

Running Head: WHAT MAKES AVID WRITERS?

What makes avid writers? An examination of students' out of school writing practices

by

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### ABSTRACT

As a high school English Language Arts teacher and literary magazine staff advisor, I have witnessed a difference in the degree of enthusiasm and engagement with which students approach writing for their classes, and writing for their own purposes. Typically, students are more authentically engaged in their self-initiated writing. This study uses a grounded theory approach to explore how and why avid young writers write to discover ways in which classroom writing programs can be made more authentic. Through interviews with five young writers who were actively writing outside of school, I was able to discover key findings about the identities and practices of these young writers and offer implications of these findings for the teaching of writing in high school English Language Arts classes.

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DEDICATION

To all the avid writers I have met over the years, and especially to my own “writer-in-residence”.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

*I began writing  
When I was ten, eleven,  
In grade seven,  
Back in high school.  
My spark was  
My brother, his hip hop music.  
My cousins were writing short stories.  
My grandpa would write; my dad would write  
And so it was that sense of thinking to myself  
"This is in the family and I need to do this,  
I need to figure out how to do this."*

(excerpt from Appendix A: Honouring their voices: A found poem)

### My perspective

I have arrived at this project as part of a continuing journey as an educator of high school students that began in 1988. My partner's education took us to a number of Canadian cities, providing me with rich learning experiences teaching English Language Arts and Social Studies. In 2000 we settled down in our third province and I have been teaching in the same high school ever since. Having served on professional development (PD) committees studying assessment and literacy, I was asked five years ago to take on the role of literacy coach in my school. This new responsibility led me to return to university, looking to improve my understanding of the research related to literacy development. At this point in our school's literacy journey, we began by focusing on concrete actions such as implementing literacy strategies all our subject areas, and developing a greater understanding of disciplinary literacy. My understanding of literacy learning has continued to grow as I have come to look at literacy in the larger context of its importance to students' quality of life and how it is situated as a key element of 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning.

This emphasis connects to another aspect of my identity as an educator. Throughout my career, my extra-curricular activities have always centred on issues of social justice. I have run various charity clubs and at one school worked with another teacher to take students on a mission trip to a developing country. Thus, the work of writers such as Paulo Friere (1970/2000) who makes the connection between literacy and quality of life strongly resonated with me. So, while I was learning about topics such as instructional practices to improve student literacy and achievement, I began to consider broader topics such as student engagement in literacy practices and the importance of literacy in developing active citizens in our society. Meeting up with the ideas of Ada and Campoy (2004) and the experience of the University of Manitoba's 2014 Summer Institute: Writing for/as Social Justice helped me broaden my view of social justice. Where I once thought social justice meant taking action on the big issues of the world, I came to realize that at the heart of social justice was the need for individuals to feel empowered to find their own voices and be able to articulate their values. As a result of these experiences, I found myself looking at student writing as the means through which students (or young adults) can develop their voices and express their thinking as valued, active members of society. It is through this lens that I arrived at the present point in my journey, considering the attributes and practices of passionate young writers.

### **Problem**

As a high school English Language Arts teacher, I am often discouraged by the lack of engagement some students demonstrate in their approach to the projects I ask them to undertake. While we as teachers see the importance of the tasks we assign, many students see them as irrelevant. Those who do engage are often doing so for marks rather than for learning. This disengagement with school writing has become more noticeable to me in the last five years, since

our school launched a literary magazine, an annual anthology of student writing, artwork and photography.

Over this time, I have had the privilege of working with students who submit work to, and create this book. Discussing with them the ideas in their artist statements in particular, shows a deep and intelligent understanding of their purpose in creating their work and their creative processes. Yet, these same students often come to our after school meetings with complaints about the assignments and projects they have to complete for their English Language Arts (ELA) classes. The first sentences of the acknowledgements in one of their literary magazines make it clear that even these students do not see school writing in the same light as they see the writing they do for themselves. I was quite taken aback to read,

Under the ever-present shadow of homework and the expectations of high school, the personal creativity of students often does not find its chance to shine. Instead, its brilliance remains veiled from the world, stowed away in the margins of papers, corners of canvasses and film of cameras. *The Looking Glass* (title is a pseudonym) sets the stage and acts as a spotlight in which students' work can be illuminated and recognized. (2015, p. 110)

When I asked the students about this perception, they replied that they felt school writing was not giving them the opportunity to be creative or demonstrate their talents. While they worked hard on it, their motivation was, by and large, for marks, not personal satisfaction.

As part of the literary initiatives undertaken in our school, many of us in our ELA department have spent the last number of years emphasizing critical thinking and strategy use, and providing more choice and time for independent reading. My own academic journey over this time has also led me to see literacy as a wider social justice issue, rather than simply an

academic one. I have come to see the changes I have made in my own classroom as instrumental not only in helping students read better, but more importantly, in helping them see literacy as a means through which to explore and develop their own identities and feel empowered to express their thoughts and feelings. While I have received positive feedback from students on this approach, I was quite disappointed to see that my lit mag students still thought of school writing as disengaging and inauthentic.

Recently, I attended a conference presentation by Donalyn Miller (2015) on results from a study she had done on the qualities of avid readers. She noted that while she had inspired students to read avidly while she had them in her class as students, many did not continue to read once they moved on to the next grade. She conducted a survey to discover the proclivities of people who did read voraciously outside of school in order to inspire teachers to help students develop these qualities. This got me thinking about my own students who did not seem engaged in writing in the classroom in comparison to those students I had met over the last five years who demonstrated a true interest in writing on their own. I began to wonder if there were things I could learn from these independent writers that could help make my writing program more engaging. It was this desire to learn what makes an avid writer that led me to this study.

### **Research Questions**

Having seen the enthusiasm with which students approach their out of school writing through my own experiences and in the examples in the research, I became interested in looking into their motivation to write to see if there are ways teachers can replicate how students write independently. Clearly, the situation of schools is unavoidably different from students' out of school writing communities. Even the most democratically minded teacher is, by virtue of the need for assessment and evaluation, in a position of power over her students. Because of this,

students focus on rubrics and what they feel are the requirements of a given writing task rather than taking creative risks. Our classes themselves are artificially built communities, unlike the groups with whom students chose to share their writing outside of school. As well, ELA teachers are beset with many real and perceived conflicting priorities that take time away from an open-ended writing program, such as the pressure to put more emphasis on reading traditional class novels or to focus on the formal, academic writing required in post-secondary education rather than expose students to a broad range of forms and purposes. Most are also working within a semester system, in which students come together for 70 minutes a day for a brief five months before disbanding and perhaps not having another ELA class for over a year. Despite these and other realities of the classroom setting, I felt it valuable to take the time to have conversations with young writers to see if there are elements of their writing lives we can incorporate into the classroom, to help students to see themselves as people with something to say and the means to do it when they are not in our classes.

It became my intent to interview young people, in high school or recently graduated, who see themselves as avid writers. In broad terms I wanted to know what teachers could learn from students' out of school writing behaviours. In particular, I was curious to know:

1. What can be learned from how avid writers describe their identities, processes, and motivations to write?
2. To what extent do avid writers see a disconnect between their independently initiated writing and that which they are asked to do in school?
3. How can writing in school benefit from the insights and experiences of avid writers?

The ideas expressed through the exploration of these questions have the ability to help us to design writing opportunities in the classroom that students may value in the same ways that these avid writers do. I also hoped to learn something about the processes these students use to create their pieces that might shine some light on how to best use the time we give to writing in our classrooms.

### **Relevance**

I believe this study will be of practical import to teachers in the field who are interested in student motivation and empowerment. It may be particularly timely as the Manitoba ELA curriculum is currently in a process of renewal. As it has been presented so far the new curriculum is built on four literacy practices: language as sense making; system; exploration and design; and power and agency (Boyd & Warkentin, 2015, p. 9). The rolling out of the new curriculum will provide teachers with an opportunity to renew their own thinking around their instructional practices.

This study ties to all four of these practices but looks most directly to the latter two practices of exploration and design, and power and agency. Identifying adolescents' out of school writing practices will be of use to teachers wanting to create a more engaging and effective writing program. First, understanding students' out of school writing processes will help teachers create activities that students will see as authentic, leading them to actively engage in the creative processes of exploration and design. Second, knowing what they write about and why will help teachers design writing opportunities which students will find empowering and transformational. Thus, students may be more engaged in their learning and development of their writing and thinking processes and become better writers.

On a personal level, I see this study as the next step in the journey I am on as a literacy coach and classroom teacher. Having returned to the classroom myself as a student some five years ago, I have become more reflexive in my own practice. I have worked to make my classroom more responsive to the needs of my students as individuals and less focused on the content of English literature. Inspired by Faye Brownlie's (2005) *Grand conversations, thoughtful responses: A unique approach to literature circles*, I have moved to a book club approach allowing students to set goals and read in response to their background knowledge, interests and abilities. Through these choices, students are able to read and discuss a variety of texts in which they are more engaged than they were when the whole class read the same books together. I have begun to open up the writing portion of my program, having students create a multi-genre project as their final assessment piece. While I have moved away from whole class novels, there is still something of the whole class approach in many of my writing assignments. This study has helped me learn more about student writers so I can better respond to the needs of my own students.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

*I have learned:  
That as you're explaining to the reader what's happening,  
You're able to learn new things about yourself;  
To stay open-minded,  
To work through dark times and channel that into something productive,  
Something that can inspire;  
To share with people in a creative way;  
To tell yourself that your work sucks— you have to grow somehow;  
To understand how music and poetry work,  
and to feel happy after I finish writing something.*

(excerpt from Appendix A: Honouring their voices: A found poem)

My overall research question revolves around the practices of today's avid young writers. As such, I focused my literature review on papers published most recently, more specifically in the last decade or so, but also included some more established writers whose ideas were influential in the work of more recent publications. I began by reviewing the books that I had read in recent years on writing in the classroom. Andrea Lunsford had been recommended so I read her *Writing Matters (2007)* and then looked up more about the Stanford Writing Project online. From there I began a wider search using the terms "student writing" and "writers" and "digital literacies". Many of the studies I found were based in research being done in schools, so I added the phrase "out of school" to try and find articles about students writing in their lives outside of the classroom. I added "creative" to "writing" to try to find studies that went beyond academic writing. I also used "adolescent" and "teenager" in place of student as the base of my search threads to see if the results would differ and found that I did find more relevant articles as a result of this change. I had found some articles on performance-based literacies and so added in "performance", and "spoken word" to go farther down this avenue. Other areas in which I was interested include why and how adolescents write so I also used "motivation" and "processes" in individual searches. Another area linked to these was the notion of student writer identities, so

that became another search term. I searched broadly in the University of Manitoba's "One Stop Search" and also in the ERIC and the "Academic Search Complete" databases. In addition to searching, I looked through papers I had read previously and followed up specifically on some of the researchers cited in the papers I was reading, in particular, names that were frequently referenced by multiple authors.

In all, I read until particular ideas became apparent that spoke most clearly to my inquiry into the habits and attitudes of avid student writers. In reviewing recent writing in this area by both researchers and those more practice-focused writers in the field of adolescent literacy, a number of interconnected themes became apparent.

How students express themselves in terms of the forms that are most popular for them to be engaged in writing is one focus. Some researchers explore the performance aspect of students' out of school writing experiences that often result in participation in slam poetry events and other dramatic forms as means of self-expression. Others look to the explosion of digital literacies ranging from texting to gaming to find ways of bringing these new literacy practices students are already engaged in into the classroom. These writers emphasize the social nature of these forms of writing, be it on the stage or a social media site. Still under the general topic of how students write are those studies that look at the processes students use.

A second area of focus revolves around why students write. These writers emphasize ways writing leads to self-discovery as students negotiate meaning with various aspects of their world. As students develop their voices and identities as writers, they are more willing to speak out and share their ideas with the world. Practice oriented authors in this camp advocate the making of connections with the students' experiences and background knowledge to help them feel empowered as writers in ways they will find relevant and willingly engage in.

A third theme that became apparent was that, while this bridging of in and out of school writing practices may sound like a logical and in some ways straightforward answer to the question of student engagement in writing in school, some researchers raise concerns to show that bringing students' out of school practices into the classroom may not be as efficacious as it looks. In addition, there is still room for further exploration into the writing motivations and processes of a wider range of students than many of these studies account for.

### **How adolescents write**

**Developing community through performance.** A number of researchers have explored the use of performance-based writing such as drama and spoken word poetry in creating social connections among young writers. These communities allow students to validate their ideas and grow as they take risks as writers. The first two years of the Stanford Writing Project demonstrated the wide range of performance-based out of school literacies that college students were engaged in from “spoken word events and slam-poetry contests to live radio broadcasts, public speaking, and theatrical presentations” (Fishman, Lunsford, MacGregor & Otuteye, 2005, p. 226). The authors assert that as “a tool for innovation as well as a potential vehicle for helping students to transfer literacy skills from situation to situation, performance ... stands to reinvigorate both teaching and learning in the writing classroom” (p. 227). Fisher (2005) looked at two extra-curricular writers groups in New York City high schools where students worked on developing voice and agency through spoken word poetry. Both of these groups were described as “Participatory Learning Communities” or “PLCs” where students choose to be involved and participate. She explains that

Using an open mic format rooted in community-based spoken word venues, these two writing communities offered a neutral space where students were encouraged to maintain

a nonjudgmental attitude toward their peers ... [showing them that] they were part of a larger network of wordsmiths. (Fisher, 2005, p. 128)

Fisher goes on to emphasize the power of the social aspects of these groups where “literacy ... depended on relationships with peers and adults with mutual admiration and respect that helped expose these young writers to words, styles and trajectories that they could access while building their own literate identities” (pp. 128–129). Weinstein (2007) also looked at a community of writers, profiling four young rappers, three siblings and a friend, who formed an informal community of writers. She focused on the positive outcomes of this relationship and the pleasure the group derived from their inclusion in it. She describes pleasure as both a “quality of life ... [and] quality of learning issue” (p. 275). She breaks this idea of pleasure into three forms. The first is “Discourse membership” where the group recognized their participation as part of a larger “cultural and historical movement” (p. 276). She also explores the pleasure of self-expression and self-representation that individual group members derive in the act of creating, and third, the pleasure of play, or the joy inherent in the act of creating. She ends by encouraging teachers to explore ways to help students engage this enthusiastically in their classrooms.

This idea to engage students in writing by taking the writing off the page to make it come alive in the classroom is shown in practice in Gallagher and Ntelioglou’s (2011) research, as they argue for the powerful effects drama can have in helping high school students develop both critical and creative thinking by writing dramatic pieces based in their own experiences. They use the phrase “performative and dialogic literacies” to encapsulate the ways in which writing, performing, collaborating, and discussing drama can open up students’ critical and creative thinking (p. 324). Their study had students create monologues around artifacts related to the metaphors of open and closed doors. The students became so engrossed in their writing that the

project grew. Students extended the monologues into dialogues and ultimately wrote collective productions based around artifacts related to the metaphors of open and closed doors. The resulting productions “became the texts for opening up dialogues with other ‘others’ and consequently challeng[ed] the things they believed about themselves and others” (pp. 328–329). Gallagher and Ntelioglou show that this process, through which students worked together to open up conversations based on the dramatic works they authored and presented to each other, served the same function as “what Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) call transformative writing experiences and what The New London Group (1996) and Kalantzis and Cope (2008) call a transformative pedagogy of multiliteracies” (p. 329). To put these ideas in context, the New London Group (1996) called for a rethinking of the idea of literacy as multiliteracies in light of the world’s increasing diversity due to globalization and the effect of a rapidly growing means of communication due to media and technology (p. 63). They also examined pedagogy calling for transformed practice as the result of situated practice, overt instruction and critical framing of ideas, through which students can “design and carry out, in a reflective manner, new practices embedded in their own goals and practices” (pp. 87–88). This study clearly showed these elements at work, growing from students’ examination of the meanings of the metaphors of open and closed doors within the context of drama.

This idea of using drama to engage students in a community with others to develop their literacy practices is also put into practice by Wilhelm (2008) who advocates the use of performance-based activities to engage students, especially those typically labeled as struggling in literacy practices. He argues that drama allows students to “make moves to enter the story and move about inside it” (p. 120). He describes an eight-week project in which students engaged in nine different dramatic activities where they had to recreate a story in a variety of dramatic forms

and scenarios. The dramatic activities were all designed to help students enter into characters' points of view and explore their attitudes and motivations. Some were directly related to the story and others required extending the ideas from the story into different situations. Wilhelm noted that, "compared to the first twelve weeks of school [these struggling readers] began to make new moves to create story worlds, to connect to these worlds, and to reflect upon them" (pp. 132–135). Following the dramatic activities related to the story, students participated in additional dramatic activities that required them to reflect on the story and create new stories in relation to their own lives. In discussing these experiences, students reported becoming more engaged in reading, but also developing in more personal ways. One student, Libby, commented on her developing confidence saying that she felt more "equal" in drama and that the "people listened to [her]" (p. 144).

Clark (2012) also offers an example of the use of drama as a springboard for creative writing. She had students work together in a scaffolded lesson, first as a whole class to develop a sense of teamwork and then in smaller groups to create a story around a simple prompt created by the students. These stories all focused on the lesson's goal: to make visible the qualities of "tellability", using vivid detail to let the events of the story communicate the theme. This acting out of the story they created "enabled students to physically and socially construct [and evaluate] their stories" (p. 66). From here, students reflected in their journals and then went on to write their own stories with the examples they had witnessed in mind, allowing them to develop an awareness of the relationship between writer, audience and text.

In summary, the idea of writing for performance serves a number of purposes for student writers both in and out of the classroom. For students involved in out of school writing communities, the social aspect allows students to take risks in a safe social environment that

validates their experiences and feelings. This sense of belonging and commensurate self-confidence in turn affects their identities as writers. The idea of performance used in the classroom makes ideas visible and creates common experiences for groups of students in the classroom, acting as a catalyst for their individual creative processes.

**Using digital literacies to develop writing identities within communities.** With 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning becoming a buzz word throughout school divisions, digital literacies that students have been involved in for some time now on their own are gaining traction in the classroom. Noted scholar of rhetoric Andrea Lunsford (2007) claims that “the newest ‘new’ rhetoric is one that is deeply mediated, deeply technologized ... presenting special challenges and special opportunities for those who teach rhetoric and writing” (Chapter One, paragraph 10). Moje, Overby, Tysvaer and Morris (2008) conducted surveys and interviews with students and debunked the myth that youth do not read and write, but showed that they do not necessarily read and write the conventional kinds of texts adults value (p. 146). They show that students are engaged in writing in a variety of forms, from journals and diaries to comics, music lyrics, emails and blogs (p. 125). In an interview, Alvermann and Moore (2011) discussed Alvermann’s work in afterschool programs where she also sees students as active writers, using “literacies that are multimodal [combining multiple forms of print, visual and auditory forms and genres], shifting and relational—the very kind that defy simple categorization” (p. 58).

It becomes apparent that students are not just writing in ways outside of school that go beyond what they are often asked to do in school, but that they experience particular rewards in doing so. Like their counterparts writing for performance, writers in digital spaces benefit from involvement in writing communities.

Gee (2004) explains the importance of “affinity spaces” and how communities of learners work, based in his study of online video gaming. He defines 11 characteristics of affinity spaces, showing in all that they are very fluid in nature being based in common endeavours rather than distinct characteristics of members, with masters and “newbies” working alongside. They are creative spaces with content organized by members. They encourage many different kinds of knowledge generation and ways to participate. There are different routes to status, and leadership is porous and based on resources, not an artificial hierarchy (pp. 85–86). For examples of such an affinity space in action, one can look to groups such as the adolescents involved in the online writers’ forum, Wattpad. Korobkova and Black (2014) examined the online writing experiences of adolescents writing fan fiction related to the band One Direction on Wattpad. They showed that engagement derived largely from the teens’ abilities to define their participation and roles within the group, using the phrase “boundary work” (p. 621) to define how students were able to define their own identities within the group, depending on the kind of fan they were and the type of writing they did.

Guzzetti and Gamboa (2004) explore zines as affinity spaces for students to explore their writing identities. Theirs is a case study of three students who worked together to create a zine, defined by these researchers as a sort of Do It Yourself publication, often pushing against mainstream views in society. Guzzetti and Gamboa explain that the term zine is short for fanzine and that they originated as far back as the 1930s and have evolved considerably to their current popularity as a means for primarily adolescent girls to communicate their thoughts on issues of importance to them (p. 408–11). While these students received extrinsic rewards such as international fan mail and recognition from their peers, parents and teachers, the zinesters were also rewarded intrinsically (p. 431). As members “in the alternative cultures of protesters,

activists and feminists, their collaboration ... not only helped them each as individuals to form and represent their own identities but also allowed them to assist one another in identity formation and expression” (p. 432).

In a study based on case studies and interviews with “avid gamers” (p. 69), Gerber and Price (2011) argue that social media and video games should not be seen as contravening the goals of the English class, but should be used to “complement and enhance” them as “these new literacies allow students to examine life and learning through a different lens” (p. 68). They posit that it is important for teachers to “recognize and validate the literacies that youth bring with them to the classroom” (p. 72). They end on a practical note, providing a table that pairs particular video games with the writing genres (persuasive, expository, creative) to which they lend themselves (p. 72).

It seems plain that one factor related to student engagement in writing stems from the modalities students are engaged in and the social connections they build as a result of their involvement in a range of forms from spoken word and other performance based modes to fan fiction sites, zines, and other forms of digital communication. Williams (2010), who looked specifically at college writing classes, affirms that

the understanding that literacy is a set of socially constructed and culturally mediated practices, rather than a stand-alone set of skills, means it is vital to gain a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective on how reading and writing are learned and used (p. 142).

Clearly the research highlighted above speaks to the effectiveness of this broadening of our definition of writing to include a variety of modalities from drama to digital in the high school writing classroom to build bridges between students’ in and out of school literacy practices.

**Writing processes: How adolescent writers write.** In addition to looking at how students are expressing themselves in terms of the forms they favour, it is also important for teachers to consider the processes students use to create these forms. Studies have shown that the processes employed by students tend to be more fluid than the writing process often taught in classrooms. Jones (2013) interviewed 34 students in classrooms as they worked on narrative and argumentative writing pieces. Students had been encouraged to use the writing process of “plan, draft, revise, redraft” (p. 58). While students did speak to valuing the planning part of the process, almost half preferred “mental” to written planning, indicating for example that they preferred to “just sit down and write it” (p. 60). Others indicated that they wrote plans as they were required to but abandoned them when it came time to draft (p. 60). Many commented on writing ideas as they “pop” into their heads (p. 62) speaking to a sort of “flow” or “writing to generate” ideas kind of process (p. 63). This study highlights the complexity of the writing process and shows that separating planning from drafting may not always work for all writers and that the “requirement to plan may seem a pointless activity for some young writers and contributes to an existing dissatisfaction with the English curriculum” (p. 65). This article speaks to the need for both students and teachers to recognize the recursive and highly individualized processes writers use and the need for metacognition as part of teaching writing processes.

Students’ out of school writing processes have also been studied. The processes of young song writers was explored by Williams (2012) who interviewed two students in their first year of college who had been avid song writers in middle and high school. Both spoke to how the writing process had become an integral part of their identity with each of them carrying writers’ notebooks, or writing on anything available to be copied into their notebooks later (p. 373). They both preferred to actually compose on computers where tools such as dictionaries and the

Internet for research are readily available. They also speak to making time to write each week, purposefully setting time aside in their schedules for this activity, though they admit that this does not always work if the inspiration is not there. They also speak to the need for the right environment, with one preferring the quiet of the university library and the other more busy public spaces. Both agreed that they did not outline, that for them the process revolved around finding the right first line and going from there. While they both pointed out that the writing process itself is something they prefer to do on their own, they collaborate to put their songs to music and perform. They also seek feedback by maintaining websites where they post their work (pp. 373–374). Both of these studies give teachers much food for thought around the need to keep students' fluid and individualized writing processes in mind when planning for writing in the classroom.

### **Why students write**

**Developing identity through writing.** Shifting away from a focus on how students express themselves and the processes they use, we see that much is to be gained from considering how writing is integral to students' developing identities. Research attests to the empowering nature of allowing students to use their own experiences in their writing. By writing about themselves and their communities, students are able to find their voices and write from a place of passion for their chosen subject matter.

Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, and Otuteye (2005) highlight this need for relevancy by reporting very frankly students' perceptions of their own writing compared to school writing.

The authors concluded that

For many students the purposefulness of extracurricular writing stands out ... Describing the content of the writing she does outside of class, and registering a great deal of

frustration with introductory coursework, Alice, a participant in the study, stated bluntly: 'Not as much bullshit'. (p. 230)

Another student, Todd, spoke to the lack of passion created by in school writing as opposed to what he chose to write on his own outside of school (p. 231). Alissa, another student, identified being "more courageous" in her out of class writing (p. 231). More recently, another study by two of the same authors explored students' perceptions of their own work as intellectual property. This research showed that while students initially did not think of their writing as having value, over time they came to see themselves as writers and to consider the nuances of intellectual property (Lunsford, Fishman & Liew, 2013). In this paper, the authors conclude that teachers need to put emphasis on privileging student rather than teacher authority and "(re)create classrooms where students can imagine themselves as authors and new kinds of authorities" (p. 490).

Using a grounded theory study involving interviews and classroom observations over two years, Behizadeh (2014) also studied this notion of authenticity. She concludes that students, not teachers, need to decide the authenticity of a writing task and that authenticity comes from connections to the student's life, rather than the teacher's perception that a task connects to the world outside of school (p. 28). She identifies "choice of a valued topic, writing for impact and dominance of expression over convention" as common qualities of authentic writing for students (p. 33). She notes as well, that because each student brings different experiences, values, and understandings to the classroom that each will have different views of the degree of authenticity of a particular task. This speaks strongly to the need for teachers to empower students to make their own decisions in their writing.

Similarly, Vasudevan and Campano (2009) in their review of educational issues concerning literacy over recent decades, cite a number of researchers emphasizing the importance of “power dynamics” and the need for educators to “broaden definitions of literacy beyond conventional ‘schooled’ reading and writing, and to consider critically how students engage in and use cultural and social practices” (p. 312). They go on to cite researchers who focus on the marginalization of students’ out of school literacy practices in schools, which limits the learning potential of students (p. 322). They advocate that schools stop trying to “[change] the child to fit a (often White middle-class) norm ... by thinking more expansively about literacy and what constitutes youth intellectual and cultural expression” (p. 325).

Bickerstaff (2012) looked into the disconnect between students’ in and out of school identities as writers. She examined the writing practices of nine students in an alternate education program for students who did not finish high school. She found that many of these students had strong “writerly identities” as poets, lyricists, game designers and bloggers even though they struggled to meet the program’s expectations for academic writing (p. 59). Reasons they cited for this included the rigid expectations of the program in comparison to their own writing. Elements of formal academic writing such as avoiding the first person and personal opinion were in sharp contrast to the kinds of writing the students valued (p. 61). Sadly, she noted that as students concentrated on developing their in school writing, many stopped writing outside of school (p. 62).

There do exist positive examples of adolescent writers whose identities are thriving as a result of their writing experiences in school. Skerrett (2013) examined how a literacy teacher helped a grade 10 student, Nina, develop her identity as a writer. Her teacher explored and helped Nina see value in her writing practices at home (writing letters with her mother to an

uncle, for example) (p. 338). She also validated the personal writing Nina did in class, which the student had thought was not appropriate for the assignment at hand (p. 340). In this way, the teacher helped to position Nina as a writer in the community of writers in her classroom. Moreover, Nina was encouraged to incorporate aspects of her multilingual capacities into her writing in school. In this way her teacher helped Nina to develop her identity as a multicultural writer, bringing together school and home literacies in a way that valued both. Garcia and Gaddes (2012) also show the use of culture to create writing identities. In an after school program for Latina youth, students explored culturally relevant texts, using these as a springboard to write about their own experiences. They reported that students went beyond exploring the particular issues in the texts to develop their ideas on larger, more universal themes (p. 157). In providing reading that resonated with the students, participants came to “own their learning space and transform it to help them craft their stories” (p. 161). Through this process, students were able to validate both their experiences and their identities as writers. Using a more multimodal approach, Honeyford (2014) shows how a photo essay installation project allowed students to explore their identities. Students’ discussions of the sites of the photos they included showed how they were “creatively taking up new ‘sights’ for their immigrant identities” by considering the literal and figurative significance of these places in their lives (p. 33). It is apparent that for many students, writing acts as a catalyst for identity exploration, self-discovery, confidence and empowerment to use their voices.

This sociocultural lens, which Vasudevan and Campano define as literacy being “socially constructed and mediated by the social and cultural contexts in which meaning occurs” (p. 312) has also been taken up by those whose work is more practice oriented. A variety of models for incorporating and validating students’ own life experiences is espoused by a number of writers.

Worthman, Gardner and Thole (2011) recreate the “three R’s”, encouraging teachers to help struggling students connect in and out of school writing through *recognition* (of their writing identities), *relevance* (of subject matter), and *renegotiation* (of what writing can look like in school). In a more overtly, social justice oriented focus, Ada and Campoy (2004) advocate empowering students to discover themselves and their voices through the creation of autobiographical works connecting school and home. Fecho (2004) writes about his own experiences in using inquiry to bring students’ out of school culture into the classroom. As a teacher in a predominantly Black, urban inner city school, Fecho encouraged his students to pursue issues they felt were relevant. One student, as a linguistic minority in the class, researched “What happens when someone tries to adjust to a different form of language?” (p. 58). Another looked into what happens when a black American speaks only Standard English (p. 64). These topics came directly from students’ own experiences of the notion of power as it related to language in their lives.

Providing choice and the use of a workshop structure are well-established practices. Graves (1983) inspired many teachers when he wrote about the “surprises that come when children begin to control writing as a craft” (p. 3). He promoted the use of a writing workshop where students are given ample choice and opportunities to rehearse their writing, stating emphatically that “teachers should never assign what children choose to do when they find their voices” (p. 229). Murray (1985) also emphasized that teachers can “invite surprise” by providing the following: choice so students can discover why they need to write, time to develop ideas, connected and authentic audiences, opportunity to read, and the tools to develop the craft of writing (p. 84–88). Atwell (1998) writes about her success in changing her classroom into a writers’ workshop. Writing honestly about the “nonsense I’d had them writing for the last six

months,” she provides specific examples of the variety of meaningful pieces her students were now writing that was allowing them to “solve problems and see the world” (p. 14). She provides minilessons and practical advice on conferencing with students about their writing and on evaluating and assessing writing.

More contemporary writers have built upon the choice provided by these earlier advocates of the workshop approach. Practitioners like Gallagher (2011) use modeling to connect “real world writing” to students’ own experiences. Students are taught to use the structure of published pieces but to recreate them with their own content. Kittle (2008) focuses her writing workshops on a variety of forms, but like Gallagher emphasizes students’ own choice of content. In her workshop-oriented classroom she works extensively one-on-one with students to help them validate their ideas and express their thoughts.

In summary, the idea of bridging students’ in and out of school literacies has been documented for its value in creating connections between students’ out of school modes of communication and who they are as diverse individuals in their lives in their communities beyond the classroom. Despite these attempts to break down classroom walls, build bridges, and empower students, some questions and concerns remain, leading me to my research questions.

One of these concerns is articulated by Vasudevan and Campano (2009). While they argue in favour of bringing out of school writing into the classroom, they cite Street (1984) who warns against the “pedagogization” of these practices, making them as inauthentic and limiting as other forms of in school writing, largely due to the need to assess student performance (p. 325). Lunsford (2007) also questions the notion of authority and the challenge of creating an ethos of community in the classroom and the effect this may have on student motivation to write freely in classroom settings (Chapter Three, paragraph 26). Similarly, while I have been a

supporter of the approaches taken by Gallagher and Kittle, I wonder about the authenticity of linking students' lived experiences to forms of writing chosen by the teacher. I think as teachers we need to consider the limitations this may put on students even though we think we are opening up our curriculum to choice.

In addition to these concerns, many of the aforementioned studies focus either on students who are identified as struggling or at-risk high school students, or on college students. Many also take place in the classroom. My interest lies in finding inspiration for teachers of adolescents by talking to those students who self-identify as avid, active writers in their lives outside of school, to discover if there are elements in their processes and motivations that would serve as another bridge between in and out of school writing.

### Chapter Three: Methodology

*I am very observant  
I get inspiration from  
Books I've read, movies I've watched,  
Music and motivational speakers,  
friends and family,  
funny experiences and scary experiences,  
What I see, what I feel and even what I smell,  
The classes I do,  
When something happens in the news,  
Things I care about,  
And the more that I do, the more I have to write about.  
Definitely a lot of ideas on the back burner,  
Just waiting to be worked on.*

(excerpt from Appendix A: Honouring their voices: A found poem)

### Grounded Theory

While the research into student writing cited above identifies important ideas related to students' writing practices, much of that research has been done either in schools, or in settings very close to school such as summer and after school programs. Working with lit mag students who saw a real disconnect between their own writing and the writing that they do in school led me to consider the grounded theory approach of going to the practicing experts in the area of question to get a close look at their thoughts, feelings and actions. Citing, Corbin and Strauss, (2007), and Strauss and Corbin (1998), Creswell (2013) describes grounded theory as a qualitative research design which allows the researcher to create an explanation of a process or action shaped by the views of participants (p. 83). My interest in the ideas of young writers about their writing led to the choice of this approach.

Charmaz (2014) goes into further detail on the development of grounded theory, explaining how Glaser and Strauss (1967) worked to connect “two contrasting—and competing—traditions in sociology ... Columbia University positivism and Chicago school pragmatism and field research” (pp 8–9). She notes that while Glaser emphasized elements of quantitative methods

such as “dispassionate empiricism and rigorous codified methods ... Strauss brought notions of human agency, emergent processes, social and subjective meanings ... to grounded theory” (p. 9). She goes on to explain that beginning in the 1990s, scholars moved toward a constructivist view of grounded theory whereby “the research is viewed as constructed rather than discovered, foster[ing] researchers’ reflexivity ... shred[ding] notions of a neutral observer and value-free expert” (p. 13). She situates this constructivist theory within the ideas of social constructivists such as Vygotsky who see “knowing and learning as embedded in social life” and emphasizes that “for [her], subjectivity is inseparable from social existence” (p.14). This connection to a social constructivist way of seeing coincides with the views I have developed regarding literacy as a sociocultural practice and seemed to make sense in terms of my thinking about this research. This helped to validate my choice of this research methodology.

### **Research Instrument: The Interview**

The main research instrument in this study is the interview guide (Appendix B) that formed the basis of a semi-structured interview with participants about their writing motivations and processes.

I chose the interview process as my source of data collection as it allows for a close examination of participants’ thoughts and feelings about writing. Charmaz (2014) argues that interviewing fits as a data-gathering methodology for grounded theory studies because “both grounded theory methods and intensive interviews are open-ended yet directed, shaped, yet emergent, and placed yet unrestricted” (p. 85). As mentioned previously, Donalyn Miller (2015) answered similar questions about the qualities of avid readers through a survey. In her presentation she did mention that some of the respondents seemed to have different understandings of the definition of reading itself. I felt that the face-to-face interview would

allow for clearer communication on both the part of the interviewer and participant, due to the opportunity it offers for clarifying and follow up questions. Additionally, I was interested in factors affecting engagement and motivation, and interviews offer a better opportunity for participants to talk about and demonstrate their emotions than do survey responses.

In keeping with Charmaz's (2014) approach, I planned my interview guide as a "gently guided one-sided conversation that explores research participants' personal experience with the research topic" (p. 56).

The following interview questions formed the basis of the interview:

1. How do you define writing? What kind of writing do you do (genres, modes)?
2. What kinds of things do you usually write about? Where do you get your ideas?
3. How often do you write?
4. When and where do you like to write?
5. Why do you write? What do you enjoy about writing? What do you find hard?
6. How long have you been writing? How do you feel you have developed or changed as a writer? What has been most helpful to you?
7. What role does technology play in your writing? (creating, research, online writing communities, publishing)?
8. What do you do when you get stuck?
9. How important is audience to you in your writing? In what kinds of spaces do you write, publish, and share your work?
10. What aspects of your writing outside of school would contribute to making writing more real, enjoyable, motivating for you in school?

11. Tell me about the piece you brought with you today. Can you describe the process you used to create this piece? How long did it take? What did you do first, second, next? Did you get feedback from others? What did you do with that feedback? Was this process similar to or different from how you usually write? If different, how?

As a part of the process, participants were invited to bring samples of their writing and to discuss the process used to create this piece. This allowed participants to think metacognitively and to be specific about their feelings and the decisions they made while writing, and the processes they used.

In all, because I was interested in elements such as habits of mind and motivation, the opportunity to sit down and talk about writing with these students who are actively engaged in it, and who identify as writers, did provide rich data with which to answer my questions.

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited through advertising posters sent out to local high schools, the University of Manitoba, University of Winnipeg, Red River College and Winnipeg public libraries and other public locations with community bulletin boards (see Appendix C). Social media was also employed to reach local writing groups such as Voices Ink, Winnipeg's youth slam poetry organization (see Appendices D and E).

The posters contained the purpose of the study. They outlined the requirements of participants—to participate in an interview sharing their thoughts about writing, and the requirements of the researcher to keep information confidential. They also made clear the need for informed consent and mention of a modest thank you (gift card) in appreciation of their participation. My contact information (email) was also included.

Once participants made contact via email, I responded with a copy of the interview guide to help them further understand the content of our conversation. I also ascertained if they were over 18 and asked for a parent/guardian's email if the participant was a minor. Once they responded to this initial email, I sent the appropriate consent/assent forms and from there we set up a time and place to meet.

### **Informed Consent**

Detailed informed consent letters were prepared. Participants over the age of 18 were to sign these; those under 18 were to give assent, with their parent/guardian signing an informed consent form. These were emailed to participants/parents/guardians ahead of time to sign and bring with them, or to review and sign at the beginning of the interview (in the case of those over 18). In all cases participants were provided the opportunity to ask questions before signing and the option to refrain from answering questions or to withdraw from the study at any point if they so wished (Appendices D, E, and F). Each interview (approximately 45 minutes in length) took place in a public location that was convenient for the participant. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Allowing participants the opportunity to review the transcripts served as a means of member checking to validate data, as did giving feedback on a summary of my findings. Participants were informed that confidential material would be kept on file for six years following the publication of this thesis.

Participants were also informed that they should not anticipate any significant risk in undertaking to participate in the study. Nonetheless the possibility of minimal risk, such as feeling vulnerable or nervous in talking about their writing to a stranger was mentioned in the letter of informed consent. It was made clear that, in the case of minors any mention of abuse would need to be reported by me, by law.

Lastly, participants were informed that benefits of participating in the study could include an opportunity to talk about their writing with an interested audience, and to develop a deeper understanding of their own processes and identities as writers.

### **Confidentiality**

In keeping with the parameters of my ethics approval, efforts were made to maintain the confidentiality of participants. A transcriptionist, who signed a letter of confidentiality (Appendix I), and I were the only people with access to the recorded interviews. My advisor has had access to the transcripts with names and identifying information removed. Pseudonyms were used to identify participants' names and organizations to which they belong. Generalizations were used to where specific details might have been too revealing. Confidential data (consent/assent letters) have been kept in a locked filing cabinet in a separate part of my house from the office in which I work. Confidential material will be securely held for six years following the publication of this thesis before being destroyed. Findings from the study will be shared through this thesis, and may also be shared through future professional development sessions and publications.

### **Feedback/debriefing**

Participants had the opportunity to review written transcripts once they were prepared, to offer feedback on my initial findings, and also to comment on a summary of the initial findings. They were also offered the opportunity to receive a summary of the study results after its completion and the publication of this thesis. Participants were given the choice of how they would like to receive these documents. All preferred to be emailed.

**Participants**

I was interested in interviewing approximately 10 adolescents/ young adults who were either still in high school or who had graduated recently, and who self-identified as avid writers, students who write of their own volition outside of the classroom. In the end, due to the initial number of responses and the depth of information in the interview responses I was gathering, it was felt that five interviews would provide adequate data for this project. As it worked out, these five individuals represented a range of experiences. Participants included two self-identified males and three females. They ranged from grade 11 to mid-second year university and came from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Three were in school; two had entered the world of work and were focusing more seriously on their writing. There were two novelists, two poets, and one poet/lyricist.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is a recursive, systematic, thoughtful process, needing to be undertaken carefully to fully understand the data collected in the interviews. Thomas (2003) identifies this as an inductive approach through which themes are identified by a careful and systematic reading of the data. Likewise, Charmaz (2014) cautions that “in practice grounded research is not as linear as the organization of chapters in this book might suggest” (p. 18).

Added to the recursive nature of the meaning making process, the role and identity of the researcher must also be taken into consideration. Even in the chapter on the “logic of grounded theory coding practices,” Charmaz (2014) brings in the subjective nature of constructing codes, emphasising that “no researcher is ever neutral because language confers form and meaning on observed realities” (p.114). Keeping this in mind, I will attempt to set down the process I followed in as linear and logical a way possible. As I entered into the process of analysis it

became obvious that the data themselves and the questions and thoughts they provoked helped me to choose the path I created in writing field notes, and analytic memos and a variety of levels of coding.

**Field notes.** Following each interview I wrote field notes in my journal to try to capture my first impressions of these young people and their ideas about writing. I tried to convey a sense of who they were as people and as writers. My first participant offered very definite ideas about the role of writing in his life and the processes he found effective. Using the constant comparative method (Charmaz 2014, p.132–133) as I wrote subsequent notes, I found I was able to look at each participant in light of the others. My developing ideas were often challenged by subsequent interviews. For example, it became clear after the first two interviews that these writers had very distinct ideas on the topic of feedback. As I continued interviewing, I was able to consider these different and sometimes contradictory ideas in light of what subsequent interviewees had to say on these topics. My field notes then, provided a jumping off point and represent the beginning of my thinking about the data participants were providing.

**Initial coding.** As each interview was transcribed, I also began the process of initial or close coding. Charmaz stresses the importance of coding to building the framework of grounded theory analysis, using the metaphor of the skeleton, whereby initial coding creates the “bones” upon which the analysis is built (p. 113). I copied each transcript into a table with a right hand column for my notes. In this column I attempted to create codes for key ideas. I initially tried to follow Charmaz’s idea of using gerunds but was not successful at interpreting the data this way. Much of what was being discussed was ideas about writing, which did not seem to lend itself to this approach except where we were discussing process. I also tried to stay close to the data but found I was often drawn to summarizing and creating generalizations. I attribute this to my own

tendencies to rush things and had to work to slow myself down during this stage of the process. This became clear when I met with my advisor who reminded me to be looking at the data through the lens of my key question of what makes this person an avid writer, rather than focusing more generally on key ideas.

So, I learned to slow myself down and went back through the transcripts more than once, creating more specific initial codes, *in vivo* codes (Charmaz, 2014, p. 190) and also highlighting text that struck me as powerful. After reading Saldaña's (2016) coding manual I went back through the transcripts and used different colours to layer values (p. 131) and process coding (p. 110) onto the codes I already had. By this time, I was more successful in creating gerunds to describe what participants were doing and naming the values, beliefs and attitudes that were important to them. At this point I was satisfied that I was ready to move forward.

**Focused coding.** With this in mind, I attempted a more focused coding. Charmaz (2014) indicates that this stage in the analysis allows researchers to “condense and sharpen” (p. 138) their thinking by examining and comparing initial codes to see what they reveal about the data (p. 140). I copied the codes into a separate chart and from there attempted to create codes/categories while thinking about who the participant was and what they did that made them avid writers. The following is an excerpt from the table I created from the first interview. This shows how I moved from five pages of initial codes to more focused codes and finally to an attempt to explain what makes this person an avid writer.

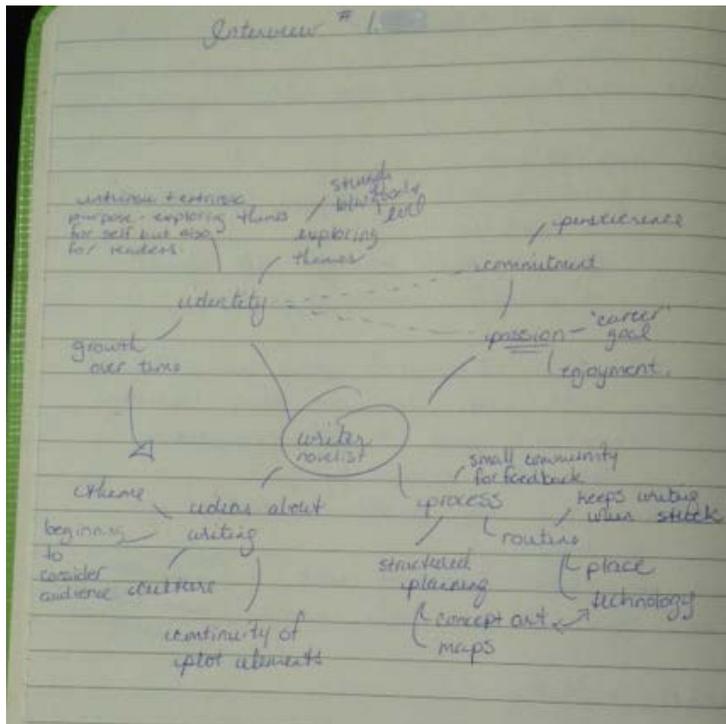
Table 1. Focused coding excerpt

Interview1 Values Coding (values, attitudes, beliefs) Process coding- actions/gerunds	Focused codes	What makes this an avid writer?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing a main priority</li> <li>• Drive to explore writing</li> <li>• V: exploring new worlds and sharing with others</li> <li>• Def'n of Writing- to explore new worlds</li> <li>• To bring those worlds to others- considering audience</li> <li>• V: bringing story to life visually for others</li> <li>• Looking for universal themes</li> <li>• Helping audience understand struggle and conflict as part of the human condition</li> <li>• Theme: struggle, Internal struggle, Interpersonal struggle</li> <li>• Exploring meaning in struggle</li> <li>• B: struggle is a part of life (theme)</li> <li>• B: stories can help readers find meaning in struggle</li> <li>• V: Inspired by little things</li> <li>• Making connections</li> <li>• Purpose of early writing: allowing him to work through emotions, a means of coping and staying positive</li> <li>• V/ B: writing as a means of dealing with emotions</li> <li>• "channel[ing]" neg. emotions to inspire</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing as exploration</li> <li>• Writing as sharing</li> <li>• Always seeking inspiration in "little things"</li> <li>• Theme: struggle (internal and interpersonal)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing linked to identity- uses writing to explore important questions related to his life and to communicate those ideas with others</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• V- writing/ storytelling a main focus</li> <li>• Storytelling a passion</li> <li>• Focus on narrative text, identifies a lack of skill at writing poetry</li> <li>• Novel is his main focus- a big project</li> <li>• Exploring their world and bringing it to life</li> <li>• Living vicariously through his characters</li> <li>• V: Enjoys "the company of the characters"</li> <li>• Creating and learning about characters at the same time</li> <li>• learning about self</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Def'n: Writing as exploration, storytelling</li> <li>• Genre: narrative – novel series</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Power of storytelling and immersing oneself in the lives of the characters and their worlds.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• V: expressing ideas effectively</li> <li>• "being able to express things in the best way possible"</li> <li>• Considering the artistry of expression</li> <li>• Linking writing (craft) and storytelling</li> <li>• Visualizing Thinks of stories visually, like movies- important for readers to be able to visualize events characters</li> <li>• Rep "most effective way possible"</li> <li>• Writing as an effective way of communicating his ideas</li> <li>• Using visualizing techniques</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing as art</li> <li>• Considers the artistry of text/ craft of storytelling</li> <li>• Audience becoming important</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear opinions about important elements, effective communication, continuity, culture, artistry</li> </ul>

**Theoretical coding, analytic memos and arriving at findings.** By this point I was ready to start pulling these ideas together to see what these writers as a group could tell me about

what sets them apart as young people who are passionate about writing. Saldaña (2016) extends Charmaz's (2014) skeleton metaphor to explain theoretical coding this way: "If Kathy Charmaz calls codes the "bones" that form the skeleton of our analysis, then think of the central or core category as the spine of that skeleton" (p. 250). I tried to get closer to this central idea using a number of different techniques. Using what Saldaña (2016) calls "code mapping", I went back to my notebook and created a web for each interview using common categories that seemed to be resonating throughout all of the interviews (p. 218). For these webs I created the main categories of *identity*, *ideas about writing*, *passion* and *process*. The web I made for the first interview is included as an example (see Figure 1). Note that it becomes apparent that these four categories are not separate and distinct but connect with and overlap each other. For example, *passion* can be seen as a subset of *identity* and while growth over time is an aspect of *identity*, it is also an aspect of the participants' *ideas about writing*.

Figure 1. Interview 1 Web



At the same time, I was also writing analytic memos exploring similarities and differences between and among participants’ responses, looking at these areas of overlap and asking and trying to answer questions that arose. I created a chart comparing the values and belief codes looking for key words and then wrote out lists of process words and values words noting common threads. Ultimately, I created a list of 12 categories. These categories formed the basis for a comparison chart to look for similarities and differences (Saldaña, p.229– 230).

*Table 2. Initial categories*

In School	Definition	Enjoys/purpose	Writer’s craft
Process	Themes	Identities/traits	Technology
Audience	Feedback	Challenges	Inspiration

I placed codes from all five participants in these categories and then reorganized the chart according to my main inquiry questions and the main ideas from my lit review: What is writing? Who am I? How do I write? The use of these umbrella questions also made clear the way these ideas overlap, with identity being tied to process and the individual’s views of writing itself. Nonetheless, the manipulation and study of these categories allowed these ideas to coalesce into five main findings. This chart is included here as an artifact of this part of the methodological process. The ideas within are explored in detail in the next chapter where I explore the findings it helped lead me to.

*Table 3. Coding comparison*

	Interview 1	2	3	4	5	Conclusions
In School	School writing limited, unsatisfactory would have liked to write more original pieces	Classroom writing community- little sharing School writing less relevant that out of school writing	Wished school writing topics were broader, included more choice	H.S.- lack of freedom	HS writing- struggled with creating images a teacher could relate to/ marks More choice	All: Choice/freedom/relevance #5: struggled with writing effectively for teachers writing about reading rather than writing for its own sake

Def'n of writing What is writing?	Def'n: Writing as exploration of new worlds, storytelling /sharing	Def'n writing is about human experience Exploration of complex themes	Def'n PERSONAL EXPRESSION Unrestricted expression	Def'n putting emotions on paper to call attention to them in a world where we are often desensitized	Def'n: clear, effective expression of authentic, original thoughts and feelings Issues- politics, environment Spoken word, some blogging	Exploration/expression of complex ideas Effective expression of ideas
Themes What is writing?	Theme: struggle (internal and interpersonal) Theme developed through introspection- important ideas to express through contemplating own dark times	Themes: good/evil, morals, temptation, ambition	Topics: nature, emotions	Memories/ nostalgia Open-mindedness Resilience/perseverance	Issues- politics, environment Keen wish to change people's thinking	Sophisticated thinking Beginning in but moving beyond own experiences, esp. #5- more political
Identity/ traits Who am I as a writer?	Disciplined approach Keys to growth: self- criticism and persistence	Recognizes own growth/ maturity will stick to own ideas when he feels strongly about them Perseverance	GROWTH as a writer- more eager to share, writing with audience in mind	Self-awareness of growth Dual purpose to explore self, movement from one to the other Resilience/perseverance	Writing from a young age Influenced by family that values poetry/ Arabic poetry Growth- thinks ideas through, not reactive	All- writing from young ages Influential others- often family Traits- persistence, perseverance All recognized growth, maturity, openmindedness- growth mindsets
Enjoys/ purpose Who am I as a writer?	Writing as sharing, pride in sharing important ideas	Enjoyable, satisfying No judgment	Enjoys ownership of expression that is uniquely hers Enjoys the "release" of being taken out of the present moment Ability as an introvert to express ideas more effectively in writing	express ideas for audience Competitive Catharsis/ opening communication Recognizes the value in adding his voice on important topics	Values the ability of poetry to connect more directly to ppl's emotions Release/ escape, stress relief Happiness, accomplishment	Catharsis/release Sharing/ expression Effective expression of ideas Communicating with others as important as personal release of writing, effect of work on others- help them understand the world
Writer's craft Who am I as a writer?	Writing as art Considers the artistry of text/ craft of storytelling; visualizing is imp for readers "most effective way" asking/ answering questions- being reflective	Recognizes growth maturity, skills learned in Literature classes Reading like a writer- influence of other writers, literature class	Works in images: collecting, describing, forming these into the poem To revise plays with positioning and structure	Need to create vivid images	Imp. to get the words right since audience is listening not reading Current events a focus- imp. to get the facts right Artistry is imp. not just venting	Imp of artistry- creating effective images/ storytelling (visualization /culture), all concerned with effective communication- for an explicit or implicit audience ELA influences- literature as mentor texts, planning/ outlining though not rigid processes
Audience	Audience becoming important (in the final editing stage-	Audience not a main concern when writing-	Considers audience while writing-	Recognition of audience- presents to diff. audiences	Audience is incredibly imp. considers their reactions	Consideration of audience varies from confining to

	thinking about publishing)	would get in the way Is beginning to submit work to school lit mag Little other opportunity to share	sometimes constraining Publishes in school lit lag and did online- lack of criticism a drawback Thinking more about audience as she writes	Will write, then consider audience	Keen wish to change people's thinking Interested in publishing	a major consideration
Process Who am I as a writer? What do I do as a writer?	Planning is important: very organized, place, time linear, stratified system- needed for story elements to be logical, fully developed	Detailed outlines but willing to change Routine	Sporadic, "SLURGE" WRITING quiet times to write: morning, evening Process: focus is on description/ images then combining these into a whole	Time (over place) "Impulsive, stubborn" Drafting/ Revision process movement from vivid imagery to idea development and technical refinement	Plans –envisions but does not outline Time and place, own room, end of day, car trips Keeps ideas in a writers notebook	Planning v. imp. for novelists, not as much for poets All knew when/ where they could write best and were very certain of this Time- morning and evening/night When can find time- car trips(3&5) V diff. processes, linear vs. more abstract All- writers notebooks or tech to jot down ideas for later
Tech What do I do as a writer?	Technology for writing/editing/staying organized	Technology- does not write well by hand	Tech- uses phone, notebook and word processor, blog, online communities	Technology is important for writing and sharing and connecting	Tech- laptop-easier, reads online too, watches others	Tech used for process and finding inspiration ( internet)
Feedback/support What do I do as a writer?	Feedback from trusted individuals: brother and cousin, has found an editor Self-criticism also important	Feedback can be intimidating, but willing to make changes	Seeks feedback from writer friends but overall lack of feedback a drawback	Feedback important Trusted individuals for feedback Support of family, mother esp.	Feedback imp. but not available right now Lack of time/opportunity for feedback Used brother for feedback Imp. of prov. Slam poetry team-community and feedback	Feedback is important for most, criticism, self-criticism Trusted individuals: writing community , family members Growth mindset,
Challenges What do I do as a writer?	Challenge: rewriting-	When stuck- takes a break editing when so many changes have been made already	Challenge: writing too routinely When stuck leaves it, possibly restructures Challenge: lack of critical feedback from online groups, school lit mag and friends/ family	Challenges- letting go and getting started	Challenge- finding the right image When stuck- looks up words, goes back to beginning and rereads Challenge- finding time to write	Novelists- editing a challenge, when so many changes have already been made Others- finding effective means of expression- rewrite/ restructures Time to write Ppl. to get feedback from (3&5)
Inspiration What do I do as a writer?	Always seeking inspiration in Little things" Making sense of "dark times"	Inspired by little things	Inspired by ppl, nature, personal relationships, older cousins	Influenced by life, other artists, older brother	Influenced by other poets Current events	All- constantly looking outward for inspiration in the world around them and other writers



My final step was to check back with my participants. I emailed them a one-page summary of my findings asking for feedback. Unfortunately, I only received a reply from one of them, but she did say that the ideas made sense to her and that she had nothing to add.

The last thing I wanted to do was to find a way as part of this study to honour the voices of the participants. I used Saldaña's (2016) tabletop exercise to create a found poem using lines I found particularly powerful from the transcripts (p. 230). I printed these pages out, cut them up, sorted them on my dining room table and ultimately narrowed them down to create the poem found as Appendix A, parts of which form the epigraphs to each chapter of this study. This step was affirming in validating my thinking and helping me focus on the implications of the findings I had discovered.

To sum up, I tried throughout this process to follow the grounded theory methodology of constructing meaning from my data. I worked to refine my skills in initial coding, and then moved through a process of creating more focused codes to looking at my data in a number of different visual representations. Throughout this journey, which in reality was more recursive and fluid than it seems when described here, I worked in a reflective way looking at the data and writing memos to clarify my thinking which ultimately led me to five main ideas in answer to my research questions.

### Chapter Four: Findings

*I define writing  
As being able to explore new worlds  
And bring those worlds to someone else,  
To express things in the best way possible,  
In a more personal kind of way  
With a sense of authenticity, originality,  
Without judgment.  
Writing is what you truly believe in,  
Putting that cloud of thought and all the mixed emotions  
Into words  
And then onto paper  
Because sometimes we get desensitized and forget to feel.  
So, you try to get people to feel  
You want them to get goose bumps  
You want somebody to cry  
That's how you know you've actually touched them.*

(excerpt from Appendix A: Honouring their voices: A found poem)

The path I had followed constructing grounded theory allowed me to explore the life of young writers through the thoughts and feelings of these five participants. In discussing my findings, I would like to first situate them in the main ideas I had learned and expectations I had developed from my literature review and original research questions. From there I will focus individually on the data from each participant and how this data helped shape my thinking. From there I will use this data to explain and support the five findings I developed in answer to my research questions.

Based on themes emerging from the literature review, I anticipated that data gathered in the interviews would revolve around the nature of intrinsic motivation these young writers have in writing. I expected that students would identify both personal reflective writing and writing to express their thoughts and feelings for a wider audience as important to them. I expected that writing for public audiences would be important and would include forms that involve performance, for example, slam poetry, drama, and singing. I believed students would provide

evidence of being immersed in many multimodal forms of communication, including those based in technology. Finally, I thought they would indicate that they follow creative processes that are more fluid and idiosyncratic than those taught in schools, and that these writers would put greater emphasis on ideas and style than on structure or correctness. Data analysis showed many of these ideas were exemplified by the participants in this study.

I had set out to find answers to the following three questions:

1. What can be learned from how avid writers describe their identities, processes, and motivations to write?
2. To what extent do avid writers see a disconnect between their independently initiated writing and that which they are asked to do in school?
3. How can writing in school benefit from the insights and experiences of avid writers?

What I discovered was a group of young people who impressed me with their enthusiasm for writing and expressing themselves, and thoughtful understanding of their identities and processes as writers. The following descriptions represent my thoughts about them as recorded in field notes following each interview and supported by my analysis of the transcripts. I have tried to capture here my main impressions of each of them in terms of what stood out as important at the time and remained as defining factors as I continued to think about what each of them brought to the discussion. These descriptions also show how each participant contributed insights to the overall picture of avid writers that emerged through the process of analysing the data.

### **Participant 1: Robert**

(All participant names are pseudonyms). My first interview took place on a very snowy evening, at a coffee shop in the participant's neighbourhood. As I crept across town in the snow,

I realized I was feeling a level of apprehension caused by more than the slippery driving conditions. Would I be able to put the participant at ease and just let them talk? Would I be able to stop myself from jumping in and directing the conversation too forcefully? What would this person have to say about their writing? Would the two devices I brought actually record the interview properly? I thought about the trial interviews I had done in a course, and about the interviews I had participated in myself for others and tried to put myself at ease.

I arrived at the coffee shop a few moments before Robert. After getting us coffees, giving him the gift card I had promised, and going over the informed consent once again (as I did with all participants), we began. Almost immediately, I realized my fears were unwarranted. This young man spoke for over an hour, very thoughtfully, about his writing. I learned that he was working on a series of novels and was just in the editing process of the first one. Writing since junior high, he was now working in the mornings and spending his afternoons writing. He shared with me his very systematic process of outlining and drafting, stressing the need for this to maintain continuity and logic. He stressed the importance of “making sure that you answer all the important questions of every character” (Interview#1, 2016, p. 14). He also spoke of his drive to communicate with others in “the most effective way possible” (Interview #1, 2016, p. 3). His passion for writing was clear in how he emphasized the value of writing in his life, especially the pleasure he derived from being in the company of his characters (Interview #1, 2016, p. 6). He went on to explain that as he gets to know his characters, he learns about himself as well. The purpose of his writing began with working through ideas for himself, but then shifted to the ability to inspire others with these ideas (Interview #1, 2016, p. 8). He also identified the need to share his work with two trusted individuals, valuing their feedback as necessary to his growth as a writer (Interview #1, 2016, p. 16). In all, Robert’s confident discussion of who he is as a writer

reminded me of Bickerstaff's (2012) discovery of the strong "writerly identities" of adolescent writers (p. 59).

### **Participant 2: Guy**

The second interviewee, Guy expressed the same understanding of his own writerly identity, but he approached the interview process with less confidence than the first participant. This may have been because he was the youngest of the participants. Nonetheless, he too professed a great enjoyment from writing, for the opportunity he felt it allows to "just express yourself however you want without judgment" (Interview #2 2016, p. 5). He too was writing a series of novels, still working on the first one. Like Robert, he also saw the need to have the story all mapped out ahead of time (Interview #2 2016, p. 4).

I was surprised to learn that his attitude toward feedback differed considerably from Robert's. He asserted that, "Feedback can be intimidating" (Interview #2, 2016, p. 12). He has not shown his work to friends, thinking they would not be interested or would not offer worthwhile feedback (Interview #2, 2016, p. 8). He mentioned having some of his novel pieces looked at by visiting writers, but could not recall the feedback they gave him (Interview #2, 2016, p.11). Guy did speak about being open to growth as a writer, discussing how he has had to change his story to reflect his own growing maturity. He attributes this growth in part to characters he is reading about in his literature classes, stating that, "The more you read, the better your writing is" (Interview #2, 2016, p. 7). It is interesting to note that while he saw the texts read in school useful as exemplars of good writing, when asked about writing in school he said it would be better if it were more relevant (Interview #2, 2016, p. 9).

**Participant 3: Carol**

My third participant, Carol, was different again from the first two. She was as thoughtful and articulate as Robert but described herself as “introverted” (Interview #3, 2016, p.1). Even though she has published work in two different lit. mags, she identified her purpose for writing as a way to explore personal thoughts and emotions. Unlike Robert who was very disciplined in writing every day, Carol described her approach as “splurge” writing, waiting until feelings build up and then having to write (Interview #3, 2016, p.3). As a poet, she writes spontaneously, without the need to plan beyond each individual piece. While Robert mentioned using concept art to give himself a “visual reassurance” (Interview #1, 2016, p. 7), she often finds inspiration in photographs. While Robert and Guy plan their writing around plot and character, Carol often begins with images and creates her poems around them. The poem she brought to share was based on four photographs that she felt were connected. She worked on creating written imagery on these photos and then connected them around a central theme (Interview #3, 2016, p. 10).

In terms of feedback, her thoughts differed from both Robert and Guy’s. Like Guy, Carol shared that currently she is not really sharing her work with anyone more than a couple of friends who also write, because she does not have many people around her that she feels would give critical feedback. Like Robert, she shared the need for feedback, stating that “I guess there’s a part of me that’s always looking for the criticism” (Interview #3, 2016, p. 9). She compared her current situation of submitting work blindly to her university’s lit. mag. to working collaboratively with students on her high school’s lit. mag. to edit each other’s work, clearly preferring this opportunity to edit collaboratively (Interview #3, 2016, p. 6–7).

#### **Participant 4: Leonard**

My fourth participant, Leonard, a poet/lyricist, was the most actively involved writer I spoke to. Writing songs for other artists and poetry for himself, he actively seeks out feedback from others who are close to him, including people who are not necessarily “professionals” (Interview #4, 2016, p. 9) and has begun networking with others online as well (Interview #4, 2016, p. 13).

I was impressed by the degree of introspection Leonard brought to the discussion of his journey and growing identity as a writer. Like Robert, Leonard spoke articulately and at great length about how writing has played a role in his life since junior high, in particular music and poetry. He talked about being inspired initially by his older brother’s rapping and then working to find his own voice as he matured as a writer (Interview #4, 2016, p. 10–11).

Like Guy, who identified being influenced by great writers studied in ELA class, Leonard seemed to realize during our conversation that his drafting process was a legacy of the process writing he was taught in school, “So, yea thinking about it, I guess it was from English class over those years ago” (Interview #4, 2016, p. 19).

#### **Participant 5: Margaret**

Having thought after the first four interviews that I was seeing a strong theme in the importance of writing to help these young writers come to terms with their emotions and help build their identities, Margaret surprised me when she claimed, fairly early on in our conversation that she writes about, “Things that are not personal. So for some reason I just find difficulty writing about something that relates to my life. But I do write about things that I care about. Usually it involves issues such as environmental issues. A lot of them involve as well political issues” (Interview 5, 2016, p. 2). Unlike the others I had interviewed, who emphasized

the role writing plays in allowing them to explore ideas and personal experiences, she emphasized that for her, the purpose of writing was to allow her to express her political ideas. While she mentioned that she does this often out of anger, in her mind her subject matter is different from what she saw as the more personal writing of others. Like the others though she did express that she found joy in this ability to communicate ideas in a way that she felt others would be moved by (Interview 5, 2016, p. 4).

That difference aside, Margaret too identified the role writing has had in her life since an early age, mentioning specifically the writing of her family's home culture and her connection to family members who had been poets in their first language. She had a close family member who wrote as well with whom she shared her work.

Margaret's ideas about feedback did solidify my initial thinking on the need for trusted individuals with whom to workshop writing. She spoke very enthusiastically about a team of other poets with whom she worked to prepare their work for a competitive experience (Interview 5, 2016, p. 7), but now that she is in university, she will share her academic writing with others but not her poetry (Interview 5, 2016, p. 20–21). She, like the others, found creative writing in school restrictive, focussed on the "need to show what you've learnt" (Interview 5, 2016, p. 13).

### **The findings**

I am very grateful that these five young writers took the time to speak to me. They were intelligent and articulate and had clearly given some thought to what they wanted to say about themselves and their writing. They gave me a number of very nuanced ideas about who they are as writers, why and how they write.

After a varied process of coding and representing their ideas in webs and charts, I realized that the main threads of their identities and processes could not easily be pulled apart. It

became apparent that identity and process stem from and contribute to each other. Who these people are as writers influences the choices they make and actions they take as writers, and these processes in turn become an intrinsic part of who they are. Keeping this in mind, I have delineated five key ideas that help us understand what makes avid writers. I will use these five findings as a means to organize my discussion of the data provided by participants as outlined above.

#### Avid writers

1. Self-identify as writers with distinct writerly identities and processes defined by these identities;
2. Recognize that writing is valuable for both writers *and* readers;
3. Revel in the artistry of text, stress the importance of communicating in the most effective way possible;
4. Have a growth mindset; they see the value of perseverance and determination, linked with the need for feedback in supportive contexts;
5. Value the freedom to write what they want.

#### **Finding 1: Avid writers have strong writerly identities**

I write, therefore I am. Paraphrasing this well-known quotation from Descartes seemed a fitting way to begin this discussion of my first finding as it gets at the heart of the connection between what these writers do and who they are, linking action to identity. The act of writing defines who they are and how they see themselves. The five respondents to my advertisement for young people who “consider themselves avid writers” clearly see themselves in this light. While there are some differences in the processes they use they all shared the same qualities:

- Writing has been a part of their lives from a young age, often including an upbringing in a culture of writing
- Writing activities are part of their day to day lives

- They have times and places to write in that they find effective.
- They have developed processes that work for them
- They see themselves as writers of particular genres
- Above all writing is a source of joy in their lives.

**Writing from an early age.** To varying degrees, all of these writers recalled writing from young ages and having family members who were involved who created a culture that valued writing and personal expression. Robert identified junior high as the first time he “really dabbled into writing” (Interview #1, 2016, p. 8). He spoke about the value of having family members to help him with his writing process. In particular, he has a cousin with whom he talks about his writing while he is writing, and a brother to whom he shows his more final drafts when he is looking for the reaction of a first time reader (Interview #1, 2016, p. 12). He went on to talk about his appreciation of his cousin who would listen actively and give opinions when asked, but who also allowed him to answer his own questions through this opportunity to think out loud (Interview #1, 2016, p. 16). Similarly, Guy identified beginning writing regularly about three years ago, which would mean around grade 8. He shared that one of his parents is a writer and that he is supported by his parents in his decision to follow writing as a career.

Carol had more to say about her writing past. She clearly identified being very proud of her first story she wrote when she was 11 (saved and date stamped in Microsoft Word). She also spoke fondly of being inspired to write by a group of cousins who were homeschooled and who wrote a lot of short stories as part of their curriculum (Interview #3, 2016, p. 6).

Like Robert and Guy, Leonard also began writing in junior high. In his case he found inspiration in emulating the rap music his older brother listened to (Interview #4, 2016, p. 9). Leonard strongly identified the value of supporting family members. He compared his

experiences to those of his writer friends who did not have support of the people around them. He expressed gratitude for his mother who realized that writing was a passion for him and who “kept [him] strong” along his journey to turn writing into a career path (Interview #4, 2016, p. 11). He went on to explain that his family would attend his spoken word poetry performances and post them to their social media feeds. When times had become difficult at one point in his life, he chose to share these feelings with his family in a poem which allowed him to open up and speak to them and begin a healing process (Interview #4, 2016, p. 22).

For Margaret, poetry was a major element of the home culture of her family. She identified beginning to write around age 10. Because literature and poetry were important to her family, she was enrolled in classes and learned to memorize and recite the poetry of her family’s home country. That her father and both of her grandfathers wrote made her think that this was “how this is in the family, I need to do this. I need to figure out how to do this” (Interview #4, 2016, p. 6). She shared that her brother is also a writer and how on one car trip she wrote a poem about the environment inspired by the scenery she saw outside the window, continually asking him for feedback as she wrote (Interview #5, 2016, p. 17).

So, in a variety of ways, all of the participants grew up with writing in the family, aiding in their developing identities as writers. This theme is apparent in the literature as well. James Gee (2004) shows that learning takes place through natural, instructed, and cultural processes. Learning through cultural practices positions learners as apprentices, working with masters (p. 12). This model is most explicitly shown in Margaret’s inculcation into the world of the poetry of her family’s home culture. While the other four respondents did not speak specifically of this apprenticeship relationship, they certainly did value the example and support of family members, echoing Gee’s statement that “people learn best when their learning is part of a highly motivated

engagement with social practices which they value” (p. 77). Skerrett (2013) provides an example of how a student was apprenticed into her family’s literacy practices of note and letter writing from a young age. Her teacher helped to nurture her identity as a writer by accepting Nina’s practices and experiences in the classroom, breaking down the barrier the student perceived between her own personal writing and the academic writing expected in school (pp. 340-341). In a similar way, in her study of young writers, Bickerstaff (2012) shows that the writers she studied mentioned friends and family members as role models that had an effect on their development as writers. She gave the example of one student in particular who highlighted her mother as one of a number of role models in her family (p. 60).

Through the literature and the evidence provided by these participants the presence of a supportive home culture that values expression and communication can be seen as an important element in the development of young writers’ identities.

**Active writing practices.** Growing out of this developing identity is the manifestation of writing practices that identify these young people as writers. Here there was very little difference between participants. All of them talked about being constantly on the outlook for inspiration. Even though Robert and Guy were working on big projects, they were still searching for and saving ideas for the future. Robert reported getting inspiration from “little things”, with the understanding that his stories are constructed from “a collection of smaller ideas that play along very nicely” and that sources of story ideas for him include movie soundtracks, songs, drawing, pictures and playing games with themes that revolve around war or adventure (Interview #1, 2016, p.4). The most organized of all the participants, he saves his ideas in folders on his tablet (Interview #1, 2016, p. 5).

Guy stressed the importance of being observant, stating that inspiration is everywhere: from books and movies, to people he has seen on the bus, to his own personal life (Interview #2, 2016, p.4). He recognized the growing importance of being able to analyze his own experiences in that, “the more that I do, the more I have to write about” (Interview #2, 2016, p. 8). Reading is also key for him. He drew an analogy to music, explaining that as good musicians need to listen to music, likewise good writers need to read (Interview #2, 2016, p. 7). His laptop is an important tool in this process as he says is very slow at handwriting (Interview #2, 2016, p. 8).

Carol identified nature and people watching as her two main sources of ideas from the outside world. She also writes about her own experiences. Of particular interest are sensations she experiences in the present moment—what she sees, hears, and smells (Interview #3, 2016, p. 3). In terms of hanging onto these ideas, she uses her phone, admitting that “in my Gmail draft box I have so many emails of inspiration, it’s funny” (Interview #3, 2016, p. 7).

Leonard, a poet and lyricist, had the widest range of sources for his writing. Like the others he too actively seeks out ideas for future pieces of writing. Recognizing that perhaps he was sounding clichéd, he answered my question about where he gets his ideas by saying, “as sappy as it sounds, life, really.” He then went on to list: friends, family, funny and scary experiences, musicians, poets, and motivational speakers. He spoke about how poetry will influence his music and vice-versa (Interview #4, 2016, p. 5). Near the end of the interview he returned to the theme of inspiration, stating that he would remind younger writers to stay open-minded in terms of inspiration. He also added comedians to his list of sources, speaking to the fact that they use humour to explore serious themes and that he finds inspiration in the responsibility they take on when they do so (Interview #4, 2016, p. 24). He too uses his computer

for most of his work, seeing it as more efficient a way to record his thinking which he describes as “impulsive” (Interview #4, 2016, p. 12).

In terms of actively seeking inspiration, Margaret’s approach was more focused than the others. While the first four participants looked for inspiration in life unfolding around them, Margaret’s focus is more political. She is keenly aware of current events in the world and draws on her emotions and opinions of these events to create her poetry. She lists the news and discussions in the courses she is taking in university as important sources. She also listens to slam poets for ideas that might be “nice to think about, maybe write about” (Interview #5, 2016, p. 3). A busy student, she admits she doesn’t always have the time to write as much as she used to in high school. She uses a small notebook to collect ideas to pursue when she is on school breaks or when she feels like she wants to “go to [her] creative side” (Interview #5, 2016, p. 3).

Looking at the array of sources of inspiration these young writers pursue, from everyday life to personal experiences to world news, shows how widely and actively they seek ideas for their writing. This act of always being on the look-out for ideas and saving them up for their possibilities shows that writing is not only who they are but what they do on a daily basis. This practice is also exemplified by the young songwriters studied by Williams (2012) whom she describes as always being “on call” as writers with notebooks at the ready and computer files with fragments of ideas, rhymes, and partial lyrics (pp. 373– 374).

**Effective writing times and places.** In addition to having developed the habit of mind of writers to actively seek out inspiration, the participants in this study know well what works for them in terms of routines around writing. Like Williams’ (2013) participants, these young writers also make time to write and have preferred places in which to write (p. 374). Robert has the strongest routine of the group. He has found a location he likes because it is warm, bright and

distraction free. He is able to put on his headphones and spends each afternoon writing (Interview #1, 2016, p. 6). Guy has discovered that he gets distracted in the evenings and works best in the mornings, and so does most of his writing on weekends. He reports trying to write at least three times a week (Interview #2, 2016, p. 5). Carol prefers early morning or late at night but identifies writing routinely a challenge, waiting instead until she has enough new ideas and then participating in “splurge writing”. While she will brainstorm in public, she prefers to do her writing in private (Interview #3, 2016, pp. 3–4). Leonard does not have a particular routine but says he is always writing, either for himself or for the music projects in which he is involved. He refers to his writing as “impulsive” and sometimes “rambling” but very active (Interview #4, 2016, p. 6). Interestingly, he recognizes differences in the writing he does at different times of day. His writing in the morning or early afternoon is more positive and open-minded, while the work he completes in the early evening is more logical or sarcastic. He identifies late at night as a special time when he can write most personally and sentimentally (Interview #4, 2016, p. 7). Margaret also writes mostly “anywhere, anytime” but prefers writing at the end of the day in the comfort of her room on her laptop, stating that by then she has usually accomplished what she needed to do in the day and has “more time or space in [her] brain to access some creativity” (Interview #5, 2016, p. 4). While the preferences these writers have in terms of the setting of their writing may differ, it is clear that these preferences make up an integral part of their identities as writers.

**Writing processes define identity.** The writing processes these writers use to turn the inspirations they have collected into written work also speak to their individual identities as writers. While their individual thought processes and preferences differentiate one from another, the common thread is that all of them can clearly articulate those processes that work well for

them. The clarity with which they described their writing processes speaks to the depth of understanding they have of themselves as writers. The differences among their various processes also speak to a very personalized view of the process of writing.

Jones (2013) examined the writing processes of 34 teenage students. She wanted to see the degree to which their writing processes matched up with common understandings of writing as it is taught in the classroom. She showed that classroom practice followed the linear process of plan, draft, revise, redraft (p. 58), whereby ideas are generated, organized and then turned into the written text. What she found was that almost half of the students either preferred mental planning to written planning or went back and engaged in mental planning as part of the writing process. There were also differences in the extent of this mental planning (p. 60). Furthermore, many abandon the plans they have made to favour a more “writing to generate ideas strategy” (p. 65).

These differences in approach are borne out by the participants in this study. Robert definitely relies heavily on the plans he makes. He felt that flaws in his early writing were due to a lack of planning, creating “loopholes” in the plot (Interview #1, 2016, p.14). In fact, for him writing “on the go” was a “very flawed approach” (Interview #1, 2016, p. 17). He said that the planning for the book he is currently working on has “allowed [him] to answer all the important questions of every character”. Guy also has his story “all mapped out chronologically,” though in less detail, creating jot notes for each scene (Interview #2, 2016, p. 4). Despite this planning though, he still leaves room to make major changes, for example changing the character of his protagonist to make him less flat (Interview #2, 2016, p. 6).

The three poets in the group were less deliberate about their planning, which may simply be due to the fact that they write shorter pieces. Like Robert and Guy, Leonard does outline

before he begins, but then follows a process of going back and adding more detail as he writes. As he described it, he begins by listing ideas and then crossing off the ones he doesn't want. Phase two sees him expanding on each of these ideas. Next, he tries to create a metaphor or simile for each of these smaller points and finally he edits for fluidity. He identified this process as being derived from his "essay writing days" in high school, where the process was to identify main ideas and then elaborate on those ideas (Interview #4, 2016, p. 18–19). Carol tends to begin with images, focussing first on physical description and then creating the feelings and ideas she gets from the images, using the writing itself to help in the generation of ideas.

Margaret begins with overall ideas and does a lot of brainstorming and in the case of her more political pieces, research. She refers back to her initial brainstorming and inspiration notes for examples of effective wording, but basically says she will "just write something down and revise it, or revise it and revise it and revise it" (Interview #5, 2016, p. 18). While she sometimes has a plan for where the poem will go, usually she will start at the beginning seeing where the idea takes her. If she feels stuck, she will work on parts of the poem she feels she can write in a "beautiful manner" and then go back to the beginning (Interview #5, 2016, p. 19).

Each of these participants also had definite though somewhat distinct ideas around what to do when they meet with challenges in their writing. Robert is very disciplined and forces himself to stay in the coffee shop where he goes to write, to "at least get a sentence down". Failing that, he draws something, or listens to music and tries to think (Interview #1, 2016, p. 7). Likewise, Margaret will go back to the beginning and read her poem over up to the point she is at, looking for ways to continue (Interview #5, 2016, p. 5). On the other hand, Guy stops writing, believing he will write something bad and throw it away anyway. He feels that taking a break and waiting until he has a "more inspired mind" is the strategy that works best for him (Interview

#2, 2016, p. 6). Carol too will just leave the work alone, but then will go back and see if ideas can be reworked when she feels more inspired (Interview #3, 2016, p. 5). Leonard will seek advice from others, ranging from other writers to his family and friends who are not writers. He will also listen to music or spoken word poetry, but he says the most important thing is to take time away first to let ideas enter into his head without others' opinions (Interview #4, 2016, pp. 8–9).

Jones's (2013) study of the processes used by students shows "the complexity of the writing process particularly regarding the integration of idea generation with translation and the variety of ways in which different writers engage with this complexity" (p. 65). This complexity is also seen in the ways the young people I interviewed described their own processes. They run the gamut from detailed planning and reliance on this plan to a more free-flowing process dictated by the ideas as they unfold, and from self-discipline to more flexible approaches to problem-solving. Regardless of their preferred processes, it became clear that each of these writers had strong opinions on what process works best for them and the process they rely on is a part of what shapes their identity as writers.

**Forms and genres as identity markers.** Not only do each of these writers identify processes that define who they are as a writer, but they very much define themselves by the forms they tend to write. Like Bickerstaff's (2012) participants who "strongly identified ... as poets, lyricists, game designers or bloggers" (p. 59), so too did these writers identify themselves by the genres they prefer. Robert clearly sees himself as a novelist, dedicating his time to a fantasy series. Robert prefers the idea of storytelling, mentioning he was never very good at writing poetry (Interview #1, 2016, p. 3). Carol is a free verse poet, matching the "unconfined structure" to the abstract themes she writes about (Interview #3, 2016, p. 2). Leonard focuses on

slam poetry and song writing, and Margaret is a slam poet. For each of these writers, poetry writing seems to have come out of their upbringing, inspired as mentioned earlier by family members. Guy is the exception to this rule. Like Robert, he is working on a series of fantasy novels. However, the youngest of the group, he is still exploring other genres, having submitted a play to a writing contest and taking a creative writing course to expose himself to other forms.

It is clear to see as well that the forms they gravitate to are not the forms that are traditionally taught in school. Just as Moje, Overby, Tysvaer and Morris (2008) showed that students are involved in a variety of forms and genres so too do these writers gravitate toward untraditional forms. Robert and Guy seem to have been inspired by the fantasy novel genre and to some extent perhaps by the recent popularity of young adult series from the *Percy Jackson* (Riordan 2005–2009) series to dystopian series' like *Divergent* (Roth 2001–2013) and *Hunger Games* (Collins 2008–2010). Leonard and Margaret are both active in the spoken word community, performing as well as writing. While Carol seems the most traditional, she did mention having put some of her work on sites like Wattpad (Interview #3, 2016, p.7). Margaret too is trying to establish her presence as a writer and has done some blogging and is thinking of sending her work to a number of lit. mags (Interview #5, 2016, p. 10). These young writers then identify very strongly, not simply as writers but in more specialized ways related to how they write and what they write.

**Finding joy in the journey.** These first five aspects of identity discussed deal with how these young writers got their start and the actions they engage in as writers. This last element centres on why writing is important to them. The passion with which these young people spoke about writing resonated throughout each interview. For each of these writers this passion seems to be driven by the pleasure they derive from the act of writing, but also by a deeper sense of

purpose. The enjoyment these writers derive is both involuntary and purposeful, as discussed by Weinstein (2007) in her study for four young writers. She shows the connection between pleasure and engagement and describes three types of pleasure: discourse membership, self-expression and self-representation, and play (pp. 275– 280). These writers also exhibit these forms of pleasure.

Robert values “enjoy[ing] the company of the characters ... exploring their world and ... it’s kind of fun” (Interview #1, 2016, p. 6). Beyond this there was a deeper satisfaction with being able to work through “dark times” in his life and “channel that into something productive and into something that can inspire” (Interview #1, 2016, p. 8). Guy too expressed enjoyment in the “exaggerations and over-the-topness” of writing fantasy (Interview #2, 2016, p. 4). He also recognizes writing as something he is talented at and committed to. In particular he derives satisfaction from being able to express himself “without judgment” (Interview #2, 2016, p. 5). Carol finds enjoyment in the break that writing provides from the busyness of the world and takes pride in what she calls “the personal element where I have ownership over that writing and it can’t be replicated again” (Interview #3, 2016, p. 4). On this subject, Leonard paraphrased James Brown whom he reported as saying that the “most important thing in life was being happy and listening to some good music ... I think that’s very much what I feel like. Life without music or expression is boring” (Interview #4, 2016, p. 6). He got more serious later though, in speaking of the power of his spoken word poetry to help others. He shared that while on stage he tries to catch the eyes of young audience members because he wants to be “as motivational and inspirational as [he] can” (Interview #4, 2016, p.22). Margaret also spoke of joy and pride, saying “it makes me feel good to know that I have the ability to express something I care about ... And I feel happy after I finish writing something” (Interview #5, 2016, p. 4). Like Leonard,

she talks about performing and the need to connect with her audience to see how they are reacting, to see if they can relate and for those “who did not relate before to get that sort of aha moment” (Interview #1, 2016, p.9). This sense of joy in what they do helps drive these writers forward and makes up a large part of who they are as avid writers.

In all, these aspects of a writerly identity form an important piece of the puzzle of what makes them avid writers. This identity began for all of them in homes in which writing was supported. As they developed these identities, they have worked out for themselves what works in terms of their interactions with the world around them as a source of inspiration, their preferences for times and places to write, the processes they have discovered to be effective and the forms in which they engage. Underscoring and driving the development for all is the deep pleasure they get from writing and being writers.

### **Finding 2: Avid writers recognize the value of writing for writers *and* readers**

Stemming from the joyful engagement in writing is the value these writers recognize in both exploring and expressing ideas. Each of these participants talked about what they learned from the exploration of ideas, and in turn, how compelled they felt to share these ideas with others. Guzzetti and Gamboa (2004) show that students publishing their writing in a zine helped them develop their identities as they were sharing their ideas with a wider audience (p. 432). Ada and Campoy (2004) and Honeyford (2014) provide examples where autobiographical writing and photo essays empower students to develop and represent their identities. Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor and Otuteye (2005) speak to the transformative power of writing intended to be performed. The participants in this study, writing on their own, seem to be writing with the same fundamental beliefs about the power of writing to help us understand ourselves and our world, and in turn to influence our world by sharing these newly discovered understandings.

Robert put this simply, defining writing as “being able to explore new worlds and to be able to bring that world to somebody else” (Interview #1, 2016, p. 2). He discussed learning about himself as he writes about his characters (Interview #1, 2016, p. 6).

All the participants talked about the idea of writing as exploration. Guy defined writing as the ability to explore complex themes such as good and evil, morals, temptation, and ambition (Interview #2, 2016, p. 3). Carol often writes about her own emotions and experiences with those she is close to; for her, writing is “very personal” (Interview #3, 2016, pp. 2–3). Margaret feels that “writing is what you truly believe in. It’s obvious that there’s a sense of authenticity, originality” (Interview #5, 2016, p. 2).

Robert and Leonard spoke most strongly about the therapeutic quality of writing and how it helped them understand and overcome difficult times in their lives. Robert showed how the profound themes of his writing come from making sense of his own struggles. He says:

A common theme I write about through my characters is the struggle of the conscience. Often portrayed by feelings of guilt, loss, and denial. You could say this can be traced back to my own dark time in life. And it is also because of that shared experience of negativity that I can connect with my characters so well.

More specifically in regards to my antagonists, I mention that I don’t like to make them so two dimensional or “cut and dry”. This is because of all of the things that I learnt from the uncomfortable years of my life, the most important lesson that I learned was that everyone is ultimately human: No better than anyone else regardless of disposition. We all struggle deep inside of ourselves with a constant war of ideologies that can only be won (at least from my experience) in silence and out of view from anyone else. (Interview #1, 2016, p. 19)

Leonard also speaks of deeper themes developed through the introspection writing allows. He too shared that writing helped him work through a dark time in his life and allowed him to ultimately write about the importance of taking control of his own emotions and find happiness in “being calm, being still ... and really proud of who I was” (Interview #4, 2016, p. 17). Furthermore, he touched on the ideas of release or catharsis, saying that, it “felt very, very relieving and it felt really good to write and find, put into words” (Interview #4, 2016, p. 20). Carol and Margaret also spoke of this idea of release—releasing something they couldn’t otherwise release (Interview #3, 2016, p. 4), and of channelling stress and anger (Interview #5, 2016, p. 4).

Beyond the value of writing in helping develop ideas for the writer was the need all these writers had to express these newly discovered ideas for others. Robert mentioned near the beginning of our interview that he “really likes storytelling” (Interview #1, 2016, p. 1), going on to emphasize the importance of sharing and communicating his ideas (Interview #1, pp. 2–3). Guy has submitted work to a play contest and his school’s lit. mag. (Interview #2, 2016, p. 8). Likewise, Carol has published in her high school and university lit. mags. and has also posted some of her writing online (Interview #3, 2016, pp. 7–8). Leonard writes lyrics for musicians to record and is active in the spoken word community, performing his poetry live (Interview #4, 2016, p. 2). Margaret, too, is a spoken word poet and also has done some blogging to share her ideas (Interview #5, 2016, p. 2).

Leonard and Margaret, who share their work most regularly at spoken word venues and slam competitions spoke most strongly about the power of self-expression and its ability to inspire an audience. Leonard was proud of his ability to be a role model for younger audience members and speak to them about important themes, giving mental health awareness as an

example (Interview #4, 2016, p. 22). For Margaret, her purpose is to motivate people to think about and possibly be moved to act on important global issues (Interview #3, 2016, p. 9).

While all of the participants spoke passionately about the need to express their ideas, they had conflicting ideas when asked about the role audience plays *while* they are writing. On the one hand, there was Guy who felt that if he focussed on the audience of his novel while writing he would worry too much and “get nothing done” (Interview #2, 2016, p. 9). And then there was Margaret, for whom audience is “incredibly important” and who actively tries to picture how the audience will react when she gets to what she feels are powerful lines (Interview #5, 2016, pp. 9–10). In the middle there was Leonard who also considers how the audience will receive his spoken word poems (Interview #4, 2016, p. 22), but cautions against pandering to an audience and losing the authenticity of the lyrics he writes (Interview #5, 2016, p. 13). Carol and Robert both described their thinking about audience as evolving, with Carol seeing some irony in that she is beginning to think about audience more now, even though her writing is becoming more personal (Interview #3, 2016, p. 6). Robert recalled being reluctant to publish his work for fear of ridicule, but recognized that he is becoming more comfortable with the idea because “it’s part of growing up as a writer, being able to share what you have with the world”. He adds that now that he is in the editing stage of working on his novel, he finds thinking about audience more helpful than when he was initially writing it for himself (Interview #1, 2016, p. 11).

Despite their differing views on how consciously they focus on audience, all five of these avid writers see the purpose of writing as two-fold: to both explore and express ideas. Clearly they are all using their writing to help them understand the world and their place in it and feel empowered to share these ideas with others.

### **Finding 3. Avid writers revel in the artistry of text**

The well-known Canadian writer Carol Shields (2003) sums up the connection between writing to explore and writing to express, concluding “that language carries weight in our culture is very often fuelled by a search for home, our rather piteous human groping toward that metaphorical place where we can be most truly ourselves, where we can evolve and create, and where we can reach out and touch and heal each other’s lonely heart” (p. 262). It is this weight of language and the joy and passion with which these young writers approach the craft of writing that is the next quality that stands out as an important aspect of what makes them avid writers. Regardless of the genres and forms they gravitate towards, all of these young writers expressed the need to communicate as effectively as possible. This harkens back to Weinstein’s (2007) recognition of the pleasure of self-expression and self-representation and the joy of “being able to use writing to externalize [the] imaginative world in order to draw responses from those for whom that world resonates” (p. 276).

For Robert the craft of writing revolves around storytelling and being able to find the most effective way of communicating ideas (Interview #1, 2016, p. 3). For him, this means meticulous planning to maintain continuity, logic, and develop complexity in his story (Interview #1, 2016, pp. 14-15). Visualization is key. In order to help with this visual side of things he creates maps and concept art (Interview #1, 2016, p. 7). He also recognizes the need for effective language, going back to revise after he saw the repetitiveness of the language in his first draft (Interview #1, 2016, p. 18). Finally, drawing on the works of writers like J.R.R. Tolkien and J.K. Rowling, he emphasized the need to develop the culture of the story through description of elements such as clothing and symbol (Interview #1, 2016, p. 18). Guy’s ideas are similar to

Robert's in that he sees the need for planning to ensure the effective communication of complex ideas. However, he also sees the need to make major changes to improve the story. As previously mentioned, he recognizes the importance of other writers, saying that "the more you read, the better your writing is" (Interview #2, 2016, p. 7).

As poets Carol, Leonard, and Margaret all talked about the importance of creating effective language. Carol admits as a self-professed introvert that writing allows her to express "exactly" what she wants to say and that it allows her to focus on description (Interview #3, 2016, pp. 2–3). She spoke about how she endeavours to create in her poetry the spirit she imagines from her source of inspiration, for example pictures, arranging and rearranging images until she achieves the effect she wants (Interview #3, 2016, p. 10). Leonard too works in images, collecting, describing, and arranging them into the form he desires, "decorating the scene and making it feel like you're in the situation" (Interview #4, 2016, p. 18). Margaret spoke about the need to create effective imagery and go beyond just ranting about issues she sees as important (Interview #5, 2016, p. 4). She wants to create language powerful enough for the audience to get goose bumps or even cry (Interview #5, 2016, p. 12). She too uses pictures to help her develop her imagery. For her this is often because she is trying to capture aspects of realities that she has not experienced, for example life in a refugee camp. She feels the need to create the picture as realistically as possible (Interview #5, 2016, p. 18). She also emphasizes the importance of getting the wording right because in her chosen form, spoken-word, the audience is hearing rather than seeing her words (Interview #5, 2016, p. 19).

For all these writers, the craft of writing is very important, coming through loud and clear not just in what they had to say about their writing, but in the passion and confidence with which they spoke. From storytelling to poetry they could all articulate the importance of

communicating ideas not just clearly, but effectively, or in Robert's words, "the most effective way possible" (Interview #1, 2016, p. 3).

**Finding 4: Avid writers have a growth mindset, and value support from others.**

While all of these participants have developed writerly identities with practices that work for them, that does not mean they are not also open to change. The degree to which this is true does vary from one writer to the next. Guy reported his writing as improving over the years as he grew as a person and how he revises because "it doesn't match how I am as a person anymore" (Interview #2, 2016, p. 5). He cites not only personal experience but also the increasing number of literature classes he has taken as helping him learn to write better (Interview #2, 2016, p. 7). Robert, on the other hand, spoke more strongly about the need to be active in seeking to improve his writing. He admitted the challenge of pushing himself to keep editing when the work is "no longer new" but recognized that persistence and routine would lead to better results (Interview #1, 2016, p. 7). While he admitted that his first work was predictable, he said this pushed him to try to do something better (Interview #1, 2016, p. 8). Specifically, he identified "persistence" and "not being afraid to tell yourself that your work sucks" as the qualities that helped him most in the process of growing as a writer (Interview #1, 2016, p. 9). Carol identified that she now thinks of the perspective of the audience when she writes (Interview #3, 2016, p. 6). For Leonard, becoming more open-minded has been key to his growth as a writer. He gave an overview of his writing journey, having begun with emulating rap artists to beginning to write poetry then going back to different music genres. He recognizes that he now has a better understanding of how all these genres work and that he has "found [him]self as a writer" (Interview #4, 2016, pp. 9–10). Margaret sees that she has developed patience with herself. When once she would write very

emotionally, she now stops to think things through and ends up with work that is more thoughtful (Interview # 5, 2016, p. 6).

An important aspect of this growth mindset and openness to change is the role of feedback from others. Many scholars see writing as a sociocultural act, and show that affinity groups play a large role in skill development (Gee, 2004; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004; Moje, Overby & Morris 2008; Skerrett 2013; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009; Weinstein, 2007). I found the participants' thoughts on feedback and working with others very compelling. At first their ideas seemed contradictory with Robert and Leonard actively seeking out others and developing communities of writers while Guy and Carol and Margaret are not currently doing so. Looking closely though it became apparent that it was the nature of relationships that seemed to drive the individual's opinions on sharing and working with others. Specifically, it seems that for the participants to value feedback from others, there needs to be a level of familiarity and trust.

Robert and Leonard had trusted individuals with whom to work. For Robert, his cousin and brother form a small close-knit group. He talked about staying up late at night with his cousin who would "tell the truth" and whom he trusted to give good advice (Interview #1, 2016, p. 16). Leonard also seeks advice from family members and his writer friends. He mentioned that he goes to these people because he does not get any "solid" feedback from his music production team (Interview #4, 2016, p. 23).

Guy had the most negative experiences with feedback, going so far as to call it "intimidating" (Interview #2, 2016, p. 12). He said he didn't share his work with many people. He mentioned "close friends who don't even actually read it" (Interview #2, 2016, p. 8). He was disappointed to have entered a play in a contest and received no feedback, other than a letter saying he had not won. For this reason he refuses to revise this piece (Interview #2, 2016, p. 3).

While he is in a creative writing class at school he said that even there “it takes a lot of prodding” to get people to share their work and that not everyone does (Interview #2, 2016, p. 9). He did receive some feedback from writers-in-residence at his school and his creative writing teacher, but could not remember what it was (Interview #2, 2016, p. 12). When talking about feedback, Guy drew on his school experiences. For him, feedback was received after he had submitted work, not as part of the process. He was not receptive to the idea of feedback because he had “already changed like a million things before I submitted it” (Interview # 2, 2016, p. 12).

Carol and Margaret helped me understand this seeming contradiction around the value of feedback and working with others. Neither of these writers is currently involved in sharing their work with others, not because they don’t value this practice but because they currently do not have people in their lives that would perform this role. Carol talked about her experience submitting work to her university lit. mag., which doesn’t give personal feedback, unlike her high school lit. mag. where students did work together to edit each other’s work (Interview #3, 2016, p. 6). At one time she did post work to online communities, but does not do so anymore, preferring instead to show her work to some of her friends because there is “a part of [her] that’s always looking for the criticism”. She is disappointed though that her friends who don’t write will just praise her work without looking at it with a critical eye (Interview #3, 2016, p. 8).

Margaret gave the best example of an affinity group in action in the slam poetry team of which she was a member in high school. The group would meet regularly to write, share, and critique each other’s work. She said that she felt she was in the company of writers that were better than her and that that helped her learn and become a better writer. She spoke about the comfort of having others with her to support her in competition (Interview #3, 2016, p. 7). She shared that currently she doesn’t share her work with anyone. Part of the reason for this is that

she is trying to fit writing into a busy school schedule and often completes pieces right before spoken word events. She also realized though that she doesn't have a lot of people around her who write poetry and so is lacking that connection she had earlier as a member of a poetry writing team (Interview #3, 2016, p. 21).

It became clear to me after thinking and comparing what these young writers had to say that community and trusted individuals to share their work with are important. It seems that trust and the ability to reciprocate are important elements of affinity groups. Leonard and Robert spoke positively about the connections they currently have in their writing lives. Carol and Margaret highlighted the fact that they once had these personal connections to other creative writers and feel this is currently lacking. Guy, the most cynical of the group in terms of gathering feedback from others has not yet had this kind of relationship with others. This shows us that part of what makes avid writers is that they recognize that writing at its best brings people together to consider ideas and craft as a social process.

#### **Finding 5. Avid writers value freedom**

This last finding takes us back to the purpose of this study. I wanted to explore the disconnect my students had verbalized between in and out of school writing. Throughout their responses, the participants I interviewed were understanding and respectful about the writing they had done in school but as a group saw the lack of freedom they experienced in terms of writing assignments for school to be a major downfall.

To begin with the positive, participants did cite lessons they had learned and aspects they valued about their ELA classes. Guy spoke specifically about how his literature classes provided him with examples of great writers to learn from (Interview #2, 2016, p. 7). Leonard recognized as we were talking that his writing process, moving from general ideas to adding supporting

details stemmed from his “essay writing days” in school (Interview #4, 2016, p. 19). Robert liked his grade 9 class where they were allowed to write their own short stories (Interview #1, 2016, p. 12). Carol recognized the importance of “training writers to write about something specific” (Interview #3, 2016, p. 9). Margaret accepted that the purpose of writing in high school was often to evaluate reading saying, “There’s nothing wrong with that. I mean you’ve got to demonstrate what you’ve learnt” (Interview #3, 2016, p. 12). As a high school English teacher it was heartening to hear that these participants saw some of the purpose behind the learning experiences their teachers were providing.

That said, they also all saw their high school writing programs as being too restrictive. Robert would have liked the chance to “be able to create something new”. He saw that “it was mostly studying the writings of other people. And while that is well and good, it kind of felt like a big limiting factor” (Interview #1, 2016, p. 12). Guy said that his out of school writing was more “relevant” than in school “textbook” based writing (Interview #2, 2016, p. 9). Carol wished topics in school were broader and that there were more options (Interview #4, 2016, p. 9). Leonard echoed these sentiments, saying he felt “trapped” having to write about the texts they were studying in class. He cited the provincial exam as the one time he felt he was provided with some choice over what to write (Interview #4, 2016, p. 15). Margaret was the most reflective on this question. Along with feeling limited by having to write within parameters of the books she was studying, she mentioned the lack of poetry as an option even when creative writing was done. She also stated the artificiality of having to write for her teachers, wondering how well they would relate to her imagery. Another limiting factor was the pressure that her work would be evaluated (Interview #4, 2016, pp. 12–14).

These ideas are borne out in the literature as well. Behizadeh (2014) studied students' perceptions of authenticity, reporting that 21 of the 22 students she interviewed identified that providing choice does not necessarily result in students viewing the work as authentic. She found that authenticity was perceived when students could make choices that they felt were of personal value to them (p. 33). This focus on choice is also a key element in the practical work of writers such as Fecho (2004) and Kittle (2008) who respectively advocate inquiry and writer's workshop approaches in classrooms.

### **Summary**

At the beginning of this study, I set out to discover what I as an educator could learn from avid young writers. I was interested in how they saw themselves as writers and what they did as writers to see if there were ways I could use these factors to create a more authentic and engaging classroom for all my students. The young writers I interviewed revealed to me many important elements about their identities and processes and about the power of writing in their lives. I learned that they all see themselves very clearly as writers who engage in distinct writing practices that make up the fabric of this identity. They recognize the power writing has to help them develop deeper understanding of themselves and their world. Linked to this is the recognition of the power of writing to change the lives of their audiences too, which has inspired them to publish their work in a variety of forms. Flowing from this, they are all passionate about the craft of writing, taking on the responsibility, but also experiencing joy in expressing their ideas in the best ways they can. As writers they are open-minded and persistent about growing and improving and see the value of working with other trusted individuals to improve their craft. Finally, they value the immense freedom they have in their out of school writing to express

themselves, as Leonard says, “putting that cloud of thought and all the mixed emotions into words and then onto paper” (Interview #4, 2016, p. 3).

In my work with my own lit. mag. students, I am often impressed with the passion, intelligence, and self-knowledge that they bring to their work. These participants deepened my understanding of the identities and practices that define avid young writers and have provided much food for thought about how I could begin to incorporate situations conducive to developing these qualities in my classroom.

### Chapter Five: Implications

*I believe  
Routine is a really big problem  
I am impulsive and stubborn; I splurge write.  
I stick with routine; I have it all mapped out.  
To make a world of your own you have to have a culture,  
That images and symbolism help make it real.  
I like using description, and creating pictures,  
It's important to give a certain complexity to characters,  
That there are times when an idea just flows,  
That pieces can take their own path,  
And that life without music or poetry is boring.*

(excerpt from Appendix A: Honouring their voices: A found poem)

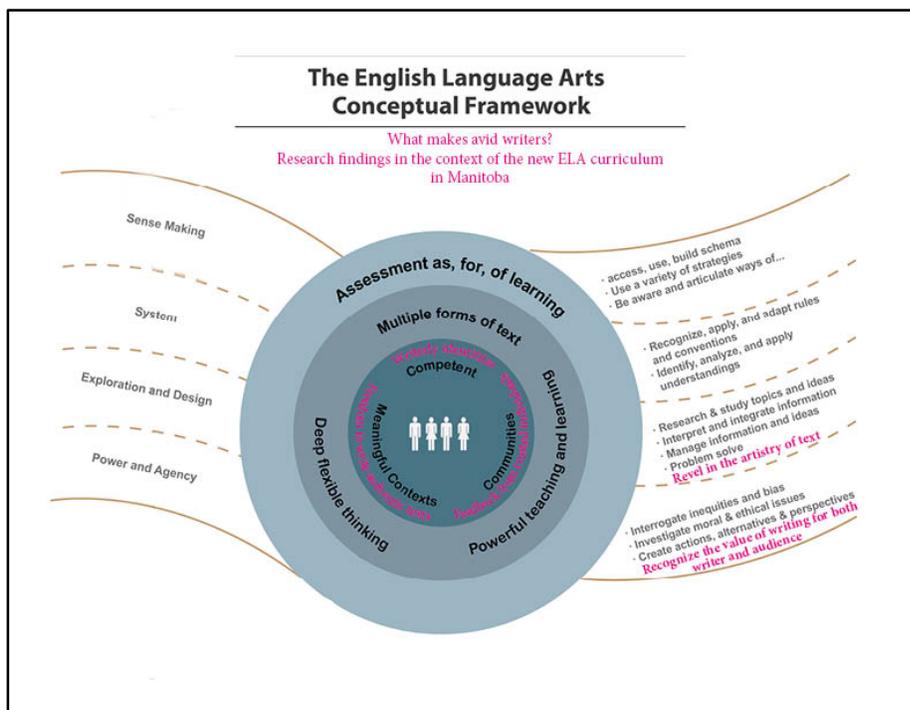
This study builds on the work that has already been done in the area of student writing and motivation. This is a topic that has long been of interest to teachers. Over the last few decades, two key themes have emerged related to engaging students in the writing classroom: the incorporation of new literacies and 21<sup>st</sup> Century literacy in the classroom, and an emphasis on writing for/as social justice. In this light students are recognized as using a variety of modes to explore and express their thinking with authentic audiences. These ideas are clearly embedded in Manitoba's new English Language Arts curriculum.

In defining the identities and practices of these avid young writers who are actively using their voices and creativity to speak about the ideas they feel are important, this study makes connections with the key understandings of the Manitoba English Language Arts curriculum and provides insights into practical considerations for the classroom. These insights lead to three main implications: the need to build networks of trusted individuals for feedback and sharing; a greater emphasis on the importance of writing to build identity and develop individual writing processes; and greater freedom for students to explore and express their ideas.

## The Manitoba Context

Currently the Manitoba English Language Arts curriculum is in a process of renewal. The new curriculum focuses on four literacy practices: language as sense making; language as system; exploration and design; and power and agency (Boyd & Warkentin, 2015, p. 9). It includes a number of elements showing how these practices can be enacted by students and teachers. The conceptual framework recognizes that these ideas flow in and out of each other, using dotted lines to express this fluidity. The findings of this study are represented in this new curriculum in how it positions learners and their identities and in how the four practices, especially language as exploration and design and language as power and agency, are enacted. The following figure shows how the five findings of this study can be situated within this conceptual framework.

Figure 3. ELA Curriculum Overlay. (Manitoba Education (2015) Conceptual Framework, used with permission)



The centre circle of the diagram shows that the learner is a part of a community that engages in learning together through meaningful contexts that build on the learners' pre-existing competencies. The participants in this study showed the importance of these ideas. In our conversations, they articulated the competencies they have developed as they continue to grow into their identities as writers. In their valuing of trusted individuals with whom to work, they showed they value the idea of community. Their wish for more freedom and relevancy in their high school writing tasks highlighted the need for meaningful contexts. The enthusiasm with which they discussed their writing processes and revelled in the craft of writing fits into elements related to the practice of exploration and design. The ideas of empowerment situated in participants' recognition of the value of writing for both themselves and the audiences they felt compelled to write for exemplifies the practice of using language for power and agency. The practices of language as sense-making and system flow into these findings as well, as it is through their development of language skills that these young writers are able to make sense of their world and express themselves so articulately.

Situating the findings of this study in relationship with the new curriculum highlights the ways in which the curriculum reflects the authentic practices of avid writers, and in turn how the practice of avid writers can be promoted in the classroom as teachers focus their teaching on this new framework.

### **Practical implications**

The practical implications of this study all connect to the overarching theme expressed in the new curriculum to provide students with authentic literacy experiences. The main purpose of this study was to discover ideas that may be useful for classroom teachers. Currently in the literature and in practice, we are seeing teachers who are interested in engaging students in the

writing process by making connections to students' out of school writing, including multimodal forms of expression and tapping into passion projects on themes that students identify themselves as of key importance to them and their communities.

Despite these practices taking place in some classrooms, many students still often see their school writing as inauthentic. Seeing a stronger connection between their school assignments and out of school practices may serve students well in terms of transferring skills learned in school to their world outside of school and vice-versa. In *Reading in the Wild*, Donalyn Miller and Susan Kelley (2014) set out to cultivate lifelong reading habits in students by drawing on the reading practices of avid readers. In a similar way, it is my hope that we may be able to develop students' writing identities and processes by drawing on the findings of the avid writers who participated in this study.

This study has highlighted three main implications for teachers of writing, which may help create classrooms where students are actively engaged in writing experiences that they see as meaningful to them. The first of these stems from participants' identification of the need for trusted individuals. While cultivating supportive classroom communities is something all teachers aspire to, this study indicates the need for even deeper connections among students within the writing classroom. The second implication is the connection between writing processes and identity that calls for greater emphasis on process over product to help students discover the processes that work for them as individuals. Just as we are teaching students to think about the literacy strategies they are using while reading, so too do we need to bring this level of metacognition to their thinking about their writing. The third idea ties directly to the thoughts these writers had on their in school writing. If they are to develop their identities as writers who feel empowered to use their voices in the world then they need the freedom to write about ideas

they find relevant in ways they find meaningful. The following ideas represent classroom practices that take these implications into consideration.

**Help students develop trusting relationships.** Even within a classroom culture of respect and community, students are often reluctant to share their work, especially unpolished drafts. Creating a writers workshop approach where students are regularly working on their writing with each other may help create more comfort and help students see the value in sharing their work throughout the writing process. Kittle (2008) uses conferencing extensively to help students, working one-on-one with a writer while other students write. She provides encouragement and brief, targeted suggestions based on conversations with the student about the piece (pp. 85–86). She also employs response groups in which students study mentor texts and then discuss their own work (p. 91). Based on how the participants in this study valued feedback most from trusted individuals, choosing their own writing groups with whom they will work to share and provide feedback for the course of the semester may help them create an effective writing community within the larger classroom community. Sharing ideas throughout the writing process rather than waiting to edit complete drafts may help students develop familiarity and comfort with each other.

Developing familiarity with a workshopping protocol such as the one described by Perl and Schwartz (2014) will also help. This protocol is set up in a very structured way to help participants share their work in a nonjudgmental setting. Readers give feedback in rounds. The first round, called “active listening” sees participants listening carefully to the writer read his/ her work and responding with what they thought was a main idea of the piece. In Round Two participants comment on what they felt worked well. It is not until the third round that participants comment on something they think could be done to make the piece stronger. Waiting

until this third round ensures that workshop members do not rush into criticism. Finally the writer is asked if they need anything else from the group before moving on (pp. 78–79). A format such as this one leads to more authentic conversations than do peer editing checklists and offers structure for novice workshop members. Not only would this network create a level of comfort, but in getting to know each other as writers, students could provide more meaningful feedback as they learn each other’s strengths, challenges and goals for future writing. Following this protocol routinely with the same group of writers each time may help those who are reluctant to share develop a sense of comfort, familiarity, and trust.

From here we can work on sharing work with a more public audience. Rather than thinking about hypothetical audiences and contexts, students should be encouraged to publish their work. Possibilities range from classroom based groups such as Edmodo to school lit. mags. and coffee houses to more public venues from sites such as Wattpad to writing contests, magazines that publish student writing and local spoken word competitions. Options should be given depending on the student’s level of comfort with publishing particular pieces and concerns about privacy. The key is to provide opportunities for students to share with authentic, suitable audiences matched to the ideas they are expressing.

Underscoring this is the need to expose students to a variety of forms so they can produce the types of writing found in these various contexts. Gallagher (2011) points out that he discovered in his search for mentor texts on a variety of purposes that “in the real world there is no such thing as a five-paragraph essay” (p. 230). We need to help students understand the connections between ideas, form, purpose, and audience and create pieces they will be excited to share with wider audiences.

**Ensure writing is seen as a priority in the classroom and in students' lives.** If students are to develop identities as writers and processes they find authentic and effective, they need to see writing as more than a way to assess reading. Gallagher (2011) strongly advocates this position and admits to sacrificing some of the standards he is supposed to teach in order to do this (p. 233). I believe that within the new Manitoba context we have a curriculum that values the time needed to develop our students' practices as thinkers, writers, and communicators. It recognizes that students arrive at school with a set of developing competencies and aims to continue building on these competencies through "multiple forms of print, non-print, human electronic, and virtual resources ... over time and in multiple contexts" (Boyd & Warkentin, 2015, p. 7-8).

A powerful way to help students explore and create writing identities is including a writer's notebook as a necessary school supply and ensuring we are using this notebook to engage in writing in the classroom on a daily basis for brainstorming, quick writes, mini-lessons, and other writing activities. Students who rely more on technology may want to use a device for this. Worthman, Gardner and Thole (2011) speak to the need to help students see themselves as writers by recognizing the complexity of their writing lives in their practice of in *and* out of school writing (p. 313). To this end, students may be encouraged to use this notebook for their own writing as well, outside of class. The young writers in this study all had ways in which they were actively involved as writers, from being active observers of their worlds to identifying times and places in which to write. Kittle (2008) reports on her successes with writers' notebooks. She includes the voices of her students who were thankful to have their writers' notebooks to help them write every day, hold onto their drafts and experiments for future

reference, develop their writing process and voices, and “learn to write what my heart feels” ( p. 22–28).

Emphasizing daily writing may help develop students’ identities as writers and help promote a growth mindset, especially in students who feel they simply are not good at writing. Helping them see writing as a process where not everything is perfect the first time lies behind the idea of using this notebook to explore and express ideas that will not be evaluated. Doing this regularly will help students see the development of their own voices as writers and help them feel empowered to express their thoughts.

In terms of writing process, the participants in this study show that more choice is needed in how we guide students from generating to publishing their ideas. Their own processes ran the gamut from very structured planning to free writing. The common thread was that all of them had developed processes that they knew worked for them. In this regard, inviting students to try out a variety of processes and helping them reflect on what works is key. Reflecting on the effectiveness of their processes in conferences and their notebook will also help teach that the process is as important as the final product.

**Provide students the freedom to write what they want.** Finding ways to provide more choice in their writing is another key implication of this study. Behizadeh (2014) states that that authenticity lies in the lived experiences of student writers rather than in what teachers feel is authentic (p. 28). Vasudevan and Campano (2009) caution against the pedagogization of students’ out of school writing activities by well-meaning teachers (p. 325). It seems clear that we need to allow students the freedom to choose to write that they feel is meaningful to them. This sentiment was echoed by the participants in this study. While there was some recognition for writing that was necessary to assess learning, all participants wished for the opportunity for

more freedom to write what they chose to. While writing to demonstrate learning, and learning to write a variety of forms important for future learning and the world of work are important, we need to create opportunities for writing for its own sake and writing that will not necessarily be evaluated. Providing time for students to work on writing of their own, including exploring a variety of modes and genres seems as important as providing time for independent reading. Having students work on pieces that will be pulled together into a portfolio or multi-genre project at the end of the year is one way to do this. This takes the focus away from immediate evaluation and allows students to think about the more authentic purpose of these pieces of writing. Having an open-ended inquiry focus to the course may give students some direction if they are struggling with identifying a focus for their writing. I have had some success with this in my own classroom, spending the year exploring the question, “What do I stand for?” through book club choices and writing with my students. End of semester course evaluations have shown that students appreciate the choice this approach offers. More importantly, I have seen a greater level of engagement in my classroom than in the past.

### **Summary**

The implications of this study speak to the need to understand the habits of mind of young writers as we approach the ELA curriculum. These young writers teach us that the keys to developing effective writers lie in allowing them the freedom grow in skills and confidence and define who they are as writers within trusting communities. If we do this we can help our students see themselves as writers, with distinct voices and important things to say in our classroom and beyond. These are important ideas to consider as we take into consideration the variety of literacy practices engaged in by 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners and the growing need to be able to communicate well in our digitally connected world. As we are about to enter into the

reflective practice of implementing the new ELA curriculum in our classroom we are being called to consider our current practice, its effectiveness and other possibilities to improve learning for our students. This is a perfect opportunity to work together with our colleagues to make meaningful change. As a literacy coach, I have witnessed a shift toward teaching reading strategies in an effort to improve student literacy and help our young people better understand and think critically about their world. I believe it is now the time to consider how we can help our students see themselves as writers in the same way the participants in this study do, and to communicate their ideas to others in ways that they identify as engaging, authentic and empowering.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

*I enjoy  
The company of the characters,  
The sense of accomplishment,  
That this might be enjoyed by someone else,  
That someone else can interpret it differently,  
That it can't be replicated, it's from my head, it's my work,  
That it still gets me choked up when I'm on stage  
It's something I'm good at,  
Something I'm committed to,  
Something that's dear to my heart,  
Something I truly believe in.*

(excerpt from Appendix A: Honouring their voices: A found poem)

This study was an attempt to look at the practices of students who are actively engaged in writing independently beyond the classroom. I am hopeful that the ideas discovered through this study will help teachers better understand adolescent writers and design classroom practices to help move their teaching of writing closer to the experiences of avid young writers. That said, we need to keep in mind the limitations of this study, the practical challenges of realizing its implications, and where we can go from here.

### Limitations

Insofar as this study has much to teach us about students' out of school writing that may be helpful to teachers in the classroom, it is not without limitations. These limitations stem from the size of the study, nature of the use of interviews, and the personal biases of the researcher.

While interviews with five young writers did yield rich information about their writing motivations and processes, as a volunteer sample, this number of writers is not representative of all such writers. Depending on the backgrounds and experiences of these particular youths, some voices may be left out and others may be overemphasized.

While interviews were chosen as a research tool because they will allow for an in-depth look at young writers' thoughts and feelings, there are limitations to this approach. The accuracy of information is one such concern. For example, the age of the respondents and how comfortable they are speaking with an adult with whom they are unfamiliar may have affected how candid or detailed their responses were. They may have been nervous and left out ideas that may be of value, or they may have tried to provide responses they felt I was looking for which may not affect their true experiences. Charmaz (2014) also calls into question the accuracy of memory, referring to interviews as "retrospective narratives" and "performances that research participants give for particular purposes" (p. 78). Thus, it is important to keep in mind that the negotiation of meaning between the interviewer and participant is a subjective process within the overall process of constructing grounded theory.

Member checking by allowing the participants to review transcripts was included to help alleviate concerns related to inaccuracy. In this project, four of the respondents had no changes to make, while one did add further explanation about the themes he focuses on in his writing. Asking for feedback on findings is another way to have participants verify the researcher's understanding. In this case however, none of the participants had anything to add or question about the research summary they were asked to comment on.

Third, the biases of the researcher need to be taken into consideration. As qualitative research is an inductive and reflexive process, I have needed to be clear about my own opinions and assumptions as I analyzed data and arrived at the findings and conclusions. My approach to this study has relied heavily on the theory of constructivist grounded theory which Charmaz (2014) contrasts with objectivist grounded theory, emphasizing that "the theory depends on the researcher's view; it does not and cannot stand outside it (p. 239). It is important that readers

understand both the context of the study and my own context as an educator as explained in the introduction when considering how my conclusions may contribute to their own practices. My stance as a qualitative researcher, engaged in constructivist grounded theory must be taken into consideration as must my position as a classroom teacher. My interest in this topic came from my recent experiences with young writers and my view that the development of student voice is an issue of social justice. Over the years, I have come to identify strongly with the notion that “all students have the right to learn in a culture of thinking, one that empowers them to participate in, lead and transform society” (Pluat, 2009, p. 2). This stance creates in me a particular view of my purpose as a teacher of English Language Arts and as a literacy coach. It is this position that guided my initial inquiry questions and framed my approach to this study. I wanted to know how the writing students did for themselves, that they were eager to publish, was more engaging and fulfilling than the writing assigned in school. My purpose was to find ways to give more power to student voices in the classroom. As such I entered into a process of constructivist grounded theory, positioning the participants as the experts and allowing a close coding and constant comparison of data to direct my thinking and ultimate findings. Readers of this study need to keep my positionality in mind as they consider my findings and conclusions, for, as Charmaz (2014) states, “The theory depends on the researcher’s view; it does not and cannot stand outside it” (p. 239).

### **Suggestions for further study**

As previously detailed, we need to acknowledge that this study represents the voices of five individuals. While these five voices are valued for the depth of thought and passion they brought to the conversation, the inclusion of still more voices would certainly have added to the body of knowledge assembled here and may have resulted in additional ideas. Another direction

stemming from this research could include a larger study with more participants and different methodologies. It would be interesting to talk to young professionals involved in fields that include writing/design (e.g. writers, lyricists, journalists, screen writers, game designers, etc.) about their high school writing experiences to see what their high school writing experiences looked like and how these experiences influenced their decision to become writers. Additionally, a case study within a classroom practicing the ideas suggested here would demonstrate their degree of effectiveness in producing more confident, active writers. Interviews with students in a classroom such as this could focus on students' levels of engagement with the activities and the degree to which their self-identities as writers might change over the course of the semester. Some quantitative data could be gathered to see if these suggestions lead to students becoming stronger writers as a result of this approach. This study relied on interviews as a method of gathering data. This provided rich conversations, but with a limited number of participants. Another study using other methodologies may also shed more light on this issue. A wider survey of avid writers, similar to Miller's (2015) survey of avid readers might provide a broader range of opinions and/ or clearer trends and a greater consensus of ideas than these five interviews did.

### **Practical Challenges and Ways Forward**

English Language Arts teachers have many choices to make as we enact the curriculum in our classrooms. In the limited time we have in a semester, it is a challenge to set priorities and give all aspects of the curriculum their due and meet the diverse needs of our students. This of course is what makes teaching an art as well as a science. Other debates are still ongoing as well, for example the use of the canon versus more contemporary literature in the classroom, or class novels versus literature circles or book clubs. The implications of this study call for a greater emphasis on writing in the classroom— time for rich conversations about thought and process,

workshopping, and sharing. Teachers considering these changes may have to think long and hard about what to change and how to restructure their use of classroom time to incorporate these practices and integrate them with other priorities.

Despite these challenges, there are ways to move forward with the ideas presented here. As a literacy coach, I have worked with teachers in multiple subject areas who are making writing a priority and devoting class time to working on writing and conferencing with students. I have seen English Language Arts classes become more inquiry-centred with students and teachers working together to create answers to open-ended questions. Our English department has moved away from writing on demand to more authentic projects as final assessments. In my role as lit. mag. staff advisor, I am starting to see more students submit creative writing they wrote initially for a class. Rather than selecting the best work for our lit. mag., we invite students to join us to workshop their pieces.

In my own class I have moved away from teaching class novels to offer my students more choice in the books that they read and my students all have writers' notebooks that we use regularly. The time I used to spend on more direct instruction of the same novel for the whole class is spent on guided book club discussions and has freed up time to explore writing a variety of forms for their multi-genre project. This shift has, in particular, opened up the curriculum for the many students in my classroom learning English as an additional language. Instead of always struggling with new material, these students are able to draw on their own experiences in much of their writing, which has the added benefit of honouring their experiences. While I still have work to do in light of what I have learned from the participants in this study, I feel I am moving in a positive direction in creating a classroom that will help students explore their identities and discover their voices as writers.

## **Final thoughts**

The voices of the young people included in this study give us much inspiration as we move forward. They have shone some light onto the ways young writers actually write, illuminating a path that we may follow in the classroom. The ideas in this study may be useful to teachers who are interested in providing learning experiences that more directly connect students' in and out of school writing lives in ways students find engaging and authentic. It is my hope that incorporating these ideas into the classroom will help students see themselves as writers, with strong voices, engaged, and willing to share their thoughts and ideas with the world.

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## Appendix A: Honouring their Voices: A found poem

I define writing  
As being able to explore new worlds  
And bring those worlds to someone else,  
To express things in the best way possible,  
In a more personal kind of way  
With a sense of authenticity, originality,  
Without judgment.  
Writing is what you truly believe in,  
Putting that cloud of thought and all the mixed emotions  
Into words  
And then onto paper  
Because sometimes we get desensitized and forget to feel.  
So, you try to get people to feel  
You want them to get goose bumps  
You want somebody to cry  
That's how you know you've actually touched them

I began writing  
When I was ten, eleven,  
In grade seven,  
Back in high school.  
My spark was  
My brother, his hip hop music.  
My cousins were writing short stories.  
My grandpa would write; my dad would write  
And so it was that sense of thinking to myself  
"This is in the family and I need to do this,  
I need to figure out how to do this."

I am very observant  
I get inspiration from  
Books I've read, movies I've watched,  
Music and motivational speakers,  
friends and family,  
funny experiences and scary experiences,  
What I see, what I feel and even what I smell  
The classes I do,  
When something happens in the news,  
Things I care about,  
And the more that I do, the more I have to write about.  
Definitely a lot of ideas on the back burner,  
Just waiting to be worked on.

I write about  
Abstract ideas:  
Guilt, loss, denial,  
Morals, temptation, ambition,  
The struggle of the conscience,  
The environment, politics, nature,  
Reminiscing about good memories,  
Emotions I don't feel all the time,  
Perseverance.  
Be calm, still, positive and smile;  
I really just want to be as motivational as I can.

I have learned:  
That as you're explaining to the reader what's happening,  
You're able to learn new things about yourself;  
To stay open-minded,  
To work through dark times and channel that into something productive,  
Something that can inspire;  
To share with people in a creative way;  
To tell yourself that your work sucks— you have to grow somehow;  
To understand how music and poetry work,  
and to feel happy after I finish writing something.

I believe  
Routine is a really big problem  
I am impulsive and stubborn; I splurge write.  
I stick with routine; I have it all mapped out.  
To make a world of your own you have to have a culture,  
That images and symbolism help make it real.  
I like using description, and creating pictures,  
It's important to give a certain complexity to characters,  
That there are times when an idea just flows,  
That pieces can take their own path,  
And that life without music or poetry is boring.

I enjoy  
The company of the characters,  
The sense of accomplishment,  
That this might be enjoyed by someone else,  
That someone else can interpret it differently,  
That it can't be replicated, it's from my head, it's my work,  
That it still gets me choked up when I'm on stage  
It's something I'm good at,  
Something I'm committed to,  
Something that's dear to my heart,  
Something I truly believe in.

## Appendix B: Interview script

## Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. We have reviewed the consent form together. Please remember that we can skip any questions you are not comfortable with and that you can stop the interview at any time if you no longer wish to participate. I want to confirm are you comfortable with me recording this interview? If you brought a piece of writing with you today, have you indicated on the consent form that I may have a copy of it? Do you have any questions about the consent form or the interview process itself before we begin?

## Interview guide

1. As you know I am interested in students who consider themselves writers. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself to get us started?
  - a. Why were you interested in taking part in this interview?
  - b. How old are you?
  - c. What grade/year are you in? (or, if out of school, what are you doing currently?)
  - d. In terms of gender, how do you identify? I am asking this to ensure I am using the correct pronouns when I write about our discussion.
2. How do you define writing?
  - a. What kind of writing do you do (genres, modes)?
3. What kinds of things do you usually write about?
  - a. Where do you get your ideas?
4. How often do you write?

5. When and where do you like to write?
6. Why do you write?
  - a. What do you enjoy about writing?
  - b. What do you find hard?
  - c. What do you do when you get stuck?
7. How long have you been writing?
  - a. How do you feel you have developed or changed as a writer?
  - b. What has been most helpful to you?
8. What role does technology play in your writing? (creating, research, online writing communities, publishing)?
9. How important is audience to you in your writing?
  - a. In what kinds of spaces do you write, publish, and share your work?
  - b. Is this the same for all your pieces?
10. What aspects of your writing outside of school would contribute to making writing more real, enjoyable, motivating for you in school?
11. Tell me about the piece you brought with you today.
  - a. Can you describe the process you used to create this piece? What did you do first, second, next?
  - b. How long did it take?
  - c. Did you get feedback from others?
  - d. What did you do with that feedback?
  - e. Was this process similar to, or different from, how you usually write? If different, how?

12. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about writing that I haven't asked?

Thank you again for participating. I will have this transcript typed up and will send you a copy to check over so you can add, change, or delete anything you feel you need to in order to make sure we've captured your ideas correctly. Please provide me with an email address that I can send this to.

Do you have any other questions for me?

Thank you again for helping me with my research. I really appreciate you for taking the time to contribute.

# Creative Writers Wanted!

- Are you in high school or recently graduated?
- Do you love writing?
- Do you write outside of school?

I am looking for young people who consider themselves avid writers, and who would enjoy sharing their experiences and ideas about writing.

I invite you to take part in a research study about avid young writers (high school students and recent graduates). Participation would include a 45 minute interview in a mutually agreed upon public location and follow up email.

Participants will receive a \$10.00 gift card from Tim Hortons or Starbucks as a small token of appreciation for supporting this project. The first ten people to respond and confirm their participation will be chosen.

If you are interested in taking part please contact the researcher, Cathy Oresnik at [oresnikc@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:oresnikc@myumanitoba.ca).



This research is in fulfillment of my Master of Education degree at the University of Manitoba. All information will be kept confidential and participants' names and identifying information will not be used. Participation is strictly voluntary. Further information about the study will be discussed and informed consent obtained before the interview. This study is in accordance with full university ethics standards and has been approved by the Education/ Nursing Research Ethics Board and the relevant superintendent/ administrator of the division/post secondary institution. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact the Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC) at 204-474-7122 or by email at [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca)

Appendix D: Writing Organizations Contact List

Winnipeg Arts Council : ~~103~~@winnipegarts.ca

Manitoba Writers' Guild: info@mbwriter.mb.ca

The Centre for Creative Writing and Oral Culture University of Manitoba:  
ccwoc@umanitoba.ca

The Writers' Collective: thewriterscollective@gmail.com

The Manitoba Writing Project: cwm@cc.umanitoba.ca

Juice Journal- University of Winnipeg: uwinnipeg.juice@gmail.com

Literacy Partners of Manitoba (WriteOn! magazine): literacy@manitobaliteracy.com

Dovie Thomason U of M writer in residence

Voices, Ink. : chim@voicesink.org, shelley@voicesink.org

Appendix E: Poster distribution request



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a Masters of Education student at the University of Manitoba. I am currently conducting a study to inform my thesis. I am interested in the motivations and processes of avid young writers who write for purposes other than schoolwork. My study is called: “What makes an avid writer? Exploring adolescent writers’ motivations and processes.”

In order to conduct my research, I am looking to interview young people who self identify as avid writers. I would like to use these interviews to better understand why and how students write in their own spaces outside of school. I would greatly appreciate your support in publicizing this project. I have attached a recruitment poster with the details of the study. Would you please post it in any meeting areas and distribute it via email and whatever social media platforms your organization uses to connect with your members? As the poster indicates, if they are interested in participating or have any questions, they can contact me directly.

Please be assured that this research is being conducted in accordance with the University of Manitoba’s research ethics guidelines. Participants, and if they are under 18 years of age their parents, will engage in a process of informed consent. This will include signing an informed consent form before the interview takes place. Participants have the option to refrain from answering any questions and to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. I am anticipating that the risk of harm will be minimal, not exceeding that which is expected in the normal conduct of one’s life. Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms for all names and other identifiers. Any disclosure of abuse will be reported to the authorities as is required by law. Participants will be sent a copy of the interview transcript to check and if they wish, a summary of the results of the study.

This research has been approved by the Education/ Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB). If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact me or my faculty supervisor Michelle Honeyford at [michelle.honeyford@umanitoba.ca](mailto:michelle.honeyford@umanitoba.ca). You may also contact the Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC) Maggie Bowman at 204-474-7122 or by email at [Margaret\\_Bowman@umanitoba.ca](mailto:Margaret_Bowman@umanitoba.ca).

Thank you for the consideration of your support in this undertaking; it is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Cathy Oresnik,  
[oresnikc@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:oresnikc@myumanitoba.ca)

## Appendix F: Letter of assent (under 18)

**UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA**

Research Project Title: **What makes an avid writer? Exploring adolescent writers' motivations and processes.**

**Researcher:**

Cathy Oresnik

[oresnik@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:oresnik@myumanitoba.ca)**Research Supervisor:**

Dr. Michelle Honeyford

Michelle.Honeyford@umanitoba.ca

204-474-7243

This assent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and discuss it with your parent/guardian who will sign a separate letter of consent giving approval of your participation. and to understand any accompanying information.

I am a graduate student at the University of Manitoba, pursuing a Master's of Education in the area of Language and Literacy. I am conducting research in the area of the writing that students such as yourself engage in apart from the writing they are assigned for school. I am interested in interviewing students who are currently in high school or people who have recently graduated and who consider themselves avid writers to discuss their writing. Participation consists of a 45-minute interview and follow up email to review the printed transcript of our conversation, which may take another hour or two of your time.

I do not anticipate any risk beyond the level of the normal routine of your daily life; however you may, naturally, feel nervous talking about your writing with a researcher. Participation is completely voluntary. You will be asked a series of questions about your writing. You may choose not to answer all questions and may leave the study at any time without consequences simply by letting me know by phone or email. If you withdraw from the study at any time, all audio recordings and printed notes and transcripts will be immediately and permanently destroyed.

I will hold the interview individually in a quiet, public place, for example a library meeting room, at a date and time that is mutually agreed upon, if you can meet locally. Skype or another web-based communication tool will be used if the interview is to be done from a distance. A follow up phone call, email or interview may be required for fact checking or clarification. I will audio record the interview using a handheld device. An assistant will later transcribe what was said word for word. This assistant will have signed a pledge, promising to keep the contents of the interview confidential. I will also take written notes. These notes will help me to recall the discussion and also serve as a back up in case the recording malfunctions or is inaudible in any way. I invite you to bring a piece of your work to share with me during the interview.

Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms for all participants and other identifying names, place names, or other identifiers included in the interview or pieces of writing participants share. My research supervisor, transcriptionist and I will be the only ones to see the data. The list of participants' names and any identifying data will be kept separate from the other data in a locked filing cabinet. Please be aware that any disclosures of abuse will be reported to the authorities as is required by law.

In appreciation for their participation in this project, participants will receive a \$10.00 gift card for their choice of Starbuck's or Tim Horton's. This is yours to keep, even if you choose to end your participation. If you require bus fare to the interview location, please let me know before the interview and I will provide bus tickets.

After each interview is transcribed, I will send a copy of the transcript to the participant, asking him/her to read it over, make changes, delete commentary or make additional comments, if there is more to add and return it to me. Participants will have two weeks to review the transcript, after which time, and a reminder email, if I have not had a response I will assume they approve of the transcript. In the same way, I will also invite you to comment on my findings once all the data has been analyzed.

This data will be used in the preparation of my Master's thesis. The results may also be shared at professional development events and in other publications. I will send a summary of the findings to all participants who wish to receive one. You may indicate whether or not you wish to receive a summary and how you would like it sent at the bottom of this consent form. All confidential material will be kept on file for six years following the defense of my Master's thesis. At the end of these six years all data will be destroyed. At that time all information will be destroyed. That includes deleting electronic files and audio recordings and shredding all interview transcripts and other materials.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researcher, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as

informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at the research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Education/ Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB). If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact the researcher or my supervisor, Dr. Michelle Honeyford at [michelle.honeyford@umanitoba.ca](mailto:michelle.honeyford@umanitoba.ca). You may also contact the Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC) at 304-474-7122 or by email at [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca). A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Participant's Name (under 18) (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ I wish to receive the transcript and summary by regular mail. My address is:

\_\_\_ I wish to receive the transcript and summary by e-mail. My address is:

Appendix G: Letter of consent (over 18)



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

Research Project Title: **What makes an avid writer? Exploring adolescent writers' motivations and processes.**

**Researcher:**

Cathy Oresnik

[oresnikc@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:oresnikc@myumanitoba.ca)

**Research Supervisor:**

Dr. Michelle Honeyford

Michelle.Honeyford@umanitoba.ca

204-474-7243

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

I am a graduate student at the University of Manitoba, pursuing a Master's of Education in the area of Language and Literacy. I am conducting research in the area of the writing that students engage in apart from the writing they are assigned for school. I am interested in interviewing students who are currently in high school or people who have recently graduated and who consider themselves avid writers to discuss their writing. Participation consists of a 45-minute interview and follow up email to review the printed transcript of our conversation, which may take another hour or two of your time.

I do not anticipate any risk beyond the level of the normal routine of your daily life, however, you may, naturally, feel nervous talking about your writing with a researcher. Participation is completely voluntary. You will be asked a series of questions about your writing. You may choose not to answer any questions and may leave the study at any time without consequences simply by letting me know by phone or email. If you choose to withdraw from the study at any time, all data, including audio recordings, printed transcripts and notes will be immediately destroyed.

I will hold the interview individually in a quiet, public place, for example a library meeting room, at a date and time that is mutually agreed upon, if you can meet locally. Skype or another web-based communication tool will be used if the interview is to be done from a distance. A follow up phone call, email or interview may be required for fact checking or clarification. I will audio record the interview using a handheld device. An assistant will later transcribe what was said verbatim. This assistant will have signed a pledge, promising to keep the contents of the interview confidential. I will also take written notes. These notes will help me to recall the discussion and also serve as a back-up in case the recording malfunctions or is inaudible in any way. I also invite you to bring a piece of your work to share with me during the interview.

Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms for all participants and other identifying names, place names, or other identifiers included in the interview or pieces of writing participants share. My research supervisor, transcriptionist and I will be the only ones to see the data. The list of participants' names and any identifying data will be kept separate from the other data in a locked filing cabinet. Please be aware that any disclosures of abuse will be reported to the authorities as is required by law.

In appreciation for their participation in this project, participants will receive a \$10.00 gift card for their choice of Starbuck's or Tim Horton's. This is yours to keep, even if you choose to end your participation. If you require bus fare to the interview location, please let me know before the interview and I will provide bus tickets.

After each interview is transcribed, I will send a copy of the transcript to the participant, asking him/her to read it over, make changes, delete commentary or make additional comments, if there is more to add and return it to me. Participants will have two weeks to review the transcript, after which time, and a reminder email, if I have not had a response I will assume they approve of the transcript.

This data will be used in the preparation of my Master's thesis. The results may also be shared at professional development events and in other publications. I will send a summary of the findings to all participants who wish to receive one. You may indicate whether or not you wish to receive a summary and how you would like it sent at the bottom of this consent form. All confidential material will be kept on file for six years following the defense of my Master's thesis. At the end of these six years all data will be destroyed. At that time all information will be destroyed. That includes deleting electronic files and audio recordings and shredding all interview transcripts and other materials.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researcher, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as

informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at the research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Education/ Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB). If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact the researcher or my supervisor, Dr. Michelle Honeyford at [michelle.honeyford@umanitoba.ca](mailto:michelle.honeyford@umanitoba.ca). You may also contact the Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC) at 304-474-7122 or by email at [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca). A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Participant's Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ I wish to receive the transcript and summary by regular mail. My address is:

\_\_\_ I wish to receive the transcript and summary by e-mail. My address is:

## Appendix H: Letter of consent (parent/ guardian)



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

Research Project Title: **What makes an avid writer? Exploring adolescent writers' motivations and processes.**

**Researcher:**

Cathy Oresnik

[oresnikc@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:oresnikc@myumanitoba.ca)**Research Supervisor:**

Dr. Michelle Honeyford

Michelle.Honeyford@umanitoba.ca

204-474-7243

You are being asked to review and sign this consent form as part of the process of informed consent relating to your child's participation in the research project outlined below. This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your child's participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

I am a graduate student at the University of Manitoba, pursuing a Master's of Education in the area of Language and Literacy. I am conducting research in the area of the writing that students engage in apart from the writing they are assigned for school. I am interested in interviewing students who are currently in high school or people who have recently graduated and who consider themselves avid writers to discuss their writing. Participation consists of a 45-minute interview and follow up email to review the printed transcript of our conversation, which may take another hour or two of their time.

I do not anticipate any risk beyond the level of the normal routine of your child's daily life, however, your child may, naturally, feel nervous talking about their writing with a researcher. Participation is completely voluntary. Your child will be asked a series of questions about their writing. They may choose not to answer any questions and may leave the study at any time without consequences simply by letting me know by phone or email. If they choose to withdraw from the study at any time, all data, including audio recordings, printed transcripts and notes will be immediately destroyed.

I will hold the interview individually in a quiet, public place, for example a library meeting room, at a date and time that is mutually agreed upon, if your child can meet locally. Skype or another web-based communication tool will be used if the interview is to be done from a distance. A follow up phone call, email or interview may be required for fact checking or clarification. I will audio record the interview using a handheld device. An assistant will later transcribe what was said verbatim. This assistant will have signed a pledge, promising to keep the contents of the interview confidential. I will also take written notes. These notes will help me to recall the discussion and also serve as a back-up in case the recording malfunctions or is inaudible in any way. I also invite your child to bring a piece of their work to share with me during the interview.

Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms for all participants and other identifying names, place names, or other identifiers included in the interview or pieces of writing participants share. My research supervisor, transcriptionist and I will be the only ones to see the data. The list of participants' names and any identifying data will be kept separate from the other data in a locked filing cabinet. Please be aware that any disclosures of abuse will be reported to the authorities as is required by law.

In appreciation for their participation in this project, participants will receive a \$10.00 gift card for their choice of Starbuck's or Tim Horton's. This is theirs to keep, even if they choose to end their participation. If they require bus fare to the interview location, please let me know before the interview and I will provide bus tickets.

After each interview is transcribed, I will send a copy of the transcript to the participant, asking him/her to read it over, make changes, delete commentary or make additional comments, if there is more to add and return it to me. Participants will have two weeks to review the transcript, after which time, and a reminder email, if I have not had a response I will assume they approve of the transcript.

This data will be used in the preparation of my Master's thesis. The results may also be shared at professional development events and in other publications. I will send a summary of the findings to all participants who wish to receive one. You may indicate whether or not you wish to receive a summary and how you would like it sent at the bottom of this consent form. All confidential material will be kept on file for six years following the defense of my Master's thesis. At the end of these six years all data will be destroyed. At that time all information will be destroyed. That includes deleting electronic files and audio recordings and shredding all interview transcripts and other materials.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to allow your child to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researcher, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. Your child is free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as

informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your child's participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at the research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Education/ Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB). If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact the researcher or my supervisor, Dr. Michelle Honeyford at [michelle.honeyford@umanitoba.ca](mailto:michelle.honeyford@umanitoba.ca). You may also contact the Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC) at 304-474-7122 or by email at [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca). A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Participant's Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/ Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ I wish to receive the transcript and summary by regular mail. My address is:

\_\_\_\_ I wish to receive the transcript and summary by e-mail. My address is:

## Appendix I: Letter of Confidentiality

### Confidentiality Statement

I am aware of the confidential nature of the experiences, questions, ideas and concerns that may be shared in the recorded interviews that I will be transcribing. I will keep in confidence what has been shared in confidence.

Printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_