing gave them a structure for how to present what they wanted to present. Judy

talked about how having to figure out the topic of her memoir and how that process allowed her

to reflect on her childhood. Sifting through memories gave her the details she needed to

construct a story. The process of writing the story gave her the much needed writing practice she

required to push her thinking and apply new skills.

Julia spoke many times about having a roadmap with which to apply her thinking. Clear,

intentional instruction gave her the tools to construct a new reality. One that included her taking

control over her environment. Piaget believed that intelligence is the level at which an individual

is able to manage their environment through their own life experience (1936). In Julia's case,

she was able to manage her environment and her emotional well-being through the construction

of a fantastical reality.

Vygotsky drew attention to the pivotal role of the sociocultural context in which students

construct meaning from experience (Vygotsky, Hanfmann & Vakar, 1962). He noted that the

process of constructing meaning is a social one facilitated through the culture's symbols and

language (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). While all of the participants in the study relied on their

sociocultural context to create meaning through the use of writing, Ruth was one student who

was driven by her context more than the rest. As a self-proclaimed battered woman who fought

to get an education, Ruth is determined to achieve her goals in order to support other women. As

she worked on her memoir and memories of her strength emerged, she realized her memoir could

also be used to help others. Her hope is that if other women learn about her life, they will realize

that there's more out there than their current situation. More than anything, she wanted other

women to know if she could do it, so could they. A memoir was a perfect outlet for her to

embrace the sociocultural context of her past and share her wisdom from the experiences that

shaped her future with others.

Lave and Wegner's Situated Learning Theory

Situated learning theory (SLT) is a constructivist view of learning in which learners develop meaning through practical application within a community of learners. From this practical application, students develop an identity within their social context and bring learning from formal environments like school and work into informal ones like home. Creative writing bridges the gap of formal and informal learning because students are able to use formal writing techniques in a world of their making or to tell a narrative about themselves. Lave and Wegner (1990) also coined the term "legitimate peripheral participation" to describe learning that is integral and inseparable from social practice.

This theory aligns well with the results of the study because the students were writing to learn, but all wanted to finish their project in order to publish their stories. Judy and Ruth both wanted to publish their memoirs to connect to the larger community; Ruth to connect to other women who are experiencing abuse and Judy in the hope that her memoir will help others reflect on their lives and situations. The motivations noted by students speak to their need to connect to community and learn with and from community. Another nuance to this is the community of the class. Students were able to experience legitimate peripheral participation through the shared experience of being a community of writers in a class. This participation supported their motivation to complete their projects.

Knowles's Andragogy

Andragogy was brought to the forefront by Malcolm Knowles (1975). Both pedagogy and andragogy involve six assumptions about how adults and children learn and they are the need to know, the learner's self-concept, the role of experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation (Knowles et al., 2015). While we can make these assumptions about

both adult and children, how they are discussed is very different. For example, with the need to

know, adults need to know why they need to learn something before agreeing to learn it whereas

children will most likely be able move forward with the lesson without knowing how it applies to

their lives (Knowles et al., 2015; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017). Another example is with a

learner's self-concept. The andragogical model states that adults are responsible for the

decisions that they make for their own lives. Adults and children differ in this area because

adults walk into an adult education setting with a sense of self and the need to be responsible for

their lives whereas children are more dependent on the teacher and their family structures

(Knowles et al., 2015).

With this context, the ways in which Andragogy illuminated the results of this study are

aligned with instruction. The foundation of Andragogy is that adults require a different style of

teaching. It is common, based on my experience as an adult educator, for teachers to use pre-

packaged curriculum developed by vendors who know the exams. Those methodologies will not

work with adults who require instruction that brings their prior knowledge to the forefront and

provides the level of transparency needed to understand how the projects they are working on

will connect to their lives. Pre-packaged curriculum tends to be generic and requires additional

scaffolding to make sense to all students.

Participants in the study were able to connect the skills they already had to the writing

projects they were assigned. They were able to choose what they wanted to work on and devise

a plan to complete as much of their project as they could in the time allotted. All of this they

controlled while I facilitated their progress through direct instruction, guidance and discussion.

It felt like a partnership and students noted more than once how I gave them everything they

needed to succeed. I didn't do the work for them, but I did make sure they were learning and doing in the course of the class.

Limitations

All research has limitations. This section will discuss possible limitations of the present study. It's important to note that the findings in the present study are not generalizable to all adult education students in publicly funded HSE programs. The participant size was small and specific to one location; therefore, the current findings may only be applicable to similar cases.

Another limitation is the literacy level of the participants in this study. The three students have higher levels of literacy than the average. Two of the students have already earned high school equivalency diplomas and are in a college preparation course. The third student is an avid writer who came to class with a considerable amount of writing ability. It is unclear whether students who write below an 8th grade level would have equally positive experiences in creative writing courses. As noted in my recommendation to researchers, further study with a variety of participants would bolster these findings.

This study was not able to determine the extent to which creative writing skills translated to other disciplines. There was some indication that students felt more confident in their writing abilities after the course, but further study needs to be done to understand the extent to which the creative writing skills learned in the class were transferrable to other disciplines and to more traditional writing. A longitudinal design across educational environments (i.e. adult education program and college) and disciplines is recommended.

Finally, researcher bias is another limitation. It is important for me to be aware of my position as a researcher and an HSE diploma graduate who identifies as a writer and sees creative writing as liberatory and transformational. It is also critical for me to examine my own

assumptions, experiences, and views to understand and limit possible researcher bias. Future studies might benefit from using research assistants or researchers whose background is unrelated to that of the participants to conduct interviews.

Concluding Remarks

I started this dissertation with the quote from Toni Morrison, *narrative is radical*. Narrative is radical and it's simple. A story can create lasting change especially when cultivated and shared. Teachers need to provide instruction that allows for narrative and honors individual stories so that students feel as though their knowledge and histories have been *unlocked* as one student described it.

Even though organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English and the Council of Writing Program Administrators have increased their literacy advocacy through the distribution of policy statements, action alerts, and instructional resources, more needs to be done to infiltrate and completely overhaul writing instruction especially for those youth and adults who have been traditionally marginalized due to race, abilities and English language proficiency because they often have needs that extend beyond what is on standardized tests. We must pay attention to the interconnectedness of reading, writing and socializing ideas and drafts. Writing can't happen in a vaccum. In order for students to become proficient writers, they must share their work, discuss ideas, gather feedback and revise. They must read more to understand texts and complex ideas that they can apply when appropriate to their writing. And, we must create mechanisms for students to share what they are reading and writing in order to socialize new ideas and build confidence in their learning.

The sense of belonging that comes from having a mechanism, like creative writing, with which to share one's full self as a student is vital for those students who have disengaged from

educational pursuits. This sense of belonging will lay the foundation in the classroom for the acquisition of the literacy skills adults need to succeed in HSE programs and beyond.

Chapter Summary

This study's inquiry into the ways in which creative writing strengthens and deepens literacy skills in adults pursuing high school equivalency programs is a unique one. The focus of existing literature, to date, has centered on elementary and secondary writing instruction or adult literacy learning in broad strokes. This inquiry contributes to the literature by focusing on the experiences of three students in a 12-week creative writing class at a Boston-based adult education program. The findings fell under the broad category of student-centered learning and the promise student-centered instruction has for adult literacy education. Students shared how the class unlocked within them something they didn't think was possible, a newfound appreciation of writing. Teachers, researchers and policymakers should take the findings and interpret them through their own lenses. I provided recommendations for each stakeholder to support their integration of the findings to their own work. An important finding is the role that storytelling plays in building literacy confidence and agency. Adult student who return to school for a high school equivalency diploma need a teaching that transforms and builds their sense of self-worth especially if leaving high school before completing has taken a toll on their academic confidence.

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Appendix A

Recruitment flyer

"I believe myself that a good writer doesn't really need to be told anything except to keep at it."

— *Chinua Achebe, Author of* Things Fall Apart

Have you ever wanted to write poetry, comic books, a memoir, song lyrics or a book? Do you want to learn more about creative writing? Do you want to write in a way that expresses yourself? If you answered yes to any of these questions, join the creative writing group at Strive!

Together, we will:

- Explore different writing styles until you find one that speaks to you.
- Be creative and try different ways of writing.
- Practice writing in a supportive environment.
- Discuss writing with the instructor and other classmates.
- Engage in writing best practices until you have a piece of writing that you feel good about.

If you are interested, please reach out to your Program Director.

About the Instructor:

Elizabeth Santiago is a writer and writing teacher currently living in Dorchester. She left high school in the 10th grade and returned to earn a GED in her late teens. She loved to write poetry and short stories and turned that love into a job in publishing. While working, she earned a bachelor's of fine arts degree in creative writing from Emerson College in Boston. She is currently working on a doctorate in education from Lesley University in Cambridge.

This creative writing and reading project will form the basis of a research study. The instructor will share detailed information about the study if you would like to join the group!

Appendix B

Writing Pre- and Post-Survey

Writing Pre- (and Post) Survey

Name:

- In two to four sentences (use the extra paper provided or an available computer) respond to this question: How would you describe your relationship to reading and writing? What type of reading and writing have you enjoyed?

- In one paragraph (use the extra paper provided or an available computer) tell me a little about yourself and what you do during the day or evening.

- Write an essay (use the extra paper provided or an available computer), to the best of your ability, in response to this: What is one important goal you would like to achieve in the next few years? In your essay, identify that goal and give an explanation of how you plan to accomplish this goal.

- Tell me a story (true or made up) or write a poem, in any format you'd like (including in pictures or drawings). It can be as long as you'd like (use the extra paper provided or an available computer). The only requirement is to have fun with it!

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Interviews will be 15-20 minutes in length and will be held at Strive Education

Script

Good morning (afternoon). Thank you for coming. This interview should take roughly 15-20 minutes. The purpose of the interview is for you to talk about your relationship with reading and writing and to share your goals as they relate to reading and writing. There are no right or wrong or desirable or undesirable answers. I would like you to feel comfortable saying what you really think and how you really feel.

Tape recorder instructions

If it is okay with you, I will be tape-recording our conversation. The purpose of this is so that I can get all the details but at the same time be able to carry on an attentive conversation with you. I assure you that all your comments will remain confidential. I will be compiling a report that will contain all students' comments without any reference to individuals. If yes, great I'll turn the recorder on now. If no, that's fine. I will just be taking lots of notes!

Questions

1. What prompted you to return to school to earn a HiSET?
2. Tell me about your goals for returning to school. What are you hoping to accomplish during your time at Strive Education?
3. What are your plans for after you earn a HiSET?
4. What do you think you need to do to reach your career or academic goals?
5. What barriers do you face as you think about your goals?
6. What has been your experience with writing?
7. What has been your experience with creative writing?
8. Do you consider yourself a writer? What experiences have you had with writing that caused you to feel the way you do about writing?
9. Do you believe that you need to be a good writer or a better writer to achieve the goals you have set for yourself?
10. What are your reading habits? Do you consider yourself someone who likes to read?
11. What experiences have you had with reading that caused you to feel the way you do about reading?
12. Do you believe that you need to be a good reader or a better reader to achieve the goals you have set for yourself?
13. Is there anything you'd like me to know about your experiences with reading and writing or with HiSET instruction that you'd like to share that you haven't been able to so far?

Thank you so much for your time. It's much appreciated!

Appendix D

Creative Writing and the HiSET Course Outline

Course Overview:

This 12-week course is designed with adults who are returning to earn a high school equivalency diploma (in Massachusetts the GED or the HiSET). This course is intended to support adults in attaining the literacy and writing skills they need quickly while building their confidence in their own voice and writing skills through creative writing, reading literature, and having meaningful discussions.

Course Outcomes:

By the end of this course, students will have:

1. Shared their hopes and goals for themselves.
2. Built relationships with others in the class through group work, dialogue and shared writing.
3. Developed a sense of confidence in their writing abilities and an appreciation of writing.
4. Developed a sense of confidence in their reading abilities and an appreciation of reading.
5. Analyzed different genres of literature in order to make predictions, identify themes, identify figurative language, determine word meaning, and understand character development.
6. Written during every class and written outside of class in their writer's notebook.
7. Participated in a *Writer's Workshop* where they were able to give and receive feedback on writing.
8. Produced a creative writing project of their choice in one of the genres covered.
9. Applied what they are learning to the HiSET in order to be prepared for the exam, and applied what they are learning in other contexts in order to prepare them for higher education or the world of work.

Course Description:

This class happens once a week for 2.5 hours of instruction. I will ask students to do some work in between classes for homework, but the majority of instruction and learning will happen during class time. The class will culminate with a writing project of their choice. Projects will be chosen students from the following choices:

1. Poetry
2. Memoir
3. Short story
4. Essay of their choice
5. Other based on proposal by student (i.e. Graphic novel, magazine article, children's book, script, etc.)

Over the course of the 12 weeks, students will learn about one of the main choices listed above, interact with as many other genres as possible, connect their choices to broader goals and have structured, supported autonomy in their writing projects. By the end of the class, students will have a portfolio of writing projects that show their progression and learning. In order to move the class toward the intended outcomes, the class will make use key instructional strategies that will be incorporated in classes and lessons in as many places as possible. They include the following:

1. *Student choice and learning from each other*: Students will get exposed to different genres of reading and writing and will choose the types that resonate with them. They will also take the lead on sharing what they have learned about different genres with each other.
2. *Writer's Workshop:* I will use the *Writer's Workshop* model because it is designed to emphasize the act of writing itself. Students spend most of their time writing and not just learning about writing. As the teacher, I will also write modeling the process and making sure they know we are all in this together. For this class, they will be working toward the development of a final project that they will be working on over the last two weeks. Smaller projects will help scaffold the process and allow for more practice, but we will not be workshopping all of their works due to time. We will most definitely be using *Writer's Workshop* to workshop final projects.
3. *Active learning strategies*: It's important that students' literacy skills are enhanced and their understanding of the world and their place in it is deepened. To that end, I plan to embed these critical instructional strategies into most every class:
   a. *Low Stakes Writing:* Brief writing in which students describe their thinking and understanding of content. This writing is not corrected because it is intended to be more free form and intended to build confidence in writing.
   b. *Productive Group Work:* Students work in small groups in which they are mutually accountable for a product and for ensuring that all members understand the content.
   c. *Questioning:* A method for deepening classroom conversations, probing students' understanding, and prompting students to apply higher-order thinking skills to content.
   d. *Classroom Discussions*: Students articulate their thinking and deepen their understanding through conversations in pairs, groups, and with the whole class.

12-week breakdown

- *Week 1:* Introduction, norm setting, class culture building, overview of projects, overview of connections to big ideas in HiSET. Students will be exposed to many literary genres then asked to choose a mentor text that they can read on their own throughout the semester.

- *Week 2:* We begin to scaffold learning toward the eventual writing of the end of semester creative writing project they will have chosen. Students get immersed in topics and themes and do some preliminary outlining/mind-mapping/brainstorming on the narrative essays they will write.
- *Week 3:* Students write outlines for their projects and share their work with the entirety of the class building confidence in choices. Students also discuss their mentor texts and describe what they are reading to other students.
- *Week 4:* Students bring in drafts of writing to share and we practice giving and receiving feedback and using the language of the HiSET in our discussions.
- *Week 5:* Students continue to work on their drafts getting customized feedback from the teacher and other students. We also continue to check in on what mentor texts students are reading.
- *Week 6:* We continue to dig deep with writing projects and do a lot of reading and discussion using action strategies.
- *Week 7:* We read and discuss poetry and begin to dig deeper into some specific concepts like figurative language, word usage, and determining point of view to name a few.
- *Week 8:* Continue poetry discussion and ask students to work on a poem for class that focuses on an issue of identity. Students will get guidance from the teacher and feedback from their classmates on their poems. We continue to work on larger projects and discuss areas of challenge and areas of success.
- *Week 9:* We work on expository essays applying everything we have learned previously. We finish up poetry discussion and begin to revise our writing individually and with each other.
- *Week 10:* We finish an expository essay that puts into place all they have learned about writing. Students engage in a discussion about the genres we have experienced so far in class.
- *Week 11:* Students work on their projects in class and for homework, getting guidance from the teacher and feedback from their classmates in order to finalize projects and be ready for in class presentations.
- *Week 12:* Students finalize their projects then participate in In-class presentations of their projects and of their mentor texts.

Focus on Writing in the Classroom

It's important to note how *Writer's Workshop* and other writing strategies will play a role in the design of this curriculum. The general flow of class will go something like this:

1. Reflection and discussion of current learnings/projects (over time building in time for revision of writing)
2. Time to read literature (including student chosen mentor texts and other relevant literature based on class needs)

3. Time to practice and learn about specific formal writing forms (in particular essays simply because it's a reality), but continually building off of skills learned in class and in *Writer's Workshop*
4. *Writer's Workshop* will be organized as follows:
   a. 5-10 minutes of a mini-lesson around a specific topic based on collective need
   b. 35-45 minutes for writing of a student's specific project
   c. 10-20 minutes of share time for discussion and feedback

Because students come in at varying levels, it will be important to spend time getting to know students, helping students feel confident in the class as individuals and as part of a community of learners, and scaffolding toward building a culture of writing in the classroom.