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TEACHERS AS WRITERS:

A descriptive case study of my observations of English teachers as writers in the middle school  
classroom.

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A THESIS APPROVED FOR  
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BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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DEDICATION

*To Mom and Dad*

*For believing in the value of education and being two of the best teachers*

*And to Bubba*

*For being the support that fuels the fire to my crazy ideas*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

For decades, numerous reports show a deficit in the American students' ability to write well. Many sound recommendations, such as teachers acting as writers, have been made to improve the performance of students writing, yet sustained growth in student writing is infrequently reported. Data used comes from public middle school ELA teachers in the Southern United States. Data was collected during the 2019-2020 school year, before the COVID-19 pandemic. This study describes middle school English Language Art teachers as teacher-writers, specifically illustrating their experiences with writing and their approaches to teaching writing. I used a case study of four middle school ELA teachers at a singular site to describe teachers as writers. Data collected included interviews, focus group discussion, and observations. These were then analyzed using the constant comparative method to identify themes from individual teachers as well as draw comparisons across teachers. Results highlight significant differences in the four teachers experiences with writing and the significance their experiences play in their approach to teaching writing. Results indicate that, like students, teachers could be better served by specific learning opportunities that meet their needs as writers and as teachers of writing.

*Keywords: teachers as writers, middle school, writing*

**TEACHERS AS WRITERS: A descriptive case study of my observations of English teachers as writers in the middle school classroom.**

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

**First Writing Experiences**

My first writing experiences came from my first teachers - Mom and Dad. They both held careers in education, but not specifically in English.

My mom, a dance team director at the collegiate level for over four decades, would sit at our kitchen table and type out the scripts before upcoming performances. Her creativity led these scripts to be poetic in form and themed to the show her dancers were about to perform. At her retirement party a little over a year ago, hundreds of former and current dancers recited some of her famous variety show lines (S. Hinton, personal communication, October 10, 2019):

“Step right up, step right up and find a seat.

And before your very eyes there will be a treat.

A bevy of beautiful young ladies, and one fine gentleman so sweet,

You’ll never want to leave your seat.

And now, before it gets too late,

Let’s start this show - Don’t hesitate!”

The writing and creativity did not end there. Every Halloween there was a costume and scavenger hunt party. Here is where I learned the importance of word choice. For the hunt, mom (with the help of my dad, sister, and I) would come up with clues/riddles that led groups of four to five dancers around the town. The clues had to be just tricky enough; otherwise teams would often end up at the wrong restaurant or destination dressed as Michael Jackson, The



Bride of Chucky, or a giant green M&M and announce to a young and confused hostess “Do you have a clue?”

Mom would try out written riddles or clues on my family in order to determine their level of difficulty. She might ask “What rhymes with...?” or “What is another word for ...?” This shared and collaborative experience in writing was both memorable and fun and set the tone for my relationship with writing early on.

### **School Experiences with Writing**

As a middle school student, my memories of writing and of my teachers engaged in writing are limited. The two memories from this time do not include my English teachers as writers - they were from a World History class in 6th grade and later on in 8th grade from a Public Speaking/Speech teacher.

My World History teacher, Ms. Bolt, created one of the most exciting events of my memory - the Olympic games for our entire 6th grade class. Part of the assignment was to research a particular sport of interest within a specific country, and create a narrative for fictional athletes who would be competing in the upcoming Summer games. I recall my teacher bringing in and sharing reports of high profile athletes of the time. Athletes like Michael Johnson in track and the Magnificent Seven in women’s gymnastics. She shared their stories to give us inspiration and we used them as springboards for creating the backgrounds of our fictional Olympic athlete story. The writing activity culminated with an actual Olympic Games, and Ceremony for track and field events. Standing on the stage and receiving that silver medal was a special moment for all of us.

Later, around 8th grade, my Public Speaking/Speech teacher, Ms. Nelson emphasized the importance of feeling in the writing of speeches. She would often write a quote of the week and then ask us to respond to it. She would respond on the overhead projector with a Vis-a-Vis marker, a cup of water, one damp cloth, and one dry cloth. We would watch her and then be asked to try it.

We didn't know it at the time, but by late spring of that year she published a biography about her father who had been terminally ill and had recently passed. She would often share memories of her father with us and the quotes she posted were often his. Through her writings, she brought him to life and we felt we knew him. She shared the biography when it was published and many of us saved money to purchase a copy.

Knowing a "real" writer was cool. She had shared with us the experience and struggle of writing with and without emotion and with and without purpose. I learned that writing was not just for an assignment, or for a teacher to critique, but for a "real" audience who cared enough about reading something that they would pay to do so. But most importantly, I learned that writing was personal; writing was about discovering what you know and feel.

### **Personal Writings**

These days when I write, I write more often for myself. There are times when I write more frequently. Life changing events like an approaching marriage, a decision to relocate, opportunities for career changes, decisions about children, and family heartache tend to be occasions when I feel the desire to write.

But I love to write in an attempt to solve a problem. I get an idea for a lesson and I write it out. Sometimes I write it out with my peers in the moment.

Other times it is in the middle of the night and I share it the next day or later that week once I've had some time to think on it for a while. And sometimes it is scrapped - never to be seen or heard from again.

I often refer to my writing as "ideaing." My ideas are usually generated from a problem or situation that needs tweaking or fixing. My scribble-scrabble notes turn into reflections of a situation. Re-written notes, bulleted lists of good things, possible problems, potential misconceptions, and reactions to ideas, all help me to form a better understanding of the problem and process how I can solve it.

I also have very vivid memories of my mom writing for hours at a time, under the shade of the Executive Keys pool deck in Port Aransas, Texas. Our family summer vacations, then and now, revolved around weeks spent at the beach and pool. Here mom wrote poems, or descriptions of events, and reflections on the lapsed time since the previous summer. Sometimes I would ask her to share. Sometimes her writings were too personal to be shared. I grew to respect that - intimacy- but mostly she shared. Her poems are published in my childhood home, framed in the coastal themed rooms. Her story of coaching her eldest daughter in dance was published in 2001 in the book *Sharing the Spirit: for and by cheerleaders, dancers, and coaches* (Kawecki, 2001).

### **Reflections on Writing**

As I ponder my opportunities to observe writing as an adolescent, I realize I was extremely fortunate. I also think about the teacher-mentors in my education to become a Secondary English/Language Arts teacher at the University of Oklahoma. During my undergraduate work, I took Creative Expression: Paint/Write with Dr. Michael Angelotti. His Paint/Write course involved two weeks of intensive writing, and subsequently has inspired me to play with paint and words to this day.

When I was afforded the opportunity to teach a high school Sophomore through Senior elective Creative Writing course, I was elated. Paint/Write was always a favorite for both myself and my students. We all (teacher and students) worked in a craft (paint) different from the one intended (write) to inspire us to be vulnerable, free, and open to creating. We shared what we thought was silly and began to open up to each other in conversations about the work we were doing and beyond. We discovered similarities in our differences. We collaborated in paint to learn how to share and collaborate in writing, but more importantly, in life.

Additionally, my cooperating teacher, during my student teaching, showed me the importance of being vulnerable in front of her 6th grade students. The message was clear: "When you make a mistake, and you will make many mistakes, it's okay." Teaching students

that you're human and can recover from mistakes was a revelation. My best teachers reminded me of what life had already taught me... "Just try it. You'll miss 100 percent of the shots you never take."

### **Reflections on Reading**

It was not until the latter part of my high school career that I felt somewhat comfortable with reading. My early relationship with reading scared me. I couldn't read well, therefore I didn't.

As an adult reader, I enjoy the classics, *Jane Eyre*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Animal Farm*, because I'm intrigued by re-reading books each time with a different lens. As I re-read, I think about how the words and descriptions impact a particular group of people. And I think about ways the old can be made new again. I ponder and write about how I can help students relate to the characters in each of these great works. I write about times when I felt like Snowball (*Animal Farm*), outcast from a group of friends; or Tom Robinson (*To Kill a Mockingbird*), wrongly accused by someone with more power; or when I felt like Jane (*Jane Eyre*), bound by some self-driven misconception about love. I write about when I acted like Napoleon (*Animal Farm*), better than everyone because I was scared; or Scout (*To Kill a Mockingbird*), speaking too honest, too loud, and well before I should; or Mr. Rochester (*Jane Eyre*), escaping reality by pretending it doesn't exist and locking it away for another day. Essentially, I now read in order to better understand and connect to people.

In order to help my students experience and enjoy reading, I often share my experiences and perceptions with them. When I do share, it comes in many forms such as think alouds, or prepared pieces I have written a few days or weeks before. Sometimes my sharing is a reaction in writing to what I have read in the moment.

### **STATEMENT of PURPOSE**

Because my career has led me back to middle school English Language Arts, I wondered how my co-workers became teacher-writers, and how they decide when to share,

collaborate, or write with their students. And maybe most importantly how do they value writing in their ELA classes?

Numerous reports solidify the need for better writing instruction (*NAEP Writing - 2017 Writing Technical Summary, 2017*; Graham and Perin, 2007; National Commission on Writing in America's Families, Schools and Colleges, 2004; National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003). This study works to describe middle school ELA teachers from one school, their experiences with writing, their path and practice to teachers as writers, and how these factors impact their instruction.

#### STATEMENT of PROBLEM

The plate (or should I say platter) of any teacher has never been more full. At all levels of education - early, elementary, secondary, post-secondary, the demands of teachers continue to escalate (TALIS, 2018). The middle grade English Language Arts teacher is expected to effectively teach and fill gaps in both reading and writing in a short forty-five to fifty minutes.

So how do middle grade ELA teachers implement a "balanced literacy" approach where they are supposed to model writing, create, share, interact, guide, and significantly improve the writings and reading skills of all students? The reality of the daily demands of teaching adolescents, responding to parents and administration, and adhering to state mandates, (ad nauseam) may limit the ability to reach every student.

Pressure to provide effective writing instruction is both decades old and months old (NAEP, 2020; College Board, 2003 the Neglected "R"). In order to meet the demands of state assessments and renewed attention to writing instruction, it is suggested by many scholars that teachers act as writers in their classrooms (Atwell, 1991; Kittle 2007; Gallagher, 2019).

A teacher with the confidence and moxy to demonstrate the vulnerability it takes to write on demand in front of a live audience (their students) is able to showcase the real struggles and rewards of writing. When a teacher becomes a writer, they have realistic expectations of what it is to write and can better help students with their writing (Gallagher, 2019).

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2003, The National Commission on Writing noted that public education had “neglected” writing instruction and called for a “writing revolution”. With this came a list of challenges and recommendations that still hold their validity. One of which is the “opportunity [for teachers] to see themselves as writers” (NCOW, 2003).

At the time of the study, the National Writing Project was “the only federally funded program that focused on the teaching of writing”. The NWP is additionally funded by smaller, more local efforts such as foundations, individuals, universities, and K-12 schools across all 50 states (NWP, 2020). At the core of the NWP model are a set of principles; one of which states that the “knowledge about the teaching of writing comes from many sources: theory and research, the analysis of practice, and the experience of writing” (2020). The need for teachers to “frequently” experience writing for themselves and within their craft of teaching is necessary to build their knowledge of writing (2020).

While the National Writing Project’s 1976 Vision and Mission have grown to include new digital and social writing opportunities, the importance of teachers as writers has not diminished. Since its debut, the NWP has had substantial support from federal, state, local and private entities. The impact of the NWP’s work with teachers has been shown in several studies to impact both teacher’s instructional practices and student writing.

A study published in 2016 of the NWP: College-Ready Writers Program across its nearly 200 sites nationwide “found positive, statistically significant effects” of students writing (Heitin, 2016). The two-year-long review and experiment demonstrated that the NWP professional development models provided an impactful opportunity for teachers of writing and their students.

Current scholars in the teaching of writing have expounded on the need for teacher writers or, at least, for teachers to act as writers (Atwell, 1998; Kittle, 2007; Gallagher, 2011). With the earlier works of Donald Graves and Donald Murray as a foundation for her beliefs and

practice in writing workshops, Nancy Atwell, author of *In the Middle*, welcomed the notion of writing teachers as teacher-writers. She illustrates her writing through demonstrations and “taking off the top of [her] head.” This allows students to hear the thinking and see the moves she made as a writer (Atwell, 1998, pp. 331-332).

Atwell (1998) illustrated a classroom environment where she served students “as a *mentor* of writing, as a *mediator* of writing strategies, and a *model* of a writer at work” (pp. 20-21). Modeling a writer at work allowed for Atwell to build a trusting relationship among students as a class of writers. There is a profound desire for students to understand the reason behind any assigned writing and “how it serves their purposes -- as young adults, as their parents’ children, as citizens, as writers, readers, historians, and thinking human beings” (Atwell, 1998, p. 23). Without ensuring students know the purpose of their writing, the unique thinking that was desired often becomes a superficial response. By responding to prompts and assignments alongside the students, Atwell demonstrated and modeled the purpose for each, while simultaneously providing real-world applications for writing. This allowed students to assign purpose to their own writing beyond appeasing the teacher for a grade.

An additional benefit is that students come to know that their teacher is engaged in the writing as well, creating a level of trust between writers. This relationship allows for each to show a degree of vulnerability to the other; thereby creating an environment for both or all learners and writers (teachers and students) to discover, struggle, and grow.

When teachers “stand in front of them and have trouble composing...[students] begin to understand that the struggle they feel when they attempt to write is normal” (Gallagher, 2011, p. 16). According to Gallagher (2011), there is an urgent need for teachers to be writers (however they define the term -- published or not) in their classrooms and alongside their students. As teachers model and externalize the internal thinking and processing that occurs often in the silence of one’s brain during the act of writing, students are better able to link the act of writing to their unique thinking.

Similarly, Penny Kittle's *Write Beside Them* described how she overcame the hurdles of conceptualizing herself as a teacher-writer. By reflecting on the research and teachings of Atwell, Graves, and Murray, she realized that as a teacher she would have to overcome the fear and find the courage to write beside her students. Teachers may find themselves in much the same predicament, wondering if they are writers and if they understand how students become real writers. Once finding the courage to write beside students, Kittle outlined the following findings:

1. I wasn't supposed to be a writer - just someone trying to write- like them (her students).
2. My job was to be a great model of the process of writing; not the product.
3. Doing the writing taught me what to teach. It was that simple. I know what my writers needed because I was inside the process of writing. (Kittle, 2007, pp. 8-9).

In *180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents* by Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle, the two teacher-writers examine their beliefs and determine that "what (they) understand and practice (themselves) in writing profoundly influences what (their) students learn". As dedicated learners of their craft, they find great reward with the practice of themselves (teachers) as writers. Rewards of students recording that at the end of the school year they had "read over twenty books" when a beginning of the year survey indicated the student "couldn't remember the last book they read." Rewards of students filling composition books with writings that are as unique as the student. Rewards of feeling that they have done their best to prepare students for the real world of writing.

Certainly, there exists a gamut of classroom environments: high and low socioeconomic situations, small and large class sizes, brand new and dilapidated buildings. Within the luxury or turbulence of the educational setting, Gallagher and Kittle (2018) remained steadfast with their



belief that “we can only teach well what we know well” (p. 81). The message for teachers to “be students of what they teach (writing)” (Gallagher and Kittle, 2018, p. 82) is abundantly clear. Without knowledge of writing, teachers may lack the ability to teach with clarity and may be unable to anticipate potential missteps with their students (Gallagher and Kittle, 2018, pp. 80-81). Essentially, sharing and modeling the moves a good writer makes is integral to writing instruction.

Teacher-writers who work in the top tier of Bloom’s Taxonomy alongside their students, are able to make the HOT (higher order thinking) skills behind writing visible (Chan, 2010; e.g., Bloom, 1971). In more recent research, John Hattie, identified “feedback and formative evaluation” as practices that “yield desired effects” or grow student ability rapidly (Hattie, 2019). The writing conferences of Atwell, the act of “writing beside them” described by Kittle, and the demonstrations of Gallagher’s “write like this” are all anecdotal supports to Hattie’s meta-analysis of general teaching practices.

Other researchers have found that the “meaningfulness” of the writing assignment mattered when examining students’ writing ability (Gadd and Parr, 2016). Creation of meaningful tasks may look different for each teacher and may include tasks that students believe to be “purposeful and challenging”, and that they are “involved in constructing” as these and other qualities provide motivation (Gadd and Parr, 2016, p. 94). While this study focused on “task orientation” and its effective outcomes on student writing, it included instances of teacher participants being involved in the task of writing with their students. While it was not specifically identified in this study, a reader could interpret that the teacher participants wrote alongside and/or with their students.

## **REALITY OF STUDENTS WRITING ABILITY**

While the data of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) of *The Nation’s Report Card: Writing 2017* are still under analysis at the time of this study due to

technology changes, earlier NAEP report cards have not heralded American students' writing abilities.

In their 2011 report, the NAEP concluded that only “one-quarter of students perform at the “proficient” level or with “solid academic performance...” and they “clearly demonstrate the ability to accomplish the communicative purpose of their writing” (NAEP, 2011). That means 75% perform below proficient. Unfortunately this deficit in our nation's ability to write “frequently and efficiently” seems to only grow as we soar into the second decade of the 21st century.

### **FUTURE IMPORTANCE OF WRITING**

Written communication permeates everyday life. As technology progresses and provides an array of social media platforms on which to communicate, the importance of writing only escalates. As students begin to formulate thoughts into words, they may find new platforms of expression and unexpected audiences.

Whether students enter post-secondary academia or head straight for the workforce, effective writing skills are important to professors and employers. Even employers that require some level of post-secondary education, are reported as being displeased with the writing skills of incoming new hires (Garner B. & Shank N., 2018). The redundancy of the need for effective writers found in these reports goes back decades.

*The Nation's Report Card: Writing 2011* stated “it is clear that the ability to use written language to communicate with others - and the corresponding need for effective writing instruction and assessment - is more relevant than ever” (National, 2012).

### **STUDY GOALS**

As Brooks' (2007) notes, teaching writing is a complex act that teachers need to continually demonstrate with their students. According to Brooks (2007), the effective writing teacher allows time for multiple writing lessons where the teacher demonstrates to students the struggles a writer goes through, while also weaving in other effective writing practices. The tapestry of an effective teacher-writer is unique and built/created thoughtfully. Judith Langer

(1999) also recognized the complexity of the ELA teacher tapestry in order for them to “beat the odds” and move past contextual hurdles.

Thoroughly describing the middle school ELA teacher and understanding their reality, can help us learn their strengths and capitalize on opportunities to grow them as teacher writers; so that they can in turn do the same for their students. Descriptions of their experiences with writing could assist in pinpointing where teachers are in their journey as teacher-writers. Additionally, descriptions on their approaches to teaching writing could help in understanding why some of the sound recommendations of the NCOW, scholars, and researchers are struggling to make a dent in our nation’s progress toward building strong writers.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### PERSPECTIVE

I seek to understand middle school ELA teachers as writers by describing teachers' experiences with writing and how they approach the teaching of writing. I want to describe middle school ELA teachers as writers and make sense of their instructional decisions. First, I conducted interviews to describe the individuals' experiences and perspectives (Creswell, 2007). In order to deepen my understanding of the teachers, I also conducted classroom observations and arranged for focus group discussions.

### STUDY CONTEXT

This study was conducted in the Southern-Central region of the United States. As a general consensus, the states that make up the South have strayed from the federal mandate of the Common Core State Standards ("Oklahoma Academic Standards | Oklahoma State Department of Education," 2018; Texas Education Agency, 2019; *Academic Standards*, 2018). Whether withdrawing, never adopting, or somewhere in between, there was open resistance to the Common Core. OKDOE mandates, that professional educators at every level - state, local (districts), and the classroom teachers - are involved in the writing, revising, and reviewing of the standards our students are held to is of high priority ("Oklahoma Academic Standards | Oklahoma State Department of Education," 2018; Texas Education Agency, 2019; *Academic Standards*, 2018).

A historical glance of the regional reports for writing noted in the *Nation's Report Card: Writing 2007*, the 8th grade scores for Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas were lower than the national average (U.S. Department of Education, 1998, 2002, 2007). With the exception of Arkansas, which slightly increased average NAEP scores in writing from 1998 to 2007, scores have not improved or declined much (U.S. Department of Education, 1998, 2002, 2007). Oklahoma's average score was "not significantly different" from the national public school average (U.S. Department of Education, 1998, 2002, 2007). More of the same was reported in

the *Nation's Report Card: Writing 2011*, which found that only “twenty-four percent, about one quarter” of public school students in the 8th grade perform at the “proficient” level. Additionally, the preliminary reporting for the Nation’s Report Card: Writing 2017 has not found much improvement, only a lower national average (*The Nation's Report Card: Writing 2011: Executive Summary*, 2011).

**Site Description:**

The city in which the site is located has an estimated population of just over 70,000. The research site is one of the district's six middle schools and feeds into one of four high schools. Approximately 1,100 middle schools students in grades 6 through 8 are enrolled. It had just over twenty percent of the student population classified as Economically Disadvantaged, which did not qualify the school for Title I funding. There are approximately a dozen members in the English Department and within this group there are three classroom teachers at each grade level, each teaching between 120-130 students.

Grade level ELA teachers teach five of the seven periods a day. One of the two periods is for PLC (Professional Learning Communities) that meet at least twice a week. Teachers are required to take Meeting Minutes for administrative documentation. During meetings teachers may discuss a variety of topics including, but not limited to: curriculum documents, standards or explanation of standards, methods of teaching, sharing activities, strength and weaknesses of lesson designs, accommodations, modifications, assessment creation, data analysis of common assessments, and retellings of their daily teaching experiences. The importance of the PLC is felt across the site.

The additional period is taken by personal conference, during which teachers respond to a myriad of tasks: communication to/from colleagues, administration, counselors, parents, students, and organizations. Teachers are also called upon during this time to attend special education meetings like Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meetings. Many times teachers are found conferencing with non-ELA teachers about specific students they have in

common, updating lesson plans, making copies, creating new ideas for lessons, researching, learning the in's and out's of a new textbook, prepping for extra-curricular assignments, helping organize school events, assisting "lost" students, checking on students sent to nurse/office, etc.

The teaching experience of the ELA department ranges from zero years to over thirty, many having held positions at this site for three years or more. Like much of the nation, some of these teachers have found themselves in the field of education only after stints in other careers.

### **Data Sources**

Following the advice of Creswell (2007), I paid special attention to interviews and observations as sources for data collection. Including the focus group interviews was advisable due to the time constraints of the study and with the singular case site. Additionally, the participants were cooperative with each other. However, it was important to make sure the interview was not dominated by one participant. Therefore, the focus group was conducted after one-on-one interviews and during the same general time as classroom observations. The primary sources for this case study were one-on-one interviews, a focus group discussion, and classroom observations (Creswell, 2007, pp. 132-134).

### ***Participant Selection:***

Teacher participants were selected based on the current teaching assignment at the designated school/research site. All participants were teachers of grade level English Language Arts classes in at least one of the middle grades 6 through 8. Teachers were recruited to participate through the researcher's verbal request after a department meeting. Potential participants were then noted and the researcher followed up to ask for and receive consent. Nine grade level teacher participants originally consented. Of these, eight completed the Beginning of the Study interview. Due to time constraints, the researcher selected four of the eight teachers. The four participants were selected based on their availability to complete the study focus group interview, classroom observations, and End of Study interview. Only data

regarding these four participants were studied. In order to protect the participants' identities they were given pseudonyms for reporting purposes. (See Table 1: Sources of Data).

**TABLE 1**

*Sources of Data*

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Beginning of Study</i>		<i>Focus Group</i>	<i>End of Study</i>	
	<i>Interview</i>	<i>Observation 1</i>		<i>Interview</i>	<i>Observation 2</i>
Arturo	11/19/19	12/18/19	1/16/20	2/7/20	3/10/20
Ben	12/10/19	12/18/19	1/16/20	2/12/20	Unav
Cindy	12/10/19	12/12/19	1/16/20	2/5/20	3/9/20
Deveon	12/16/19	12/17/19	1/16/20	2/10/20	3/10/20

*Interviews:* Teacher participants were interviewed in-person and in secured locations of their choosing and convenience. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Each teacher participant was interviewed twice - once at the beginning of the study and again at the end of the study (Creswell, 2007, p.133). Both interviews were semi-structured to allow for unfolding of conversation (Creswell, 2007). Handwritten notes, codes, and remarks were taken on the participants' reactions to questions to assist in transcription, but not so much so that attention was taken away from being an engaged listener (Creswell, 2007, p. 134). The semi-structured Beginning of the Study interviews lasted from four minutes to over twelve minutes. End of the Study interviews lasted between four and eight minutes. After transcription of each participant's interview, the researcher solicited participants to confirm credibility of the findings and interpretations (Creswell, 2007; Ely et al., 1991; Erlandson et al., 1993; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

***Focus Group:***

The focus group consisted of all four teacher participants. As per the request of the site, the focus group was conducted on the personal time of the teachers and researcher. The focus group interview followed much of the same procedures as the in-person interviews. A secured location on-site was reserved, as this was most convenient for the participants. The focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed. Handwritten notes and coding were rarely made at the time of the interview because the conversation moved very quickly.

***Classroom Observations:***

Observations of participants teaching writing were conducted after the Beginning of Study interviews and during a teacher selected class period. Observations lasted between forty to fifty minutes. Because the researcher is a teacher at the site and has familiarity with the students and staff, the participants made the decision of whether or not to introduce the researcher to the class.

The researcher followed the protocol of strictly observing the teacher and did not participate in the lessons or assist students. A seat was reserved for the researcher in the least intrusive location so as to not disturb the environment; this usually was in the back of the classroom. Field notes were handwritten and documented teacher participants acting as writers which included modeling; shared, guided, or independent writing; as well as teacher and student interactions. The researcher often conversed with the participant before an observation to gain an understanding of the instruction to be observed. Some participants chose not to disclose the lesson and materials prior to the observation; however, this was not a requirement or a request from the researcher. Debriefing with participants after an observation was limited to the availability of the researcher and participant.

Scheduling classroom observations required logistical planning and flexibility. The site's district curriculum and pacing calendar along with district and state assessments were



determining factors for scheduling observations. Additionally, factors beyond the control of the researcher and the participant often called for a rescheduling of the observations.

### **ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER**

I approached this research as a fellow middle school ELA educator, having experiences teaching high school ELA and Creative Writing courses in the Southern-Central region of the United States. Being a member of the site faculty for the past two years allowed the unique opportunity to conduct this research study in classrooms led by my fellow teachers. In order to keep their anonymity, pseudonyms were given and no identifiable demographic information was reported.

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND ORGANIZATION:**

I first created a table and charted participants' answers to interview questions along with any additional handwritten notes made during the process. After each interview I cross analyzed participants' data in order to draw out any themes or patterns (Creswell, 2007; Wolcott, 1994).

After classroom observations, I again created a table to pull apart any key themes and then cross analyzed them with the participant interviews. This same process was done again with a focus group. Continual cross comparison and charting of themes as advised in case studies was key to understanding and drawing relative conclusions (Creswell, 2003; Wolcott, 1994). Aggregating the information into tables helped the researcher identify themes with supporting details as is suggested by Creswell (2007) (See Appendix A, Appendix B, Appendix C). The analysis of the sources is organized by themes, which is followed by potential results and interpretations of the study.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this case study, the focus is on teachers' experiences with writing and how they approach the teaching of writing. Following the individual cases is a cross-case analysis which includes an analysis of the findings.

### *Arturo: Experiences with Writing:*

Arturo, a sixth grade teacher who wears the latest Michael Jordan's with his dress slacks, welcomes students at the door with a high five or fist bump.

Arturo engages in writing mainly for the purpose of his professional life. He feels confident in writing for multiple purposes within the field of teaching, such as correspondence with parents, colleagues and administration, reporting on student progress, and creating lesson plans. Arturo journals on occasion. He makes clear that journaling is not something he does with frequency or with the drive to create a written piece. He notes,

When I journal they consist of reflections from the day. It's not long. It's usually bulleted lists.

Arturo recalled memories of writing in high school. While there were not specific tasks or projects that were memorable, he noted that weekly literary analysis papers were expected. He recalls that the analytical style essays came more easily to him and noted that unlike writing creatively,

It [literary analysis] was just kind of easier to explain my thoughts and prove why I thought the way I did.

He acknowledges that while he reads a good deal of nonfiction for the purposes of teaching, in his free time he enjoys reading fiction. Authors such as J.K. Rowling, LeAnn Moriarty, and Michael Connelly provide detailed character descriptions or characters that he can connect with, which make them enjoyable.

Because Arturo prefers to read during his free time, he refrains from considering himself a writer. He defines a writer as someone who “keeps journals... and wants to write stories or diaries” which is not how he defines himself.

*Approach to Teaching Writing:* In order for students to understand the traits of a specific genre, Arturo uses writing prompts associated with the genre. For instance, if students are reading persuasive writing, Arturo provides writing prompts that are persuasive. He acknowledges that designing writing prompts in this way helps students structure their writing. Arturo also creates prompts that are similar in structure to those that students will see on their end of year state assessment.

On the interactive whiteboard, he takes time to deconstruct the writing prompt with students. Students are somewhat familiar with this concept and as they make observations Arturo jots them down, asking students to do the same. When questions about abstract terms in the prompt are raised, he responds by asking the whole class “Is anyone else having trouble with this term? Can anyone help clarify or explain the term?” With this practice, the knowledge that peers can offer is noted and valued. He also reminds students to refer to anchor charts on “deconstructing the prompt” that were created in a previous lesson. Arturo allows students multiple opportunities to turn and talk to their partners about their thoughts and responses to the prompt before directing them to begin writing their thesis statements on paper.

He knows that his middle school students often get stuck with generating ideas for writing prompts which is why he frequently requires them to discuss their thinking with a peer. While peer discussion takes place, Arturo is cognisant of his struggling students and

conferences with them individually or in small groups. He makes this easier on the student by moving to their desks.

Arturo understands that this particular class has difficulty staying focused and requires more consistent procedures than other classes might. Therefore, remaining in the mix of students, allows him to answer individual and small group questions, model for specific needs/desires, and think aloud with students.

Arturo finds that many of his students struggle to get started writing, so a great deal of time is occupied by idea generation or teaching strategies for generating ideas.

As their teacher, “one limitation is remembering that they are only in [middle school]. Sometimes because students have not practiced writing as much... they are not as skilled. So the way I would say things is not the way they would. I have to find ways for them to make it their own - so they keep their voice instead of me telling them exactly what to write.

*Ben: Experiences with Writing:*

Ben, an eighth grade teacher, who plays instrumental versions of popular music while students enter the room, believes the music will help settle them down before a writing task. Ben knows that many students have difficulty giving their attention wholly for a writing task. The importance of feeling comfortable and being in a place of calm, both physically and mentally, before engaging in learning or writing is a priority for Ben.

Ben confidently describes himself as a writer, even though he may not write as frequently as he would like. He notes that he writes about three times a week for personal and professional reasons. He reflected that at this juncture in his life, his writing is more reflective, provides ideas for self-development, and expresses his gratitude. “I write to [reflect]... and to just relax... and be grateful.” He also notes that writing quotes from books and entertainment

are topics of interest which often springboards his writing. He acknowledged that a good portion of his writing is also for correspondence and edification.

Ben recalled enjoying writing as a child and noted that he had an elaborate imagination which he believes fueled his writing. He credits being an only child, reading, movies, and the frequency of good teachers to his early ease with writing and reading.

It was a great combination... and I had a pretty big imagination as a kid. So that was probably one of my strong suits.

Structured writing in high school came easy to Ben as well. It was the collegiate arena where Ben notes becoming “fickle and concentrat[ing] on the very technical things” in writing.

I kind of revised as I wrote which was not a good idea...It takes longer to do things [writing].

Being a writer who “revised as [he] wrote” was not ideal for him. Even so, Ben described a prideful moment in his writing when his college professor asked to use his piece in a textbook he/she was going to have published.

Ben mentions that he reads more YA (Young Adult) literature due to teaching middle school ELA. While his time for pleasure reading is limited, he enjoys humorous and light-hearted topics. He also noted that as a middle grade student he found it difficult to find readings that kept his interest and recalled short stories being the most memorable. He recalled reading Roald Dahl’s short story, “Lamb to the Slaughter,” and chuckled at the memory of his response to the unexpected plot. Ben noted that much of what he remembers about his middle school years is due to the teacher and how they presented the material and less about the product he created.

Ben declares that, in his experience, middle school students tend to take more ownership over writings that are less structured and he encourages students to be more creative and imaginative. He also adds that allowing students opportunities to take their own spin on prompts often equates to stronger, more authentic student voice and quality of writing.

I think the ones [lessons] that are probably less structured... they lend themselves to being more creative. Quality, in terms of imagination, humor, and personality and voice... those are the most important type(s) [of writing]. It is something that is hard for a lot of kids to do.

*Approach to Teaching Writing:* Ben uses writing warm-ups to review grammar and styling of sentences through mentor texts. He uses randomization to select students to correct or uncover errors in a sentence he writes or projects on the board. While uncovering the errors, Ben reads the sentence several times for students to hear where the punctuation needs to be added, deleted, or revised.

Ben reviews a writing prompt that students have seen the class period before. He refers to the pro/con anchor chart created by this class the day before. In reviewing the list, Ben asks for any additional points the students have thought of and adds them to the chart. Students are asked to add these to their anchor chart in their notebooks as well.

When introducing a concept and having students write using a new technique, Ben models for his students. For example, students have read and are able to identify a counterargument and concession, but have not yet written their own. While he is at the document camera, students have the same graphic organizer. Ben writes on-the-spot, posing questions to himself and to students as he writes. His questioning requires students to use previously issued and reviewed words and phrases for the concept being taught. These charts have sentence stems that students will offer to help their teacher-writer. Ben takes the time

needed to draft the concept/technique. After his think-aloud and on-demand writing, he asks students to acknowledge the time, and effort it took for him to write. During the observation he asked students,

What did you notice about how long it took me to think of and select ideas for the prompt?... Even with your help, it took some time.

He encourages students to not get discouraged if the process seems like it is taking a while. While he is modeling, Ben notices that some students have figured out the goal and have begun the writing task, while others continue to struggle. He leaves the teacher writing and the anchor of the sentence stems visible on the document camera and begins conferencing with students.

Ben struggles with time. He notes,

Time and quality of time [is what] kind of limits me... you would like ideally to conference with every kid. Say, "Look, this is what you're doing. This is how you do this or this..." So that's difficult. Especially with the amount of students that need intervention.

While he is adamant about dedicating time for writing conferences, the amount and quality of time he has is limited by class size and the number of students reading and writing below or well below grade level. While he acknowledges that this is a concern of many teachers, it is one that does not go unnoticed in his classroom. He noted that he engages students in strategies for productive peer conferencing, but realizes the limits of their interactions due to the same factors mentioned above.

*Cindy: Experiences with Writing:*

Cindy, a 7th grade teacher who enjoys dressing as a Greaser when her classes read S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, dimming the lights and celebrating with snaps during poetry readings, enjoys publishing recent writings of her students both inside the walls of her classroom and in the hallway.

Cindy declared that she journals nightly mostly for personal reflection. While she has written a fiction novel in her adult life it was some time ago when life's circumstances allowed her the freedom to write more frequently and creatively. Cindy also recounted memories of writing competitively in high school. She acknowledged that the competitive environment allowed her to understand the importance of description because she was reading the descriptive work of her peers/competition.

She now engages in writing that is similar to what she reads, which is biographical in nature or for self-improvement - much like her reflective journaling. She also mentioned that whether fiction or nonfiction, if the reading included a struggle or redemptive ending she was engaged in reading. Her writing also includes the descriptions of her daily events, stream of consciousness, descriptive scenes while on vacation, and stories that will bring back the feelings and emotions associated with the events. She notes,

Sometimes I have a specific purpose like [writing] about a vacation. And then that will be like a longer [entry] just because I want to go back and read [it] ten years later. But usually [journal entries are] like a stream of consciousness.

Cindy struggles to consider herself a writer. While she has written a novel, journals, and practices writing as a teacher, these acts seem simple or unequivocal to a defined writer.



I always think of [a writer] as like a “published” writer, which isn't really a good thing to think because everybody should write. So I guess I am a writer...I think I write more for a pragmatic purpose right now. Even in my journal it's a little pragmatic, too... So when I write now, I think about “How can I use this for my classroom?” or if I read something that I think would be interesting to copy, like a mentor text. I always frame it in this way.

As an avid reader, she actively and consciously searches for materials to help teach writing. At the same time, she realizes that writing takes different forms and being “published” does not limit or define a writer. She realizes that her students may also struggle with the label of “writer” as well.

*Approach to Teaching Writing:* Cindy uses free-writing and quick-write prompts to engage her middle grade students. She acknowledges that these informal pieces of writing prompt students to think deeper, creating richer conversations about their writing or deepening their interactions with literature. Cindy models a writer’s thought process by regularly engaging in “in the moment” think alouds. She interacts with student writers by asking them to share their thinking/brainstorming aloud. She often asks students,

Okay, Let’s listen in.... What did you see as readers?

Cindy sits alongside her students as they write in order to converse with students independently or with small groups. She knows that her middle grade students struggle with developing their ideas with relevant descriptions, therefore she intermittently pauses the students to refer to anchor charts on previously taught strategies. Additionally, she pauses to read student work in draft form, question students on ways their peers can improve their word

choice, and to give praise. Her praise comes in the form of repeating the poignant phrases or descriptions her young writers have written. Using their words, phrases, and descriptions to illustrate the concepts she desires. Student writing becomes the mentor text.

Cindy also uses the interactive whiteboard and projector to reference anchor charts. Additionally she notes, "I usually do it [modeling] on the whiteboard because it's so big and I let all of the kids come up and write something in a bubble (using a bubble map) or sometimes every single class does it differently and then they copy it on their own paper and then they can add to it. And so it's very similar. And then after they put on their paper and they start doing their own writing, then I walk around and we have discussions about it."

I usually always make the kids write it and they should be in control of it. I want them to be in control of the process. But then I'm there to say, "You know, maybe we should think about it like ---", or question "Is that really what --- looks like?". So we have a discussion and take it off or on (of the collaborative write). Because like when the [state assessment] comes, I want them to be able to really say, "Is that really a good example of ---?" or "Does that really fit with [my] thesis or not?" We always go through their process.

She may refer to student writing in other class periods that are exemplars or can be used to identify needed help in a given area, such as using imagery to develop descriptions. She knows that respecting the identity of the writer is especially important in the middle grades. Cindy asks for student permission before sharing with others. Cindy regularly publishes student writing in her classroom and in the hallway.

While Cindy recognizes that some ELA teachers may feel bound to formulaic writing, she does not consider this is a limitation. She notes,

I don't feel confined, honestly ..... I think one of my jobs is to teach them that you actually can express a lot in a short amount... I think if you really think about what you're doing as a writer [and] you use your words wisely [then] you can get the point across. If you're skilled or if you try hard enough.

Cindy acknowledges the time it takes for writers, especially her young writers to write clearly, concisely, and within specific guidelines. Cindy wishes there were more time for her and her students to experiment with genres they enjoy, like fiction. She recognizes, even in fiction, there are guidelines and styles that make for a more enjoyable experience for the reader.

*Deveon: Experiences with Writing:*

Deveon, an eight grade teacher who prefers teacher-themed Toms or Converse, pencil skirts, and inspirational graphic t-shirts, welcomes the random student to a comforting hug even in the middle of class.

Deveon reported that she writes “all of the time.” She explained that she writes for more pragmatic purposes, specifically jotting things down that she does not want to forget, like grocery lists and students who need grades updated. In her professional life, she writes for correspondence purposes.

Deveon recalled a vivid memory of a Creative Writing course in college. She described that the professor assigned a writing task where students were allowed to select any topic of their interest, however it had a highly scripted structure. At the time, the scriptedness seemed paradoxical and to compromise the definition of creative. However, afterward she felt the product was somehow “very distinct and different .. and nothing like I’d ever written before.”

Deveon characterized herself as an avid reader, who participates in book clubs. As a teenager, however, she hated reading because she was a slow reader in high school. She

claims she still is. She hated the assigned reading selections like Emily Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, but thoroughly enjoyed John Grisham's *The Firm*. As a teacher she enjoys reading YA literature and anything that is not too heavy in topic. She noted *The Selection* series by Kiera Cass and *Spin the Dawn* by Elizabeth Lim.

While Deveon writes, she struggles to consider herself a writer because she defines a writer as someone who can "easily come up with ideas" and elaborate on them." She acknowledges that she tends to "overthink and therefore she is "insecure" in her ability to write. She notes,

I consider myself to be an editor (not a writer). I feel like I am better at picking out things and finding [errors]. I can write, [but] I struggle with it more.

*Approach to Teaching Writing:* Deveon incorporates previously learned skills into writing tasks, such as metaphors, similes, and imagery. She attempts to find topics that will engage her students. She finds that topics that elicit strong emotions and opinions or that students can make personal connections with are those that provoke the strongest writing from her students.

Deveon uses anchor charts that are duplicated in student notebooks. She uses these as well as whole class collaborative writings to review previously taught concepts before setting students free on writing tasks. While collaborative pieces are not always doable, she shared that this relieves some of the pressure to write in-the-moment with students.

While students write in a similar structure, she monitors the room and makes time to conference with students. Through these conferences she often uncovers repeated student struggles and may address them by pausing the entire class for a quick mini-lesson. Years of experience have taught Deveon some of the common struggles students will face, but she knows that these quick reteaches are important and they vary between class periods. Their effectiveness, she measures in the improved quality of the written piece.

Deveon establishes the importance of sharing writing with peers by routinely asking students to turn and talk or read aloud their writing. She also allows for student tables/groups to select a “best” writing to share with the whole class. She realizes that this seemingly simple act is a form of publishing and establishes her students as writers.

Deveon acknowledges that she struggles to find the balance in modeling and giving students creative freedom. She is often reluctant to model before she allows them an opportunity to create because she wants to hear their authentic voices rather than have students attempt to mimic hers. Deveon is also cognizant of her insecurities as a writer and struggles to put her creative ideas on paper. These insecurities are, at times, the same as her students, which allows her to help them navigate a writer’s block.

I have insecurity about my own writing. I feel like it's difficult to teach them... how to get the creativity out... I relate to them and tell them that “I understand how you feel. I feel the same way.” It's just a matter of finding the right... *their* right voice.

By conferencing individually and in small groups, she leads them to the paper through questioning and relating to their struggle as writers.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Arturo, Ben, Cindy, and Deveon provide an insightful examination of how middle school English Language Arts teachers become and act as teacher-writers. The purpose of this study was to describe and understand how middle school ELA teachers become teacher-writers. While the study is limited to one study site and a small sampling of teachers, it does depict the different experiences and approaches of middle grade teacher-writers.

From the results of this study emerged several similarities and differences between the teachers, both in their experiences with writing and their approach to teaching writing. Following this interpretation are a few conclusions on middle school ELA teachers and their journey to become teacher-writers.

### *Similarities and Differences: teachers experiences with writing*

The results of the study show the following similarity with the teachers' experiences with writing. All four teachers are avid readers and recognize good writing. What they read varies greatly, (self-help, YAL, historical fiction, short stories, fantasy, news, etc.) and serves them for a variety of purposes (relaxation, self-help, pleasure, professional). Their experiences with reading, like those in Brooks' (2007) study, were complicated and interwoven with their personal and professional "interests and responsibilities" (p.189). While they all note a desire for more time to read for pleasure, Cindy noted that many teachers read for the purpose of finding materials and models for teaching writing. Ben acknowledged writing in response to his reading through journaling. As Ray (1999) described, the participation in bridging the two literacies (reading and writing) in their personal lives, shows a correlation to their comfort in bridging the two in their teaching.

### *Similarities and Differences: approaches to teaching writing*

With regard to their approaches to teaching writing, there were also several similarities and differences. All four teachers seemed to predicate the teaching of writing through reading response. Arturo noted that students (much like himself) are more comfortable making claims about a text and providing evidence of their thinking. Deveon and Ben did not disagree. Cindy allowed students opportunities to demonstrate their comprehension of a reading through more creative outlets. She described the following scenario in which her students responded to reading in a less standardized form:

We're reading *Holes* by Louis Sachar right now. I had (students) rewrite the story using the framework of the author while practicing some set skills. "OK, pretend that Camp Green Lake isn't a "real" place (a real fictional place). I want you to write a story about a kid who is falsely accused of a crime and they had to go to a rehabilitation camp, but I want you to change the story." So they absolutely loved that. They took the whole class for reading their responses and they came up with so many different scenarios (claims with evidence). Camp Green Lake turned into so many different things.

While this is a response to reading, there is an important difference. Cindy capitalizes on what she knows her students like to write - fiction - and allows them to demonstrate the comprehension of the reading, practice the skill (creating claims and providing evidence), and respond in a way that helps express their voice. Through what Ray (1999) refers to as "reading like a writer," Cindy stretches her students to mimic the author's craft. The combination of experiences with reading, writing, knowledge of students, and ability to respond with an instructional activity that fits the needs of students and teachers, are features of an effective writing teacher.

Additionally, all teachers used the district provided curriculum as a guide for teaching writing by referring to it frequently; however none feel confined to it. This is likely aided by the support of the district and the state mandates (previously mentioned), which require teacher participation in the multiple processes of creating and writing curriculum (“Oklahoma Academic Standards | Oklahoma State Department of Education,” 2018; Texas Education Agency, 2019; *Academic Standards*, 2018). Each teacher acknowledged the autonomy they felt with the curriculum and understood the importance of writing. Though they have and continue to take different paths to acting on this knowledge, none seems obligated in a sense that they only teach writing because it is required. Even with her insecurities in writing, Deveon notes that writing is an integral part of reading and understanding:

[Writing] is embedded in our curriculum. But it is not *just* the curriculum... When we’re analyzing pieces (literature), we write. When we annotate, we write. When we summarize, we write.

Extending this line of thinking that writing is needed to read a text is acknowledged by Cindy, who describes,

[When] reading a persuasive text... I make sure that they can understand the concept of “claim,” and “evidence”. Then we create (write) an exemplar [of a claim with evidence] together, then they write an example by themselves....And to make sure they understood the concepts - they write.

Teaching students to reflect on their reading through writing was similarly described by each participating teacher.



The importance of the teachers' autonomy becomes the interest of the following similarity - all four teachers wanted the unique voice of each student to be developed through writing.

The approaches, however, shift somewhat when it comes to teaching students to write, specifically to uncover the voice of individual students. Arturo and Deveon worried about providing too much scaffolding or modeling for students explaining that the voice of middle school students is very different from their own. Deveon noted being "nervous" when it comes to writing with students because "(she) struggle(s) with doing it for them."

Another difference between the teachers' approaches to teaching writing was their practice of "in-time coaching" or in-the-moment thinking and writing. While the four teachers all practiced writing conferences, Arturo and Deveon were a bit more hesitant to jump in than Ben or Cindy. Ben jumped right in and felt confident his questioning, ability to think aloud and, open style writing, helped students process how to write the way they want. Cindy acknowledged the feeling like she may be "doing too much" at times, but concluded that writing with them in-the-moment assists in clarifying the voice of the student. She was observed asking the following questions during "in-time coaching"

Is there a better or more accurate word for...? and Why did you select to say...?

The power of one-on-one coaching has the potential to grow student ability rapidly (Bloom, 1977; Hattie, 2019). Yet working in this individualized setting can be taxing and difficult. Ben and Cindy dedicated time for writing without the pressure of a grade through daily journaling or quick writes. Knowing students will have multiple opportunities to write and practice their craft, potentially allowed Ben and Cindy the opportunity to comfortably share/model during "in-time coaching" and allowed students to briefly borrow or mimic their style. The teachers agreed that time seems like a precious commodity and Ben specifically explained that those moments of "in-time coaching" are extremely valuable. With such limited time for individual writing conferencing, and its potential power being of great effect (Bloom, 1977; Hattie, 2019), it

could be interpreted that a “borrowed phrase” is worth the student moving forward in their writing. As a draft, this “lending” may be drafted out, but the technique modeled by the teacher-writer could be retained and used in another piece.

### *Conclusions*

Each of the middle school ELA teachers demonstrated qualities of teacher-writers. Like Langer (1999) described, determining what qualities, approaches, and practices of teachers who can “beat the odds” and move student writers forward is notable. From this study I concluded that strong teacher-writers need to be able to fluidly weave the following approaches into their writing instruction:

1. “In-time” coaching,
2. individual conferencing (time),
3. collaborative writing with students,
4. using mentor exemplars (professional, teacher, and student).

Additionally, I concluded that teachers' experiences with writing greatly affected how they choose to teach writing. Like all teachers, these teachers varied in their writing experiences. Cindy's experiences writing a fiction novel (while unpublished) and journaling almost daily gave her an authentic reference point when teaching her young writers. Ben's graduate school writing provided him with more in-depth experiences to write, but with academia as the main purpose. Arturo's disinterest in writing and Deveon's lack of confidence could have stemmed from their lack of writing experiences. Similar to one of Gallagher's (2011) core beliefs for students in “Write Like This,” teachers need more time to write, and they need more time to be coached how to write (p. 232-233). “Deliberate practice” requires teachers to push themselves outside of their comfort zone. With continual writing practice, teacher-writers become more comfortable and more confident in sharing and modeling messy in-the-moment writing processes.

A final conclusion is that each of these ELA teachers, like all teachers, is at a different stage in life; and therefore at a different point in their journey to becoming effective teacher-writers. Much like the categorization of teachers in Langer's (1999) study, all of these teachers are "dedicated to their students", yet their work to "lift beyond the expectations" of tradition is limited (p.14). Each of the teachers in this case study was observed using multiple approaches to teach writing, however teachers had a tendency to act on the knowledge of one teaching strategy more than another. Particularly the approaches they are most comfortable with. For example, Cindy and Ben did not hesitate to "dive in" to writing in front of their live audiences (Gallagher, 2019). However, it seems that it is less about which strategy or strategies used and more about their comfort with using them. The balance, the fluidity, the attentive weaving with which the teacher diligently practices writing and the teaching of writing these are critical to student engagement and success.

Each of these teachers is a teacher-writer. They are, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, "taking the shots" - attempting the strategies but perhaps, like their students, they need more time to process, struggle, and sit with their thoughts and write (NCOW, 2003). Perhaps in their journey to becoming their most effective teacher-writer self, they are still in the rough drafts.

### **FUTURE IMPLICATIONS**

Teachers could all benefit from more "frequent opportunities to see themselves as writers," and "deliberate practice" with writing which was the recommendation of the NCOW recommended in 2003 and Gallagher in 2011. Pinpointing where teachers are in their journey as teacher-writers is an important investigation. Knowing what specific training teachers have had with writing and the teaching of writing would allow leaders to more appropriately determine professional development opportunities. Providing more "frequent experiences writing for

themselves and within their craft of teaching writing”, like the NWP calls for, could potentially begin to deplete our nation’s deficit in writing (2020).

Further research may look into what professional development is needed to help assist ELA middle school teachers grow as writers and as teacher writers. Brooks (2007) states that a primary lesson from his study is the importance of “knowing and supporting students as readers and writers...”. Specifically noting “a teacher’s job is to reach students and support their growth” (p.189). Similarly leaders can support teachers by providing them with a writing framework from which they can grow in their craft of teaching writing. From this study, the following writing framework and expectations for the four teacher-writers under consideration emerged:

Teacher-writers should:

1. Understand that reading is a framework for writing (mentor texts)
2. Conduct writing conferences
3. Write with students (in-time coaching)
4. Provide dedicated daily practice to writing

With a common writing framework teachers and leaders can reflect on how to assist teacher-writers in developing their craft and grow student writing ability as well. Paying special attention to the fluidity with which the teacher weaves these qualities with their knowledge of their students is vital.

When professional development opportunities are provided to growing teachers as writers, like NWP, AP Summer Institutes, and district lead-teacher created Writing Institutes, what keeps the middle school ELA teachers from attending? An investigation of obstacles that inhibit or delay their participation could provide insight.

An additional suggestion is for teacher-writers to be summoned to publish their expertise and share their journey as teacher-writers. Whether this is through professional publications, sharing and modeling their craft with colleagues in professional development sessions, or

opening the door to their classroom for observation, teachers should be encouraged to stretch beyond their comforts, gain insight, and continue to learn.

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## Appendix A

*Beginning of the Study Interview Themes*

Question/ Topic	Arturo	Ben	Cindy	Deveon	Themes
Frequency of Writing	Classroom: at least once a week to model; to model good writing On my own: not very often sometime I keep a journal; help me process my thoughts	3x a week for personal writing: recording information; quote from books;  daily journal writing for therapeutic purposes	Journal nightly, Written fiction novel	All of the time: Lists with a good pencil or not black pen; things I don't want to forget;	-daily  -purpose of writing
Types of Writing	A lot of notes, and summaries, when we write an essay I'll model a narrative or persuasive  On own: journals are reflections on the day, usually bulleted things	For the sake of self-development; reflections; relax; being grateful,	Adult fiction Journal: memory writing, problems, reflection of life, stream of consciousness, scene writing of travels; sometimes about a vacation because I want to remember (travel writer)	Write to explain for students; grocery list, grades lists;	-personal reflection  - professional pragmatic  -reading with writing
Memorable Experience	High school wrote a lot and analysis papers a week. Analysis of literature... I enjoyed it because I was good at	Enjoyed writing as a kid, pretty good imagination as a kid; high school didn't have problems with following structure; started to hone skills as writer in college -	Didn't go into detail; in UIL writing as a Junior and Senior in high school. - lazy writer at first. Realized form reading competitors	Creative Writing class in college; topic anything we wanted but a scripted paper It surprised me .... It seemed like if it was creative; it	-reading with writing  -ease with writing and -reading  -reading

	<p>it.</p> <p>It was easier to explain my thoughts and prove why I thought the way I did.</p>	<p>came naturally; in college (revising as I wrote, which was a bad idea)</p> <p>Professor took ideas for writing and that made me know that I wrote well.</p> <p>I think a lot of the reading that I did and made connections to tv/movies and good teachers</p>	<p>papers that I need to show and not tell.</p>	<p>shouldn't have been scripted....</p>	<p>and writing</p>
<p>Favorite Authors</p>	<p>JK Rowling because I can re-read the HP series and still be engaged. She has a lot of descriptions and authors that really develop characters, like LeAnn Moriarty and Michael Connelly. I can connect with the characters.</p>	<p>No favorite authors per se... my job needs me to read a lot of YA.</p> <p>As a child it was hard to find things I liked to read... I really liked and still do enjoy short stories because of their length and messages, and kept my attention. Roald Dahl's <i>Lamb to the Slaughter</i> American literature in school... I like the reading based on my teachers and how they presented the material.</p> <p>Right now... more self-development, improving state of mind</p>	<p>Non-fiction; self-help Deepak Chopra; Louisa May Alcott (Little Women), Rose Wilder - strong women's biographies</p>	<p>As a teenager I hated reading b/c I was/am a slow reader. Loved "The Firm" by John Grisham; not Jane Eyre...in high school that I had to read I like silly things, not heavy, YA, Spin the Dawn, The Selection by Cassandra Cass</p>	<p>-Reading for profession</p> <p>-YA</p>
<p>Favorite</p>	<p>Any sort of</p>	<p>Humorous and</p>	<p>Biographies:</p>	<p>Good</p>	<p>-some</p>

Types of Writing to Read	<p>non-fiction writing; easier to make statement to use facts rather than come up with ideas on my own</p> <p>Students struggle with coming up with ideas as well.</p>	light hearted; something to lighten the mood.	<p>gives hope to improve myself; Meditation self-help; desire to be a calmer more zen person; Personal experiences where people overcome; A struggle with a redemptive ending</p>	<p>character development Slow reader get into the details Realistic fiction, YA, fantasy</p>	similarities to what they like to write
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## Appendix B

## End of Study Interview Themes

Question/ Topic	Arturo	Ben	Cindy	Deveon	Theme
Do you consider yourself to be a writer	<p>I don't b/c it is not something I do as a hobby or for pleasure I don't think of myself as a writer.</p> <p>Writers are people who keep journals, write stories...</p> <p>I'm a reader.</p>	<p>Yes. I should write more often, and don't write as often as in school</p> <p>Usually for correspondence or edification, but not personal or academically.</p> <p>But since I teach it I am constantly trying to be a better writer</p>	<p>I don't know. I don't write as much as I used to.</p> <p>I'm a writer because I'm a teacher-writer. I model for my students.</p> <p>Writers are published writers. I am a writer.</p> <p>I don't write just to write - or communicate information...</p> <p>But I write for maybe a pragmatic purpose-teaching</p>	<p>I consider myself to be an editor. I can write, but I struggle with that.</p> <p>I really like correcting and fixing.</p> <p>I struggle with creation b/c I overthink it</p> <p>Writer: to me a writer mean being able to come up with and idea and elaborating</p>	<p>- correspondence</p> <p>- modeling</p> <p>- professional</p>
Lesson that have best student writing outcomes	<p>Depends on students - some like the open ended and some like the structure Know this because they write more and (clearly)</p>	<p>The ones that are less str/or lend students to being more creative/ imaginative. Allows them to have their own personal spin and they come up with more ideas</p> <p>This age group and more are open to</p>	<p>When they get to choose what they get to write about.</p> <p>Short stories in this grade level, Changing familiar story plots - fiction</p> <p>In upper grade levels, what has impacted you?</p>	<p>Finding a topic that engages the student that they can make personal connections to. A strong opinion</p> <p>"Do you think parents should be allowed to go through your</p>	<p>-voice</p> <p>-emotions/ opinions</p> <p>-choice</p>

		<p>sharing these (but when it comes to write more open creative - they will)</p> <p>More creative free writes that lend themselves to the most quality in voice, creativity and imagination.</p>		<p>cell phone?"</p> <p>They were very heated and had strong opinions on both sides</p>	
<p>What are some of the limitations faced as a teacher-writer</p>	<p>They're only middle schoolers, I have to find ways for them to keep their voice instead of giving them what to say...</p> <p>Students don't see themselves as writers - so getting started is difficult for them.</p>	<p>It is hard to work more with individual students who need more conferencing and structure. So time and quality of time is difficult. Especially with the amount of students who need this.</p> <p>I try to aid this by having them peer-conference with each other.</p>	<p>creative/freedom to write, but I don't feel confined as a writer b/c I think it is important to teach students to write with clarity and conciseness</p> <p>I would like to have them write more fiction and opportunities to share their writing. The rest of ELA... like reading, analyzing.</p>	<p>I struggle with doing it for them.</p> <p>I know it is important to model, but not too much modeling</p> <p>I think since I have insecurity about my own writing I struggle with that (getting the creativity out).</p> <p>Definitely, some (have insecurities). Some are natural writers.</p> <p>A battle to show them that they can.</p>	<p>-doing too much</p> <p>-voice</p> <p>-time</p> <p>-time for conference</p> <p>-time to write</p> <p>-relationships with students</p>

				So, I relate to them by asking wide questions... that are kind of leading, but has them feel like they are finding it on their own	
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## Appendix C

*Focus Group Discussion Themes*

Questions	Arturo	Ben	Cindy	Deveon	Themes
How and when do teachers decide to write?	Some type of writing everyday (annotation/ gist) and at least one larger processed piece a 9 weeks to develop their depth in writing	Teaching a specific structure, I may model, demonstrate, or share an example sort of impromptu	Understanding the concepts in a ELA (claims, evidence, reasoning) I may write this with them, we write together, as a class and then by themselves; share with each other	Curriculum maps  And critical writing when reading and summarizing	-Curriculum as a guide  -impromptu  -reading to write
How & when do you decide on writing prompts	Try to backward design; knowing what the specific grade level standards are- What they have to know before they leave this grade level Trying to figure out the ultimate goal (curriculum standards) and try & lead them to that through scaffolding  Sometimes it comes to you as you're teaching		Reading specific genres and understanding them in order to write in this form. For example, if they we are teaching persuasion we break it down in little pieces like different rhetorical devices, evidence  It does need to be interesting to kids  Model each type of structure/genre	During PLC meetings  We discuss & research  Try to create something engaging and that they have background knowledge	- PLC -curriculum maps  -backward design/Curriculum  -reading to write  -engaging to student  -in the moment
How & when do you decide to	If I'm introducing a new strategy or a something that they struggle with	I go through the prewriting /dissecting the prompt.	We always spell out what their reasons are and I	I'll model after seeing what they need.	-new skill  -prewriting

<p>model any part of the writing process?</p>		<p>What is the prompt? I may do it for each part.</p> <p>I like to use prompts that will allow them to come up with a lot of ideas, especially for those students that may have limited experiences.</p> <p>Prewriting is very daunting for students, so I do a lot of that.</p> <p>If I'm modeling, I'm using a doc camera or on the whiteboard bc it is the quickest.</p>	<p>usually do it on the white board so everyone can collaborate and they are in control of it.</p> <p>Ask students "What does it look like?"</p> <p>Thinking aloud the revising.</p>	<p>I want them to try it first.</p> <p>When I first started teaching (pre-k) I wanted them to try it first.</p>	<p>-process</p> <p>-needs assess.</p> <p>-collaborative writing</p> <p>- think alouds</p>
<p>How often do you plan on modeling ?</p> <p>Any particular types/generes that need more modeling ?</p>	<p>What I model the most is responses to literature.</p> <p>They can talk/find evidence to a question, but getting it down on paper is difficult.</p>	<p>Differentiation determines how much modeling is needed.</p> <p>In the beginning of the year for sure.</p> <p>The more practice they get the less time you have to spend modeling.</p>	<p>Descriptive writing/imagery Because they struggle with extending and showing.</p>	<p>Poetry is hardest...</p> <p>Bc it is different and weird and abstract with younger students</p>	<p>-Reading response</p> <p>-beginning of year or new concept (when they're out of practice)</p> <p>-poetry, imagery, descriptive writing</p>



<p>Is it important to model? Why? Why not?</p>	<p>It is important for students to see their teacher doing what they've asked their students to do.</p> <p>Modeling helps them build a relationship with themselves as writers, but it also helps them feel comfortable that their teachers are human too and they've seen their teacher go back and changes/correct.</p>	<p>You have to be able to do it on-demand</p> <p>And certain kids are reluctant to write</p> <p>And journal writing helps them write something informal/silly for fun.</p> <p>Give me your top 5 things that annoy you. You can show them that writing can be fun and then change to a more formal academic writing experience</p>	<p>B/c sometimes simply giving directions to "describe the scene" is not enough. We must "show" them instead of just giving directions.</p>	<p>Sometimes I do it afterward. Living room idea.. I ask them to do it, but then I'll tell them mine.</p> <p>In a think aloud writing style.</p> <p>Impromptu and on demand</p>	<p>-impromptu modeling</p> <p>-see teacher as writer</p> <p>-Teacher must show instead of tel I</p> <p>-modeling shows the process of writing(error /edits)</p>
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