Listening to and Learning from the Stories of Early At-Risk,
Eventual High-Achieving Urban Student Writers

A Doctoral Thesis
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Abstract

This qualitative study contributes to understanding urban student experiences with high-achieving writing growth over time. A narrative inquiry methodology was used to explore the lived experiences of eight urban public high school students who scored in the Needs Improvement, or academically “at risk,” performance level on the fourth-grade English language arts annual statewide assessment who went on to score Advanced on the tenth-grade English language arts statewide assessment, with high writing sub-scores. Student participants shared stories of their writing growth in their own voices through in-depth interviews and by identifying a teacher who could comment further on their writing development. Two writing development theories: social cognitive theory and sociocultural theory offered a framework for understanding the influences on student writing development. Key themes that emerged from student stories include: recalled writing structure, high school as turning point, the presence of self-efficacy beliefs, and motif as illuminator of writing growth. All too often, student voices are missing from the research into urban student writing development. The authentic voices of urban students who achieved academic writing success affirms that high achievement is possible within urban educational contexts. Key words: academically at risk, high achievement, narrative inquiry, self-efficacy beliefs, student stories, urban students, writing development, social cognitive theory and sociocultural theory
Dedication

to my daughters, Clare and Catherine, and their special mommy, my wife, Jenn

and

to my mother and father, Joan and Frank, who always believed in me
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Helping to improve the academic success of public education students has been the goal of educational reformers for the past two decades in the United States. Despite these efforts, urban students continue to struggle academically (Geisler, Hessler, Gardner, & Lovelace, 2009). For the core skill of writing, these students perform poorly on measures of writing proficiency, and their underachievement continues to be given less attention (Ball, 2008). Interestingly, from among this cohort of underachieving urban student writers a subset of positive outliers emerges—students who somehow go on to master academic writing during their K-12 education. What are their success stories, and are there insights we can learn from these stories that may help other urban students to be successful as writers in school? Finding answers to these questions may help educators to understand that listening to the authentic voices of these urban students may go a long way towards explaining why these students succeed as writers when most from the same cohort do not.

Problem Statement

In examining the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing results from 2007 and again in 2011, statistics suggest that writing achievement for urban students continues to have the highest percentage of students in Basic and Below Basic, or the two performance levels below Proficient, in grades 8 and 12 when compared to the national average (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012; Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008). For NAEP, Proficient represents a standard of writing that is defined as “competent” on a given writing task (NCES, 2012, p. 23). In the most recent 2011 NAEP results, empirical evidence indicates continued lower achievement by urban public school students with 26% categorized as Below Basic and 52% as Basic for a total of 78% in grade 8, compared to suburban students who
were ranked as 17% *Below Basic* and 51% as *Basic* for a total of 68% (NCES, 2012). For grade 12, evidence indicates similar results for urban public school students scoring 25% *Below Basic* and 51% *Basic* for a total of 76%, compared to 18% *Below Basic* and 51% *Basic* for suburban students for a total of 69% (NCES, 2012). Thus, the most recent NAEP assessments indicate that approximately three quarters or more of urban public school students have not acquired the writing skills necessary for academic success.

With the 2010 advent of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a standards-based educational reform effort involving a consortium of 43 states to improve K-12 student writing by establishing new, more rigorous writing outcomes, the academic expectations for all students are higher than they have ever been (Graham & Harris, 2013). State-level writing standards, intended to provide a framework for writing expectations since the 1990s, have been replaced by CCSS standards that require students to meet more challenging writing outcomes than had been required of them previously (Applebee & Langer, 2011; CCSS, 2010; Troia & Olinghouse, 2013). These higher standards require student writers to produce evidence-based writing in response to texts; to become skillful in the various writing modes: informative, narrative, and persuasive; to construct and to share their analysis of content knowledge through research; and to use 21st century writing tools such as digital media to help them achieve their writing goals (CCSS, 2010; Graham & Harris, 2013). The intent of these new writing expectations is to prepare students for information age jobs where writing is required for success (National Commission on Writing, 2003).

These new and more rigorous writing expectations will significantly impact K-12 urban public school students who, based on national studies of writing achievement, continue to lag behind their suburban peers when it comes to being “proficient” in writing (NCES, 2012;
Student writing is assessed by the NAEP, a federally-mandated measure of academic achievement that uses representative sampling of 9-, 13-, and 17-year-old students over time (NCES, 2012; Salahu-Din et al., 2008). NAEP results indicate that urban student writers’ underachievement manifests early at the elementary level and places them at risk academically for below proficient rankings on state writing assessments (Geisler, et al., 2009; Graham & Perin, 2007). Urban students who have not yet mastered the writing skills necessary to be successful in today’s technological society are at an enormous disadvantage (Ball, 2008). Without these skills, urban students will be unable to handle the communication required of them in postsecondary and workplace learning environments, thus limiting their educational and career prospects (Ball, 2008).

Attempts to help urban students overcome this record of pervasively low growth in achievement have been largely unsuccessful. At the national level, the impact of powerful teaching and learning is notably absent from attempts to improve urban student writing achievement (Nagin, 2004; The National Commission on Writing, 2003). At the state level, Massachusetts offered few solutions for ways to improve urban student writing (Goldsmith, 2002). Urban school districts throughout the country with statewide testing programs, but for a few exceptional schools, demonstrated no sustainable success in the area of student writing growth (Duke & Lindahl, 2011; Wilder & Jacobsen, 2010).

Despite the persistent writing achievement gap for urban, academically at-risk students (Ball, 2008), public education’s inability to demonstrate notable gains in urban student writing (NCES, 2012; Salahu-Din et al., 2008), and relatively limited research into this problem (Wiggan, 2014), there are a small group of urban students who go on every year to become high-growth writers during their public school education. Clearly, it is important to further explore
the factors that may have contributed to their success. Thus, the purpose of this narrative study is to understand the stories of eight urban public school students in the 9Public School District who began as academically at risk writers at the elementary level and who went on to become high-growth and high-achieving writers by tenth grade in high school.

**Research Question**

The following research question guided this study: What stories do urban public school students have to tell about their writing growth after beginning as academically at-risk writers in elementary school and then becoming high-achieving writers by high school?

**Significance of the Problem**

As Graham and Harris (2013) assert, writing is the gateway to learning and a key to academic success. The fact that content knowledge is often assessed through writing (Graham, Harris, and Hebert, 2011) and that NAEP data indicate that urban students’ writing is below proficient (NCES, 2012) provide some insight into why urban students struggle academically while in K-12 public education. In addition, studies suggest that writing is a necessary means for learning content (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson, 2004; Graham & Perin, 2007) and further that writing about reading materials enhances comprehension (Graham, et al., 2011). Moreover, the academic struggles of underachieving urban students place them at higher risk for dropping out or disconnecting from the school learning community (McGee, 2013).

However, the negative impact on urban students has deeper causes, fueled by the critical role of systemic perceptions and inherent cultural biases in public education that lead to what McGee (2013) refers to as “the normalization of failure” (p. 450). To begin, the educational and research narrative of urban students in America is framed around low growth and continual
academic underachievement, which fosters negative perceptions of this group, particularly related to the notion of needing to be fixed (McGee, 2013).

Systemically, these negative perceptions create a range of “significant achievement barriers” for urban students attending K-12 schools (McGee, 2013, p. 449). These take the form of lost opportunities because of academically at-risk status, lower-quality instruction, a lack of culturally-relevant curricula, less-experienced teachers, low teacher retention rates, and cultural differences between teachers, a majority of whom are white and middle class, unlike their urban students who are not (Barton & Coley, 2009; Donnor & Brown, 2011; Garrett, Antrop-González, & Vélez, 2010; Schott Foundation, 2010; Talbert-Johnson, 2004).

The impact of this pervasive academic underachievement for urban students and the negative perceptions that accompany them continue to compound and create effects that last well beyond high school. The reality is that most urban students who struggle with writing during their public education have not gained the writing skills needed to be successful in today’s technological society (Ball, 2008; Geisler et al., 2009). In effect, their writing deficits decrease their chances for academic success while in K-12 public school and limit them as they transition to college and careers to follow. Therefore, the outlook for urban students remains a pressing concern.

Finally, on a societal level, this ongoing struggle of urban students to become proficient writers during their public education certainly runs counter to “the great democratization of learning in the United States,” called for by the National Commission on Writing (Ball, 2008, p. 307). As long as the academic growth and achievement of urban students continues to lag behind all students, the goal of giving all students access to a high-quality education to maintain a strong and productive democracy remains unfulfilled. Moreover, the lack of highly-skilled
writers entering the workforce jeopardizes the United States’ competitiveness economically (Ramey, 2013). The need for highly-skilled employees initiated the call for public education reform in the 1990s by national and state business alliances citing that public high school graduates, including urban students, were not ready to meet more challenging workplace demands. The fact that urban students have not been successful despite these reforms only compounds the problems because it means that the legacy of the education reform movement itself remains mixed (Ramey, 2013).

**My Story as a Developing Writer**

My own story as a developing writer from a low socioeconomic background came not from school, but from watching television at home. Neither of my parents, both educated in urban public schools, had the opportunity to attend college. In my lower middle-class world, books were mostly absent; there were no regular visits to the library and no quiet time for completing homework. Instead, there was unfettered access to television. From my earliest memories through high school, television dominated family afterschool and evening activities.

While most students make writing gains as an extension of their reading development, I succeeded academically by growing as a writer based on my writing ability alone. All the way through public school, I never read anything in its entirety, but only micro-read, at a survivalist level, short segments of text from novels and plays, sufficient to have something to say when I wrote about content. My strength was in writing and, in particular, the ability to create style with a distinctive voice. This ability to construct varied and interesting sentences came from what I had learned, or more precisely, *heard* from television. This was first noted in high school when teachers would comment that I could write with style. What I was doing was converting the spoken word I had heard on television into the written word.
Limited early exposure to student diversity. It should be noted for the purposes of this study that while my parents were from low socioeconomic, urban backgrounds and my earliest educational experiences were urban from kindergarten through second grade, the schools I attended in the 1960s and 1970s had little diversity. Before I began third grade, my parents moved to a mostly white, suburban public school district. Thus, my formative years as a writer were shaped in a learning environment and era very different, in terms of diversity, than those of the urban students of this study.

Impact on my professional work as a writing teacher. These personal experiences shaped me into the educator I am today. First, I have experienced and understand the powerful impact that cultural influences and artifacts outside the classroom, such as television, can have on developing writers. This led to my second discovery—if my writing development came from watching television: what impact, if any, came from the public education classroom?

These insights impact my perspective on my problem of practice in two ways. First, in listening to the stories of early at-risk, eventual high-growth urban student writers I am open to influences on writing development that emanate not directly from classroom experiences aimed at improving writing but from the broader, cultural sphere of influence, especially in this ever-expanding technological age. While current classroom writing assignments accompanied by teacher comments may contribute structure and a feedback loop to writing development, there is a tendency in education, especially among classroom teachers, most of whom do not write regularly and are not professional writers, to use a simplified, three-step version of the process writing model approach, plan-write-rewrite, to improve student writing. My position is that this approach, while easy to teach, may be limiting on these particular writers who are at risk to begin with and who need to learn to grow at significantly higher levels.
Second, if the influence of culture is an important mediating factor in the writing development process of urban students, it is possible that cultural exposure through television, video games, and family may be a more significant asset than public school teachers working with urban student writers realize.

From my perspective as an English curriculum coordinator in an urban public school district for the past thirteen years, writing is rarely taught using cultural resources and the power of context to shape young writers. Instead, the process-writing approach continues to dominate instruction instead of attempts to utilize the many cultural influences on urban student writers that may benefit their writing. Given these realities, it is no surprise that urban student writing growth and achievement have shown no gains in the past eight years (NCES, 2012; Salahu-Din et al., 2008). It is no wonder that The National Commission on Writing (2003) warns “American education will never realize the potential until a writing revolution puts language and communication in their proper place in the classroom” (p. 17). It is my position that the writing revolution, long called for, has yet to be actualized in urban public school instructional practice.

Finally, having taught student writers and coached teachers throughout my educational career, I have a passion for this subject. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) point out the benefits of having a researcher who knows about the school system where this writing growth took place. This is another benefit to conducting a narrative study. In fact, the narrative researcher is encouraged to “position himself or herself within the inquiry” by including the researcher’s “narrative beginnings in relation to the topic” (Connelly & Clandinin p. 483).

**Theoretical Framework**

While life stories are not based on a theoretical framework, the meaning in these stories may fit a particular theory (Atkinson, 2007). What is known from research on the writing
development of urban students is that social context is an important factor in writing development (Ball, 2008). Therefore, this study is grounded in two social learning theories that “stress the importance of meaningful learning in situated contexts” (Harris, Graham, & Adkins, 2015, p. 7). Both sociocultural theory (Wertsch, 1991) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) frame the writing development process as one influenced by social context. What separates these two theoretical perspectives is where each theory posits the nexus of change to occur. For sociocultural theory, writing development has its origins extrinsically through the ways in which cultural context shapes the student writer. For social cognitive theory, the dynamism for writing development occurs intrinsically to the student writer as self-efficacy beliefs increase, motivation grows, and writing improves (Pajares & Valiante, 2008).

**Sociocultural theory.** With its origins in the writings of Vygotsky (1978, 1987), sociocultural theory emphasizes the influence of cultural context as that which powerfully shapes human development (Wertsch, 1991). How students learn to write is the outcome of a social process (Englert, Mariage, & Dunsmore, 2008). For writing development, therefore, the cultural context shapes cognitive processes through the key contextual factors of participatory apprenticeships, procedural facilitation, communities of practice, and semiotic tools (Englert et al., 2008). The first contextual factor to shape writing development are semiotic tools or the language, signs, and symbols that continue to mold young writers’ cognitions about writing throughout their entire development (Englert et al., 2008). The second contextual factor is participatory apprenticeship where a teacher purposefully shapes the young writer’s understanding through instruction in order to make the process of writing explicit to the developing writer through “co-participation and guided practice” (Englert et al., 2008, p. 209). The third contextual factor are procedural facilitators that include the scaffolds, steps, and tools
the teacher uses to help the young writer to use independently over time through practice (Englert et al., 2008). These facilitators include a variety of writing tools from graphic organizers, exemplars, and spell checker, to word processing. The final contextual factor is communities of practice, which is where student writers actually compose or share their writing; most often, though not always, this is the classroom (Englert et al., 2008). These communities provide the context whereby students are given writing assignments, they are able to share what they know about writing or discuss their confusion, and can be given further assistance. Cognition is shaped during this apprenticeship between expert and novice writer with the intent of helping the novice writer “to construct well-written text” (Englert et al., 2008, p. 211).

For writing, sociocultural theory posits that these contextual factors exert a powerful influence on the two cognitive processes of appropriation and internalization (Englert et al., 2008). Appropriation is how student writers adapt the writing tools and assistance that come from the cultural sphere as they set about their own writing process. In fact, research suggests that student writers who demonstrate the highest levels of appropriation make the highest gains on writing measures (Englert et al., 2008). According to sociocultural theory, what follows appropriation is internalization where the writer gains the capacity to write effectively, and no longer requires external support because this support is now entirely internalized and the result becomes transformative (Englert et al., 2008).

**Social cognitive theory.** With its origins in the work of Bandura (1986, 1997), social cognitive theory suggests that cognitive processing is the key to learning in the form of self-efficacy beliefs and motivation (Pajares & Valiante, 2008). Self-efficacy beliefs are the judgments a learner makes about how well a task can be solved despite dissonance from ambiguity and challenge (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). Closely related to self-efficacy is
motivation, which is defined as the willingness to take on a particular task. For writing development, social cognitive theory posits that only as self-efficacy and motivation increase at the cognitive processing level can a writer be successful on more challenging and complex writing tasks (Bruning, Dempsey, Kauffman, McKim, & Zumbrunn, 2013; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994).

Similarly rooted in the influence of cultural context, social cognitive theory for writing posits that self-efficacy and motivation increase in response to feedback from contextual factors (Pajares & Valiante, 2008). The first contextual factor is process goals such as when students are given specific strategies to help them improve their writing (Pajares & Valiante, 2008). The second contextual factor is regular feedback, and this is when student writers are told how well they are using particular writing strategies to improve their writing (Pajares & Valiante, 2008). The third contextual factor is observational learning, which is where a student writer learns vicariously through observing a more-skilled writer or through analyzing writing exemplars (Pajares & Valiante, 2008). The fourth contextual factor is successful outcomes on previous writing. Studies have shown that successful outcomes exert the greatest influence on self-efficacy beliefs about the next writing task (Pajares & Valiante, 2008).

Graham and Harris (2013) call for consideration of both cultural and cognitive theoretical conceptualizations for writing development. They argue that otherwise, “writing development cannot be adequately understood” (p. 32). Combining sociocultural and social cognitive theories as a guiding framework for this study provides the broadest possible foundation for listening to and learning from the stories of early at-risk, eventual high-growth urban students and how they understand their paths to writing success.
Figure 1 illustrates a schematic representation for understanding how sociocultural and social cognitive theories may serve to frame urban student stories about their writing development.

Figure 1 brings together two writing development theories into a shared conceptualization. The fact that writing is a social activity, influenced by cultural context, has been well-established (Englert et al., 2008; Pajares & Valiante, 2008) and is represented for both theories by the outer ring and the arrows pointing inward from culture to cognition. The inner
circle identifies the key cognitive processes that are central, though distinctly different, for each theory as represented by the two halves of the inner circle.

The theoretical framework in this narrative study is simply to provide the reader with a context for understanding what is known about writing development. While theory is important as a guide to understanding, it is not used in a narrative study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this way, narrative inquiry is profoundly different from other research methodologies because the storied experiences that emerge are the central focus for deepening our understanding of the phenomenon. These subjective experiences and how what they tell us about urban student writing development are purposefully unconstrained by theory (Patton 2002).

**Methodological Approach**

This study uses a narrative approach in order to seek a new understanding of the problem of practice by beginning with a research puzzle (Clandinin, 2013). Likewise, the research question is not a result of a clearly defined problem and search for a solution (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Instead, this narrative study represents a chance to search again into writing development using methods that look differently at the entire topic, especially where there are gaps in our understanding of what is and what is not working with urban student writers. This study attends “to the connections between the powerful forces of cognition, context, and language” in a way that has not yet been done (Ball, 2008, p. 293; Freedman & Dyson, 1987).

Key to the narrative research question is that it shifts our way of knowing to encourage openness to lived experiences situated within stories, not as a means to a reductionist end, but as a way of more broadly and more deeply knowing (Clandinin, 2013). Creswell (2012) points out that narrative studies may share a particular contextual focus. This narrative inquiry is centered on what Clandinin refers to as “relational space” between researcher and participants who are
situated within a shared learning and writing community (Clandinin, 2013, p. 34). Urban student writers’ stories serve as the primary source of analysis for this narrative study in order to understand their experiences as storied phenomena (Clandinin, 2013).

**Thesis Proposal Summary**

This thesis is comprised of five chapters. Chapter One provides an overview of the problem of practice, why it warrants further exploration, the researcher’s positionality regarding writing development and personal and professional experiences, the integration of two theoretical conceptualizations on the topic, and a rationale for how a narrative research design is suitable to understand this topic and this problem further. Chapter Two reviews the extant research literature relative to what is known about the topic along with considerations of other studies into the high-growth and achievement of urban students. Chapter Three provides the methodology that was used to understand this topic further through student stories. Chapter Four presents the primary findings. Chapter Five offers implications for the theoretical framework, methodology, and practice.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter presents the relevant scholarly literature aligned with the theoretical framework of this study. Social cognitive theory and sociocultural theory guided the following four questions for understanding the stories of early at-risk, eventual high-achieving urban student writers:

1. *How can writing process theory and the writing process model provide a background for understanding the stories of student writing development?*

2. *What do studies of classroom writing practice reveal about the social context for student writing growth?*
(3) How can studies of writing development theories illuminate our understanding of student writing growth?

(4) What does the research about urban student learning identify as key factors that promote writing development?

The first question examined the historical context for understanding the writing process itself. To understand writing development theories, or how students grew as writers, first required a closer examination of what is known about writing process theory, or what happened when students actually wrote. Because writing process theory has evolved into a popular model for classroom instruction (Sharp, 2016), the writing process model was also reviewed to situate what all student-participants referred to when talking about their own writing process. The second question reviewed the research relative to classroom writing practice. Social cognitive and sociocultural theories of writing development framed the use of classroom writing practices in terms of the range and efficacy of instructional practices aimed at helping student writers grow. The third question considered the influence of the two major writing development theories on student learning. Student-participants were influenced by internal and external factors and these two writing development theories; social cognitive and sociocultural, illuminated what is known about the complex and multi-faceted writing development process. The final question of the literature reviewed for this study involved an examination of research into what is known about writing development with urban students. Social cognitive and sociocultural theories emphasized the importance of context and cognition on how these writers optimally learn.
This chapter is divided into the following four sections: writing process theory and model, classroom instructional practices, social cognitive and sociocultural theories of student writing development, and high-growth urban student learning.

Section I: Writing Process Theory and Model

Social cognitive and sociocultural theories of writing have their origins in writing process theory. Writing process theory frames the act of writing as a series of steps that correspond with the writing process involving pre-writing, writing, and revising (Lacina & Silva, 2011). Over the past fifty years, as writing process theory has evolved it has been interpreted differently depending upon the theoretical paradigm of the factors that influence the writing process (Nystrand, 2008).

Existing research around writing process reveals that the roots of our understanding about how a person writes lies in the Cognitive Revolution of the 1960s when Noam Chomsky, a major researcher in the field of cognitive science, made his breakthrough connection between language and the rules of cognitive process (Nystrand, 2008). Language, Chomsky hypothesized, provided a way to see how the mind structured thinking (1968). What followed was a new line of research at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that connected cognition with spoken and written language known as psycholinguistics (Nystrand, 2008). By studying how the mind constructed schemas or mental representations to represent cognitive processes, researchers had an entirely new way to understand writing than by studying writing outcomes only.

This theoretical shift toward inner cognition as the dynamism for writing process represented a movement away from Rohman and Wlecke’s (1964) earlier stage model for writing, where the process of writing was compared to the growth stages of a plant (Sharp,
2016). Known for being a traditional approach to writing, in this model students were taught to perform a series of nonrecursive, linear steps in the composing process—from prewriting, to writing, to rewriting, with a focus on writing outcomes (Hayes & Flower, 1986; Sharp, 2016).

From theory to classroom, Janet Emig’s (1971) groundbreaking composition research into the influence of cognitive processes on writing, entitled *Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, was the first study of its kind to use think-aloud protocols to capture these otherwise unseen cognitive writing processes. Concluding that high school writers were negatively impacted by a simple, three-step sequence, Emig expanded the conceptualization of writing to include ten dimensions within three stages: the subject stage, the preparation stage, and the writing stage, that emphasized the importance of prewriting processing as well the need to allocate time for reformulating what had been written (Sharp, 2016). Emig’s expansion of the writing process shifted the emphasis toward cognition. She was also the first to assert that the linear stage model of writing instruction needed to be replaced by instructional approaches that treated learning to write as a complex, non-linear, recursive thinking task (Emig, 1971).

By the mid-1970s, articles in the American popular press decried the decline in student writing at both the college and public school levels and the shift toward the cognitive processing of composing became the answer to improve student writing (Nystrand, 2008). This renewed interest in writing as a skill that cognitive researchers could improve led to the seminal work of Flower and Hayes (1981), who introduced a new and more complex theory of cognitive processes for composing aimed at helping student writers through the writing process by understanding their thinking.

The key to Flower and Hayes’ (1981) model was their articulation of the writing process, or the role that cognition plays in writing. For these researchers, writing involved not just
externally taught stages, but three elements representing mental operations that the writer shifts between involving writing processes, the writing task environment, and long-term memory (Hayes & Flower, 1980). Writing processes occur in three phases: *planning*, when the writer generates and organizes ideas and sets goals for writing; *translating/drafting*, when the writer actually puts ideas into language; and *reviewing*, when the writer evaluates and/or revises what has been written thus far (Flower & Hayes, 1981). According to this model, these three elements of the writing process are under the control of a monitor, when the writer “functions as a writing strategist” moving between processes at different times in response to the needs of the task (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p. 374). Another component of the Flower and Hayes (1981) cognitive process model is the task environment, which involves “all of those things outside the writer’s skin,” (Flowers & Hayes, 1981, p. 369) such as the task, the audience, and the text that has been written at varying stages. The task environment also includes the physical context: the written text and the composing tools, along with the social context: peers, other audiences, and the writing classroom itself (Hayes, 1996). The final component is the writer’s long-term memory, where the writer’s knowledge of the topic and the audience are kept along with the writing plans (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Flower and Hayes (1981) claim that by studying the differences between novice and expert writers, more effective cognitive strategies can be discovered and, thus, novices can be trained to improve their writing. This new cognitive process model not only provided a deeper conceptualization of what writers do to “create a hierarchical network of guiding goals” when they compose, but also revealed an established routine that high-growth writers follow (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p. 379).
Figure 2 illustrates Flower and Hayes’ (1981) cognitive processing model of composing.

In response to Flower and Hayes’ cognitive conceptualization of writing came sociocultural theorists who critiqued this model as ignoring the social and emotional influences on writers (Brand, 1987; Faigley, 1986). Bizzell (1982) and Nystrand (1982) countered Flower and Hayes’ (1981) internalized cognitive paradigm with their assertion that social context also fundamentally shaped the writing process. For these social theorists, learning is a social construction shaped by language and experience from outside the writer (Prior, 2008). Writing research studies by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), Brandt (1986), Faigley (1985), Nystrand (1986), and Prior (1998) therefore shifted the focus from internal processing to the social and interactive aspects of the writing process (Prior, 2008). For these researchers, the writing process is socially situated and helping students learn to write requires a better understanding of how writing context, writing tools, and discourse communities significantly shape the writing
process. In the case of writing, the discourse community would be classroom teacher and students who share a specific language about a task or topic.

One final note from the research about evolving writing process theory is that it has spawned an approach to teaching writing referred to as the writing process model, also known as the process approach to writing instruction. This process approach to writing has continued to the present as not only “one of the most popular methods for teaching writing,” where writing is student-centered and collaborative, but very likely to be the favored method to improve writing results on standardized tests in the United States (Graham & Sandmel, 2011, p. 396). With its roots in Rohman’s simpler stage model approach, this approach involved a broad range of problem-solving strategies at various stages of the writing process, though the most commonly taught stages that students learned in the classroom were once again a simplified linear approach involving pre-writing, writing, and rewriting (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2008). In their meta-analysis of the process writing approach, Graham and Sandmel (2011) concluded that process-writing instruction had a limited benefit with general education students, but did not result in writing improvement or increased motivation for at-risk writers in grades 1-12.

**Summary.** Writing is a multi-faceted, non-linear, goal-directed process influenced by both internal and external factors (Graham & Harris, 2013). The differences between writing process theory (Flower & Hayes, 1981), or how one writes, and social cognitive and sociocultural writing development theories (Bandura, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978), or how one grows from beginner to expert writer, may offer context for better understanding the stories of early at-risk, eventual high-achieving writers. With its origins in writing process theory, the most popular classroom model for teaching students to improve their writing is the process-writing
approach, though this approach has been found to be less effective in helping struggling students and their writing development (Graham & Sandmel, 2011; Hayes & Flower, 1986).

Section II: Classroom Writing Practices

This section includes a review of meta-analyses of experimental and quasi-experimental writing research studies, national teacher surveys on classroom writing instructional practice, and research studies of schools with a reputation for excellence in teaching writing. To situate the influence of social cognitive and sociocultural theories on writing development through a closer look at classroom writing instructional practices, this literature review reveals the complexity and inconsistency in writing instruction over the past thirty years.

The two most comprehensive studies of classroom writing instruction were conducted by Hillocks (1984) and Graham and Perin (2007) consisting of meta-analyses of experimental and quasi-experimental treatment studies of classroom writing instruction and its impact, as measured by effect size, or the measure of the strength of a particular treatment, on improving the quality of student writing. In research that spanned two decades, Hillocks (1984) concluded that writing outcomes increased the most when classroom instruction activated high levels of student involvement through peer group problem-solving activities that targeted specific writing objectives. Over twenty years later, in response to growing concerns that poor writing skills were limiting students in school and in the workplace, Graham and Perin (2007) updated and expanded Hillocks’ work by examining the findings of classroom writing intervention studies for students in grades 4-12 (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Graham and Perin (2007) concluded that struggling students benefitted from an instructional emphasis on self-regulated strategy development, where student writers learned to internalize strategies related to planning, revising, and editing their writing. Even more importantly, Graham and Perin (2007) confirmed
that student writing development was most influenced by classroom context, which has its roots in both social cognitive and sociocultural theories of writing.

To further understand the influence of teaching practice on student writing development, data was also reviewed from a series of more recent national teacher surveys on typical classroom writing practices aimed at improving student writing. Cutler and Graham (2008) reported the results of a survey of first- through third-grade teachers, focusing on writing instruction in the United States. What is important about this cohort of teachers is that their work was with students who are first learning how to write, thus it is critical to understanding learning how to write as a developmental process. The data from this study suggested that first- through third-grade teachers placed more emphasis on traditional writing skills instruction in spelling, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation, instead of having students write expository texts (Cutler & Graham, 2008). From a sociocultural perspective, grammar and similar writing mechanics skills function as procedural or cultural tools that can help writers compose well-written texts provided beginning writers are given the opportunity to do so (Englert, et al., 2008; Smith, Cheville, & Hillocks, 2008). However, early elementary teachers reported combining their skills instruction, but with less time given to process approach writing (Cutler & Graham, 2008). Hillocks (1986) confirmed that teaching form grammar had a negative effect if it displaced time dedicated to having students write. One other finding pertinent to the social cognitive theory is that the study also reported that not enough time was dedicated to enhancing student motivation, which is a key construct related to writing growth (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Hidi & Boscolo, 2008).

Gilbert and Graham (2010) conducted a similar national survey of teachers responsible for teaching writing to students in grades 4, 5, and 6. Similar to early elementary writing
practice, Gilbert and Graham reported that upper elementary teachers teach writing infrequently, by half compared to a survey of primary grade writing instruction (Cutler & Graham, 2008). The most frequent writing assignments these teachers assigned to students are writing-to-learn activities, such as short answers, worksheets, note taking, and summarizing, whose primary task is knowledge telling, instead of more complex writing tasks such as persuasive, descriptive, informative, and research writing (McCutchen, 2008; Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Thus, students had little opportunity to do analysis and interpretation (Gilbert & Graham, 2010) despite the finding that other research affirmed that at-risk students are able to learn from these more complex writing tasks (Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2006). As a final caution, Gilbert and Graham reported that a decline in time dedicated to writing from primary to upper elementary “represents a misunderstanding about how writing develops” (p. 511). From a social cognitive perspective, teachers working with young writers needed to give them “challenging tasks and meaningful activities” to purposefully build student confidence (Pajares & Valiente, 2008, p. 167). From a sociocultural perspective, “schooled literacies” or classroom environments where young writers talk, read, write, observe, and act, are the critical context necessary for them to develop further as writers (Prior, 2008, p. 61). Thus, the research suggested that current classroom writing practice at the elementary level was insufficient in promoting writing development.

The most recent study of classroom writing practice by Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, and Morphy (2014) surveyed sixth- through eighth-grade teachers and continued to raise concerns about writing instruction at this level. The study reported that middle school students did mostly writing without composing where students wrote only short-answer responses, fill-in-the-blank worksheets, notes, and lists, instead of dedicating greater frequency to having students
write more extended responses or multi-paragraph essays or being instructed how to write analysis and interpretation (Graham et al., 2014). As for struggling writers, the data indicated that teachers used sparingly any writing adaptations designed to help students improve their writing through revision (Graham et al., 2014). For social cognitive theory, teachers play a key role in piquing student cognitive stimulation and the resultant motivation. Writing-without-composing assignments inhibited the cognitive stimulation that comes from more challenging writing tasks or those that invite greater self-expression (Bruning & Horn, 2000). For sociocultural theory, the infrequency of writing self-reported by middle school teachers represented a limitation to the rich “literate activity” needed to promote writing development (Prior, 2008, p. 64).

At the high school level, Kiuhara, Graham, and Hawken (2009) raised concerns when the results of a national survey of teachers in the United States questioned about their writing instructional practices revealed that writing was infrequently assigned to students and writing instruction was infrequently adapted for struggling writers. The writing tasks teachers did assign required minimal interpretation and analysis and the frequency of these more challenging, multi-paragraph writing tasks was less than one per month (Kiuhara et al., 2009). Compounding matters, positive writing practices based upon evidence from research studies were used sparingly (Kiuhara et al., 2009). Similar to the findings in middle school, social cognitive theory posited that increasing confidence in students’ writing ability required the teacher to assign a range of writing tasks, some with challenge, as well as to attending specifically to building student self-efficacy (Pajares & Johnson, 1996; Bruning & Horn, 2000; Hidi & Boscolo, 2008). Sociocultural theorists suggested that high school students needed to write more, not less and
that the “teacher agency in the sharing of expertise” with students was key to the apprenticeship relationship (Englert et al., 2008, p. 209).

Finally, two other important studies of classroom writing practice in the United States confirmed the findings of these national teacher surveys. Applebee and Langer (2009) examined NAEP writing data from 1975 to 2004, and pointed out that achievement gaps have remained large for free-and-reduced-price lunch students and students of color. They also concluded that the dominant approach to writing instruction remained the process approach (Applebee & Langer, 2009). While there has been an increased focus on writing and writing instruction due to pressure from high-stakes testing, these researchers concluded that “many students are not writing a great deal for any of their academic subjects, including English, and most are not writing at any length” (Applebee & Langer, 2009, p. 26).

Applebee and Langer (2011) conducted an extensive follow-up case study on writing instruction, using data collected from 20 middle and high schools known for their excellence in writing instruction. What they discovered is that students are not being asked to write much—81% of writing assignments were less than a paragraph—and that the writing that does take place is writing without composing (Applebee & Langer, 2011). Reflecting upon a similar study that Applebee (1980) conducted, classroom writing instruction has remained comparable “with students completing many more pages of exercises and copying than they do of original writing or even a paragraph in length” (Applebee & Langer, 2011, p. 24). The key difference, they discovered, is that writing instruction has focused on preparing students for high-stakes writing assessments rather than on helping students develop a range of writing skills for a variety of more complex writing tasks (Applebee & Langer, 2011).
For both social cognitive and sociocultural theoretical perspectives, these Applebee and Langer (2009, 2011) studies continued to reflect opportunities lost in leveraging the social context of the classroom in promoting writing development while offering students sufficiently challenging writing tasks and support to facilitate writing growth.

**Summary.** In summary, findings from recent teacher surveys conducted across all grade spans in the United States suggested that students do not write much and what little writing they do is either writing without composing or formulaic writing aimed at high-stakes test preparation (Applebee & Langer, 2009, 2011; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Graham et al., 2014; Kiuhara et al., 2009). This review of the literature offered some context for possible limitations on the influence of the classroom on writing development where research-based practices in writing remained not the primary instructional focus.

**Section III: Writing Development Theories**

This section includes a review of writing research studies to understand more fully the impact of social cognitive theory and sociocultural theory on student writing development itself. Research into social cognitive theory offered further insights into studies of self-efficacy beliefs and the related constructs of self-regulation and motivation as these apply to writing development. Research into sociocultural theory explored studies of the efficacy of participatory apprenticeships, procedural facilitators and tools, and communities of practice on writing development.

**Social cognitive theory of writing.** Social cognitive theory posits that learning to write is the outcome of an ongoing interaction between cognition, behavior, and context (Bandura, 1986). Central to this theory is self-efficacy or the core belief that a given task can be successfully accomplished. Self-efficacy beliefs help the learner to mediate thoughts and
feelings throughout the learning process and in this way, exert a powerful influence on behavior (Bandura, 1986). Bandura later added that self-efficacy is the “incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties” and that once a skill is successfully acquired, a task successfully completed, the process of learning reaches its end point in self-regulation, where the learner can self-initiate thoughts, feelings, and actions to complete the next task (2002, p. 270). Conversely, for at-risk writers who struggle Bandura asserted that low self-efficacy has a negative impact on behavior even when learners know what to do to accomplish a given task, which is how social cognitive theorists understand and address learning difficulties (Bandura, 2002).

The influence of self efficacy on writing development. From a theoretical perspective, positive self-efficacy beliefs are powerful predictors of academic accomplishments because they serve as the “filter through which new phenomenon are interpreted” and influence whether a learner will attempt or avoid a given task (Pajares & Valiante, 2008). For some writing development researchers, self-efficacy beliefs that lead to greater self-regulation provided a helpful framework for understanding what the learner must deal with in undertaking the complex and challenging task of writing (Harris, Graham Friedlander, & Laud, 2013). Thus, the notion that writing confidence, motivation, and self-regulation are rooted in self-efficacy beliefs becomes the first method by which to synthesize the research about writing development through this important theoretical lens.

Klassen (2001) conducted the first review of self-efficacy studies as they relate to student writing by examining self-efficacy beliefs of sixth- and tenth-grade students through developmental and gender lenses. Klassen confirmed that for a majority of the studies self-efficacy did indeed help predict student writing performance, though boys who had greater self-efficacy than girls did not write better than girls as a result (Klassen, 2001). Klassen also
concluded that the transition to middle and high school is a critical time developmentally for helping to support students when self-efficacy decreases for both boys and girls in response to more challenging academic writing tasks.

Expanding upon Klassen’s review, Pajares and Valiante (2008) helped to understand further the four sources from which writing self-efficacy develops in student writers. Building upon Bandura’s theory, Pajares and Valiante asserted that writing self-efficacy is formed from mastery experience or past performances of previous writing success; vicarious experience from observing others successfully perform a similar writing task; social or verbal persuasions in the form of feedback from others; and emotional feedback from others when undertaking a writing task (Bandura, 1997; Pajares & Valiante, 2008).

Research findings suggested that the most powerful of these sources is mastery experience and this, in turn, leads to greater confidence and motivation on the next writing task (Pajares & Valiante, 2008). It is also important to note here that self-efficacy beliefs do not in and of themselves increase writing competence. Rather, greater confidence helps the student writer overcome the writing process obstacles through greater effort and perseverance to complete the task successfully (Pajares & Valiante, 2008).

There have been a number of studies on the impact that self-efficacy has on writing development, offering additional insights relative to how social cognitive theory conceptualizes writing development (Graham, Schwartz, & MacArthur, 1993; Klassen, 2002; Pajares & Valiante, 2001). Pajares, Johnson, and Usher (2007) examined the four sources of writing self-efficacy to discern differences between academic level—elementary, middle, and high school—and gender. This study confirmed an earlier finding that mastery experience is the most powerful predictor of writing success for all genders and academic levels. In contrast to Klassen
(2002), Pajares et al. (2007) found that girls had higher self-efficacy beliefs than boys in writing across grade levels and also had more mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasions, and less anxiety than boys.

In a more recent study, Bruning, Dempsey, Kauffman, McKim, and Zumbrunn (2013) confirmed that writing self-efficacy was correlated to writing performance. Using a comprehensive, multi-factorial approach, these researchers found that self-efficacy helped middle and high school writers in all aspects of the cognitive processing model, including idea development, writing, and self-regulation (Bruning et al., 2013). In addition, students with higher self-efficacy for idea development and self-regulation did not necessarily possess self-efficacy for writing, which expands the notion that self-efficacy can manifest differently at different stages of the writing process (Bruning et al., 2013). These findings helped confirm that there may be some variability in how high-achieving urban student writers understand their strengths when it comes to their own writing process (Bruning et al., 2013).

The importance of self-regulation for high-achieving writers. Another key variable for understanding high-achieving student writing development involving self-efficacy beliefs is the role that self-regulation plays in writing or the ability of the writer to manage successful writing decisions and behaviors (Bruning et al., 2013). For writers with high self-efficacy, (2001) identified three phases to the self-regulatory process: forethought, performance, and self-reflection. High-achieving writers set specific goals during the forethought phase; during this time, they engage in strategic planning that may come in the form of a brainstorm, outline, or notes, and they have a positive attitude toward writing (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2007). The performance phase when actual writing begins is characterized by self-control and self-observation (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2007).
The literature reviewed included multiple studies of the impact of self-efficacy on self-regulation, beginning with Zimmerman and Bandura (1994) who found a link between a writer’s self-efficacy beliefs and self-regulation for academic achievement. In a subsequent study, Zimmerman and Risemberg (1997) confirmed that self-efficacy is closely linked to writing self-regulation and that high-achieving writers who used self-regulatory processes wrote better than their lower-performing peers. Zimmerman (2011) noted that when students possess high self-efficacy and self-regulation that they also have increased motivation to accomplish a given task. In light of these findings, this review of the literature examined motivation as a final key construct in understanding influences on student writing development from a social cognitive perspective.

The impact of writing self-efficacy on motivation. For Bandura (1997), learners with high self-efficacy take action through hard work and persistence in the face of a challenge to be successful in accomplishing a given task. Therefore, it can be said that self-efficacy has a motivating influence on the learner. Positive writing motivation is the ability of a writer to activate strategic learning strategies and maintain persistence through challenges in a way that ultimately leads to academic achievement (Troia, Shankland, & Wolbers, 2012). If self-efficacy beliefs are a key mediating factor in writing development, then motivation is the other important cognitive construct for seeing a writing task through to its successful completion (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Motivation and its impact on writing development is a more recent focus for research and has its origins in studies of writing self-efficacy that conceptualized writing as a complex task involving cognitive and affective processes (Hidi & Boscolo, 2008).

Bruning and Horn (2000) were the first to identify four key factors that contribute to increased motivation, including the ability of the writer to learn nurturing self beliefs; being
engaged by the writing task; providing a supportive context; and establishing a positive emotional environment. Hidi and Boscolo (2008) added that interest, self-efficacy, and self-regulation and their influence on motivation are more interrelated than previously thought. These findings supported the problem of practice and the notion that both cognitive and contextual elements are likely to be necessary for urban students to improve their writing. Pajares and Valiante (2008) studied writing self-efficacy and its relationship to motivation, concluding that, of the two, only self-efficacy was predictive of writing success. They also posited that as self-efficacy increased, student writers became more motivated to take on even more challenging writing tasks; therefore, confidence in writing was necessary before motivational gains occurred (Pajares & Valiante, 2008).

Further studies suggested that the relationship between self-efficacy and writing motivation was influenced by other variables. According to Pajares, Valiante, and Cheong (2008), development impacts motivation through a pattern of decreasing self-efficacy and academic motivation as students enter middle school, which does not recover in high school. More recent studies confirmed a link between self-efficacy and writing motivation though the relationship between these and other writing development variables may be more nuanced. Troia, Harbaugh, Shankland, Wolbers, and Lawrence (2013) have shown that students with high motivational beliefs wrote better stories and that self-efficacy, while a contributing variable to improved writing, is one of a number of factors, such as interest in a given task, that contribute to writing development.

**Summary.** Social cognitive theory provides an important framework for understanding the writing development process of high-achieving, high-growth writers. Self-efficacy, or the belief that a writer will be successful in undertaking a writing task, plays an important role in
becoming a successful writer (Pajares & Valiante, 2008). This idea is especially critical in order to understand writing, which is a challenging and complex activity that involves the writer’s thoughts, feelings, actions, and environment (Bandura, 2002). Studies have shown that high self-efficacy leads to greater academic achievement (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997), most powerfully when the writer achieves mastery experience from successfully completing a prior writing task (Pajares & Valiante, 2008). There is mixed evidence regarding self-efficacy and gender (Klassen, 2001; Pajares et al., 2007). High self-efficacy leads to greater self-regulation; thus high-achieving writers are self-regulatory and know how to manage the complexities of the writing task (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2007). Studies revealed that greater self-regulation resulted in increased motivation during the writing process (Zimmerman, 2011). Finally, the impact of self-efficacy on writing motivation is one of a number of contributing variables that impact writing development (Troia et al., 2013).

**Sociocultural theory of writing.** The second theoretical lens to illuminate what is known about research into writing development for this narrative inquiry is sociocultural theory. The seminal work of Lev Vygotsky (1978) and the contributions of James Werstch (1998) hypothesized that learning is shaped entirely by culture. The work of these two theorists later came to be known as sociocultural theory. Vygotsky was the first to theorize that culture influences human development on two levels and in this order: first on the social level between individuals, also referred to as social mediation, and then within the individual, first as appropriation and later, once the skill is mastered, as internalization (Vygotsky, 1978). Werstch advanced Vygotsky’s vision and sociocultural theory further by pointing out that all learning is socially mediated and that cognition does not happen in a vacuum (Werstch, 1991). From this theoretical perspective, higher order processes, like language acquisition and eventually writing,
are first learned socially through cultural artifacts such as the “language, signs, symbols, actions, and objects,” and then these become internalized to shape cognitive development (Englert, Mariage, & Dunsmore, 2008, p. 208). The emphasis for sociocultural theorists, therefore, is that all learning is situated and mediated through culture.

*The influence of sociocultural theory on writing development.* Because sociocultural theory conceptualizes learning as a process that is transferred from outside the student writer to literally shape the writer’s cognition (Vygotsky, 1978), writing development requires social mediation through tools and artifacts for this transfer to occur (Wertsch, 1985). This explains why explicit skills instruction, a popular method for working with struggling student writers, is considered a sociocultural approach provided that the instructional intention is to transfer a given skill from expert writer to the novice writer (Wells, 1999). A key difference for sociocultural theorists is their assertion that writing development is situated within a context of cultural practice, operating from the outside in, instead of conceptualizing development as the outcome of cognitive processes operating from the inside out.

Englert et al. (2008) were the first to articulate writing development as a process that is shaped by four pedagogical principles of sociocultural theory. The first principle comprises participatory apprenticeships in writing where a classroom teacher works with students by externalizing the tacit knowledge that is necessary for them to participate in the writing process (Englert et al. 2008). Through social mediation, either the teacher working with the student or in the classroom milieu, the teacher engages the novice writer by making explicit the strategies, modeling, explanations, discourses, tools, and actions that will help the novice writer to internalize how an expert writes (Englert et al. 2008). On the cognitive level, sociocultural theorists identify appropriation as the initial process by which a novice writer begins to be
shaped internally by social processes and knowledge that comes from classroom interaction and cultural tools, but assert that the final and lasting cognitive construct for the expert writer is internalization (Englert et al. 2008).

Vygotsky (1978) hypothesized that the greatest teaching tool was language. Therefore, teacher-to-student dialogue was both a social activity as well as a way to transfer explicitly through language the mental activities of the learner’s internal discourse (Bakhtin, 1986). From a sociocultural perspective, the goal of classroom activities is to alter through internalization how the student writer knows what to do to plan, write, and revise a given task (Englert & Dunsmore, 2004; Englert & Mariage, 2003).

The second pedagogical principle relates to the use of procedural facilitators, which are various external scaffolds and tools that help students through the writing process (Englert et al., 2008). What is unique to these and the reason why such facilitators are a sociocultural tool is how they are used. Baker, Gersten, and Scanlon (2002) examined procedural facilitators used with students with learning disabilities accompanied by dialogic interactions where techniques, content, and quality of the writing was purposefully discussed. The explicit design goal was to transfer to the novice writers through dialogue the steps taken by expert writers when confronted with the same task (Baker et al., 2002). Researchers further discovered that it is not just the use of these facilitators, but the language that is shared between teacher and student writer that makes these tools more effective (Englert et al., 2008). Therefore, the role of the classroom teacher as the one who will model and then guide the transfer of skills is critical for the success of this sociocultural approach.

Cultural or semiotic tools are another element of the second pedagogical principle, and these can range from the foundational: language, to the structural: graphic organizers, to the
assistive technology, as tools that make elements of the writing process more visible and accessible per sociocultural theory (Englert et al., 2008). Key experimental studies using semiotic tools involved explicit mnemonic strategies for planning, writing, and revising text (De La Paz, 1999; Graham & De La Paz, 2002; Harris et al., 2015). De La Paz (1999) concluded that middle school students with and without disabilities wrote better essays after learning to use mnemonics, or external memory tools for helping students break the writing task into component steps that guided them through the entire writing process. Graham and De La Paz (2002) followed this research with a second experimental study with middle school students using the same mnemonics and found that the students in the treatment condition wrote longer essays that were qualitatively better than those of the control group.

Other more recent research has validated the use of different mnemonic tools to facilitate student planning strategies. Harris, Graham, and Adkins (2015) conducted an experimental study with second-grade students attending an urban elementary school. Students in the treatment group wrote better stories than those in the control group. Another key to this study was that this was the first study where teachers were able to implement the mnemonic tool effectively to benefit students who are at risk for writing failure (Harris et al., 2015). The major implication of the use of cultural tools is that students and teachers benefitted from using tools that deliberately made writing strategies explicit and external to the student.

The final pedagogical principle relates to communities of practice that makes knowledge sharing and knowledge construction a social process (Englert et al., 2008). The first environment where student writers encounter a community of practice is typically the classroom. Per the tenets of sociocultural theory, students have improved writing performance because these
communities make writing an activity that gives students access to distributive expertise from the peer group and expands the audience beyond that of the teacher (Englert et al., 2008).

A review of research studies revealed that communities of practice can take many forms. In a qualitative study of third- and fourth-grade students who participated in a community of practice, Mariage (2001) concluded that a dialogic process of writing was beneficial to students because it made the entire writing process a social learning event. In this study, the entire writing process was collaborative and conducted daily to shape young student writers (Mariage, 2001). More recent studies reviewed argued that communities of practice enhanced learning, both in the classroom (Brown, 2007) and through online communities (Novakovich, Miah, & Shaw, 2017). These findings suggested that student involvement in the established community helped them to be more involved in their learning (Brown, 2007, Novakovich et al., 2017).

**Summary.** Based on this review of the research, social cognitive and sociocultural writing development theories help to provide important conceptual information and technical language related to writing practices as both an internal cognitive and external cultural process. Social cognitive theory and sociocultural theory offer insights into a variety of ways to help students improve their writing. Considering both writing development theories together may provide an important context for more fully understanding urban student writers’ stories in the analysis of findings.

**Section IV. Related Urban Student Writing Studies**

A final review of the literature involved a closer examination into the known factors relative to writing growth and achievement for urban students. Ever since the United States Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, which declared state laws that allowed segregation of public schools to be unconstitutional, the call and struggle to offer urban
students equal access to high-quality education has been underway. In light of the fact that the academic progress of urban student writers in the United States, to this day, continues to lag behind their suburban peers in achievement (Salahu-Din et al., 2008; NCES, 2012), this review found that much of the educational research focused on academic underachievement and far less on the role of cognition and context in helping to promote the writing development of students learning in culturally diverse settings.

**Challenges to student achievement in urban public schools.** The challenges that urban students must overcome to become high academic achievers in public education are many (Foote, 2005; Greene & Anyon, 2010; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Studies suggested that a number of factors influence academic underachievement of urban students, including socioeconomic level, parental involvement, teacher expectations, and the lack of culturally relevant curricula (Bolshakova, Johnson, & Czerniak, 2011; Garrett et al., 2010; Wiggan, 2008). Compounding this, there remains an ongoing disconnect between at-risk urban students who come from very different cultural and linguistic backgrounds than their teachers and suburban peers (Sleeter, 2001; Talbert-Johnson, 2004).

Freedman and Dyson (1987) signaled a key shift in the focus of writing development theories relative to urban students toward the role of language and how it is learned through culture and context. This was an intentional move away from earlier theoretical studies of writing product and process in order to understand the needs of urban students within classroom settings (Ball, 2008).

Ball’s (2008) research framed the issues for at-risk urban students, finding that they can benefit from explicit instruction, more frequent opportunities to do extended writing, and teachers trained specifically to promote higher levels of self-confidence. Regarding the
theoretical framework of this research, Ball affirmed and extended sociocultural and social
cognitive theories by specifying three influences on the writing development of urban students.
These are: the impact of context from the teacher, classroom, and community on the student
writer; the influence of language from the student’s culture and/or home; and the effect of
particular skills-based teaching strategies (Ball, 2008). While a gap remains in the study of
urban student writing growth, the following is a select review of the research into urban student
writing achievement that highlights findings aligned with Ball’s three influences and inherent
connections to either social cognitive or sociocultural theories of writing.

**The impact of context through disciplinary writing.** The first influence on urban
student achievement and growth originated from studies of discipline-specific writing aligned
with a sociocultural theoretical framework. In one study of urban middle and high school
students from higher and lower performing tracks, Wilcox (2015) explored the benefits of
exposing students to “disciplinary writing,” defined as writing that activated a particular
discipline-specific content, in this case teaching students the academic language and processes of
historical analysis (p. 245). The findings revealed that lower-track students had fewer
opportunities to do more challenging analytical writing tasks (Wilcox 2015). This also
negatively manifested in the instructional quality of teacher feedback, where lower track students
were directed to focus on more surface-level writing issues such as organization and
conventions, instead of on analysis, synthesis, and interpretation (Wilcox, 2015). Meanwhile,
higher-track students with teachers who assigned more challenging writing tasks, benefitted from
being exposed to what Wilcox (2015) referred to as “the discourses of disciplinary communities”
(p. 262). Such exposure is consistent with sociocultural theory in that these students benefit
from being shaped by the language of a particular community of practice. Similarly, Monte-
Sano and De La Paz (2012) found that teaching urban high school students to do “disciplinary thinking and writing” helped students improve their historical reasoning at much higher levels than summarizing historical texts (p. 293).

Clearly, using the language of a particular discourse community is consistent with sociocultural theory and its emphasis on establishing learning contexts where novice writers are exposed to the particular content language of a particular community of practice. Per the theory, the leveraging of context shapes the learner through the influence of content-specific language and culturally embedded knowledge and practice (Davidson, 2010).

**The impact of culture through language.** A second influence rooted in sociocultural theory was the use of language to connect urban students to their culture. Blackburn and Stern (2000) conducted an earlier study on the impact of discourse styles on urban high school students learned by analyzing the students’ uses of African American Vernacular English along with Standard English. What they found was that by inviting “non-school literacy practices into the classroom,” students and their teachers discovered a powerful new approach to student writing through high engagement (Blackburn & Stern, 2000, p. 67).

In a more recent study, Tatum and Gue (2012) explored the cultural context of language and writing through the formation of a discourse community with African American males attending urban schools at the secondary level. These students used writing to connect their culture to language by writing poetry that gave voice to “issues of ethnic and racial identity, violence, and injustice” (Tatum & Gue, 2012, p. 136). In this study, students showed increased engagement and higher confidence toward writing (Tatum & Gue, 2012). The researchers pointed out, in particular, that students also benefitted from an approach to writing that did not
follow a cognitive writing model, but a sociocultural one by connecting students to their own culture through collaborative and highly personalized writing (Tatum & Gue, 2012).

Consistent with sociocultural theory, the key emphasis of studies of culture had to do with the role that language played in representing a student’s particular culture (Ball, 2008). The intent was to improve classroom writing instructional practice by validating non-standard English as an alternative literacy (Ball, 2008).

**The impact of skills-based teaching strategies.** A third influence on achievement and growth for urban students that affirmed social cognitive theory derived from explicit skills-based instructional strategies. Olson, Matuchniak, Chung, Stumpf, and Farkas (2017) conducted a study of strategy-based instruction with Latinos and English language learners who attended large, urban schools in grades 7-12 and found that an instructional intervention designed to help these students write better analytic essays had a significant impact on writing outcomes. Key to this writing intervention involved helping students learn cognitive strategies through a focus on academic texts, language, and supportive teacher feedback (Olson et al., 2017). Social cognitive theory identified procedural knowledge that is necessary for these students to develop the cognitive strategies as a social process from the guidance of instructional support. Moreover, the intervention deliberately employed three tenets of sociocultural theory: cognitive apprenticeship, procedural facilitators and tools, and communities of practice to help students learn challenging material by working together collaboratively with teachers as experienced writers (Olson et al., 2017).

Another similar study of urban middle school students employed strategy instruction to help students write persuasive essays (Hacker, Dole, Ferguson, Adamson, Roundy, and Scarpulla, 2015). This writing intervention included elements of social cognitive theory by
working with students through a series of writing steps: teacher modeling, scaffolded practice, student-developed goals on a similar task, and finally independent application in different contexts (Hacker et al., 2015). These findings suggest that the intervention group not only made gains in their ability to write persuasive essays, but more importantly acquired the strategies for future writing performance along with increased self-efficacy and motivation to use these strategies in the future (Hacker et al., 2015). From a social cognitive perspective, strategies modeled, taught, and acquired through the classroom context have a lasting impact on the internal cognitive development of the student writer on the journey from novice to expert.

Studies of high-achieving urban students in other contexts. Finally, only a few qualitative studies reviewed examined positive outliers, or urban students who were academically high achieving. Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman (2007) asserted that parent involvement is a key factor for high-achieving students from at-risk, urban populations, recommending that the keys to high achievement stem from the parents’ support in maintaining positive working conditions for students at home and encouraging home learning activities (Ingram et al., 2007). Garrett et al. (2010) found that these urban students benefitted from the influence of a community or social network; a strong ethnic identity; an involved mother or sister who made sure these students stayed on top of their school work; and caring teachers.

Wiggan (2014) acknowledged the importance of adding student voice to studies of high-growth students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. In a narrative study, similar to the approach of this study, though with suburban students from diverse populations, Wiggan (2014) examined seven high-performing, African-American students and expanded the definition of academic achievement to include student social and cultural contexts. Interestingly, these students rejected a definition of achievement as something that can be measured by standardized
tests; they referred to this process as “playing the game” (Wiggan, 2014, p. 487). Student narratives defined achievement motivation more broadly through shared meaning, academic growth, and social motivation (Wiggan, 2014). Prior to this, Wiggan (2008) conducted a phenomenological study of the experiences of seven different high-achieving, African-American, suburban students and identified from student voices three factors that helped them succeed in academic achievement. The students attributed their high achievement to engaging instructional approaches, extracurricular participation, and scholarship incentives (Wiggan, 2008).

Similarly, McGee (2013) conducted a narrative study to learn from the voices of 11 urban, high-achieving, African-American high school students and the factors that accounted for their success in mathematics. The desire for academic achievement was the source of their resilience in a school and community environment marked by the threat of violence and by negative stereotypes against them (McGee, 2013).

**Summary.** There has been very little focus on high growth writers in general when it comes to urban student writing (Saddler & Graham, 2005). Ball’s (2008) paradigm of context, culture, and skills framed the few positive studies showing that discipline-specific communities of practice, classroom connections to urban culture and language, and the use of skills-based writing interventions benefitted urban student writers. Finally, a look at very few studies of high-achieving urban students in other contexts noted that these students benefitted from parental support, engaging instruction, academic achievement, and social motivation.

**Summation**

While there have been few studies of high-achieving urban student writing, the research that has been done has helped to expand what is known about the factors that helped culturally
diverse students to become high achievers and their connections to social cognitive and sociocultural theories of writing.

Given that narrative research does not require a literature review, the questions posed of the literature are intended to provide a guiding framework for understanding what is known about writing theory, classroom instructional practice, writing development, and pertinent challenges that urban student writers have to face. The need to add urban student voices to the ongoing dialogue about writing development is a pressing one in light of what is known about writing development and urban academic achievement. This narrative study will explore urban student writing growth through rich, thick description embedded in students’ stories and may provide a significant contribution to our understanding of ways to improve urban student writing development from the voices of these students themselves.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The fact that National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing results for urban students continues to be well below those of their suburban peers indicates that despite a greater focus on writing with the 2010 adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in many states, more positive writing outcomes for urban students have yet to be realized (NCES, 2012). These new and more rigorous writing expectations are significantly impacting K-12 urban public school students who continue to lag behind their suburban peers when it comes to writing proficiency (NCES, 2012).

Moreover, it is telling from the review of the literature that a majority of research into how to improve the writing of academically at-risk students was of an experimental or quasi-experimental design (Graham & Perin, 2007). Such studies possessed commonalities including their conclusion as the identification of “a collection of skills which mark excellent performance,
and which may then be taught, but do not have as their aim knowing the person being studied” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989, p. 7). While there have been some qualitative studies of urban student academic achievement (Ingram et al., 2008; McGee, 2013, Wiggan, 2014), to our knowledge there have been no narrative studies to date that closely examined at-risk, urban students and stories of their writing success. Therefore, there was a need to hear their stories and to understand the emerging themes that may be nested in the experiences of a very small cohort of urban students who go on to become high-achieving writers over the course of their public school education.

The purpose of this narrative study was to understand the stories of eight urban public school students in the Fitch Public School District who began as writers deemed academically at risk at the elementary level and who went on to become high growth and high achieving by high school. The use of a modified life story narrative approach, focusing principally on writing development and the emergent themes that were revealed in the stories of these urban students, served as a way to explore the factors that shaped their lived experiences of this phenomenon.

Research Question

The particular research question central to this narrative study was: What stories do urban public school students have to tell about their writing growth after beginning as academically at-risk writers in elementary school and going on to become high-achieving writers by high school? This research question was well suited to the problem of practice because it provided a way to learn about a unique aspect of writing development that has otherwise remained hidden from view.
Qualitative Rationale

This research study was best situated within a qualitative research approach given that the focus was on learning from the authentic “voices of participants” who shared the lived experience of exceptional writing development and achievement over time (Creswell, 2012, p. 44). Learning from these shared experiences was a key philosophical underpinning of qualitative inquiry, an approach to understanding real-world phenomena characterized by an openness to human experience through a multifaceted process that was exploratory, emergent, and interpretive (Creswell, 2012).

Qualitative inquiry encouraged the study of individuals collaboratively in their natural setting and was grounded in inductive and deductive analysis to identify patterns and themes that emerged from shared experiences (Creswell, 2012). The rationale for using a qualitative approach for this study arose from the need to understand a particular phenomenon that currently lacks the authentic voices of those who have experienced exceptional writing growth by high school after beginning as at-risk writers in elementary school. Thus, a qualitative approach helped to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon being studied through this holistic, meaning-making process.

Of the various qualitative methodologies that can be used to explore human experience, narrative inquiry offered a unique lens into understanding personal experiences and what can be learned from both what the story says or its content, and how the story is told or its structure (Riessman, 1993). For this study, narrative inquiry was a compelling methodology for several reasons: personal narratives offered access to student thinking and feeling; the focus was on an in-depth exploration of the writing development of a small number of students; and the approach afforded a connection between these private stories and consideration of deeper structures related
to urban student writing development (Riessman, 1993, 2008; Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2013).

**Research Paradigm**

The research paradigm for this study was interpretive and represented an attempt “to understand the world as it is” through the experiential “frame of reference of the participant” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 28). Consistent with this paradigmatic view, narrative inquirers collaborated with individual participants to help the researcher to negotiate the meanings of their stories as lived and told (Wells, 2011; Clandinin, 2013). This paradigm was best suited for this study because little was known about urban student successful writing development and achievement and therefore, the focus needed to be on exploring the participants’ lived experiences through their subjective understandings, shared meanings, and personal knowledge of the phenomenon.

**Narrative Research**

Narrative research represented a unique way of understanding how individuals make meaning out of experiences by putting these experiences into storied forms (Riessman, 1993). Riessman (1993) pointed out that because stories are “meaning-making structures,” the researcher must respect the way this meaning is constructed while analyzing “how it is accomplished” (p. 4). Moreover, the turn toward narrative required the researcher to think about experience as case-centered and situated within certain individual, social contexts and times (Riessman, 2008). Narrative research was both a way of knowing “truths about human experience” as well as a methodology for accessing experiences in storied forms (Riessman, 2008, p. 10).
Further, Czarniawska (2004) posits that narrative inquiry was open to “an alternative mode of knowing,” something which otherwise may have remained unnoticed or misunderstood (p. 8). As a framework for knowing, narrative helped to explore layers of meaning that can be varied and sometimes even contradictory in order to “bring them into useful dialogue with each other” (Squire et al., 2013, p. 2). As Bruner (1990) pointed out, the richness of narrative inquiry came from the “method of negotiating and renegotiating meanings,” while accepting multiple ways of understanding particular experiences (p. 67).

While narrative research did not articulate a formal hypothesis that it tested or proved, the proposition for this research into the lives of early at-risk, eventual high-achieving urban student writers was that this was the next logical place to turn in educators’ efforts to understand these students and the reasons why they have been successful as writers when a majority of their urban peers have not.

There are several approaches that narrative inquiry can take. For this study a modified life story interview was used that focused on participants’ writing growth stories over time (Atkinson, 1998). As Atkinson (2007) defined more broadly, “[a] life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it” (p. 232). As a narrative methodology, the life story interview provided a way, through guided questions, for experience to be placed in storied form in order to explore larger meanings and connections (Atkinson, 2007).

In the present study, eight urban students participated in writing development life story interviews where the focus was on telling the story about their public school writing growth and achievement over a span of seven years, from elementary school to high school. The rationale
for using this approach was to focus on the writing growth story the participant wanted others to hear and the meaning conveyed by the story itself (Atkinson, 2007).

**Site and Participants**

Participants for this study consisted of a purposeful sample of eight students from a large, urban high school in the northeast region of the United States. Located in a city, Fitch Public School District had between 43 and 51 percent of its student population defined as low-income as designated through free and reduced lunch data for the past seven years (National School Lunch Program, Analysis of Meal Count Data, 2009-2015.) During the 2015-16 school year, the student body at Fitch High School included 11.2 percent African-American students, 6.0 percent Asian students, 35.5 percent Hispanic students, 2.6 percent multi-race, non-Hispanic students, and 44.2 percent White students.

The students selected for this study represented those who scored *Needs Improvement* on the grade 4 statewide English language arts test and who scored *Advanced* six years later on the grade 10 statewide English language arts test with high sub-score writing results. Participants were selected using statewide assessment data results from 2009, when students were in grade 4 and in 2015, when these same students were in grade 10, selecting only those participants with at least two out of four perfect scores on open-response items and at least one high score, 5 out of 6 points, in topic/idea development from two scorers on their annual statewide composition. In addition, only students who attended the urban school district continuously from grade 4 to grade 10 were considered for participation.

By selecting student writers with high writing sub-scores, the rationale was to focus on students who demonstrated maximum writing development growth from elementary to high
school, thus representing the highest achieving group of students who had experienced the phenomenon for this study.

In addition, maximum variation sampling was used in order to generate the fullest range of data from the representative cohort selected for this study. Thus, students were selected from a range of racial/ethnic groups and different genders, including five females and three males, with 1 African-American male student, 1 Asian-American female student, 2 White male students, 3 White female students, and 1 Hispanic female student.

**Recruitment**

Once IRB approval was granted, the next step involved requesting permission to conduct the study from the school district superintendent. The superintendent further required that a letter requesting consent be mailed to all parents of grade 11 students who scored Advanced on the annual grade 10 English Language Arts statewide assessment administered the previous year in 2015. This parent consent letter described the research study, the purpose of the inquiry into writing development, participant qualifications, and the researcher’s professional background. Parents were asked to sign an informed consent form. This consent form specified that the confidentiality of all names in the study were protected by pseudonyms during the interview transcription, data analysis, and results findings process. The form also indicated that students could withdraw from the study at any time without having to give any reason. The form included possible benefits to participation in the study and the time commitment and location of the participant interviews.

Only parents who gave their signed consent to have a school district administrator review their child’s grade 4 annual statewide English language arts assessment 2009 results and their grade 10 annual statewide English language arts assessment 2015 results were included in the
initial pool of students selected for this study. Based on this review, only eight students met the criteria to participate in this study.

Once signed parental consent forms were returned, student participants at Fitch High School who met the criteria for this study were scheduled for interviews. During the first student interviews, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and the time commitment. Student participants gave their verbal assent to participating in the study. At this time, the professional background of the researcher was shared with participants. Participants were also told that they would receive a $20 gift card for completing two interviews.

Data Collection

Interviews. For narrative inquiry, the life story interview offered a powerful method by which to understand experience as a storied phenomenon that is lived and shared, relived, and retold (Clandinin, 2013). The writing growth life story interviews for this research engaged students to tell their life stories with a particular focus on how their life experiences impacted their writing development (Atkinson, 1998).

Atkinson’s (1998) life story interview questions, adapted to focus on student participants’ stories of writing growth, served as a guide for two face-to-face, one-on-one interviews (Appendix B). The two interviews took place within two to four weeks, depending on student participant availability. The focus of the first interview was on the student participant’s writing growth life story with particular emphasis on major learning moments and turning points as a writer. The second interview involved student participants talking about a piece that they had written that demonstrated their high growth and/or achievement as writers. In this interview, student participants were asked to tell their story about the preparation, planning, writing, and
revising of a particular writing product. During both interviews, the researcher recorded
descriptive and reflective field notes.

Forty-five to sixty minutes each were allotted for the first and second interviews and the
interviewer’s approach shifted between openness and asking probing questions, depending on
participant engagement levels (Atkinson, 1998). The goal of the open-ended interview process
was to look for “narrative opportunities” through question-asking that “open up topics, and allow
respondents to construct answer in ways they find meaningful” as they told their writing growth
stories (Riessman, 2008, pp. 24-25).

Participant interviews were held in a common meeting room at Fitch High School with a
school administrator present. Once parents granted their signed consent to have their child
participate in the research study, student participants were approached to confirm their interest in
participating in this research study. Student participants were notified of interview times that
were selected to be least disruptive to their learning.

The audio recording process was tested before the interview to confirm that it was
working. A back-up audio recording device was also tested and used throughout the interview
process. At the beginning of the first interview, students provided their verbal consent to
participate in the interview process and all student participants were willing to be interviewed.
These recording devices were stored in a secure, locked file cabinet and the student researcher
was the only one with access. After these interviews, the student researcher completed all
verbatim transcriptions of student and teacher interviews.

**Student writing artifacts.** A second data-collection method was used to record
descriptive and reflective field notes as student participants told a story about their own writing
growth and achievement. During the second interview students brought a writing sample and
told a story about how they wrote this particular piece while reflecting on both their writing process and product.

**Influences on the writing development process.** A final data-collection method involved a follow-up interview with anyone who the participants identified as serving as a significant guide to their writing development process. In addition, the school district writing program outline, implemented during the 2006-07 school year and continuing for all the following years, was reviewed as a data source to provide systemic data that may have had a potential impact on student writing development.

**Data Storage**

All interviews were transcribed electronically and student participants and the teachers they identified to be interviewed about student writing growth were assigned pseudonyms. A paper version of these interview transcripts was stored in a secure, locked safe, and these transcripts will be maintained for six months upon the completion of this research study. Electronic interview recordings were saved on the recording devices and electronic transcripts of the interview files were saved on two external hard drives. The researcher generated field notes on separate notepaper that were recorded at the time of the student interview, and these field notes were stored with other secure materials. In addition, research notes were made on the hard copy transcripts and these were stored with other secure materials in a locked safe. All electronic and hard copy data, codes, notes, and journals will be destroyed within six months of this study’s publication. All signed paper consent forms will be stored in the locked safe for six months before being destroyed.
Data Analysis

Riessman (1993) explained that narrative analysis investigates as its focus “the story itself” (p. 1.). The purpose was to ascertain not just what the storyteller said, but how the story was constructed (Riessman, 1993). Stories told by different storytellers who shared similar experiences offered insights into deeper levels of narrative structure about the experience itself (Riessman, 1993).

Identifying emergent patterns. During the first phase of the data analysis process, the researcher read and reread the transcripts and field notes multiple times to determine a storyline related to writing development within the participants’ experiences over the past seven years of their writing development lives. The transcripts were initially color coded to identify a chronological sequence as well as to scan for other story elements such as turning points, discrepancies, and motifs. As part of this initial process, the researcher also created research notes for possible emergent themes. To begin the process of looking for other storied patterns within the data, the researcher identified initial codes that were then organized into categories clustered according to emergent themes and meanings along with discrepancies within the transcripts. Narrative plotlines, turning points, epiphanies, resolutions, and contradictions were discovered during this process and preliminary themes were linked to textual quotes from each transcript.

Structural analysis. The second data analysis phase involved coding the student transcripts according to narrative structure (Riessman, 2008). In this way, new insights emerged from analyzing the student stories by focusing on “how a narrator uses form and language to achieve particular effects” (Riessman, 2008, p. 81). This methodological shift in analysis by
shifting focus from “the ‘told’ to the ‘telling,’” offered insights into student storylines along with emergent patterns across student stories (Riessman, 2008, p. 74).

Using Labov’s (1972) model for coding student narratives as storied forms, transcripts of student interviews were analyzed according to his six-part coding schema (Patterson, 2013). Riessman (2008) described the following structural elements of the six-part coding schema:

- an abstract (summary and/or ‘point’ of the story);
- orientation (to time, place, characters, situation);
- complicating action (the event sequence, or plot, usually with a crisis or turning point);
- evaluation (where the narrator steps back from the action to comment on the meaning and communicate emotions—the ‘soul’ of the narrative);
- resolution (the outcome of the plot); and
- a coda (ending the story and bringing the action back to the present (p. 84).

Each clause of student transcripts was numbered and assigned a representative code according to a chronological ordering of the underlying narrative events (Labov, 1972; Riessman, 2008; Patterson, 2013). Through this coding method, “parts of the narrative are identified by their function” (Riessman, 1993, p. 35). Labov’s model was adapted by adding a seventh code related to motif or the identification within the narrative structure of a recurring idea. Once codes were assigned, case-centered comparisons were made between different student narratives (Patterson, 2013). Using Labov’s systematic approach, preliminary themes were reordered into a chronological sequence based on a comparison “across a sample of narratives” (Patterson, 2013, p. 34).

**Restorying.** The final phase of data analysis involved the researcher writing a restory for each student participant as a final narrative report that combined the writing growth stories of each individual student writer along with the motifs that emerged from these student stories.
This provided a fuller analysis of the storied phenomenon relative to early at-risk, eventual high-achieving urban student writing development and achievement.

The process of restorying involved multiple readings of student transcripts, field notes, research notes, and then “reshaping what was told, and turning it into a hybrid story” (Riessman, 1993, p. 13). This allowed the researcher to organize the raw data into a chronological sequence with a beginning, middle, and end to facilitate comparisons between stories retold within a shared format. Finally, the restorying also included a motif that provided an overarching idea that emerged from the data intended to illuminate each student story based on this unique feature.

Trustworthiness

Riessman (2008) offered several criteria regarding establishing trustworthiness in narrative research, though stressed that there is no set of formal rules for validation. The first criterion is “correspondence” or whether “a particular story… is consistent with other evidence” (Riessman, 2008, pp. 186-187). Given that narratives are “not simply a factual report of events, but instead one articulation told from a point of view” it increases trustworthiness to include other points of view from other data sources (Riessman, 2008). In this study, urban student stories were triangulated by their teacher’s reflections of a respective student’s writing development. These teacher reflections contributed not just a secondary source of data, but also further validated, or possibly contradicted, information about the students writing growth over time, discussed in technical terms that allowed another perspective on the student’s writing growth process. In addition, documentary evidence in the form of a district-wide writing program, in effect throughout the seven-year time period during which the students were selected for this study, helped to contextualize the interview data. Field notes and research notes recorded the researcher’s thoughts and observations throughout the interview and data analysis.
process. Member checking, where students were given the opportunity to review their transcripts and verify their accounts, was another procedure through which coherence was established.

Another criterion is coherence that Riessman (2008) defines as whether the participant’s life story holds together and has meaning “constrained by the spoken text in important ways” (p. 189). In this study evidence of coherence was demonstrated by the integration of rich, thick description in both the restorying process and primary findings. Participants were encouraged during the interview process to use analogies and metaphorical language when the participant’s ability to use technical language about writing hindered the meaning’s complexity (Polkinghorne, 2007). Moreover, additional time was given when necessary to help participants access their reflective understanding of their storied experience. Active listening and encouragement were employed to help participants explore emergent meanings (Polkinghorne, 2007). Further, emergent themes in this study were identified, reconsidered, and revised through multiple readings and coding.

A third criterion is persuasiveness; Riessman (1993) defined this as whether the interpretation is “reasonable and convincing” (p. 65). Does the restorying sound straightforward, probable, and believable? For a narrative study, “[s]tories function as arguments in which we learn something essentially human by understanding an actual life… as lived” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 8). Integrating student statements in their own words throughout the restorying process and primary themes contributed to persuasiveness. Participant trust was crucial to accessing the full story rather than a story the participant believed would be more acceptable to the researcher; therefore, the narrative researcher remained actively attentive to developing and gaining participants’ trust (Polkinghorne, 2007). The researcher also controlled
body language, provided sufficient wait time, and monitored tone of voice to elicit and encourage the participant’s own voice (Mishler, 1986). Finally, storied texts were further validated through conducting more than one interview (Polkinghorne, 2007).

Riessman (2008) also advised following “a methodical path” by relying on detailed transcripts, attending “to structural features of discourse,” and “practicing reflexivity” to strengthen persuasiveness (p. 193). In this study, there were two levels of coding: generic followed by structural that offered two levels of analysis: the former examining at what was said and the latter focusing on how it was said. For reflexivity, the researcher’s background was shared with student participants and research notes were maintained to document the researcher’s own personal ideas and insights. Although these notes helped contextualize and interconnect student experiences, listening to and learning from the voices of students on their writing development journey remained central to this study.

A final criterion that Riessman (2008) articulated is whether the study is useful for other researchers in the future who deem it to be trustworthy. Given that this study was intended to be exploratory about an area of student writing development that was mostly unknown, the belief was that it might be useful to others. Therefore, the stages of analysis outlined in this chapter were intended to serve as an audit trail and a coding snapshot (Appendix C) was also included.

Protection of Human Subjects

The study required approval from Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and followed the guidelines established and approved by the IRB. All participants were informed about the purpose of this study and the parents/guardians of student participants signed an informed consent form as all students in this study were under the age of 18 (Appendix A).
The goals of this narrative study and any questions by participants or parents of student participants were answered in non-technical language that was easily understood.

The identities of all participants in this research along with the district and school names were protected with the use of pseudonyms. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and were informed that they could decide at any time and for any reason not to answer any questions or participate in the study. All audio and written recordings, transcripts, field notes, and research notes will be destroyed within six months of the study’s completion.

Conclusion

Narrative inquiry represented a powerful method by which to convey the rich details relative to student writing growth and, in particular, to give voice through the restorying of early at-risk, eventual high-achieving student writers. Through this approach, the personal experiences of student participants were represented and analyzed. The methodology of this study offered a window into the life experiences of early at-risk, eventual high-achieving urban student writers that may help us to understand more fully through richness and subtlety the writing development process for these select students. Findings from this study about urban student writing development were unique and have the potential to provide empowering voices to student writers who have yet to realize that their stories are not only timely and relevant, but overdue and necessary and provide additional understanding about writing development than is currently known.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

The purpose of this present narrative study is to answer the following research question: What stories do academically at-risk, urban, public school students have to tell about becoming
high-achieving writers over time? All eight students offered detailed and personal recollections about their writing growth over the past eight years as they transitioned from elementary school, to middle school, to high school. They shared their experiences with the writing process over the years, including their struggles and successes; they provided their writing itself, telling stories about how they created these particular writing products; and they offered advice from their own growth experiences to students interested in becoming better writers and to teachers interested in becoming effective writing coaches.

This chapter has three sections: participant stories, emergent themes from the narratives relative to the research question, and a summary of primary findings. The final chapter of this study will present interpretation of the data referent to its impact on theory, research, and practice.

**Student Stories of Writing Growth**

Central to narrative analysis is restorying that is used to convey a complete focus on the participant’s experience of exceptional writing growth through a structured narrative chronology with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The framework for restorying involved recording student interviews, reading and re-reading the transcripts, and retelling the story from the original interviews to discover the students’ lived experiences from early at-risk to high-achieving writers. Restorying for the student writers in this study began with a motif, or recurring idea, that was central to understanding the students’ writing growth. This was followed by a chronology of each student’s writing growth, beginning in elementary school, through middle school, and ending in high school. Students also provided a turning point in telling their writing growth stories. Students concluded their stories by giving advice to other students and to teachers based on what they had learned from their own growth experiences from low-to-high
performing writers. Additional data sources for student restorying came from a follow-up interview where students talked about a particular writing product they had brought with them, along with field notes, teacher interviews, related documentary evidence, and research journals.

Given that each student story represents his or her unique journey of writing growth, these stories will be conveyed separately to honor what is distinctive about each student’s lived experience of the phenomenon and followed by emergent themes.

**Judy.** Judy’s story of writing growth employed the voice of a student with insights validated by her writing successes, having transitioned to high school and the higher and more individualized expectations that required her to improve her writing. She told her story of writing growth from the vantage point of one validated by her growth, having nearly completed eleventh grade and her Advanced Placement coursework in both English Language and Composition and United States History. Throughout her writing reflections, the central motif or reoccurring idea for Judy was diversity of interpretation, or the ability of the writer to make connections between and among ideas, issues, and movements that transcended the text or topic. Reflecting on her need to make connections, Judy pointed out, “I’ll either try to tie it (the topic) in with other literature that I’ve read and tie it into it or try to pull from the time period or like my own thoughts and opinions.” From this perspective, the direction of her writing, and her mind, was connecting specific words to universal ideas.

Judy’s recollection of the early days of her writing journey in elementary school were of a time and place where nothing special stood out when it came to her writing growth. She smiled demurely as she said, “elementary school was just sort of like finding how to write.” She identified book reports, or the retelling of something that she had read, as the high-water mark of her writing during this period in her life. In her own words: “Just sort of summarizing what the
text said, but not really anything special.” Judy reflected that at this level, writing was just doing what the teacher directed her to do. “I didn’t have any guidance of what they were looking for,” she pointed out, adding that she was directed to “put this down on paper” and “so I would just write.”

By middle school, Judy remembered an over-concretized, relentless pursuit of plot events in stories leading to the obvious. “They made it so clear cut that… the book is saying this,” she complained, leaning forward in her chair for emphasis. “There’s no implications of anything else behind it.” As a result, she felt she had no choice but to surrender to a “sort of bland and straightforward” interpretation of the various novels she had read in class. For Judy, her middle school teachers did not welcome multiple or even opposing interpretations of texts because “they didn’t really think that we would understand it, from the way I felt.”

Instead, Judy’s middle school teachers placed greater emphasis on writing structure in the form of a color-coding system, where students were taught to highlight their use of writing elements. Judy recited the coding system from memory: “Pink is the thesis. Green is your, you know, textual evidence. And then blue is your analysis or your own ideas.” Color-coding was used with students when they practiced open-response questions in preparation for the annual statewide English language arts assessment. She remembered with irony, “We used to go through and highlight papers and mine would be like all green or something like that.” As a result, she concluded, “My writing was so slow to progress into something that was my own.”

From the very beginning of the school year at Fitch High School in ninth-grade English class, Judy was challenged to do the exact opposite of what she had been taught about writing in middle school. Her English teacher that year “opened my eyes to like a whole bunch of other things that I didn’t even really know.” The teacher expanded Judy’s understanding of the first
novel they read by helping her see a multiplicity of themes, and Judy’s interest grew as she began to notice more in what she was reading. “Like we read… Of Mice and Men was like my first really interesting one,” she recalled with fondness and excitement, “even though it’s such a short book, but it’s like, it has so many important themes… Steinbeck really blew me away.”

For three quarters of freshman year, however, Judy talked about solely writing summaries of what she had read, until her Romeo and Juliet paper when her teacher, kind but insistent, advised, “We’ve got to insert some opinions here.” Judy identified this as her growth turning point as a writer. She explained, “That’s when the light bulb really went on, if I could pinpoint a moment.”

From that time forward, Judy learned from her teacher a variety of vantage points, learning to look for the author’s purpose or “why writers do things.” This concept opened up the world of rhetorical analysis or the interaction between the author, the audience, and the text that for Judy was transformative. Suddenly Judy understood books to be “lively and juicy,” full of meaning and no longer having only one correct answer but layers of interconnected meanings that even transcended the text itself. She personalized these new connections by saying, “Just knowing where I stand on the topic. Like… when I’m reading something… just seeing like what I connect with… the author. Or what I find interesting. And then I sort of base my own opinions around, I base my paper around that, I should say.”

Sharing her recollections of the remainder of freshman through junior years, Judy talked as one set afire with newfound writing freedom by connecting her voice to the multiple layers of meaning within, around, and outside of the texts. She even found connections that had never been made before but that had been waiting for her to make them. Understanding texts through
the rhetorical analysis prism was where she discovered some authors to be “manipulating” and sometimes even “aggravating.”

In recollecting her most powerful writing, Judy talked about an assignment she completed for her Advanced Placement English class: “that piece from Letter from a Birmingham Jail because… I could like totally see… King, like I really admire him as a person, as a writer. Everything… all that he did for the Civil Rights movement.” As Judy learned to make connections outside a given text, she also grew as a writer by “just pulling things from my own life.” Looking back on her writing growth journey, she characterized her writing as qualitatively better: “I feel like I create better… I have better diction when I write, when I’m more inspired.”

Bringing her writing growth story to an end, Judy offered advice to teachers and students based on what she had learned along the way. Judy thought it important for middle school teachers to be “more accepting of creative differences. It’s like, I don’t know, up until my, up until high school, I was just taught like there’s one way or the highway.” Echoing her interest in making connections, Judy suggested that students spend time before they write educating themselves by “getting a broad perspective” on what they are writing. She also encouraged students to practice reading around the text: “I looked up just stuff about the time period… and immersing (yourself) in the culture” to understand where the author is “coming from.” At the draft phase of writing, Judy reflected that for students who want to improve, they should “write anything down that you think would be valuable for supporting your thesis.” She further stressed that writing is an unfolding process rather than a one-time event and she reminded those students interested in improving their writing: “You don’t have to make every paragraph like your best piece of work as long as overall it just supports the thesis.”
Marcia. Looking back in silent disbelief as someone selected to share her writing growth story sat Marcia, a thoughtful, methodical, and highly resourceful eleventh grader at Fitch High School. Marcia began by sharing her learning challenges first. She explained, “reading in English class was not always my favorite. I like to write, but I do not like reading that much. It’s a struggle to, I don’t know, read a book on my own.” These admissions offered helpful insights into why Marcia framed writing as a fixed duality: as either “boring” or “interesting,” or as “right or wrong.” The recurring motif for Marcia’s writing growth was this duality, or pairing of opposites, as a way to understand writing growth as the absence of something else. For Marcia, quality writing began not with compelling ideas but with the absence of something negative: bad “grammar” and “spelling.” Therefore, eliminating errors in her writing and replacing them with something better was how she framed her writing growth or, as she described it, “not giving it a half job.”

When asked about herself as a writer in elementary school, Marcia remembered only her teacher’s names, but when asked if she remembered anything about her writing at the same time, she replied, “No.” Interestingly, she did recall the fourth-grade writing prompt from the statewide assessment test that year: “I think the question was like a vacation you want to go on. I think it was something along that,” adding, “and it was just like an interesting topic.”

By middle school, Marcia recalled that her seventh- and eighth-grade English teachers offered her feedback that helped guide her as a writer for the first time: “Like they’ll show me... what I did wrong,” adding “they’ll walk over” and “help you if you’re stuck.” Marcia added that these two teachers “were just really hands on” during classroom writing activities and “they made the topics like interesting” that she was asked to write about. She explained that in these English classes she was taught the structure of the five-paragraph essay, with “the intro, three
topics, and a closing.” Marcia also revealed that throughout elementary and middle school her parents gave her feedback on her writing, read it out loud for her, served as first readers and, through this process, helped her to fix “the little things that I did wrong.”

By high school, Marcia had developed into a high-volume writer. If a teacher gave a writing assignment asking for two pages, Marcia wrote more than double that length. As she explained, “I was good at writing more.” Marcia used a positive word, “fun” multiple times to describe the writing that she did in her Sophomore Composition class, a required two-block writing lab at Fitch High School where students were coached to write for the English language arts statewide assessment test required for graduation.

Marcia noted that the Sophomore Composition teacher applied a balanced approach to student writing, weaving highly engaging, shorter writing tasks with the formal structure of writing an open response or a long composition, the two distinctive writing tasks on the grade 10 statewide assessment. Marcia noted that her teacher that year, “would figure out fun things for writing about,” adding that they would write about “movies, listening to something that she would have to say and we had to write about it and then she would like just talk about it with each person.”

The turning point for Marcia in her writing growth occurred in Sophomore Composition class after months of writing and weaving “very tangible goals” between short but fun writing exercises and practicing “open response” writing. She recounted how her Sophomore Composition teacher helped her to write the long composition: “You use like a quote or a question or something interesting about the topic to grab them to read what you’re writing,” she clarified with authority. “I usually like split them into three groups like start like a little topic and something more interesting.” Over time, Marcia learned to write “less and less” and even
succeeded at writing well on the first try rather than through writing high volume and then spending time going through a series of time-consuming edits.

By eleventh grade, Marcia was a writer still motivated by interesting topics. She continued to activate her feedback team of parents and teachers to help her through the drafting process of longer writing tasks. She clearly articulated what makes an introductory paragraph a good one, down to the interrelated components: “a good… grabber,” then some sentences that “introduced what I was going to talk about,” then the plan or “a little about what each paragraph I was going to talk about,” followed by “the thesis.” Marcia was able to explain both her plan for writing and how to execute this plan through a step-by-step process. She also learned to add “research” with “citations” and to do multiple revisions with the help of her feedback team. She recalled after completing one paper, “I think it was looked at like three or four times.”

Reflecting on her own writing development, Marcia ended her story by offering advice to help other student writers on their own growth journey. She said that teachers needed to “pick more interesting topics to write about” and always include writing exemplars that “shows you exactly how (teachers) want it.” Her suggestion to students interested in learning to improve their writing was to “just try to make it fun.” Returning to her motif of duality, she added that students needed to learn how to make their writing interesting, instead of “boring and plain.”

**John.** John’s writing growth story began in elementary school where he learned what he referred to as “the basic stuff.” His demeanor was imbued by a quiet confidence when it came to talking about his development over time. In fact, John quickly offered his trajectory and through line, “So fourth grade we obviously got taught like… essays and responses and… as the years went on I kind of used the basis of that and then just like made it more advanced and improved.” He also shared the fact that he revised and edited as he composed, saying, “Most people would
make a first draft and then edit it and then make a final draft. But I just make a final draft.”

Thus, John revised as he worked through his first (and only) draft in step-by-step fashion. He clarified further, “if an idea ever pops in your head like, say you’re doing the strategy that I use, like I just write.” The recurring motif for John’s writing growth was characterized by his confident linearity, or a mastery of the straightforward approach that allowed him to apply the tools he had acquired from teachers over the years to improve his writing.

This same linear consistency was evident in John when it came to being retrospective about his writing growth. He professed to liking writing from as early as fourth grade where he said he wanted to be a sportswriter and where, for the first time, he recalled “learning how to write essays,” or what he called the “basic stuff.” He recalled his fourth-grade teacher who “had a lot of faith in me” and knew that he “had some potential.”

By middle school, John’s writing was influenced by classroom coaching and preparation for the writing tasks of the grade 7 statewide English language arts assessment. It was, he remembered, “a big year of writing.” When pressed for details, John recalled doing “a lot of writing” and structurally learning to write better introductions and conclusions. He explained a thesis as “what you want to argue” and understood how to develop body paragraphs through the use of “the quote sandwich,” a writing scaffold where students place two sentences of analysis around, literally, a sentence containing important textual evidence. These were the writing strategies that John learned during these years of his writing development.

The turning point for John’s writing growth happened in high school; it had two parts. The first, in ninth grade, stemmed from a writing assignment that coincided with the loss of a beloved grandfather. He described, “It was a long poem. It wasn’t supposed to be that long and I read it to the class.” For the first time, he was able to put his emotions into words: “Like it
came from the heart and it was something I had to get out kind of. Yeah, that one definitely had more, a little more meaning than the others.” On the practical level, John experienced a new motivation: “I was looking forward to… writing.” Reading this poem aloud to the class is where he experienced the power of words to do something more than simply telling a teacher what he knew about a character in a story. Suddenly words on paper were connected to real life—a profound loss for him—and were transformational. To wit, words and the writing process captured and conveyed the powerful emotions he was feeling. Through this seminal experience, John encountered the power of writing as a process for healing: “It helped me a lot.” This was a moment in John’s writing growth that stood out.

The other important turning point in John’s writing growth moment arose from a classroom encounter with his tenth-grade English teacher who picked up on both John’s receptiveness and his facility for quickly acquiring a writing technique and using it in his next piece of writing. John wrote a paper on Beowulf early in tenth grade and, as he confessed, “I wrote about plot.” The teacher gave John a technique called Says/Does that transformed the middle school “Quote Sandwich” into a more complex analysis where the writer makes a simple summary of what the text says and pairs this with what the text does by identifying how language functions through various rhetorical techniques. John added that it was in tenth grade when his teacher “helped me out with like that final thing about like writing more about your thesis and the argument rather than the story.” Looking back on his writing growth from high school, John said confidently, “I think I’ve got it down pretty well… I know what I’m doing.”

John concluded his writing growth story by advising teachers to give students concrete ways to move beyond plot summary to analysis about text vis-à-vis strategies like the “Quote Sandwich” and “Says/Does.” For student writers, John suggested that if they think of a strategy
as they write that, “pops in your head… write it down so you don’t lose it.” This came directly from John’s own experience as a writer who revised as he wrote. He also cautioned against writing about a story that is plot-based rather than idea-based, reminding future students that “you don’t need to go in the order of the book” with your analysis because the best writing is based on the quality of your ideas and their connection to a thesis.

**Jackie.** Jackie introduced herself first as a musician: “I’m Jackie and I’m in eleventh grade and I play many musical instruments like piano, violin, guitar, ukulele, stuff like that.” Learning musical instruments refined Jackie’s ear for tone, which she said had positively impacted her writing growth as well. Music and reading, Jackie explained, helped her to develop an ear for words well chosen. These early encounters with music and reading inspired Jackie to want to be distinctive, to stand out—as someone seeking through her writing, “just to be different from everyone else.” It is no wonder that writing became another area of Jackie’s life where she “always put a creative twist to… everything,” because she was able to “say the sentences in my mind.” The central motif of Jackie’s writing story was this quest to find her true self, or as she said, “just how unique I am,” through hearing words and writing with different tones.

Jackie’s recollections of writing at the elementary level paralleled learning to playing musical instruments, which she began in third grade. At this stage, learning to write and play music were both structure bound and Jackie was taught to stay within the safer instructional confines of the rules for each discipline. Looking back on this phase of her writing life, Jackie noted, “I remember just doing what I was told, playing what I was told.” She later confided, “in elementary school I just started writing and I didn’t know what to do.”

By middle school, Jackie said that her reading took off and with it her internal sense of
hearing language as well. “I read every day,” she stated without the slightest hint of bragging. She encountered many different authors in books at the library, in particular, historical ones, and she began to “wonder what it’s like to write in that era.” She observed that these writers had something different; what she identified as “certain tones” and “authentic voice.” As Jackie’s ability to hear tone grew through transmogrifying reading into inner sound, she began to experiment with words that captured “a certain tone” in her writing. Recognizing this, Jackie’s middle school teachers encouraged her to experiment with being creative and allowing her to find, as she professed, “your true self” as a writer. Jackie recalled in particular being inspired by British author J.K. Rowling. She claimed, “Like I imitate the tone” from reading Rowling and listening to Rowling’s online talk about her own writing. In this way, Jackie shared, the hearing-language connection continued to grow.

One day during middle school, Jackie recalled, while reading a variety of authors with different voices, she “had a really awesome dream.” Asking her parents for a notebook, she began to write these dreams down in what she named “a dream journal” as a way to hold on to these creative thoughts by putting them into words. With excitement, Jackie explained, more dreams followed and “I had to… write all of these down because they’re really good.” Over time, Jackie’s dream journal morphed into “story ideas” that she would continue to develop as she mused throughout the day. It was also another way in which Jackie was unique as a developing writer.

Jackie’s turning point came in her writing growth during the transition to high school where she was encouraged to explore style and tone in both her music and English classes during freshman year. At the time, Jackie’s music teacher challenged her “to put style into my music” and to “be more expressive.” In English, Jackie recalled, “every morning we’re going to have
free writes and... people would get crazy ideas and that... influenced me to have crazier ideas.”

For Jackie, the word “crazy” was a synonym for “becoming more creative” as a writer. Jackie articulated the connection further, adding, “Well I feel like with music you always put your own like, voice into it. So then you just put your voice into your writing.”

Jackie’s thoughts on her own writing growth echoed the motif of her growth story. She advised teachers to help “let the students go loose” through the frequent use of free writes as in-class, low-stakes writing activities. She also urged teachers to, “just let them go, but let some people share” because the intermingling of ideas would encourage other student writers “to be more creative and want to do it more.” She emphasized the importance of “teaching creativity” because “it boosts like how you write formal essays.” For students interested in becoming better writers, Jackie advised, “you need to always keep creativity your priority. It’s like even though every day can be plain and stuff if you keep every day creative that’s how you build off as a writer.” Jackie also suggested that students should “read more books” so that they can see and hear, as she did with J.K. Rowling, how inspiring writers purposefully “use sentences and phrases.” In wrapping up her growth story, Jackie returned to learning to listen to authentic tones and then imitating how these writers craft language to create a distinctive style. This was the pathway for Jackie to “just be different from everyone else,” in order to discover her own true self through writing.

Billy. An everyman who preferred bowling and trumpet playing to the challenging grind of writing, Billy deadpanned at the beginning of his writing growth story: “I used to just despise writing itself.” Billy quickly shared that writing for him was a real struggle at first: “Well in elementary school I wasn’t the best writer. I struggled with it a little bit.” He chronicled needing help from a writing tutor in elementary school, “because I was falling behind,” and this
additional coaching involved weekly after-school sessions as well as summer work. This early extra work shaped Billy’s mindset as a developing writer: “I started to accept that I needed to write and to be good at it, so I started listening more and getting help when I needed it.” Billy’s writing growth story reflected his procedural and incremental learning.

What Billy found worked for him was approaching his writing procedurally, “step by step,” and consistently, “taking in what they (his teachers) gave me and what I’ve learned and what they’ve given me for assignments and basically just almost like practice.” For these reasons, the emergent motif of Billy’s story of writing growth was patiently plugging along; a writer who realized through practice the truth that, “The more you do it, you’re bound to get better at it at some point,” thus revealing a practical wisdom through a union of consistency and hard work.

Billy’s dislike for writing began in third grade when he had to take “the writing part” of the statewide assessment test for the first time. He volunteered humbly that in elementary school he was not doing well and even “falling behind a little bit.” The first person that stood out as someone who helped Billy grow as a writer was the tutor who worked with him outside of school. In addition to these memories, Billy explained that in the elementary classroom the teaching was task driven, “they all just gave us a format,” and it was the student’s responsibility for “doing the assignments.”

A second reason Billy offered for not having fond memories of his early writing experiences had to do with what his middle school teachers told him about what he was taught in elementary school. “They threw that out the window,” he said matter-of-factly, adding, “They said that what they taught us at the elementary was wrong.” He continued to explain that this new way of writing involved “more detail” and was “more in depth than just the format that they
gave us at elementary school.” This revelation turned Billy’s outlook on writing around. He recalled, “at the middle school, we had to I guess learn kind of to write a different way.” By seventh grade, he remembered distinctly trying to write to get better at it. “Just reading the questions and writing more,” Billy reflected, “I learned to teach myself just a little bit how to keep writing and not just to repeat my thoughts over and over again.” He trusted more and listened more to his English teacher who showed him a specific set of strategies for “how to write a five-paragraph essay.” He made writing improvements working on “bigger assignments,” pointing out further, “so I had to write more and...by doing that more often I got a little bit better myself.”

This pattern of plugging away at writing more to get better continued into high school where Billy was chagrined to find yet again that there were even “more writing assignments” and that the “volume went up” from middle school. He identified high school as the place where “I think I grew” as a writer, “to where I am now.” By high school, Billy no longer needed a writing tutor, so during this time he showed his writing to his mother for feedback. It was here at this level that Billy recalled having real writing success, explaining, “but you go more in depth which makes writing easier.” At this level, Billy also talked about writing a research paper at the end of freshman year history class “that was like the first real big writing assignment I had to do for high school.” He revealed in his low-key way, “I got a good grade on it.”

When asked to identify a turning point in his writing growth, Billy said it was in eleventh-grade English when he learned to expand his topic to consider “different views.” Recognizing that Billy was good at staying safely within a formula for writing, his teacher challenged him to expand his writing in ways that required him to juggle multiple perspectives and consider multiple themes. To accommodate this change to his writing, Billy discovered how
to expand his writing by learning to look at the topic “from other angles than just one.”

Reflecting on his writing growth from what he knows now in eleventh grade, Billy attributed his success as a writer to responding to his teachers through consistent effort: “taking in what they gave me and what I’ve learned and what they’ve given me for assignments and basically just almost like practice.” Connecting his writing to playing the trumpet, Billy reflected, “I have to practice a lot. And the more you play, well you play harder pieces so you grow as a musician yourself so kind of as you write longer papers with either harder topics… I think you grow as a writer.”

As he closed out his story of writing growth, Billy offered two pieces of advice that he thought might be beneficial in helping to nurture future high-growth writers. First, to teachers working with student writers, Billy advised them to be alert for students needing help and to encourage students during the writing process to ask for help. This came out of his experience of working for years with a writing tutor. He recommended that teachers needed to be clear with their expectations for issues related to format, writer’s block, and other issues that may make writing difficult for students. Second, echoing his own story as a student who achieved writing success by learning from teachers and plugging away at his craft, Billy counseled: “If you need help, ask for it,” recommending further, “Just know that once you start writing it does get a little bit easier.” He concluded: “Outlines do help, I believe.”

**Rita.** Rita compared her experiences as a developing writer to skills that she learned on the softball field where practice was key to her performance in the big game or when the big paper was due. “Like if you practice as much as possible and… over time,” she explained, “eventually you’ll be a good writer.” In this way, she attributed her success to a particular high school teacher who gave her one-on-one coaching and feedback: “It was really helpful
because… she’s like: I didn’t really get this. Can you explain it for me? And then she puts it like in new words. So you know how to write it the next time.” During her interview, Rita recounted with procedural confidence how she planned and drafted her writing. She also admitted that her early writing was not easy, but that it was teacher dependent, “I don’t really write for fun. I just write because I need to. So I just like try to follow what the… teacher is looking for.” This mindset helped to reveal that the central motif that runs throughout Rita’s story was responsiveness to coaching. Her growth was tied to support from the teacher who “focuses on… one student at a time” and make it easier for Rita: “it’s just easier… to learn.”

Rita was upfront about her early attitude toward writing, admitting, “In elementary school, like I hated writing. And like I was terrible at it.” After a pause, she added, “I wasn’t really like understanding how to do it.” The other recollection about her writing instruction at this level was that it was statewide assessment driven, though her sense was that her teachers “didn’t really focus on… writing” as she later came to experience the coaching she received as she moved into middle and high school. When asked to name anyone who helped her as a writer at the elementary level, she disclosed, “I don’t think there was one.”

This early experience stands in contrast to Rita’s experience in middle school where “they focused on writing more” and “teachers were… explaining… what you needed to do.” She remembered having difficulty at the time when writing with “repeating myself,” and receiving specific instruction from her teacher. “She was just like, this… conclusion isn’t really a conclusion. And then she like gave me a paper and like step by step showed me how to write a conclusion.” What was noteworthy for Rita’s growth was that the teacher showed her both a model written response accompanied by individualized feedback “based on an essay that we did.”
By high school, with the high-stakes statewide test looming as a graduation requirement, Rita recalled receiving both a consistent focus on writing “throughout the entire year” along with high frequency, one-on-one teacher feedback sessions about her writing. Rita noted that her teacher took the time and “explained certain things” about her writing, “and why they didn’t make sense.” She recounted writing activities in her tenth-grade English class where the teacher guided students through a whole exercise, highlighting student essays on a whiteboard.

She reported on her experience learning a color-coding approach to analyzing the elements of writing: “Pink was topic sentence… Green was details… Blue is explanation… And orange was transitional words.” Rita claimed this method helped her by providing a “color scheme” where she could “see like a pattern… so… you know how to write it in [statewide assessment] form.” Color-coding her own writing and looking for similar elements in better written, color-coded exemplars helped her grow as a writer. “Because like instead of like writing things in the wrong order or like doing your explanation before the detail,” Rita pointed out, “she [her tenth-grade English teacher] put it in the right order.”

This experience strengthened further the student-teacher bond for Rita who learned “to go to the teacher” whenever she had “no idea how to keep going with” the idea she was developing in her writing. She explained in precise detail both her process for writing as well as the structure she had internalized as a tenth grader. She talked about brainstorming to identify “three points” and the importance of “finding evidence in the novel” and explaining how this evidence fits with the overall thesis. Exhibiting the confidence of a writer who had mastered a method, Rita read aloud her three-part structured thesis from a paper composed in tenth grade: “In the tragedy, *Macbeth*, written by William Shakespeare, Shakespeare uses details, figurative language, and characterization to convey that greed causes the downfall of Macbeth.” She talked
in great detail about how to build an introduction “leading to the thesis statement.” She then shared how she crafts body paragraphs, stressing the importance for the writer to develop a connection between a hierarchy of interrelated writing elements: “thesis,” “topic sentence,” “evidence,” and “explanation.” Sitting upright, her eyes brightening, Rita recounted how she wanted the conclusion paragraph to show how “you want it to all connect,” so that the reader understands more clearly “why those things happened” in relation to Macbeth’s greed.

Rita identified her writing growth turning point as one that occurred when she received the highly detailed, step-by-step methods and customized feedback in her tenth-grade English class. Rita described her writing growth during this time cognitively, pointing out that by becoming “more understanding of… why I wrote” as she discussed two English essays from tenth grade. Speaking with authority, Rita described each paper in great detail. The difference maker between the first paper, written at the beginning of the year, and the second, written later in the year, was Rita’s ability to write “paragraph by paragraph,” something she learned that year from her English teacher. She explained that this level of construction allowed her to understand how each paragraph functioned within the entire essay as parts of a whole: “So then I got more into details and like knew what I needed to do for that one paragraph. But then also like connecting it all together.” Thinking about how this experience had changed her as a writer, Rita shared, “I’ve used what I learned,” concluding, “I think I’m a pretty good writer.

Reflecting on her own writing growth experiences, Rita offered advice for those teachers and students looking to help developing writers in the future. Per her motif, Rita returned to the power of a one-on-one approach: “So they’re not all learning the same way. And I think that if a teacher focuses on one student at a time it’s just easier for them to learn.” Having a teacher be “really easy to talk to,” she recalled from her own experience, was even more helpful. She
stressed the value of structured one-on-one feedback in the computer lab where each student was given time in class to work on his or her writing with the teacher as writing coach. For students wanting to become better writers, Rita asserted the importance of the reading-writing connection. She counseled, “students should read… as much as possible,” because, “if you like read on your own you’re able to like get a larger vocabulary.” She added that reading provided student writers with an opportunity to learn from authors, reflecting, “when I read books like, it’s easier to write clearer sentences.” Finally, Rita directed future students to be active in becoming better writers, advising, “if you really wanted to become a better writer… go to your English teacher and just ask. And be like: can you go over this essay with me? Because usually teachers are pretty good.” In this way, Rita’s story of becoming a high-achieving student writer involved two critical elements that helped her own growth: student action and teacher coaching.

Andrea. As a second-language learner, Andrea’s story of her writing growth was illuminated by the recurring motif of language acquisition, and in particular, how improving her vocabulary enhanced her writing growth over time. Although Andrea was generally soft-spoken and frequently offered one-word replies, she became more animated when talking about her writing, a skill set where she had experienced academic success as evidenced by advancing from the general-track to the honors-level track in high school. She opened her writing development story by sharing: “Well I’m not really like a big writer. Like I’ve never written in my free time. But like in English class it’s something that I actually feel confident in.” Throughout her story, Andrea returned to vocabulary acquisition as the key to her writing development and achievement, with wariness for the use of what she called, “everyday words.”

While Andrea recalled learning from her teachers how to do “the color coding,” when she wrote in fourth and fifth grade, there was little else that she recalled about her writing at this
level besides remembering her teachers’ last names. Andrea felt that elementary school was a place where, “To be honest, I don’t really remember… how I would write.” What had staying power in her memory was the fact that color-coding continued as a writing approach into middle school. “I remember we had like boxes and boxes of highlighters,” she described that “we would always use.” Andrea recalled the color-coding key: “first you need your introduction, which is pink… Then you need your, I think the transitions words are orange… The green is a quote… The blue is your own words.” Smiling confidently, she talked about how this method formed pieces to “a puzzle” where “it goes together” to provide structure for her writing. So it was learning what the colors represented and how they fit together that was key to her writing growth. In her words, “You never forget it.”

By high school, Andrea talked about a new standard of writing expectation and instructional practice. She remembered, “it was in (grade 9 English) class… she would tell us to find the thesis but you don’t want it to be like you’re… just giving a book report.” Andrea recounted, the text was to be analyzed using the more sophisticated “thesis,” the writer’s claim that had to be proven. Her grade nine English teacher used new writing structures in the form of a “template,” that meant Andrea had to “write your quote and your explanation and then your… claim.” The claim was the key sentence; she explained, that involved “bringing it all together,” through evidence and analysis. Returning to the importance of vocabulary, Andrea recalled that every two weeks her ninth-grade English teacher would give her new vocabulary words. She explained, “I learned that I have to put like more effort. Like I couldn’t just write something. I had to like look into the vocab.”

Looking back at her writing growth, Andrea identified “my turning point” was “definitely freshman year,” in English class, “because I feel like I learned so much there… in that one
class.” She offered a qualified, “I think I’m like an overall good writer” and quickly followed this with, “I don’t feel like I’m… an excellent writer.” Returning to the motif of vocabulary acquisition, she added, “sometimes… I feel like my words are… not… fancy enough.” She confided that she noticed this most when she read other people’s writing.

Andrea’s writing growth story ended with advice for future students interested in growing as writers. She emphasized the importance of worksheets with more sophisticated replacement transition words and synonyms, “so you don’t just use… everyday words.” She added that it helped students when teachers provided them with “a specific order” of sentences when writing. Her final suggestion to students who wanted to improve as writers was about “learning vocab” by imitating examples from other online essays. She shared that this came from her own experience, learning “to imitate” what better writers have already done successfully.

Steve. Steve’s central motif was personal freedom. In sharing his writing development story, he identified writing formulas, which he called more damningly “scripts,” such as color-coding and other “formulaic” fixes as restrictions on the “quality of writing.” As a writer, Steve’s story of growth was imbued with his savage pilgrimage to set himself free from any writing tips, techniques, or topics that moved him out of the center of his own writing.

Steve’s earliest recollection of writing in elementary school was that it was a struggle. He blurted out, “I didn’t know what I was doing.” Reflecting upon his writing at the elementary level he described it as a place where there was “a set precedent of how you’re supposed to write.” He added for emphasis, “everything was so scripted.” This early writing for Steve became a tyranny of musts. He droned on for effect, “This must be your intro… you must say… start with this and all that and must go into this.” Appraising his early years as a writer, Steve
confessed: “I just got like so confused with everything. I just didn’t understand how you were supposed to write.”

For Steve, the transition to middle school brought more structure through a district-wide practice of teaching students to color code the various elements of writing. “So it was formulaic,” Steve complained and then with an impish grin he added dismissively, “they made us do all this highlighting stuff.” What did help him “a little” in seventh grade was the notion that the true quality of writing was on the idea level where the writer needed to “continue the whole idea through the whole paper.”

Steve’s English teacher that year emphasized that writing had to “have some significance.” Piquing Steve’s curiosity in seventh grade, his teacher “pointed out things that I didn’t even notice.” Further, Steve explained, “he showed me how to get quality,” though this quality writing was still taught “like an English lab report” with formulas, color-coding, and page limits. Steve was taught that structure and sequence were important. He commented that his middle school English teachers, “usually make you do like: oh, first sentence should be an attention grabber.” He contrasted this with what he preferred to do: “But I like to like introduce a separate idea” instead. When asked about any writing he did on his own, Steve contrasted his middle school classroom writing experiences with the freedom he experienced at the time by writing on his own, volunteering, “I’d write like great raps and stuff.”

Steve’s turning point in his writing growth occurred in his honors English class: “when I got to ninth grade, that’s when it became a little bit more free.” He added, “That class was hard,” and burst into laughter with his toothy smile. He described the writing his ninth-grade English teacher had them do, saying “she just taught us how to do like free writing” and that this was a definitive break from formulaic writing. Steve’s epiphany happened here in that class.
where he encountered professional writers. “I just realized a lot of my writing didn’t have like all these… cool… different… ideas presented in them,” he said, comparing this to his own writing. Then he added, “but like because they’re authors they can write about whatever they want. But their writing… had value to it.”

This quest for writing freedom and value for Steve continued to develop in tenth and eleventh grade when, learning from the same teacher for both years, he recalled coming into full ownership of his writing. Steve explained, “he like low-key criticizes your writing.” During this time, Steve came to trust his English teacher who helped him to break through formulas. “Mr. B. would just be like: this idea doesn’t belong here. This idea doesn’t like fit into what you are talking about. So just take it out and stuff.” Steve recalled that over time he learned from this teacher to focus on “finding the right words and making them actually make sense.”

Steve talked about a particular paper he wrote for this class where “we had to connect a piece of writing, like a bunch of pages of a book and stuff to just one image” from A Raisin in the Sun. “I talked about dreams of like Walter in A Raisin in the Sun and how like his dreams… didn’t really matter because he was, of course, African American.” For Steve, what was very different about this assignment was that “we kind of had to look like at the image and just like see everything in it rather than just seeing it as one thing.”

In terms of feeling support from his teacher, Steve recalled fondly how Mr. B. “just helped me, from the moment that he gave the assignment in class.” He said his goal was for his writing to “try to make it just… valuable” and where “my voice is actually in the writing.” To pursue this goal, Steve would scrap an entire essay and start over again because he sensed that it wasn’t right. As he reflected on where he is in his own writing growth journey, he said, “Now I try to be like creative. Try to think of clever things.”
Based on his writing growth journey, Steve’s advice to other writers in the future reiterates the idea of freedom. He first joked: “get rid of highlighters.” But then his demeanor became more serious. He offered that teachers needed to help students “input their own voices into their writing.” For students intent on becoming better writers, Steve doubled down on easy answers from teachers. He mimicked, “this needs to go here and this need to go there,” encouraging students instead to “just do it.” He returned to his motif of freedom, reminding students who want to grow as writers of his big discovery: “you can write however you want.” His best teachers in high school, Steve added, “just taught me how to like write more freely,” because “a set precedent of how you’re supposed to write and stuff,” with formulas, scripts, and colors just keep the writer from being free to be “me in my writing.”

**Primary Themes**

It is from the student writers’ rich stories of their experiences as early at-risk, eventual high-achieving and high-growth writers that key themes emerged. These themes included: recalled writing structure, high school as turning point, the presence of writing self-efficacy beliefs, and motif as illuminator of writing growth. After reading through the transcripts multiple times and reviewing the teacher interviews, field notes, research journals, and writing artifacts, the next step was to code for common patterns and differences that were embedded within these stories.

**Recalled writing structure.** All students recalled being given various writing structures from their teachers in the form of sets of rules, steps, or scaffolds to follow early in their writing development, especially as elementary and middle school students. This structure represented functional writing that was task-specific in order to yield a specific outcome or type of writing. Students in the study recalled being given structure to complete writing tasks from the statewide
assessment administered in grades 3-10. These structures functioned within the student stories as complicating actions, requiring them to change their writing practice based on directive instruction through the use of writing structures. These new writing structures dominated their writing instruction and all students mentioned being coached to meet particular statewide assessment writing outcomes.

In the classroom, instruction centered on these writing outcomes and meant that students were taught to follow a writing structure, typically in a step-by-step approach, often using color-coding, a method particular to this school district. Given that the desired end of this writing was outcome driven, there was no mention from students of any coaching from their writing teacher instructing them to follow a process to improve the students’ voice, tone, or style. The only process emphasized was following the writing structure. From the overall theme of recalled writing structure, two sub-themes emerged.

Structure as enhancing writing growth. Five of the students: Marcia, John, Billy, Rita, and Andrea, told stories based on learning and eventual mastery of these particular writing structures. Therefore, the first sub-theme is that this first group of student participants viewed structure positively, as details and steps they could articulate that helped them become better writers. It was and remained important to them throughout their stories. In their stories, the complicating action arising from structure was something they learned to deal with and eventually master.

As a middle school writer, Marcia recalled being coached on how to write an open response, and having “five body paragraphs” with details and that she “had to fit” her response “in that one… piece of paper.” She referred to an expanded version of this pattern again when
talking about her high school writing saying, “I have like three topics” and “keep the most interesting [topic] for the end.”

Likewise, John remembered practicing open responses and essays in elementary school and over time making these structured responses “more advanced and improved.” By middle school, the instructional focus for John shifted to the long composition where he learned from his teachers how to use a specific structure for writing introductions and conclusions. He also was learning the structure of “the Quote Sandwich” in seventh grade as a helpful way to ensure that his textual evidence was always accompanied by analysis, a structure that was stressed in the higher writing expectations of middle school. John’s response to structure was positive because he was the kind of writer who benefited from taking steps to make his writing better and, therefore, he experienced his writing growth as one continuous process of improvement.

For Billy, who needed writing support once the third-grade statewide assessment results were released in October of fourth grade, the need for writing structure took away a chunk of his free time. He accepted this, knowing it was the only way he would make writing improvements. He recalled positively the complication arising in seventh grade when he learned from his English teacher the structure of “the five-paragraph essay.” Billy explained confidently and in detail how the paragraphs worked together in support of the thesis. The fact that he still considers this structure helpful allowed him to get over being told in middle school that the writing structure given to him at the elementary level was “wrong” and lacked “more detail” and “depth.” By high school, Billy had become a more independent writer, but one who still adhered to the structure of an expanded five-paragraph model by adding a “different view” about the topic. Billy’s growth as a writer relied on structure and he continued to master its evolution
through practice. It was at the core of his writing growth experience so much so that he recounted, “if I’m stuck I just keep going back and just go back to the basics.”

Comparably, Rita and Andrea credited the structured color-coding system that they were taught coming up through the school system as a benefit to their writing. Both students shared positive writing growth stories that revealed how color-coding helped them write better on the statewide writing assessment assignments. Interestingly, both also noted that the color-coding structure formed a pattern that they each found helpful to their writing. Rita recalled from her middle school writing instruction that “teachers were… explaining what you needed to do” in terms of structure and that this continued into high school, where her teacher determined, “she mastered it.” Andrea likewise remembered learning color-coding in middle school and discussed her writing using these terms. Because the color-coding structure was in place throughout all levels of the school district, Andrea shared that “over the years I learned that technique,” referring to what good writers do. Moreover, as an English language learner, Andrea shared a positive insight about her own language acquisition when sharing that the elements of color-coding: thesis, topic, transitions, evidence, and explanation, fit together “like a puzzle.”

**Structure as limiting writing growth.** A second sub-theme arose from the data for the remaining three students: Judy, Jackie, and Steve. Looking back as they narrated their writing growth stories from the vantage point of eleventh grade, they experienced structure as limiting to their quest to become authentic writers with distinctive voices, tones, and styles. Their recollections were critical of these early structures that emphasized statewide assessment outcomes. Specifically, they considered it as a negative because of what they later learned as writers in high school English classes that the best writing involved ownership of a process and an outcome that reflected individual ownership. They were encouraged instead by their high
school English teachers to offer an “opinion” when they wrote, or to be more “free” or “creative.” Therefore, their stories recounted the experience of being restricted by structure, of it holding them back as they wrote and, ipso facto, preventing them from becoming successful writers.

According to Judy, this kind of functional writing was “disinteresting and unmotivating.” The negative impact on her writing growth represented opportunities lost. Reflecting on her middle school writing instruction, she reported, “they made it so clear cut that… the book is just saying this, like there’s no implications of anything else behind it,” and then contrasting this with her high school experiences, “which is exactly what it’s not now.”

For Steve’s quest to become himself in his writing, structured writing was both outside of him and applied to him, or as he captured it bluntly, “how you’re supposed to write.” This formulaic approach confused him and prevented him from learning how to write. The color-coding of formulaic writing exemplars tied to the statewide English language arts assessment at middle school only specified the sequence of sentences while deepening the voice-inhibiting pattern further. Steve aptly referred to this as “forced structure.” He was the most vocal about his disdain for structured writing. He referred to the use of structure in writing as “forced” and “formulaic.” During his interview, Steve praised his high school English teachers for teaching him how to “write more freely.” Developmentally, he discovered that the purpose of writing was not to just write, to follow a sequence, but to convey through words something that was “unique about my thinking” and a means to “make myself interesting” to others. Steve’s writing growth hinged on freeing himself from someone else’s structure “just to get it done” in order to allow “ideas [to] come into my head” so that his writing could “have value” for himself and for others.
Jackie’s experience with structured writing was negative but somewhat more nuanced. In elementary school, she was directed to follow the structure that was given to her, which looking back, caused her to conclude, “I don’t think I really grew in elementary school.” By middle school, Jackie noted that her English teachers “had a structure,” but they were more accommodating, telling her, “You should put a little twist of yourself in it.” Her reaction to structure also departed from Judy and Steve in that she described an alternative way that she grew as a writer: “so then I started reading a lot and I picked up all these different books from the library that no one would read. Like I used to read a lot of historical ones.” This exposure from outside the writing classroom, Jackie recounted, helped her as a writer by exposing her to writer’s who wrote with tone. She reflected, “It was like, wow, I wonder what it’s like to write in that era. It’s like, there’s a certain tone.” She characterized her high school writing as “revolving around reason and evidence” and she experienced this idea-level structure as a confining expectation or, as she put it, “when you’re telling me to do it a certain way… it puzzles my brain just to see what… they (teachers) want out of it.”

Another primary theme that emerged from the students’ writing experiences was that high school was the place where they made a developmental transition to more complex writing tasks that required them to make claims, consider differing perspectives, and develop their authentic voice.

**High school as turning point.** A second theme that emerged from student stories was high school as turning point in their writing development. As the final chronological sequence in their public school education as they progressed from elementary to middle to high school, all students identified high school teachers as the ones who exerted a final influence over their writing growth and subsequent high achievement. Students referred to this focus and were well
aware that in the transition into high school there were higher writing outcomes in the form of the grade 10 statewide English language art assessment, which counted for graduation. While their high school experiences differed somewhat from student to student, there was full agreement among the students that high school was the setting where student writing growth reached its highest level; what they learned there made them better writers.

Another key aspect of this theme that surfaced from student stories was the notion that high school was not just a physical setting, an actual transition to a larger school, but also a psychological space, a sphere of influence where higher expectations required students to make their best effort to improve their writing. Added motivation came from the fact that students did not want to let their high school teachers down. This influence caused students to respond positively to their high school teachers who purposefully used personalization as a way to shape these developing writers. High school teachers entered the student writer’s private writing world, offered customized writing strategies, and thereby gained student trust.

There were two interrelated features that functioned as sub-themes within this larger theme of high school as turning point.

*Teacher as key to change.* The first sub-theme that emerged from student stories was the high value that some students placed on a personalizing high school teacher. Four student writers: Judy, Marcia, Rita, and Steve, described their high school turning point stories by talking about a particular teacher who they felt had a powerful influence in shaping their writing growth.

Judy described the writing she did for a succession of her high school English teachers as key to her writing growth. In Table 1, Judy referenced how her teacher helped her to develop greater diversity of opinion:
Table 1

*High School Turning Point Quotes from Judy*

- She [Judy’s grade 9 English teacher] really motivated me and like opened my eyes to a bunch of different, you know, tools and sort of a beginning of rhetorical analysis and so using that sort of really sparked my interest for seeing why writers do things, you know, even to the point of like, oh, is the author like manipulating me?
- Like I would have all these concepts out loud like: talking through it, like [Judy’s grade 9 English teacher] would be like, yeah, this is great because before my analysis would be just be a summary of the quote I would use or something like that.
- I remember probably like the first three quarters of freshman year like every single paper that I wrote would just be a summary of whatever the book was. And every time [Judy’s grade 9 English teacher] would be like, “Oh, that’s not like we’ve got to insert some, you know, stuff” (laughing). “We’ve got to insert some opinions here.” And I was like I just don’t understand. That’s when the light bulb really went on, if I could pinpoint a moment.

The greatest impact on Judy’s writing growth had to do with the role her teacher played in encouraging her to make connections between her own perspective and those of others. This came in the form of encouraging Judy to have the confidence to insert her own opinions and ideas within her writing. For Judy, this was an entirely new level of analysis and allowed her to interpret texts and write about authorial intent through the epiphany that some texts had multiple layers of meaning. Making these topical connections suddenly caused Judy to find texts enjoyable because her high school English teacher encouraged her to look closely for this newfound depth and layering. As she reflected, “That’s when I really started to appreciate it more.” By guiding Judy to “bridging the connection” between her ideas, those from the text, and ideas of others outside the text, she was able to develop “my voice,” something that helped her move from writing simple summaries upon entering high school in ninth grade, to inserting her opinion into her formal writing before the end of freshman year.
Judy’s turning point as a writer was confirmed by one of her current eleventh-grade English teachers. In Table 2, this teacher identified that the real change took place inside Judy’s writing process:

Table 2

Teacher Quotes About Judy’s Writing Growth

- I think that she’s more comfortable as a writer and, you know, you kind of see that. You know, how many pages now of her writing have I read this year… a hundred, two hundred? That sort of thing. You know, I think she’s more comfortable and you see it. She doesn’t seem like she’s trying to impress as much, which is oddly enough more impressive writing a lot of times.

- So I think that, you know her growth has been largely due to her own willingness to work and her own kind of honesty with her own writing.

- She’s a very reflective, self-reflective writer and… I’m guessing that that would be the thing that has contributed to her growth more… than any sort of bag of tricks that I can imagine would have been thrown at her.

Inner qualities such as Judy’s comfort, honesty, and self-reflection were key to her writing process and resultant growth. As Judy’s awareness as a writer grew, her willingness to take on more challenging writing tasks also increased, driven by her quest to connect her own ideas to the world of ideas outside herself. Judy’s teacher also suggested that Judy’s writing improvement emanated from being “more comfortable with her own voice” and that this acquisition of voice emboldened her to try out “interesting ideas that are interesting” to her.

Similarly, Marcia attributed her high school turning point as a writer to an encounter with her tenth-grade English teacher in a writing workshop class called Sophomore Composition. Her reliance on this teacher is conveyed in Table 3:
In telling the story of her writing growth, Marcia returned repeatedly to her Sophomore Composition teacher who made writing engaging, which was the key to her turning point as a developing writer. Marcia recalled a number of thinking games in class that were linked to writing, including an alphabet name game and writing in response to movie clips. These fun writing activities that her teacher used in class opened Marcia up to following the specific instruction related to writing an introduction for the composition on the statewide assessment test. Interspersed with these engaging low-stakes writing activities, Marcia learned from her teacher specifics related to the sequence of ideas in an introductory paragraph of a five-paragraph essay. From teacher support and personalization, Marcia gained confidence in herself as a developing writer and learned to apply this confidence to discrete skills for more complex writing tasks without needing to overcompensate by defensively writing more.

Reflections from Marcia’s Sophomore Composition teacher are represented in Table 4:
Table 4

*Teacher Quotes About Marcia’s Writing Growth*

- So for her [Marcia], I think, the color system was super helpful because as we would go through, and I would often do it for her, as I would have her read the sentence and I would have the colors and I would just kind of highlight what she was reading. And she would see that there was, you know, a page of green. And so then we would work together to say, okay, how do we take this page and write it in two sentences?

- But I think that the vast majority of kids, Marcia included, have the basic knowledge: can read, they have thoughts about it, but making those two things come together in writing is really difficult. So if you give them the structure, and you give them a format to follow, and they can start to plug those ideas in at a very basic level, then that’s where their voice actually starts to emerge.

- [In response to the interviewer asking: “What shaped her the most?”] One, feeling confident like she knew exactly what needed to go into an essay. And two, having the confidence to write less. Being told it was okay to cut.

Marcía’s Sophomore Composition English teacher asserted that the key to Marcía’s writing growth came from her growing confidence. She specified that Marcía benefitted from the intermingling of “low-stakes writing” activities with “mini lessons,” or a mix of writing structure and formal practice. In this way, Marcía’s English teacher moved her from “practicing those small skills” to helping her with “open responses and long comps.” She purposefully gave Marcía “very tangible goals” and over time instructional approach is how Marcía’s “voice actually start[ed] to emerge.” In addition, this teacher noted Marcía’s “intrinsic motivation” as another factor in her writing growth in her class, adding, she “wanted to do well, so she was willing to take those lessons and work with them.”

For Rita, advice and support from her tenth-grade English teacher played a critical role in her high school turning point as a high-achieving writer. Rita’s reflections about her teacher are included in Table 5:
STORIES OF HIGH-ACHIEVING URBAN STUDENT WRITERS

Table 5

High School Turning Point Quotes from Rita

- She’d [Rita’s tenth-grade English teacher] go: “What do you need help with?” And like: “how can I help?” She was like: “How can I help you become a better writer?”

- But with her [Rita’s tenth-grade English teacher] it was much easier… because she was like really easy to talk to.

- It was really helpful because like it’s easier to comprehend when like instead of like just writing notes on the essay that you handed in she [Rita’s tenth-grade English teacher] can like analyze it more. And so like she’s like: “I didn’t really get this. Can you explain it for me?” And then she puts it like in new words so you know how to write it the next time.

This teacher facilitated Rita’s high school writing growth through customized feedback on her writing and by developing a comfort level with Rita. It was this personalized approach combined with color-coding that helped Rita see specifically what pattern she needed to follow to improve her writing. Rita recalled how this teacher showed her how to work backwards from the evidence and then connect this to the thesis statement and topic sentences, adding analysis of the evidence at the end. This helped Rita write with greater depth and her writing improved once she learned this. As Rita reflected upon understanding this pattern sophomore year, writing “just came a lot easier because I knew it was… expected.”

Rita’s grade 10-grade English teacher identified her ability to think about a topic and to be coached as the two qualities that Rita possessed that were key to her high school turning point as a writer. These qualities are reflected in Rita’s teacher’s comments in Table 6:
Table 6

*Teacher Quotes About Rita’s Writing Growth*

- So she’s… good at listening, at following through with what you ask her to do in terms of: start here and move to this end product.
- But I think that ideally what I’m hoping and maybe what happened with her is that having the structure and then having chances to try to enhance, go beyond the structure helped her.
- I did see more of what I’ve been labeling as intellectual curiosity. Which to me reflects the fact that, you know, she has something more to say.

Rita’s teacher mentioned several times during the interview an inner quality of intellectual curiosity that Rita possessed, “which lends itself to having more of a voice because you want to say something interesting.” Moreover, she recalled Rita “investing in the process of doing the work and doing it well.” This “internalization” of the following qualities: curiosity, determination, and discipline combined with showing Rita how “to enhance” and “go beyond the structure helped her.” Rita’s teacher then elaborated in detail on the full structure, from putting sentences back together into one paragraph as a classroom activity and then asking: “How could we improve this?” In this way, Rita grew significantly from being “all over the place as a writer” to “having the structure” and then through instruction being shown how to use “your own tools” to “go beyond the structure.”

Steve identified his ninth-grade English teacher as the person who fostered his turning point as a developing writer. In Table 7, Steve recalled the impact of this teacher on his high school turning point:
Table 7

*High School Turning Point Quotes from Steve*

- And as I grew up, more so like I’d say in ninth grade, I learned with like [Steve’s ninth-grade English teacher].

- They [Steve’s high school English teachers] just taught me how to write more freely. Don’t be like: oh, here’s my intro, first this happened, blah, blah, blah. Just try to… immerse yourself into a story and engage the reader into it.

- That you’re not just like… that you’re not just writing to get stuff out of the way. And just to put it on paper. Like you’re not just taking like notes and then just putting it there. You’re actually writing the paper. And you should be like, like engaged in your topic. Or whatever that is. I can’t remember like fully what she [Steve’s high school English teacher] was like, what she was all about.

During his interview, Steve attributed the reading-writing connection in that ninth-grade honors English class where, “I just realized a lot of my writing didn’t have like all these… cool… different… ideas presented in them.” For Steve, “finding the right words and making them actually make sense” was where he struggled as a writer. But his ninth-grade English class was where his teacher expected him to do his own thinking and self-discovery process. Steve commented, “She just taught us to do like free writing,” which was difficult at first because that approach was new to him as writer. He also recalled this teacher challenging him to engage the reader and doing so by requiring of him: “you should be like… engaged in your topic.” Steve’s writing growth increased dramatically in this first year of high school and continued to develop over the next two as he transitioned to Advanced Placement English.

Steve’s tenth- and eleventh-grade English teacher, who had worked with Steve for two years in a row, validated high school as the place where Steve experienced major growth as a writer. In Table 8, this teacher described Steve’s high school turning point as a developing writer:
Table 8

*Teacher Quotes About Steve’s Writing Growth*

- Steve is a really interesting kid. He thinks differently than a lot of his classmates. He’s an insightful kid. He’s a perceptive kid. And he’s a philosophical kid. And he’s a kid who will take risks in his writing, sometimes very on purpose. He’ll say: I don’t want to do a five-paragraph essay. I say: I don’t want you to do a five-paragraph essay. He goes: good. What if the thesis comes at the end?

- But he’ll break these little rules and it’ll sound just off, just stilted. And so for Steve the best thing that I’ve been able to offer him is another set of eyes, another ear for his language, and an ability to… kind of meet him at the philosophical level and say: I think I get what you’re going for. I want you to talk through this. And then to try to say: okay, let’s… see how we can get you to go in a direction that the reader will follow you on. Because his writing is not directional. It’s… circular and recursive.

- It’s a voice that is playing around with language at a level that most young writers aren’t doing. And what’s so fascinating and a little bit frustrating about Steve is he’s not one of those gifted writers who just gets it on his own. He… needs to be taught.

Reflecting on Steve’s writing growth over the past two years, this teacher echoed Steve’s struggle with word choice, saying, “He picks the wrong word more often than he picks the right word,” commenting, “but he does it because he’s got a vast vocabulary.” The interplay between language and voice then were all a part of Steve’s creative process as a writer. His teacher added that this “experimental kind of mindset” makes the kind of student who is “willing to try stuff and see what sticks and, you know, he’s… incredibly coachable, too.” So coachability was key to Steve’s writing growth along with a certain kind of freedom to make mistakes. His teacher pointed out “every single mistake that I’ve called him on he’s learned from.” Steve’s growth has its roots in playfulness with language and his intense focus on breaking beyond writing formulas and conventions.

*Writing strategy as key to change.* A second sub-theme for high school as turning point related to student attribution of writing strategies and it helping them become high-growth
writers. The remaining four student writers: John, Billy, Jackie, and Andrea, credited their high school turning point to acquiring a particular writing strategy or being encouraged to pursue a worthy writing target that definitively changed them as writers. Through teacher instruction and personalization of writing, the techniques have much in common, and how students perceived their writing growth based on these differences provided a fuller understanding of nuances within this particular theme.

John identified his high school turning point in terms of acquiring and operationalizing new writing techniques. In Table 9, John mentioned the work he did in his tenth-grade high school English class as acquiring “that final thing” that was a turning point for his writing growth:

Table 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School Turning Point Estimates from John</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• So tenth grade last year I remember I wrote a <em>Beowulf</em> essay at the beginning of the year. And I was doing that and he [John’s English teacher] told me to restart, so I made like an essay much better than that… that was more like the argument rather than about the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Yeah, Says/Does. Oh yeah, we did a lot of that, too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The paper needs to be more about… an argument than a summary.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Specifically, John identified the shift from retelling the story to “writing more about your thesis and the argument” as key to his high school writing growth. He recalled learning the “Says/Does” approach in tenth-grade English as a strategy that helped improve his writing and the key to this shift was connecting a quote with related ideas. This gave instant depth to John’s writing. John’s insights during this time revealed his new awareness, and he said that his essay was not “based… on the quotes,” but on “my argument” and that this was the writer’s unique
perspective on a given topic. John shared that he has continued to apply this approach to his writing in eleventh-grade English as well as in his history classes and that in this way, “I’m learning by writing each essay.”

John’s tenth-grade English teacher echoed the impact that writing strategies had on John’s high school turning point as a high-growth writer:

Table 10

*Teacher Quotes About John’s Writing Growth*

- And so what that says is that he’s the kind of kid who will… take the instruction, kind of direct writing instruction, and incorporate it rather quickly into his writing and go with it. So, you know, he’s an eminently teachable kid and… I think I can actually take a little bit of credit for his growth as a writer here.

- Oh, he did it [Says/Does] immediately and it… I think shook him out… of his comfort zone a little bit because it’s always asking: can you go deeper? Can you offer anything else? Can you offer an alternative theory to what the author might have been trying to accomplish there?

- I’m looking at some of his old work, ah, through the power of Google docs and, you know, his *Beowulf* essay was three pages. By the time he gets to his poetry research paper in June this is almost perfectly a year ago, you know, he’s got a nine-page paper if you include the bibliography.

This teacher recalled that John came into class at the beginning of the year “as that sort of good rote ninth-grade writer,” who did the typical “plot driven, summary kind of writing,” but who turned out to be a quick study who “does everything that he’s asked to do. And he does it well.” His teacher identified “this protocol called Says/Does” as a writing strategy that helped John to do systematic “layers of analysis on every piece of text.” John’s ability to quickly operationalize this writing strategy both expanded his writing length as well as added a quality of “empathetic thinking” to his writing. For John’s teacher, the key to his writing growth, therefore, was not voice but his receptivity and ability to successfully apply these new
approaches shown to him in class. His teachers also linked John’s confidence and his receptivity to being coached as a writer to John’s high school writing growth.

Similarly, Jackie attributed her high school turning point to operationalizing voice as a way that allowed her to tap into her true self as a writer. Table 11 included some of Jackie’s reflections about her high school turning point process:

Table 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School Turning Point Quotes from Jackie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• I think what helped me a lot was in Ms. Benson’s [grade nine English] class. Because she was all about being creative and like every morning we’d have creative writings. And that really opened me up, so I guess like the more opened up the more creative I got.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We had a lot of free writes and like she [Ms. Benson] like emphasized on like having your own style, having our own tone and everything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I think by teaching creativity it boosts like how you write formal essays.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jackie identified her ninth-grade English teacher as the person who helped to shape her into a writer with a penchant for tone and that particular class as the setting where her writing growth increased significantly. Jackie emphasized the “free writes” in this teacher’s class as helping her to explore tone and creative thinking. Throughout the interview, Jackie raised this issue of creativity several times and substituted the term “crazy ideas” to describe when this teacher gave her the freedom to think creatively. She recounted a process in class where during free writes, “it’s like competition in a way, whoever can get like the most creative.” Jackie associated this process of becoming “more creative” in English with her independently written story and dream journals where she recalled, “it just amazed me how you can create different stories like you can create different worlds with just writing.”
Jackie’s teacher also emphasized a structured creativity in her class as an important factor in Jackie’s writing growth. In Table 12, Jackie’s teacher shared her thoughts about Jackie’s high school turning point as a high-growth writer:

Table 12

*Teacher Quotes About Jackie’s Writing Growth*

- I would use examples and I believe Jackie was one of the examples that I used. So her creative writing really developed and I think because she had more confidence.

- But I really think this book [*The Book Thief*] really just opens their eyes to like wanting to be a creative writer and wanting to express yourself and, you know, it’s okay to express yourself… But I just remember Jackie liking that book.

- When she was there, it’s a heavily-structured classroom. You want to build voice. You want them to sort of think in form and be their own person.

Jackie’s grade nine English class, her teacher confirmed the fact that Jackie’s writing growth was linked to creativity and added literacy through writing activities that emulated the author’s writing style, as a contributing factor as well. By having Jackie and her classmates do “write alikes” where they had to imitate an author’s writing style, the creative activities were given structure and purpose. These “imitation” writing exercises, her teacher reflected, “really just opened [student] eyes to… wanting to be a creative writer and wanting to express yourself.” She also had Jackie and her classmates “describe their bedroom and what was inside their bedroom. But they couldn’t put their name on it,” as a way to explore “their personality and their voice combined.” These creative writing tasks piqued Jackie’s own interests in tone, voice, and style and thereby furthered her writing growth in this high school setting.

Billy’s high school turning point emerged from his expanding awareness of the writer’s responsibility to develop different perspectives on a given topic. In Table 13, Billy recalled high
school as the turning point for him in the acquisition of new writing strategies he learned in response to new writing tasks and approaches:

Table 13

*High School Turning Point Quotes from Billy*

- And then in high school I’ve, given that you’re going to write a lot now since I’m in eleventh grade SATs with the essay option now, I have to learn to write within a given time period.

- Look at it [the topic] from different views and write about it.

- When writing about a topic, how to expand on it, not that you’re repeating yourself over and over again, but you go in more depth that makes writing easier.

In fact, at first Billy said that his turning point took place in middle school where he “had to write more and... by doing that more often I got a little bit better myself.” However, he could not recall any particular strategy he learned or realization he had that made his writing better in middle school. Later, upon reflection in the interview Billy identified what he learned in his eleventh-grade English class, specifically how to “expand the detail in more depth,” and the importance of looking “at it [the topic] from other angles than just one.” This expansion in Billy’s awareness as a writer translated to multiple perspectives and themes along with coached practice and served as the key to his high school writing growth. He mentioned a few times during the interview that this new approach helped him avoid repeating himself and made his writing better.

Billy’s eleventh-grade English teacher confirmed his growth as a writer in her class.

Table 14 includes his teacher’s reflections on high school as the turning point for Billy’s writing growth:
Table 14

Teacher Quotes About Billy’s Writing Growth

- So the second prompt was… “What’s likely to make you more successful: persistence or ability?” And he did really well with it. He did pretty much exactly what he was told. He used… the three examples. He expanded on them.

- He does well with writing creatively also, so I wouldn’t… put him in the box of just saying he can only write with a formula.

- So he wrote about something that was abstract. He wrote about something that was not a physical thing that you carry and he, you can definitely tell that his writing is his. He definitely has voice.

This teacher validated Billy’s ability to take instruction and to follow a structured writing formula, “he did exactly what he was supposed to.” But this teacher also emphasized that Billy and his classmates were able “to do a little bit more creative writing in the eleventh grade.” His teacher stressed working beyond the five-paragraph formula that Billy learned in grade 10 English in preparation for the statewide writing assessment, replacing it instead with “more styles of writing” and “free form stuff.” She also mentioned that Billy wrote with “voice” on one recent persuasive writing assignment and could handle abstract ideas, two areas where he demonstrated writing growth in her class.

Finally, Andrea identified vocabulary acquisition strategies and activities in her ninth-grade English class as key to her writing growth relative to her high school turning point moment. Table 15 captured Andrea’s thoughts about vocabulary as key to her high school turning point as a high-growth writer:
Table 15

*High School Turning Point Quotes from Andrea*

- Because in her class we learned a lot of vocabulary. And she… always told us that if you wanted to sound nicer you should… better your vocabulary.

- Every two weeks she’d give us new vocab that she said we would use it on in the future like the SATs… I will never forget that.

- I feel like I learned that I have to put like more effort. I couldn’t just write something. I had to… look into the vocab.

Andrea’s interview included many references to vocabulary acquisition that improved her writing by substitution, or replacing a word or phrase with a better word or phrase. Sometimes at a loss for finding the exact wording to explain her writing growth, Andrea remembered being directed to use better, more sophisticated word choices. She also recalled learning in this class the key difference between having a “thesis” that involved “bringing it all together” versus “just giving a book report.” This movement from surface to depth helped Andrea develop into a successful high school writer. Andrea recalled using color-coding and graphic organizers where “you like write your quote and your explanation and then your… claim” as writing structures that helped her grow significantly as a high school writer.

Andrea identified her eleventh-grade history teacher as the person who could talk about her most recent writing growth because he had taught her in tenth and eleventh grade. In Table 16, Andrea’s history teacher described her high school turning point as a result of acquiring these new writing strategies:
Table 16

*Teacher Quotes About Andrea’s Writing Growth*

- And so one of the things that I concentrated on with her was, you know, let’s make sure that… when you’re writing, let’s make sure those words carry weight for a reason.

- I think a lot of it’s confidence and she’s so much more confident now. I think that… some of these formulaic, you know, writing techniques, I think they help her kind of focus.

- And she’s responsive to feedback. Yeah, so if I said, you know, I needed more, I need you to really… weave together what this document is talking about and what you know. You really need to bring these things together. And then she would work on that next time. And I’d see change. And I would see her concentrating on the document.

Andrea’s history teacher recalled her scoring “really low on one of the first writing assignments,” a document-based question in tenth grade. He noticed at the time that, “she had a lot of empty statements” with “vague wording.” So he recounted focusing her writing on being more purposeful with her word choice through “bringing in historical evidence.” Similar to Andrea’s ninth-grade English teacher, her history teacher used graphic organizers and exemplars as “targeted interventions” to provide structure for improving her writing. He concluded at the end of tenth grade that “she handled anything you throw at her” and recommended her for eleventh-grade honors history the following year. Teaching Andrea for the past two years in a row, he commented on her writing growth: “I’ve seen further improvement” because “she learned from her mistakes” and “she’s responsive to feedback.”

High school was the learning environment that garnered the strongest responses from all eight students. Whether it was a particular classroom writing activity or personalized feedback, the students’ best writing and “A-ha” moments happened at this level in this school district. Judy, Marcia, Rita, and Steve responded to the power of teacher personalization, which served as
the key to their high school turning point. Meanwhile, John, Jackie, Billy, and Andrea associated their turning point in high school with a new writing skill, approach, or method that made them better writers.

To understand the eight student writing stories, therefore, required the ability to identify the central motif, or recurring idea, that emerged as unique for understanding each student writer. Rita captured this well in her story when she recounted what her high school English teacher said to her one day in class: “I didn’t really get this. Can you explain it to me? And then she puts it like in new words.” This comment provided a connection to another theme that emerged from these stories of student writers; a motif as illuminator of writing growth.

The presence of writing self-efficacy beliefs. Students’ judgments about their own competence as writers, known to researchers as writing self-efficacy beliefs, represented a third theme that emerged from all student interviews. Evidence for the presence of writing self-efficacy beliefs appeared in student narratives when they talked about using more effective writing strategies, being persistent in the face of demanding writing challenges, writing more rather than less, receiving higher writing grades, and setting higher writing goals for themselves. These students all described the specific actions they took to plan, write, and revise a particular writing piece they brought with them, which yielded richer evidence for the presence of self-efficacy beliefs.

Judy’s writing self-efficacy beliefs were revealed through multiple references to using more effective writing strategies, which in her case included the use of voice and the positive impact it had on her writing process. In discussing an essay that she had completed for her junior year Advanced Placement English class, Judy shared, “it’s a stronger reflection of my opinions and my views and overall voice and, I don’t know, I really connected with the piece, so
I found it a lot more easy to write.” Judy also recalled her persistence in the face of writing challenges, in this case making her writing better in response to teacher feedback on her writing and the need to be persistent. Judy contrasted the highs of completing a written task, saying, “Sometimes I feel like after… I wrote I was like, wow, I’m amazing. I’m incredible. This is amazing.” Then she contrasted this with the pressing need to let these emotions go in order to revise it to make her written response better: “but then I sort of got off my high horse when he gave me the remarks. And I was like, okay, I’m going to go back and revise this.” Judy likewise stressed the need to persist with her writing through hard work, “You just got to put effort in and do it. Like you can’t really expect to just skim it and, you know, get the results that you want to see.”

For Marcia, her writing self-efficacy beliefs manifested through her frequent sharing of the fact that she wrote more rather than less to demonstrate her confidence and mastery of a particular writing assignment. She commented, “I think I’m good at writing. I like to, like there was a thing the other day in class we only had to write five sentences. I ended up writing ten.” Her persistence as a writer also had its roots in the deliberate intention of writing more as a signal to the teacher that she was a good writer. She reflected, “More than everyone else who just did the little limit that you had to do… I went above and beyond than I was actually supposed to.” In discussing her writing, Marcia evoked a number of specific writing strategies that she had learned from pervious success on writing tasks that made her writing better. She specified the use of “a good grabber” for the opening sentence of her introduction. She talked about her strategy for gradually introducing a topic before offering her thesis statement, saying, “I didn’t go right [into] talking about what the essay was about,” but instead, “I’ll keep the most interesting for the end.” These comments reflected her self-efficacy beliefs as a writer and
framed what she had learned from previous writing and how she demonstrated this learning to others through her writing.

Evidence of John’s writing self-efficacy beliefs took the form of sharing what he had learned about moving beyond what he called “standard writing” and his self-assessment of knowing how to use “the format,” stating confidently, “I think I’ve got it down pretty well.” But then John stressed where he experienced writing as a challenge, saying, “The hard part is like really like explaining what I mean.” John further clarified this notion, saying that a more effective writing strategy was no longer “just [to] summarize the book,” but to focus instead on the development of “your ideas.” John’s tenth-grade English teacher provided supporting evidence for John’s writing self-efficacy beliefs when talking about John’s growth and how he went from writing “three pages about a book” at the beginning of tenth-grade English to writing “a nine-page paper” by the end of the year. His teacher attributed John’s writing growth to his success operationalizing various writing analysis strategies, such as “Says/Does,” that produced “more nuanced and kind of sustained analysis that gets beyond that kind of, I’m going to use that word again, rote kind of like robot writing.”

As Jackie discussed in great detail her process for writing a history paper on Lewis and Clark, her writing self-efficacy beliefs were revealed through her willingness to set higher goals for herself on this assignment by taking a risk and writing historical fiction. Jackie shared the details of her adventure story based on “historical events,” commenting “I wanted to be more creative” and needed “to use the creative voice in my head” on this particular assignment. What remained distinct to Jackie as she discussed this paper was that she could set a higher goal for herself as a writer by combining her interest in voice with bringing historical research to life. A confirming indicator of Jackie’s writing self-efficacy beliefs was the success she received on this
assignment in receiving “an A.” What was unique for Jackie’s self-efficacy beliefs among the student writers in this study was that she was the one student who wrote independently of school assignments, maintaining since middle school what she referred to as her “story/dream journal.” In addition to her Lewis and Clark paper, Jackie shared during the interview how her journal writing reflected an entirely different level of motivation and achievement. Such journal writing was connected to her self-efficacy beliefs through ongoing engagement in subsequent writing tasks. She needed a space to be “free” to write with “my own tone” and to experiment in a way that allowed her to, in her words, “keep creativity your priority.”

Speaking about his own writing process, Billy’s writing self-efficacy beliefs emerged from his reflections over the years about how he improved as a writer. Evidence of his persistence in dealing with writing challenges came from what he learned from his mastery experience or past writing successes. Billy valued “practice” as key to his writing growth and equated improvement in his writing to his trumpet playing, commenting, “you play harder pieces so you grow as a musician yourself” just as he learned to “write longer papers with… harder topics.” As for using more effective writing strategies, Billy also shared the importance of writing an outline “to make sure I have enough ideas” and, more importantly, that the outline focused on a thesis that he needed to answer to ensure “that I’m explaining my point well enough.” His eventual success using these writing strategies helped “make the essay kind of flow” and made sure that “it’s all kind of connected as you read through it.” He also confidently shared his grade on this paper, saying it received an “A-” as confirmation of his own writing growth over time.

Rita told a story about two different papers—one in October of tenth grade, the other in March of that same school year—that reflected her growth as a writer. Her story was imbued
with self-efficacy beliefs when she pointed out that these papers demonstrated that the March paper on *Macbeth* “is just a lot more well written than the other one” on *Beowulf*, and that the differences reflected, “how I became… more understanding of… why I wrote them.” Additional indicators of Rita’s writing self-efficacy beliefs came from learning how to employ more effective writing strategies, instead of trying to write a paper “all at once.” She admitted, “I didn’t really know how to write an essay.” What she believed made the difference in growth was learning how to write in “steps” in order to “get more ideas” and knowing how to compose “paragraph by paragraph” by focusing on “connecting it all together.” She recounted that these strategies represented big changes in her writing process resulting in demonstrable improvement. She also volunteered that using these new strategies gave her the confidence to write more. In the case of the *Macbeth* essay, Rita said she “added more background into the conclusion” while making sure that she answered the “bigger” ideas as to “why” Macbeth was “greedy.” Closing an essay in this way, she recounted, came from her teacher’s feedback and was something she had not done before.

Andrea’s writing self-efficacy beliefs imitated the “structure” of well-written model essays or vicarious experience. The first writing strategy she identified relative to structure was to “imitate” these models. She identified a second structural approach of color-coding as another writing strategy that helped her grow as a writer by focusing on the elements of writing: thesis and topic sentences, transitions, quotes, and explanation. She also learned to use other structural strategies reflecting her writing achievement by creating an “outline” based upon a “rubric” as a guide. Andrea’s history teacher affirmed that her writing achievement was rooted in what he called “formulaic… writing techniques” that she learned to “focus” when she composed, and that
her writing success came from mastery of these techniques. He pointed out that “she gained more and more confidence as the year went on.”

Finally, writing self-efficacy beliefs for Steve took the form of learning to acquire and apply writing strategies that allowed him to make broad connections to the topic while following a process that helped him create “a sense of awe” for the reader. His past writing successes helped Steve push beyond structure to experimenting with new challenges related to language, thought, and audience. The downside of this approach was what Steve referred to as “branching off” that resulted in “drifting away from the topic” when he was in ninth-grade English. To counter this negative writing experience, Steve learned to apply a more effective writing strategy by actively revising or, in his words, learning to “write sentence by sentence and then edit sentence by sentence” in a process that involved continual revision. The goal for Steve was to persevere in “moving from one idea to the other,” and the confirmation that this approach worked was when he could see that he maintained “one idea and just one path.” In terms of new writing strategies, Steve talked about learning to “read it out loud.” Steve told the story of an essay that he brought to the interview that received an “A-,” reflecting not only his writing success with applying these writing strategies but his intention to follow his own process in order to “write however you want.”

**Motif as illuminator of writing growth.** While all eight students were considered high achieving based on similar writing performance outcomes on the same tenth-grade statewide assessment, all these writers understood their writing differently. Gaining insight into student writing growth required first the ability to grasp how each student regarded what was central to his or her own writing. Student stories conveyed this insight in the form of different motifs that were key to understanding each student’s writing growth. This theme was further supported by
individual teachers named by students in this study who customized their instructional approaches to suit the unique needs of each student writer. Student stories included at least one trusted writing teacher who understood the way the student learned to write and provided the right balance of personalized instruction, customized feedback, and purposeful writing strategies.

Judy’s motif relating to diversity of interpretation signaled what she considered to be most essential for her own writing growth. She mentioned multiple times the importance of having “voice” and learning to look for layers of meaning as elements that made her writing more compelling. Learning to make connections between ideas, authors, and texts was the final element of how Judy came to understand what good writers do. Her eleventh-grade teacher tailored his feedback to Judy by recognizing her “expansive mind” and provided her support through helping her “try out ideas that are… unique or original, especially for an eleventh grader.” In this way, Judy’s teacher encouraged her to take risks and rooted for her to pursue her own interesting ideas knowing that this was what made her writing “interesting to the reader.”

Marcia’s motif for how she understood her writing growth was framed as the absence of writing that had errors or that needed correction. This duality, or conceptualization of good writing, initially as the absence of making errors, appeared numerous times during the interview when she judged herself for being “a bad speller,” or having problems with “grammar,” or writing something that she labeled as “mumbo jumbo.” Understanding this pairing of correct versus incorrect writing was key to how Marcia’s Sophomore Composition teacher coached her by using an addition-by-subtraction approach.

Marcia’s teacher explained, “she was very adamant that she wasn’t a good writer… so for her it was teaching her how to get rid of the stuff that wasn’t necessary.” From her teacher’s perspective, this approach was one of the keys to Marcia’s writing growth. By using the color-
coding system, Marcia’s teacher was able to shift from “me highlighting her work to her highlighting her work,” and “once it finally clicked to her that… writing less wasn’t bad” her writing improved. Over time, Marcia’s teacher refined her writing instruction even further with specific structured writing activities. Her teacher pointed out that Marcia “liked having a very structured sentence,” so Marcia was taught that “every time she introduced a new character” in a composition, “she needed to use an appositive after that character’s name before she went on to her descriptive sentence.” Marcia’s teacher offered an example of this: “So Lennie, a tall big man with a heart of a, you know.” In essence, by offering Marcia “very tangible goals” in her writing, over time she was able to “put it all together.”

The key that illuminated how John understood his writing was to look closely at the motif of confident linearity that emerged from his writing. Throughout John’s interview he recalled the key strategies such as the “Quote Sandwich” and “Says/Does” that different teachers would show him that gave him relatively quick fixes that were specific and applied in order to improve his writing without having to get bogged down with the complexity and messiness of the writing process. This was something John eschewed. John’s straightforward approach meant that the key to teaching him was to provide him with formulas and structured coaching. John summarized his writing growth, “we learned like different strategies… and made it more advanced over time.” John’s teacher commented on John’s receptivity to individualized coaching: “you might tell him you should do some combining of sentences. Try using a semicolon. Then you teach him how to use that and lo and behold there’s semicolons in every paragraph.” His teacher added that John’s “the kind of kid… who will take… direct writing instruction and incorporate it rather quickly into his own writing and go with it.”
For Jackie, the central motif that emerged from the interviews that provided a key to how she understood her writing growth was the quest for true self. This appeared as multiple references to writing with different kinds of “tone” and being “creative” with the overall goal of seeing writing as another pathway to being “unique.” She referred to how this motivated her as a writer by adding, “I just like being unique. Like that’s the thing I push forward a lot.” Moreover, the fact that Jackie independently wrote her own dream and story diary demonstrated that her motivation for writing was both deeply personal and internally driven; she wrote to make sense of what was happening inside her mind. Her references to her own writing process mentioned this interior quality: “I tend to say the sentences in my mind,” and “throughout the day I’d just think of the story.” Jackie’s teacher noted, “I just remember Jackie liking” Markus Zuzak’s *The Book Thief* and confirmed that Jackie’s motivation to grow as a writer came from within: “her creative writing really developed and I think just because she had more confidence.” The purpose of having students imitate Zuzak’s writing using “write alikes” in class was to provide structure for students to learn to write with style by imitation. Jackie’s teacher emphasized, “internalizing” what skillful professional writers do. This was her instructional intent and the ultimate goal was to teach Jackie that with “practice… this spices up [your] writing a little bit.” Jackie’s teacher’s ability to match the creative writing as classroom practice with Jackie’s own creative quest to find her true self turned out to be the prefect approach that in Jackie’s words, “really opened me up.”

The central motif for Billy was patiently plugging away at his writing. Hard work and persistence were central to how he grew as a writer. He shared an early insight about how he understood what he needed to do to become a better writer, “I needed to write and to be good at it, so I started listening more and getting help when I needed it.” His story reflected gradual
improvement in his writing over time through patient acquisition, describing his learning process with insights reflecting an abiding belief in practice making perfect or, at least, pretty good: “The more you do it, you’re bound to get better at it at some point.” His eleventh-grade English teacher echoed Billy’s growth-through-effort approach to writing, mentioning multiple times that “he tries really hard” and “put in a lot of effort,” but that over time and with practice, “he took the formula and ran with it.” His teacher also noted that Billy had responded to “writing creatively” in eleventh grade and showed him that there are a “lot of different types of ways you can write” that move beyond a singular writing formula.

Rita’s writing growth was centered upon a responsiveness-to-coaching motif, characterized by teacher dependency and needing highly personalized feedback so that what she needed to do to improve her writing made sense to her. She revealed this mindset when commenting that she just tried “to follow what… the teacher is looking for.” Recounting how her tenth-grade English teacher figured her out as a writer, Rita’s writing growth flourished in response to personalized coaching that was “one on one.” While Rita benefited as a writer from seeing “a pattern” when using color coding and analyzing writing exemplars, she returned to the mantra that her teacher honored; the idea that “your writing is… your own.”

For her part as the writing coach, Rita’s tenth-grade English teacher noted that Rita was invested in her writing, in both following the structure and in “doing it well.” She also noted Rita’s “intellectual curiosity” and that she took “the time to go through things.” This epiphany for Rita’s teacher, that Rita had “something more to say” came from these individualized coaching and writing feedback sessions that helped Rita become “a better writer.”

Language acquisition shaped Andrea’s writing growth as a motif that emerged from the interviews. Multiple times she referenced the need to improve her vocabulary when writing and
recalled moments when changing one transitional phrase, “All in all” to a transitional word, “Overall” made her writing “much better.” This plug-and-play approach to writing underscored how language was constructed through a process of substitution. Andrea also identified color-coding her writing to see the constituent elements: topic sentence, transitions, details, and explanation, as beneficial and this, too, functioned as substitution, where elements fitted together “like a puzzle.”

According to Andrea’s History teacher, who taught her in tenth and eleventh grade, the key to her learning was that she “learned from her mistakes.” This again was evidence of language acquisition through substitution where Andrea would make a mistake and then, once the teacher identified it through feedback, Andrea would not make this mistake again. Andrea’s teacher characterized her as a writer who improved “one tool at a time” and added that if “you give her criticism on something… she improves on that.” Other language acquisition indicators Andrea’s teacher used to coach came from the fact that she was “responsive to feedback,” and Andrea’s improvement was immediate; “She would work on that the next time and I’d see change.”

Steve’s quest for personal freedom was the central motif that signaled how he framed his own growth as a writer. Reacting to what Steve referred to as “forced structure,” he noted that only upon entering high school did his writing become “a little bit more free” and that this continued over the next three years where he noted, “they just taught me how to… write more freely.” The personal aspect to this newfound freedom for Steve came in the form of inputting “your own voice and opinion in your writing.”

Having taught Steve two years in a row in tenth and eleventh grade, his English teacher picked up on Steve’s need for personal freedom as being something unique to his growth as a
developing writer. This teacher recounted Steve’s quest for personal freedom both in terms of playing with language, “he’s got this experimental kind of mindset” and in his desire to make his writing personalized and distinctive: “he absolutely wants a sense of poetry in his own academic, expository” writing. His teacher added, “every single mistake that I’ve called him on, he’s learned from” to emphasize the personal drive that made Steve such a unique writer. This final comment by a teacher about student learning in response to feedback touched upon the writing improvement process.

The fact that all students possessed a unique motif on their journey to become high-growth and high-achieving writers represented a final theme that emerged from the student stories.

Summary of Findings

Listening to and learning from the writing experiences of urban students who shared the stories of their exceptional growth as writers over time through in-depth interviews that were corroborated by other sources offered powerful insight into the sometimes challenging, at times rewarding process of writing development. In a research area where little is known about urban student writing success, several themes emerged from the rich description of these students’ stories that yielded further insight into the writing development of this unique cohort of high-achieving student writers.

Those student writers who needed a structured approach to writing valued writing methods that helped them break their writing into discrete tasks and specified a sequence of steps that was made clearer through the use of writing exemplars. Conversely, those student writers whose success helped them to learn that the best writing emphasized originality of thought,
connection, and style experienced structure as a limitation and hindrance to their writing ownership and subsequent achievement.

High school as turning point for student writing development emerged as a theme from the students’ stories. The high school classroom was the environment where students learned to write their best, becoming the writers they are today. There were two principle sub-themes that emerged from the analysis and these were the impact of the teacher on the student’s turning point or the impact of writing strategies as key to their high school turning point as developing writers. While these two sub-themes are related, some students attributed their turning point to one or the other.

A third theme that emerged from the student narratives centered upon student perceptions of their writing competence to complete a particular writing task well indicated by the presence of writing self-efficacy beliefs. All students told stories reflecting their individual judgments of their ability to employ new writing strategies, remain persistent despite difficulties during the writing process, and demonstrate validation of their writing success by earning high grades for their writing products as well as taking on new writing challenges.

A final theme that emerged from student stories in this study related to a motif, or recurring idea that illuminated what was at the center of individual student writing growth. This theme offered a glimpse into student writing growth situated within the powerful student-teacher interaction as a contextually rich shaper of writing success. In essence, students valued teachers who understood what was essential to the student as a developing writer. Discerning each student’s motif emerged as central to how teachers could effectively coach students toward a path of writing achievement.
Chapter 5: Study Implications

Despite the fact that many urban student writers struggled with writing, little was known about urban students who demonstrated high writing growth over time. Given the persistent writing achievement gap for urban, academically at-risk students (Ball, 2006), the inability of public education to make notable gains in urban student writing (NCES, 2012; Salahu-Din et al., 2008), and few research studies addressing this problem (Wiggan, 2014), there were a small group of urban students in the district studied who progressed every year to become high-growth writers during their public school education. The voices and experiences of these urban students provided an excellent entry point for examining writing development from a new perspective. It became important to further explore the factors that may have contributed to their success. Thus, the purpose of this narrative study was to understand the stories of eight urban public school students in the district studied who began as academically at-risk writers at the elementary level and who progressed to high-growth, high-achievement writers by high school. The sections that follow discuss implications for methodology, research, theory, and practice, and offer personal reflections and a conclusion.

Implications for Methodology

A narrative inquiry approach was chosen to explore this research puzzle, not as a clearly defined problem and search for a solution, but to use methods that looked differently at the entire topic of urban student writing development through rich data from student stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) emphasized the importance in narrative inquiry of being open to understanding lived experiences through wonderment and unconventional views. Narrative research offered an opportunity to set aside assumptions and to reflect on what was revealed through stories that represented an alternative way of thinking about experience. This
appeared especially apt for a unique examination of urban student writing development in the students’ own voices about their growth experiences.

What emerged from the student stories was the rich description of the students’ writing growth over time. Using a narrative approach engaged the urban students in this study to reflect deeply and in highly detailed ways about their own writing process and product. The fact that students were invited to tell two stories: the first about their writing growth during the first interview and the second about their writing of a particular product, added their lived experiences but in the form of a story to which their authentic voices were central. These firsthand accounts in the students’ own voices through this methodology emphasized the power of “a particular experience, in a particular setting, involving particular people” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 21). What occurred during these interviews was that the more students told their stories, the more comfortable they became, and the more detailed their writing growth was. Thus, focusing on the particular in this way led to greater understanding of writing development.

Another significant implication that came from using a narrative methodology employing Atkinson’s (2007) life story interview approach was the flexibility to modify it by using a “writing” life story approach, based on episodes, for this study instead. Atkinson reflected on the power of the life story interview, saying that the approach offered “a respect for individual storytellers and a regard for the subjective meaning carried within their stories” (p. 224). Talking about writing in a story form for the students in this study was difficult at first and it took students time to warm to the topic and to the inter-subjectivity of the interview format. As these urban student writers became more comfortable during the two interviews, what occurred was that they shared the nuances of their writing development in increasing detail. They also exhibited a level of trust with the researcher who helped them to articulate the complexities of
the writing process. In the end, the life story interview validated the students’ own experiences and offered a window of understanding that had never been studied in this way before.

A final implication regarding the use of narrative as a method of inquiry in this study was that meaning emerged over time. As the researcher restoried student interviews into a third-person narrative and incorporated students’ words and voices through the use of quotations, this retelling process revealed deeper elements, such as motifs, that emerged from students’ inner stories. The patterns that led to the appearance of these motifs were also imbued with meaning that revealed an entirely new level of uniqueness and perspective of individual writers. This offered the researcher new insights that may not have been visible had a different method been used.

**Implications of the Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

This study’s findings align with the literature review presented in Chapter 2. Social cognitive and sociocultural theory served as a framework for understanding the following four questions related to the stories of early at-risk, eventual high-achieving urban student writers:

1. **(5) How can writing process theory and the writing process model provide a background for understanding the stories of student writing development?**

2. **(6) What do studies of classroom writing practice reveal about the social context for student writing growth?**

3. **(7) How can studies of writing development theories illuminate our understanding of student writing growth?**

4. **(8) What does the research about urban student learning identify as key factors that promote writing development?**
Writing process theory and model. Based on the findings of this study, student participants reported having more skills-based writing instruction rather than the simpler three-stage writing process approach involving prewriting, writing, and revision/editing mentioned as a common classroom writing practice in the research (Graham & Sandmel, 2011). These skill-based writing tasks, known from sociocultural writing theory as procedural facilitators (Englert et al., 2008), were also a classroom writing practice unique to the school district in this study as referenced in the Fitch Public Schools Writing Program Outline document. The writing strategy referenced by all eight students was color-coding; five of the eight students reported this strategy as a benefit to their writing.

In addition, all students talked about their writing process in terms of stages that were consistent with various stage models of writing development examined in the literature review (Rohman & Wlecke, 1964; Emig, 1971, Flower & Hayes, 1981), though it was evident that the pre-writing or planning stage of the writing process model was not fully used. Instead, students told stories of relying on simpler planning approaches, such as identifying their thesis statement and three supporting points, before moving directly into the writing stage. Teachers that students identified in this study as having knowledge of the student’s writing growth, recalled classroom instructional practices to help students work through the various stages of the writing process through the use of writing scaffolds and exemplars, constructive feedback and encouragement.

Classroom writing practice. Graham and Perin (2007) theorized that high school students would benefit from classroom writing practices that helped them to plan, revise, and edit their compositions more effectively. These researchers also suggested that students would benefit from writing in collaborative groups, which is consistent with both social cognitive and
sociocultural theories of writing. However, all students in this study told stories of writing as a solitary activity with only their teacher or, for a few, a parent providing feedback.

Further, students in this study recounted a variety of classroom writing practices that helped them improve their writing. The implications of this experience were that these urban students at this particular district had teachers who asked them to do a range of low-, medium-, and high-stakes writing tasks that were far better than the writing without composing tasks reported in various national studies of classroom writing practice (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Graham et al., 2014; Kiuhara et al., 2013).

Writing development theories. The two writing development theories that framed this study: social cognitive and sociocultural theories of writing were both present in student stories of their writing development and achievement. Social cognitive theory emphasized internal processing in a social milieu as the key to writing development (Bandura, 1986, 1997). This was evident from the findings of this study through the presence of self-efficacy beliefs. Some students referred to being able to overcome writing challenges through persistence. Others noted a high degree of confidence when dealing with a known writing task and, when asked, identified the roots of this confidence as coming from prior successful accomplishments. When discussing their writing process in relation to a specific paper that they shared at the second interview, students exhibited a degree of self-regulation, or the ability to write independently, that was consistent with self-efficacy research (Pajares, 2003).

Per the tenets of sociocultural theory, student stories also reflected the impact of the cultural context on their writing development (Englert et al., 2008). All students talked about an experience where they learned an external structure or scaffold that benefited their writing development. They attributed their writing growth to that mastery of this structure that came to
them from their teacher. Many students still shared stories of relying on these external structures and scaffolds to continue their writing growth, which made them teacher dependent, a function of participatory apprenticeship (Prior, 2008). The three students who eschewed structures they perceived to be limiting, when asked to specify further, rejected only those structures that they had outgrown. Thus, it appeared they were receptive to other more complex structures provided these did not in any way limit their acquisition of voice and tone.

Related urban student studies. While there were three culturally-diverse students in this study, only one talked briefly about language acquisition as having an impact on her writing development process. The teacher interviewed to talk about this student’s writing growth reflected a stage model of support, consistent with language acquisition, where the teacher separated complex writing outcomes into more doable steps. Related to this level of customized support, all student stories in this study affirmed the role of caring teachers as key to their writing success (Garrett et al., 2010). This finding was supported by the positive, nurturing comments from teachers that students named as being able to talk about their writing development in detail and offer a window into the coaching process.

All study participants shared a strong desire for academic achievement and, while this was not motivated by threats of violence or negative stereotyping as researchers have found in other urban contexts, the desire for academic success represented a source of resilience for them when dealing with writing challenges (Robers, Zhang, & Truman, 2012; Sampson, 2012; McGee, 2013). Many comments revealed pride in their accomplishments as writers and in their ability to overcome the next academic hurdle. This study affirmed the notion that urban students can achieve academic success if given the right learning context, supportive instruction, and control over their own motivation, actions, and environment.
Implications for Research

Student interviewees talked about their writing development from elementary school to high school. Through analysis of student and teacher interview transcriptions, the following themes emerged through student-participants’ stories. Figure 3 represents these themes in relation to the writing development continuum.

Figure 3. Themes Along a Writing Development Continuum from Urban Student Writing Stories

The following outlined in Figure 3 are discussed below.

**Recalled writing structure.** The first theme to emerge from student stories along the writing development continuum related to teacher direction to follow particular writing structures in middle school. All eight student participants recalled the impact of various writing
structures, positive or negative, when recounting their writing development experiences. There were two sub-themes present in this overall theme. While five of the student writers found these structures, such as color-coding, Quote Sandwich, or developing a thesis statement with three supporting points to be very important in significantly improving their writing, the other three students shared that they had outgrown these middle school structures and that these structures in fact inhibited them from acquiring their own authentic voice in their writing. The key to writing structure for all students is that whether the student relied upon it to develop as a writer or outgrew it, all students relied upon old or new structures to help them continue to develop as writers.

High school as turning point. A second theme that emerged along the writing development continuum occurred when student participants arrived in high school. All students identified high school as the learning environment where their writing growth increased the most. All eight students attributed what was asked of them and what they learned in high school as leading to the turning point, or key growth moment, in their writing development when they determined that the writing they had done before high school was not as good as the writing they produced sometime during the first few years of high school.

Two sub-themes arose within this larger theme. Four students attributed their high school turning point as writers to the influence of a particular high school teacher. For these students, it was a teacher who was the key to this turning point, offering support and direction that helped shape them into better writers. These students held their teachers in high regard and shared stories of trust and support. They defined the turning point in their writing development as teacher-centered.
The other sub-theme that emerged from four different students who talked about high school as the turning point in their writing growth related to a particular writing strategy that they learned. These students were able to identify a particular strategy or skill that they learned in high school that made it a turning point moment. As a result of what these students had learned, they shared stories of writing with greater depth, thoughtfulness, or integration. They understood their writing development to be the result of what they had learned.

**The presence of self-efficacy beliefs.** A third theme that appeared next along the writing growth continuum was the presence of self-efficacy beliefs among all student writers in this study. Having moved beyond their high school turning point, these writers conveyed confidence in their writing ability. These self-efficacy beliefs originated from successful writing outcomes on prior writing tasks, expressed through the validation of a high grade on a writing assignment. Some students talked about how well they wrote in comparison to their peers. All students shared stories that conveyed their ability to handle new writing strategies and to overcome writing challenges with persistence. In addition, all students described in detail a writing task that they had successfully accomplished and shared elements in this story about not only their mastery but their persistence when dealing with the complexities of the writing process or, for some, when dealing with a new, more challenging writing task.

**Motif as illuminator of writing growth.** The last theme that reflects the final stage of the writing development continuum was based on the notion that all student writers were unique in terms of how they perceived their own writing growth. The discovery that all student writers had a central motif that captured the essence of their writing growth affirmed the uniqueness of every individual student. Therefore, to understand student writing growth two conditions needed to be met. The first was that the teacher took the time to correctly determine how a particular student
understood his or her own writing development. The second condition was that the teacher coached the student based on the student’s particular understanding. This was more profound than knowing whether a student would benefit from having structure or learning a new strategy. In fact, it was the key to the student’s writing growth; without this knowledge, the student would have been unable to become a high achieving writer. The stories of student writers revealed this motif as that which illuminated their writing growth. The key being that student stories affirmed that each student was unique as a learner and, therefore, learned differently and that the teacher had to listen to and learn from the student first in order for writing growth to occur.

Implications for Theory

Some of the themes identified in this study suggested that key elements of high-growth writing are a combination of students mastering external writing structures while developing internal self-efficacy beliefs. Considered together, these external and internal factors offered a more comprehensive view of the writing development process.

Davidson (2010) and Graham and Harris (2013) recommended merging writing development theories that combined the influence of external context through cultural practice and the processing of internal constructs such as self-efficacy to fully understand the dynamic and multifaceted writing growth process. The findings of this study into the stories of early at risk, eventual high-growth urban student writers and their writing development support this recommendation.
Figure 4 provides a schematic representation for how social agents, artifacts, and constructs from social cognitive theory and sociocultural theory offered a framework for understanding urban student writing development.

![Diagram of social agents, artifacts, and constructs within social cognitive and sociocultural theories of writing development.](image)

*Figure 4: Social Agents, Artifacts, and Constructs within Social Cognitive and Sociocultural Theories of Writing Development (© O’Toole, 2017)*

From a writing development framework, all student stories indicated influences by a number of concurrent factors that fall anywhere along the external influence-internal processing continuum. At the blue center was the student writer, delineated within the solid line of the innermost circle that represented the student writer’s cognition. At the center of this circle was the core construct of writing self-efficacy from social cognitive theory, with self-efficacy beliefs influencing the constructs of persistence, motivation, confidence, and self-regulation (Pajares &
Valiante, 2008). According to social cognitive theory, these constructs represented the nexus of writing growth that came from the student’s inner processing as he or she engaged in the writing task (Hidi & Boscolo, 2008). The presence of self-efficacy beliefs and how students talked about the complexities of the writing process in this study was evident.

The blue-to-red middle circle, demarcated by that which falls between the dotted line and the solid line, signified the immediate classroom learning environment where writing is formally taught and writing tasks are assigned. This area included the learning tools and methods used in writing instruction that were necessary for writing development to occur.

Both social cognitive theory and sociocultural theory acknowledged that the writing development process was a social activity and that the journey from beginner to skilled writer was influenced by the classroom context wherein students were formally taught to write and where writing was an expectation to demonstrate learning (Graham & Harris, 2013).

All the students recalled teacher instructional practices as having a significant influence on their writing development. Students reported that they grew the most as writers as a result of their classroom coaching. It should be noted that self-efficacy was important for social cognitive theory because self-efficacy required external feedback on progress toward the goal along with modeling for students to make writing gains (Schunk, 2003). Moreover, social and cultural interactions functioned as a guide to assist student writers to develop stronger writing self-efficacy beliefs (Pajares, 2003).

From the perspective of social cognitive theory, student self-efficacy beliefs were mediated by cultural context (Hidi & Boscolo, 2008). A supportive classroom environment that offered constructive feedback particular to a student and writing task, the use of writing models helped students improve their writing performance, and self-regulated strategy training nurtured
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student beliefs about their writing and, in turn, helped increase self-efficacy (Bruning & Horn, 2000; Graham & Harris, 1989; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997).

From the perspective of sociocultural theory, the classroom milieu was the concrete social space where writing as an activity was situated and where the writing development process was culturally mediated (Prior, 2008). This was where students were given the external tools and practices to facilitate their writing development. The influence of the teacher as expert and the student as a learning novice also occurred within this critical space and helped to facilitate writing growth.

Finally, the outer circle, shown as pink to red, included the broader cultural context for sociocultural theorists that impacted student writing in the classroom. This sphere contained the cultural artifacts, institutions, and individuals that represented the broader context for writing to occur and thus exerted an influence on classroom learning. From this theoretical vantage, writing development was a social action and was always situated within the wider networks of cultural activity (Prior, 2008). All student stories mentioned the impact of statewide testing on their writing development process. The cultural roots of such annual testing originated from education reform laws and the state education agencies charged with measuring student writing. The key point in this schema was that cultural influences and interactions provided the important context for the process of writing development and that student writers developed an internal socialization that was then personalized into the culture (Vygotsky, 1987).

These two theoretical approaches, rooted in social constructivist conceptualizations of writing development, offered the broadest foundation for understanding the stories of how early at-risk urban students developed into high-growth writers. Each theory, Social Cognitive and Sociocultural, was appropriate for this narrative research design because there existed an
apparent gap between what was known about at-risk, urban student writing development and the concomitant need to listen to and learn from the stories of those very students who have shown remarkable growth as writers over time (Ball, 2008). In light of a dearth of research on these select students who beat the odds as writers, a narrative approach began with wonder in response to a “research puzzle” that had yet to be understood (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Likewise, the research question was not a result of a clearly defined problem and search for a solution (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Instead, this narrative study represented a chance to search again into writing development and theory using methods that looked differently at the entire topic. Therefore, the research question was one that encouraged openness to experience, not as a means to an end, but as a way of knowing more about writing development from the authentic stories of successful urban student writers. Given that the focus for this study was on exploring writing development over time, each of these theories respectively grounded the problem of practice in the words of Bruner “from the outside in as well as from the inside out” (Bruner, 1964, p. 1).

Implications for Practice

**Leveraging the motif as the key to each writer’s uniqueness.** The biggest discovery to emerge from the urban student stories that had implications on writing instruction was the notion that no two writers were alike. All the student writers in this study were unique in how they conceptualized their own writing growth. Further, these student stories each centered upon a different recurring motif, provided critical information for writing teachers to understand how each student understands his or her own writing development process, for all eight students understood the process differently.

Based on the finding that each writer had a unique motif, a recommendation for practice is for writing teachers to focus first on determining how individual student writers understand
their own writing development. This action needs to be followed by the teacher customizing the writing instructional strategies to the particular needs of each student writer. While this would revolutionize writing instruction in most urban public school districts, this process would require trial and error to match the best writing strategy with what will optimize the student writer’s development. However, it is first necessary to listen to the student writers.

This would require several up-front, one-on-one writing conferences, followed by instructional approaches customized to the particular needs of a given student writer. This approach is not to be confused with more traditional writing conferences conducted after a student writes in order to provide customized feedback and encouragement as students struggle through the challenging steps of the writing process.

Typical practice relative to coaching writers is based on giving a common writing assessment first, scoring it, diagnosing the intervention or student need based on these results, and then determining the instruction necessary to help students increase their writing performance on one very specific writing task. Not knowing that a student would respond poorly to a highly structured, skills-based instructional approach is not considered. Instead, these instructional approaches require students to comply with the model and do what they are told. The irony here is that this is how most students in this study characterized their experience at the elementary level.

At the administrative level, the implications for practice, based on this finding, have the potential to be profound for urban writing instruction. To wit, commonly used, pre-set writing instructional approaches such as the writing process approach either with or without specific skills instruction are often applied as a pre-set, one-way method for helping student writers with a range of backgrounds and abilities (Sharp, 2016). The process for determining which student
writer received which instruction often depended upon the philosophy governing local writing curricula (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2008). Therefore, the likelihood that a student writer was taught a method that was consistent with how the student understands his or her writing development was not always consistent (Davidson, 2010).

The way current writing instructional practice takes place, students are coached using a particular method, the most common being the process writing approach (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2008). This approach, however, has its problems as a writing instructional practice. First, research suggests that the writing process approach, though the dominant instructional approach in the United States today, is known for its uneven implementation (Dyson & Freedman, 2003). These researchers pointed out that it is “difficult to evaluate the degree to which the [writing process] approach… as a whole has improved student writing” in the United States (p. 976). Organizations like the National Writing Project have since warned against the reliance on a single formula to teach writing (Friedrich & LeMahieu, 2004).

Given these issues with “the process pedagogy” at the school and district leadership level, the findings from this study suggest that a pre-conference with the student whose singular aim was understanding more fully how the student talked about his or her own writing growth and process may be a beneficial starting point to determine follow-up instructional approaches. Typically, during the writing process approach, the conference, if there was one, took place after the student had written something and was then given particular feedback relative to what needed to be improved. Further, the writing teacher often framed this conference as customized feedback that the student needed to follow based upon whatever writing prescription was given (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2008). Research indicated that these writing prescriptions can be surprisingly inconsistent and that this can lead to teachers following a “standardized linear model
of the writing process” closed to innovative writing beliefs and practices (Fullan, 1982; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2008).

The student stories in this present study revealed the importance of taking time, before a writing instructional method was employed, to understand how the student writer understood his or her writing growth and process. This level of engaging the student in what the student had learned, benefitted from, and felt limited by became the guiding process for whatever instructional intervention was to follow. The key difference being that in following this approach, the writing teacher had been trained to listen closely for keys regarding how the student learned, customized to writing. While this approach would require writing teachers and curriculum coordinators to adjust their own pre-conceived instructional practices, the simple focus on listening to urban students could have a significant impact on the ability of the writing teacher to gain the student’s openness toward future coaching.

At the state education policy level, a recommendation to support the finding that all writers are unique would be to offer multiple writing prompts on annual or periodic statewide assessments. While one student writer in this study benefited from applying color-coding as an approach to writing a statewide composition, other students likely would have benefited had the writing prompt invited them to demonstrate greater use of voice and tone. Students would benefit greatly from being allowed to make a choice between writing prompts that allowed them to demonstrate the different skills that they possess as writers.

**Promoting external structure and internal self-efficacy.** Based on the finding that urban student writers benefited from a combination of external and internal supports, a recommendation for practice for writing teachers is to apply a more comprehensive view toward the students who need greater or lesser degrees of structure. By combining instructional
approaches that considered the student’s inner and outer worlds together, nurturing both context and cognition, the writing teacher may be better able to enhance student writing development. In this way, the teacher is specifically trained to intermix “skills, strategies, knowledge, and motivation” as a more fully developed approach to writing instruction (Graham, 2006, p. 458).

Another critical element to this combined approach to writing instruction was the classroom learning space. This space represented the nexus of where writing instruction is socially mediated for both social cognitive and sociocultural perspectives. Therefore, the classroom can serve as a fulcrum to leverage student writing growth by attending to the influence of both context and cognition.

These two domains emerged in this study as the variety of external structures that more than half of the students perceived as being helpful to their writing development. The other domain being self-efficacy, the presence of which was an indicator in this study of high-growth writing. For the three students who felt that structure inhibited their writing development because they had outgrown these classroom supports, the writing teacher, framing student writing development through these combined theories, had options to shift the focus on to supporting the mental and affective processes of writing development (Graham & Harris, 2013). Better still, given the feedback from these three student’s teachers in this study, they offered particular student writers coaching that integrated less confining writing scaffolds, such as Says/Does and, in another case, free writes, while providing feedback aimed at supporting student self-efficacy beliefs.

For example, Steve’s Advanced Placement English teacher noted that Steve “is an insightful kid… who will take risks in his own writing.” This teacher also picked up on the fact that Steve had outgrown the five-paragraph essay, so the teacher’s reply was, “I don’t want you
to do a five-paragraph essay.” This then led to a discussion about having a thesis statement come at the end of a multi-paragraph essay, known among writing teachers as the inverted model.

Shifting to the internal processing level, the teacher followed this discussion of a new writing structure with coaching aimed at supporting Steve’s self-efficacy beliefs. Putting structure aside, Steve’s teacher was able to offer his student personalized feedback: “another set of eyes, another ear for his language,” along with encouragement, adding, “I think I get what you’re going for.” This was a glimpse into what instructional writing support looked like when student writing development was considered through these two theoretical lenses combined.

For administrators who oversee writing curriculum and professional development for teachers, customizing writing teacher training so that it is based on students’ inner and outer worlds represents a seismic shift away from current practice. Currently, the greatest emphasis on writing curriculum is on shaping students from the outside through skills instruction and acquisition. What has remained overlooked is student self-efficacy.

Teachers typically served as judge, jury, and hangman for urban student writers. By measuring students’ writing success by their acquisition of particular skills-based approaches, teachers have shifted student mindsets away from inner processing and toward mastering a number of external skills. Student writing growth was then measured against the ability to successfully perform these discrete skills in a written response.

These teachers need to be retrained in various ways to promote self-efficacy beliefs in urban student writers. This can be an area where administrators can refocus school and district writing instruction on instructional strategies that support self-efficacy beliefs. Offering personalized feedback, incorporating writing exemplars, and promoting student risk-taking based
on past writing successes are the kinds of writing instructional strategies necessary to increase student self-efficacy beliefs (Schunk, 2003).

**High school as the key growth setting for developing urban writers.** Based on the finding that high school was the key growth setting for all student writers in this study, a final implication for practice that emerged from the student stories was that the writing instruction at this level offered new, more expansive writing strategies and supports. Research supports the finding that developmentally high school was the context where students matured as writers (Shanahan, 2008). Studies have also shown that high school students who learned writing instruction that was embedded into reading curricula and was similar to writing instruction from other content areas benefitted from this cross-curricular support (Shanahan, 2004).

At the student level, it was prominent in this study that the motivation for high school writers to improve their writing came, in part, from statewide testing programs and the impact of these tests targeted toward high school writing curricula. Besides practicing test-simulated writing tasks, writing scaffolds such as color-coding were mentioned positively in many student-participants’ stories. In addition, for urban student writers, high school coincided with the added pressure of high-stakes testing as a graduation requirement in many states (Applebee & Langer, 2011).

The reach of these writing assessments based on legislative mandates to measure public school student writing skills has had a significant impact on student writing development. The public school system of writing, especially at the urban level, is driven by these common assessments. There are those that set the standard by articulating various writing performance levels from the state. There are legions of in-school and in-district formative writing assessments modeled upon state writing tasks. Then there are, for advanced writers, later in their
high school career, Advanced Placement tests that likewise generate targeted writing instructional practice of more sophisticated writing task aimed at helping students to succeed at these very challenging writing assessments.

Moreover, after two in-depth interviews with eight different student-participants about their writing process and product, it was evident just how challenging and complex the task of writing remained for students. All students in this study were able to answer the many questions, down to minute details, about their writing development and process. Everything was open for discussion: When they wrote? Where they wrote? Was music or television on or not? Were there other people in the room with them? What day did they write? What time of night did they write? How many days did they give themselves before a paper was due to begin the writing process? To each of these questions students had immediate and definitive answers. By eleventh grade, with the typical time constraints of a busy urban high school, students could talk about what works for them during the pre-writing, composing, and revising process.

In this study, students recounted that their high school teachers pivoted their instruction, most often over the course of ninth grade, and made these new and higher expectations explicit with students. In the case of one student-participant, John, who learned and reported being quite comfortable with the Quote Sandwich scaffold he learned in middle school, John’s high school English teacher replaced this scaffold with the more complex and nuanced Says/Does scaffold. This scaffold came from the teacher’s professional development, specifically, Advanced Placement training. The findings from this study supported the approach that student writers may have benefitted if all high school writing teachers, including those from other, related content areas, such as history, were trained in the use of more complex student scaffolds.
For school and district administrators, a case can be made based on the findings of this study to offer vertical professional development between high school and middle school writing teachers. When one student was asked whether she could have learned multiple meanings in a given text in middle school, she pointed out that middle school teachers “made it so clear that the book is just saying this, like there’s no implication of anything else behind it, which is exactly what it’s not now.” Based on this student’s experience, having high school teachers make explicit the kinds of strategies they used to bridge student writers from middle school with middle school teachers may help to strengthen middle school writing instruction.

Finally, among the eight student-participants, all selected based upon the same criteria, there were three student writers who were clearly demonstrably higher-awareness writers than the other five students in this study. Confirming again the phenomenon that all writers are unique, the fact that all eight students were identified as high-growth based on their statewide assessment writing results, there remained clear differences between students. The key difference being that three of the eight student writers had a deeper level of writing awareness. They referred more often to knowing the importance of an author’s purpose, rhetorical analysis, and how tone and voice contribute to style. They understood writing to be a magic carpet that could take them to destinations unknown. School and district administrators along with teachers must be trained to help students through this transition for students who shared similar writing achievements while demonstrating such profoundly different understandings of their writing growth.

**Study Limitations**

While narrative inquiry revealed rich, descriptive data to learn more about urban student experiences as high-growth writers over time, the findings of this study were limited to particular
students telling particular stories representative of a particular public high school. The fact that this study took place in a public school district that had implemented a color-coding scaffold established some instructional consistency from elementary to middle to high school that was unique to this learning culture. In addition, given that students in this study were selected for being consistently enrolled in the school district for seven years meant that they did not experience the learning disruptions and varied instructional approaches more typical of urban writing classrooms. However, it should be noted that intention of generalizability to control “treatments and manipulation of variables and randomization,” was not the aim of narrative inquiry that seeks instead to understand “the complexity of the individual, local, and particular” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 30). Therefore, the findings cannot lead to claims about the generalizability of this study.

A second limitation of this study had to do with the recollections of the student-participants. Asking eleventh-grade students to recall their writing development in elementary school was especially challenging for many of the students in this study. This was contrasted by the fact that they had much more detailed comments to say about their current and more recent growth, especially what they had learned since coming to Fitch High School over the past three years. The impact this had on the research is that student recollections of their elementary writing experiences were often reduced to memories related to completing what they were instructed to do. There was also the very real possibility that students judged their elementary writing—where they were just learning how to write—with a critical eye from the vantage of their high school experiences and understanding. The degree to which these hindsight judgments may have influenced student recollections about their earlier writing may have caused students to
confuse developmental learning with less effective elementary level writing instructional practices.

My experience in the school was a final limitation of this study. Having attempted to improve urban student writing achievement in the district where this study took place, there was the possibility of researcher bias. While attempts were made to ensure trustworthiness through member checking and triangulation, the role of the researcher as a co-participant in this study may have influenced student responses, positively or negatively, to particular questions. For example, the student who joked about color-coding and said, “get rid of highlighters” probably knew that I had some role in the use of color-coding as an instructional strategy. Though we never discussed in detail my connection to this particular strategy, it may have influenced my questions about color-coding as well as his response. While narrative inquiry focused on the particulars of time, place, and social context in order to understand more deeply student stories of lived experiences, this study attempted to remain faithful to this aim.

**Future Research**

It is hoped that the findings from this study will encourage future research into urban student writing and high growth in other urban high school settings. While there have been few research studies that captured student lived experiences through their narratives of writing process and product, it would be beneficial to add further positive outlier studies that countered the dominant research focus on why urban students struggled to become high-growth writers.

A second direction for future research would be to conduct a narrative study where, during the second interview, students told the story of how they wrote a particular writing piece in response to a common writing task. The original plan for this research was to have students tell the story of their tenth-grade statewide composition during their second interview. However,
the researcher was unable to secure district permission to obtain parental consent to access these compositions. Given that student stories coming from these second interviews explored the often highly detailed steps necessary to create a final writing product, a common writing task would have provided additional consistency to student narratives. This approach warrants future research consideration, especially when discussing self-efficacy beliefs that differ based on differences in writing tasks (Pajares, 2003).

A third direction for future research would be to conduct similar studies of different student populations, including schools with high-growth writing students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, greater ethnic and racial diversity, special education students and English language learners. This would be an opportunity to explore and expand the findings with a broader variety of students who have experienced similar journeys in order to deepen our understanding of the key features that influenced their writing development along the way.

Additional recommendations for future research included:

• exploring the connections between student stories and teacher stories about writing in urban educational settings

• using a mixed methods approach that compares urban student writing stories to quantitative data on self-efficacy beliefs

• conducting a longitudinal study that gathers the same urban student writer stories at high school and later from the college level

• expanding the study to include more urban student writers from a variety of different urban public high schools.
Personal Reflection

It certainly was a humbling yet eye-opening experience after working with urban students for the past fifteen years to consider how listening to and learning from student voices was not a part of my overall effort to promote writing development as a means to improve student writing. In fact, if anything, I frequently promoted and modeled skills-based approaches, such as our color-coding approach, to a number of urban school districts in order to override what I perceived to be an absence of structure and thus a fixable deficit in student writing instruction. The impact of color-coding, both positively and negatively, was referenced by different students during this study. My intent was to obtain instructional fidelity in whatever district I was helping to spread this promising scaffold that had been shown data-wise to be a benefit to student writers.

It was humbling to discover that some students in this study had outgrown the color-coding scaffold and that they needed an entirely new set of structures along with the encouragement to think on their own to help them continue developing as writers. The fact that some writers benefited while others did not helped me to understand that the one-size-fits-all approach to writing instruction, even if it worked for some student writers, certainly had its drawbacks. This reflection helped me to offer a final takeaway to conclude this study.

Conclusion

Urban students never really had a voice when it came to their writing; there was almost always someone else talking for them in public education. These were mostly the sometimes critical, other times supportive voices and perspectives of teachers, administrators, and researchers. Listening to urban student voices to learn more about writing development found its richness in the fact that the student’s actual voices were used. By placing student voices at the
center of this study, it represented one small step in looking anew at the writing development for a special population who were frequently the subject of studies, but who often had no voice. May we continue to listen to and learn from the voices of urban students.
References


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Appendix A

Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Investigator Name: Principal Investigator—Tova Sanders, Student Researcher--Thomas O’Toole
Title of Project: Listening to and Learning from Stories of Early At-Risk, Eventual High-Achieving Urban Student Writers

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting your child to take part in a research study on writing growth. This consent form will tell you about the study. You and your child do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you and your child decide to participate, the researcher will answer any further question you may have and will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
Your child is being recruited for this study because he or she is a student who has shown high growth as a student writer. For the purposes of this study, high growth is based on students who scored Needs Improvement on the Grade 4 English Language Arts Test in 2009 and who have gone on to score Advanced on the Grade 10 ELA Test in 2015.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to understand how high-achieving urban student writers make sense of their writing growth.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to let your child take part in this study, we will ask you to sign this consent form. This form indicates your consent to a) have a _______ Public Schools administrator review your child’s 2009 Grade and 2015 Grade 10 English Language Arts Test results to determine if he or she meets the criteria for selection to this study, and b) if your child does meet these criteria for writing growth, permission to interview your child as a participant in this study. Once this consent form is signed and returned, the researcher will contact you to let you know whether your child has been selected to participate in this study. If your child is selected to participate, the researcher will meet with your child at _______ High School to explain the research study and to ask for your child’s consent to participate in the research study by agreeing to talk about his or her writing growth in two 45-60 minute interviews at _______ High School during or after the school day.

In addition, your child will be asked to bring a copy of a recent writing assignment to the second interview to talk about his or her writing in greater detail. The researcher and a Fitch High School administrator or teacher will be present at all times during your child’s two interviews. Your child’s interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed and your child’s identity will be confidential. The writing sample will be used as data for the research study, but all identifying information on the writing sample will be removed. Any quotations that are used in this study...
will be anonymous. You and your child will also be given a copy of the final report of the findings from the study.

Students will also be told that they will be asked to identify a teacher who helped them become a successful writer and that the researcher will interview this teacher and that the student’s identity will be revealed to the teacher but will remain confidential to everyone else. Students will be told that the teacher will agree to keep the student’s identity confidential.

_______ High School administrators will alternate being a witness during all interviews with students.

The following is a sample schedule of your child’s participation in this research study:

- Return signed parent/guardian consent form and meet with student participants to obtain student consent to participate in this research study – March/April/May 2016
- Participate in Interviews – two 45-60 minutes (Conference Rm.) March/April/May 2016
- Transcripts of interviews will be shown to the student to check for any errors. This will be done without a formal meeting. – March/April/May 2016

**Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?**

Your child will be interviewed at _______ High School in a conference room during or after the school day. The two formal interviews will take no more than 60 minutes. The meeting in the same location as the interview to review the interview transcript will take no more than 20 minutes. By July 2017, you and your child will receive a copy of the final study by mail.

Here are sample questions that will be used in the interview:

1. Tell me about yourself as a writer.
2. Describe a time when you learned something that helped you as a writer.
3. Talk about an important person when you were in either elementary school, middle school, or high school who helped you as a writer. Were there others who helped you that you can talk about?
4. Tell a story about what you actually do when you write.
5. What advice can you give to students interested in learning how to write better?

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

The purpose of this research study is to understand your child’s writing growth in the _______ Public Schools. Your child has been identified as an urban student who has shown very high writing growth and will be asked to talk about what he or she has learned about writing. Should your child for any reason become uncomfortable during the interview, he or she can stop at any time without question. We do not expect that your child will become uncomfortable talking about his or her writing growth, but should your child for any reason want to stop the interview we will do so without question. A _______ High School administrator or teacher will be present in all meetings with your child.
Will I benefit by being in this research?
There is no direct benefit for your child taking part in the study; however, your child may have an opportunity to contribute to the understanding of how high-achieving urban students make sense of their own writing growth. There are only a small number of research articles about such a process and this study and your child’s experiences will provide important information for educators to understand how to help students to become successful writers.

Who will see the information about me?
Your child’s identity as a participant in this study will not be known except to the researcher and the teacher who your child identifies as helping him or her to become a successful writer. The teacher who your child identifies will keep your child’s identity confidential. In this study, your child will be assigned a pseudonym or code name to protect his or her identity and the researcher will be the only person who has access to the code and the information both electronic and hardcopy interview transcripts. What your child says may be used directly in this study to demonstrate a particular theme that has become important to understanding your child’s experience. No reports or publications will use information that can identify your child in any way.

A limit to confidentiality is if your child reports an experience of child abuse, which then requires the researcher by law (51A) to report instances of child abuse to the school and local law enforcement authorities. In addition, Northeastern University may provide official oversight or monitoring of this research.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
We do not anticipate any harm to your child from participating in this research.

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of your child’s participation in this research.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your child’s participation is completely voluntary. Your child does not have to participate if you or your child do not want to. Even if your child begins the study, your child may stop at any time.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
Tova O. Sanders, Ed.D., Mahwah, Principal Investigator, Northeastern University.
Thomas O’Toole, Student Researcher

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your child’s rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
For full participation in this study, you will receive a gift card of $20.
Will it cost me anything to participate?
There are no costs to participate in this study.

Is there anything else I need to know?
If your child is under 18 years of age he or she will be required to have written permission from his or her parent or guardian.

Please sign, detach, and return this to the researcher.

I agree to have my child take part in this research.

____________________________________  ______________________
Signature of person [parent/guardian] agreeing to Date
 take part in this study

____________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________  ______________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the Date
 participant above and obtained consent

____________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix B

Interview Protocols

Interview 1: Focused Writing History and Details of the Experience

Potential question starters (there will be others and some should be eliminated based on your topic - these are simply suggestions for wording and content):

Introduction to students:

You know my interest is in learning about how writing development happens over time. Help me to understand more about you as a writer.

6. Tell me about yourself as a writer.
7. Talk me the story of how you think you grew as a writer since elementary school.
8. What do you remember most about your writing in elementary school? What about middle school?
9. Describe a time when you learned something that helped you as a writer.
10. Talk about an important person when you were in either elementary school, middle school, or high school who helped you as a writer. Were there others who helped you that you can talk about?
11. What are the kinds of things did you write about?
12. What is the most difficult part of writing? How do you deal with it?
13. What comes the easiest when you write?
14. Describe in as much detail as you can a time when you had writing success.

Interview 2: Reflecting on the Meaning

The second interview will ask further questions about individuals or occurrences that had a major impact on your writing development, process, and product. Additional probing and clarifying questions will be asked.

1. Tell me your thoughts about this writing.
2. How would you compare this to other writing that you have done?
3. Tell a story about what you actually do when you write.
4. What do you think of yourself as a writer now?
5. When you write, you are like a…? As you revise, you become like a…?
6. How do you know when you are done with something you are writing?
7. What advice can you give to teachers to help other students become better writers?
8. What advice can you give to students interested in learning how to write better?
Appendix C

Structural Coding Snapshot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY</th>
<th>Andrea</th>
<th>Jackie</th>
<th>Judy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AB = ABSTRACT</td>
<td>I feel like it has been... it was (Grade 9 English teacher). OR</td>
<td>I think it was just like in Ms. Benson’s class (grade 9 English), OR</td>
<td>I think both (my grade 9 and 10 English teachers), just sort of. OR/EV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OR = ORIENTATION</td>
<td>Yeah. I feel like it was her. EV</td>
<td>it was like, okay, every morning OR</td>
<td>Like I would have all these concepts CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA = COMPLICATING ACTION</td>
<td>Because in her class we learned a lot of vocabulary. CA</td>
<td>we’re going to have free writes CA</td>
<td>out loud like: talking through it, CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EV = EVALUATION</td>
<td>And she she always told us CA</td>
<td>and it’s just like, because people would get crazy ideas CA</td>
<td>like they would be like, yeah, this is great EV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RE = RESOLUTION</td>
<td>that if you wanted to sound nicer CA</td>
<td>and that like influenced me to have crazier ideas. CA</td>
<td>because before my analysis would be EV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO = CODA</td>
<td>you should like have more CA</td>
<td>So then the more crazy, you like, CA</td>
<td>just be a summary of the quote EV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>like you should better your vocabulary. CA</td>
<td>it’s like competition in a way, EV</td>
<td>So they (grade 9 and 10 English teachers) sort of put my, let my thoughts be put on paper, EV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Like it, so it sounds, it doesn’t sound so simple. EV</td>
<td>whoever can get like the most creative. Right. EV</td>
<td>yeah, so they sort of were connecting the dots, like this, EV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And I remember like, think it was like every two weeks OR</td>
<td>And like you just become more creative through that EV</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>she’d give us new vocab CA</td>
<td>and I just stuck with that. EV</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9 your thoughts are what the analysis is. EV
10 It’s not just interpreting the book. CA
11 Like we already know that stuff happened. CA
12 So they really like gave me the confidence. EV
13 Like, you’re reading to the right things, EV
14 now you just got to put it on paper. EV

Rita
---
1 Because like instead of like writing things in the wrong order CA
2 or like doing your explanation before the detail CA
3 like she put it in the right order. EV
4 I feel like the colors just like you know what color is supposed to come first EV
5 so because like you memorize like the color scheme. EV
6 Yes. You see like a pattern EV
7 so the like you know how to write it in MCAS form. EV
8 So like in like the introduction you’re more using background information CA
9 and then like in the body paragraphs CA
10 you’re like analyzing more. EV
11 Green was details. EV
12 Blue is explanation. EV
13 And orange was transitional words. EV
14 No, because like she (Grade 10 English teacher) felt that like your writing is like your own. EV

Billy
---
1 More writing assignments (in high school)... OR
2 Than middle school... EV
3 It was volume went up. EV
4 I think I grew to where I am now (eleventh grade). EV
5 Probably at the end of freshman year. OR
6 I had to write a research paper for History. OR/CA
7 About World War II. CA
8 And that was like the first real big writing assignment CA
9 I had to do for high school. OR/CA
10 I mean there were some little ones I had to do for English, OR/CA
11 but this was like the first major one that I had to do. CA
12 I got a good grade on it. EV
13 I’d probably say my English teacher now, (grade 11). EV
14 Yeah. Like look at it from different views and write about it, EV
15 but not giving that, not repeating everything over and over again. EV

John
---
1 I remember in middle school OR
2 I had the problem of like CA
3 if I was writing about like a story or something CA
4 I’d use the plot a lot like CA
5 I-I just kind of like go through the story. CA
6 So tenth grade last year I remember OR
7 I wrote a Beowulf essay at the beginning of the year. OR/CA
And I was doing that and he told me to restart, CA
so I made like an essay much better EV
than that like that, that was more like the argument EV
rather than about the story. EV
And that’s I write now. RE
Yes. More explaining, I think. EV
Yeah. Yeah. Freshman year… OR
that was just more like, we did more reading. OR

Marcia
1 I think Sophomore Comp was fun. OR
2 I had Ms. Porter. OR
3 We just did like-- We had like fun writing topics. EV/MO
4 I don’t know, like they definitely changed it this year EV
5 because people are doing a lot of more different things, CA
6 but like she would figure out fun things for writing about CA
7 like there was once in awhile that we did like open responses, CA
8 but like we would do like things on like movies CA
9 listening to something that she would have to say CA
and we had to write about it CA
11 and then she would like just talk about it with each person. EV

Steve
1 She (grade 9 English teacher) was just like so mean on our writing. OR/EV
2 She was nice though. EV
3 She was nice. EV
4 That you’re not just like… that you’re not just writing to get stuff out of the way. CA
5 And just to put it on paper. CA
6 Like you’re not just taking like notes CA
7 and then just putting it there. CA
8 You’re actually writing the paper. EV
9 And you should be like, like engaged in your topic. EV
10 That’s that’s what I was talking about EV
11 with like adding, you know, extra fluff. EV
12 To make myself sound interesting. EV
13 But like as I’m reading I read it like, CA
14 I read in a certain type of voice CA
15 to make it sound like right CA
16 after I finish reading it’s like the best line…. EV
17 And then trying to like like after finish reading CA
18 the sentence developing like a sense of awe. EV
19 That I actually just wrote that. EV
20 And then I move on. OR