

COMPOSE YOUR SELF: EXPRESSION AND IDENTITY IN THE UNSANCTIONED  
WRITING OF ADOLESCENT AND YOUNG ADULT POETS AND SONGWRITERS

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of young people as “creative writers” penning their own personal texts in the social, political, and cultural contexts of their lives. The research problem was: From the perspective of the young adult writer, what is the experience of engaging in expression through independent poetry- and song-writing? A qualitative approach was employed to understand contextual and individual factors in exploring the roles that writing may have in the lives of young people who engage in unsanctioned writing practice, or writing practices that are independent from school-supported activities or curriculum. The theoretical framework guiding the analysis focused on understanding the young writers’ experiences and uses of writing practice as a site for identity construction. I worked with a group of ten writers, six female and four male, from age 17 to 30, who actively engaged in writing practices such as poetry, spoken word, and zines. The primary data source was in-depth interviews, which took place where the participants wrote, performed their writing, or hung out. For the participants, writing was: a context for identity construction, self-reflection, and documentation of identity; an emotional outlet and “safe place;” a way to “be heard” and recognized; a means of connecting with and understanding others; and a context for exploring ideas, expressing beliefs, and making an impact through social action/activism. They described their school experiences in relation to their writing practice and provided recommendations for making schools engaging for young people. An important recommendation was for teachers to care, encourage, and challenge their students in their writing practice. Participants recognized that teachers faced challenges in

having to adhere to a rigid curriculum, and suggested that the school system must be more flexible to permit them to bring their own life experiences, and those of their students, into the classroom. This study is one step toward understanding young people's experiences of being writers, how they make meaning and ground themselves and their identities through writing practice. The findings may inform and challenge educators, researchers, and those who work with young people in a variety of contexts.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	iv
LIST OF TABLES .....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	vii
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION .....	1
Background to this Project .....	4
Perspectives on Adolescence and Identity .....	7
Theoretical Framework: Literacy Practices as Identity Work .....	11
Organization of Chapters .....	13
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	15
Adolescence, Youth and Identity .....	15
The Problem of Categorization .....	15
Highlighting Research that Reflects Identity Construction .....	19
Relation of the Literature to My Study .....	20
Literacy Practice and Forms .....	21
Poetry: Written and Spoken .....	22
Lyrics and Music and the Context of Popular Culture .....	26
Relation of the Literature to My Study .....	30
A Focus on Unsanctioned Literacy Practices .....	31
Relating Unsanctioned Writing Practice to the School Context .....	33
Sanctioned and Unsanctioned: A Critical View .....	38
Relation of the Literature to My Study .....	40
Summary .....	41
CHAPTER III: RESEARCHER, PARTICIPANTS, AND METHOD .....	42
Researcher as Young Writer .....	42
Methodology .....	49
Researcher Positionality .....	51
Recruiting and Selecting Participants .....	54
Participants and Contexts .....	57
Profiles of the Young Writers .....	58
Data Collection Processes .....	64
Data Analysis .....	66
Representational and Ethical Considerations .....	71
Summary .....	73
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS—EXPERIENCES OF WRITING .....	76
Early Writing Experiences .....	76
Becoming a Writer .....	80



The Writers "Today" .....	83
What Inspires and Motivates the Writers .....	87
Form and Content: How and What the Writers Write .....	93
<b>CHAPTER V: RESULTS—HOW THE WRITERS USED WRITING</b> .....	102
Constructing Identity, Self-reflection and Documentation .....	103
An Emotional Outlet and a "Safe Place" .....	112
Recognition and "Being Heard" .....	117
Connecting With and Understanding Others .....	121
Learning, Teaching, Exploring Ideas and Taking Action .....	127
<b>CHAPTER VI: RESULTS—THE WRITERS' WORDS ABOUT SCHOOL</b> .....	132
Supportive Aspects of School .....	132
Unsupportive Aspects of School .....	138
Participants' Recommendations for Making School More Supportive .....	140
<b>CHAPTER VII: DISCUSSION</b> .....	144
Discussion of Findings .....	144
Writing as a Site for Identity Construction .....	145
Writing is a Way to Release and Work through Emotions .....	148
Writing is a Context for Connecting with Others and Understanding Self .....	151
Writing is a Context for Expression, Learning, Teaching and Action .....	154
Writing in the Research Process: The Researcher's Reflections .....	156
Limitations of the Study .....	160
Implications for Educational Practice .....	161
Implications for Future Research .....	165
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	168
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	181
Appendix A: Ethics Approval Certificate .....	181
Appendix B: Recruitment Poster .....	183
Appendix C: Recruitment Notice for "Youthink" Paper .....	184
Appendix D: School Recruitment Information .....	185
Appendix E: Consent Forms .....	188
Appendix F: Interview Questions .....	194
Appendix G: List of Initial Codes from Open-coding of Transcripts .....	196
Appendix H: Coding Categories, Themes and Illustrative Examples .....	212
Appendix I: Recommendations for Making School Supportive .....	218

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Original Coding Categories and Proportion of Data .....	70
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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The famous saying attributed to Anna Freud (1958) — that to be “normal during the adolescent period is by itself abnormal” (p. 275) — characterizes adolescence as a stretch of time in which humans, for several years, descend into an involuntary “madness.” Throughout recent history, adolescence — the years between the first signs of puberty and the acceptance of adult roles — has been considered in both scientific terms and popular lore as years of “storm and stress” (Hall, 1904) and role confusion (Erikson, 1968). Indeed, as Anna Freud asserted, adolescence itself may be viewed as a constellation of disordered symptoms:

Adolescence constitutes by definition an interruption of peaceful growth that resembles in appearance a variety of other emotional upsets and structural upheavals. The adolescent manifestations come close to symptom formation of neurotic, psychotic or dissocial disorder and merge almost imperceptibly into borderline states, initial, frustrated or fully fledged forms of all mental illness. (p. 267)

In this vision of adolescence, the individual is at the mercy of his or her own psychological processes — locked in a transitory period of alienation from society. Evidence of such beliefs resides deeply in theories of adolescence that guide both empirical research and common sense understandings. These characterizations of adolescence as a period of emotional instability and turmoil permeate the literature in both overt and more subtle forms. For example, even in thoughtfully constructed accounts of adolescent life such as Patricia Hersch’s (1998) ethnography of junior high school students in middle class America, the title of the work itself reveals the “otherizing” and making “strange” of adolescents, who are referred to as A Tribe Apart. While this work is a sympathetic account that exhorts adults to reclaim their

responsibility to care for children, it also contributes to a body of literature that reifies the myth of adolescent as “out of control” and “other.”

Adolescence is widely held as a defining risk factor for widespread social problems such as drug abuse, suicide, and sexually transmitted diseases (Côté & Allahaar, 1994). Adolescence is marked as “the” time of transition, and defined through transition, this period is associated with adjustment issues and difficulties to the exclusion of other moments or events over the ontological life course. During adolescence, changes across multiple spheres — physical, cognitive, psychosocial, and social — may merge into a “stress pile-up” (Eccles et al., 1993). Further, social environments that are developmentally inappropriate to adolescents’ social needs, for example, the institutional structure of many junior high and high schools, may exacerbate the difficulty of transitions (Eccles et al., 1993).

Research has revealed that mental health workers and teachers who work with adolescents view adolescents more negatively than is warranted by adolescents’ actual experiences (Jarvis, Schonert-Reichl, & Krivel-Zacks, 2000; Offer, Ostrov, & Howard, 1981; Offer & Schonert-Reichl, 1992; Stoller, Offer, Howard, & Koenig, 1996). Further, adolescents themselves have been found to hold more negative views about adolescence than is typical of their own lives (Jarvis, Schonert-Reichl, & Krivel-Zacks, 2000). Although researchers have examined the veracity of the notion of adolescence as fraught with “storm and stress” (Arnett, 1999; Bandura, 1964; Offer & Schonert-Reichl, 1992; Rutter, Graham, Chadwick, & Yule, 1976), and “debunked the myths” that portray adolescence as a developmental period characterized by extreme behavioural and emotional volatility,

much popular media has clung to perspectives of youth not supported by research. For instance, the tendency for adult crime to be attributed to adolescents in the news media and the reinforcement of themes of violence and sex in the media informs adults' beliefs about adolescence and the "social scripts" that adolescents may live by (Morrow, 1999; Onstad, 1997). Indeed, this persistent positioning of youth as "hormone crazed," "thrill seeking," and "delinquent" is evident in countless television and print-media portrayals of young people (Lesko, 1996), becoming more acute, or less, in relation to social and economic concerns (Walkerdine, 1984).

It is important to note that substantial research has examined adolescence in social, political, and cultural contexts (Hill & Fortenberry, 1992; Roman, 1996). Such research has revealed that both scientific and popular media have contributed, and continue to contribute to, negative, stereotypical, and inaccurate views of adolescence (Currie, 1999; Roman, 1996). Indeed, some research and theory within the discipline of psychology focuses on and reifies the psychoanalytic perspective in which adolescence is described as a period of "disorder" and "unrest." Examples of psychoanalytic literature highlighting the "disordered" nature of adolescence include a burgeoning body of work in the 1960's in which mood swings, the need for instant gratification, and narcissistic tendencies distinguished adolescence from other life periods (Fountain, 1961; Jacobson, 1961; Spiegel, 1961).

This chapter is organized into four sections. In the first section, I described the background to the project, including the experiences that led to my interest in this topic. The second section highlights historical perspectives on adolescence and identity and culminates with the choice to explore identity and identity construction

from a perspective that incorporates social and cultural theories. The third section previews the theoretical framework that guided my research on literacy practices and identity work, and closes with a presentation of the research questions. The fourth and final section lays out the organization of the chapters in this dissertation.

### **Background to this Project**

My interest in the intersection of arts and identity arose through my experiences working with high school students on a collaborative drama project in which the participants engaged in expressing their identities through creating and acting out a theatre piece (Novak & Schonert-Reichl, 1998). Findings from this study, which was my Masters Thesis project, emphasized the importance of opportunities for young people to express their identities and their lived experiences. I found that these types of expressions were particularly powerful when they come from the young people themselves and were not imposed or artificial. The participants were enrolled in an alternate program for students at risk of dropping out. They expressed concern that stereotypical images about young people abounded and that drama, writing, and art that they created themselves were powerful tools for educating others about the realities of their lives and about adolescence in general. The results of my Masters thesis made me think more about creative expression and identity; several of the students I worked with during my Masters study in the alternate school were avid writers of poetry. Another was involved in music and played in a band. I wanted to continue to explore the role that creative expression played in identity construction and decided to specifically explore poetry and songwriting in more depth.

I began the present study with an investigation of the literature on social and personality development with the notion of adolescence as a crucial time for identity exploration at the forefront (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Elkind, 1967; Harter, 1990; Selman, 1980). I supported the idea for this research with literature outlining the therapeutic efficacy of creative writing in promoting positive social/emotional development. Poetry writing has been used in therapeutic contexts to work through issues of, for example, depression (Leedy, 1985) and trauma (Van Zuuren, Schoutrop, Lange, Louis, & Slegers, 1999). In addition, poetry has been used in therapeutic contexts as a means of self-exploration (Wadeson, 1981; Walker, 1996). Songwriting has also been used as a therapy technique, to deal with issues of abuse (Lindberg, 1995), for treating anxiety (Mayers, 1995), depression (Goldstein, 1990) and for self-exploration and reflection (Brooks, 2003; Mazza, 1999; Miles, 1993; Phillips, Gershenson, & Lyons, 1977). These initial explorations into the literature related to my research led to a deeper understanding, as well as a questioning of the interrelationship between identity construction and creative writing.

I wanted to remain true to the notion of authentic expression described by the adolescents who participated in my Masters research, and use a research method that centered on understanding young writers' lived experiences. Indeed, researchers in the area of social policy and education have voiced concern that much of the extant adolescent research has bypassed the step of collecting qualitative data that reflect young people's organizations of their own experiences (Zaslow & Takanishi, 1993). These researchers state, "The failure to take such a step may lead to a flawed understanding of normal development; it may also limit



the effectiveness of intervention" (p. 190). Further, much anthropological research on adolescence has been from an adult perspective and the transition to adulthood and has deemphasized "youth centered interaction and cultural production" (Bucholtz, 2002, p. 525).

In the United Kingdom, researchers have identified a "recent increase in the demand for children's voices to be heard and their opinions to be sought in matters that affect their lives" (Morrow & Richards, 1996, p. 91). The current study is premised on a conviction that young people have a right to have an active voice in research, which ultimately has the potential to inform policy and practice. It is vital to undertake research designed to understand the lived experiences, beliefs, opinions, and ideas of young people (Balen, Blyth, Calabretto, Fraser, Horrocks, & Manby, 2006). Moreover, research methods used must provide a meaningful forum for the input of young people (Hill, 2006; Zaslow & Takanishi, 1993). This input could trouble assumptions about young people and contribute to retheorizing adolescence and identity, as well as to constructing "new social practices in and outside of schools" (Lesko, 1996, p.142).

While psychological research highlights adolescents' increasingly complex ways of understanding their social world (Elkind, 1967; Selman, 1980), developmental stage theories tend to foreground discrete steps to successfully forming an identity. Achieving a particular stage relies on having reached certain underlying and innate cognitive capacities, along with addressing a developmental crisis between exploration and commitment in the domains of love, vocation, and ideology (Erikson, 1959, 1968). Marcia's (1966) extension of Erikson's

developmental model, identified four identity statuses ranging from diffusion and foreclosure to moratorium and achievement, measured by a questionnaire indexing exploration and commitment across the three domains. Identity diffusion reflected low exploration and low commitment. Identity foreclosure reflected low exploration and high commitment. Identity moratorium reflected high exploration and low commitment. Finally, identity achievement reflected high exploration and high commitment. Making decisions and commitments about life domains is a process that predicts a person's identity status, and whether or not he or she has "achieved" a particular identity that remains constant from then on (Marcia, 1980). What is important to underline, however, is that although emergent capacities enable young people to negotiate their identity construction, which is the subject of developmental research, my research positions this in and through social and cultural practices, which is the subject of anthropological and sociocultural research (Bucholtz, 2002; Vadeboncoeur & Portes, 2002).

### **Perspectives on Adolescence and Identity**

Text books used in the instruction of prospective high school teachers, social workers and students of adolescent development describe adolescents as in the process of creating and constructing a sense of "who they are, what they are all about, and where they are going in life" (Santrock, 2004, p. 322). As adolescents are making this cognitive transition, they are also faced with social transitions such as moving from elementary school to the more complex world of high school. As they move into high school, adolescents find and/or construct a number of identity positions or peer group "niches" with which to identify and in which to build positive

self-perception (Kinney, 1990, 1993, 1999). For example, in my high school, there was an informal niche of punk-rockers who wrote poetry and/or played in bands. We shared our song lyrics that included indictments of materialistic consumerism and what we considered biting social satire. This niche provided a space for peer group identification within a subculture.

Recently, undergraduate texts for teacher education students and the like have widened to include social and cultural perspectives (e.g., Arnett, 2007), in which the transition to adulthood is described as a complex process of creating and constructing a sense of self within social-cultural contexts (Arnett, 1995; Steele & Brown, 1995). This literature reflects the recent critique of Erikson's (1968) developmental identity status model for presenting a narrow and unitary theory of identity formation (Côté, 2000; Egan-Robertson, 1998; Schachter, 2005). Also under scrutiny is the "accepted knowledge" associated with the stage of adolescence. The way in which adolescence is represented as a developmental stage contributes to a construction of what is normal and deviant in adolescence and to a perception that adolescence is unavoidable, but problematic, and so must be controlled (Lesko, 1996).

Scholars have recently posited a new life period that has emerged between childhood and adulthood in the industrialized West (Arnett, 2000a, 2000b). Arnett and others have presented theoretical and empirical evidence to make the case for emerging adulthood as a distinct life period, with roots in social and cultural changes over the last half century. Emerging adulthood, as operationalized in the research literature, maps onto an age range of 18-29. Various research studies have been

conducted with emerging adult samples. The sampling defines this age period variously, for example, 18-25 years old (Arnett 2000a); 18-28 years old (Arnett, 2000b); 21-26 years old (Shulman, Feldman, Blatt, Cohen, & Mahler, 2005). While adolescence has long been held as the most important time for identity development, "emerging adulthood" offers an added element of autonomy, including the attainment of legal adult status and moving out of the parental home, and is thus a time of independent exploration especially in the areas of love, work, and worldviews (Arnett, 2000a). In the West, trends have seen marriage and childbirth occurring later, and a larger segment of the population engaging in postsecondary education. These and other factors are associated with a protracted transition and extended period of the exploration associated with constructing an identity.

Emerging adulthood is characterized as a time of role experimentation leading to the making of major life decisions (Roberts, O'Donnell, & Robins, 2004). As a life period, it is posited as distinct in terms of demographics, subjective beliefs regarding one's own adult status, and identity and role exploration (Arnett, 2000a). While emerging adulthood has been characterized as the most "volitional" years of one's life, (Arnett, 2000a), for example, a time when one has the most freedom to do what he or she wants) it is important to note that this extended transition to adulthood is a social construct and is likely to be present under certain conditions, in cultures that extend the taking on of adult roles. Conditions like poverty hinder the exploration and volitional nature of this life period (Arnett, 2000a; Bynner, 2005). Life pathways are affected by personal, financial, social and cultural resources "to which the growing individual has access" (Bynner, 2005, p. 379).

Indeed, though Arnett intended the definition of emerging adulthood to address the critiques of Erikson's (1968) theory of identity formation, his work is framed by the same psychological assumptions that form the basis of Erikson's work. As such, his work cannot escape critique on the same grounds.

Proposing a position that counters traditional developmental notions of adolescence, as well as Erikson's and Arnett's theoretical positions specifically, Bucholtz (2002) has argued that instead of a lock-step series of predictable stages with a stable, integrated self as the completion point in adulthood, identity is fluid and changeable across contexts throughout the life course:

Identity is intended to invoke neither the familiar psychological formulation of adolescence as a prolonged 'search for identity,' nor the rigid and essentialized concept that has been the target of a great deal of recent critique. Rather, identity is agentic, flexible, and ever changing, but no more for youth than for people of any age. (Bucholtz, 2002, p. 532)

This view of identity construction is distinct from a developmental understanding of identity formation in that it sees identity as fluid, as incorporating individual agency with social context, and as involving situated practices or activities (Vadeboncoeur & Portes, 2002). Further, identity construction is not seen as the special "crisis" of young people, but rather is something in which people of all ages are engaged throughout the lifespan.

It is important to consider that the "lived experience of young people is not limited to the uneasy occupation of a developmental way station en route to full-fledged cultural standing" (Bucholtz, 2002, p. 532). Identity embodies the intersection of factors such as class, gender, race, and geographical location (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004). Critiques of the identity status model provide insight

into a broader perspective on exploring identity in adolescence and emerging adulthood. "Emerging adulthood" as a developmental stage in the tradition of psychology has been criticized for not adequately taking into account structural factors such as social class (Bynner, 2005). Arnett's theory is "cast in the psychological mode of 'developmental stages', which fails to recognize adequately that the huge diversity of individual experience is constrained by location in the social structure" (Bynner, 2005, p. 378). While "emerging adulthood" may hold some merit in seeking to incorporate social and cultural conditions in the understanding of identity, it merely recreates another developmental stage that attempts to explain the human condition as a series of predictable phases. The approach to understanding identity that I have taken in undertaking this research both values young people's own cultural practices and agency (Bucholtz, 2002) and recognizes the ways in which context can constrain as well as support identity construction (Blackburn, 2005; Mahar, 2001).

### **Theoretical Framework: Literacy Practices as Identity Work**

In my high school, there was a school-sanctioned extra-curricular poetry publication to which some of us contributed our writing — thus giving our voices an official avenue to be heard. This opportunity to participate and be recognized in an extra-curricular school activity seemed to fit with Kinney's (1993) findings that engaging in peer-based extra-curricular activities in high school was associated with positive identity construction. The literary practices that formed the basis of participation and membership in this group also supported these students' identity work in terms of reflection, expression, documentation, and sharing of experiences.

This research is commensurate with theoretical arguments made by Vadeboncoeur and Portes (2002), who noted the importance of understanding "...language and discourse systems as centrally implicated in both the construction and deconstruction of identity" (p. 93).

Literacy practices, such as poetry and songwriting, are ways that people communicate and interact, express and understand themselves and construct identities (Camitta, 1990, 1993). For this research, I was interested specifically in writing practice that is outside of and independent from formal school curriculum or activities; in other words, unsanctioned writing (Corey, 2001; Moje, 2000). I employed a qualitative approach in order to understand young people's experiences of real-life social and interpersonal concerns, and of how they construct their identities in the context of self-initiated creative writing (i.e., poetry and/or song). Poetry and song were examined in parallel. Both were considered for their textual content (i.e., poems and song lyrics). I did not expect to make a distinction between the two forms, but rather sought to be inclusive of various modes used for poetic expression. For example, rap or hip hop lyrics are a form of poetry; spoken word is a type of lyrical performance, without a backup band.

For the purposes of the present investigation, I operationalized unsanctioned as that which is self-initiated and/or independent of formal school curriculum or school-supported activities. Although the term "unsanctioned" can be problematic in that it may set up a dichotomy between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, my intent was not to reify this dichotomy, nor to argue that one was better than the other. I do not argue that young people's independent writing is

beneficial because it is outside school. Rather, the intent was to provide insight into the kinds of literacy practices within which young people engage, and through which they construct their identities. Recommendations for educators, schools, and education systems are made because for many young people, this form of writing filled a need that was not met in school.

This research is about how young people define and understand themselves in social contexts, and how being a writer contributes to identity. It also concerns what young people write about, and the forms their expressions take. The primary purpose of the present investigation was to explore the experiences of young adult writers who, by penning their own personal texts, engaged in unsanctioned literacy practice as identity work in the social, political, and cultural contexts of their lives. One general research question and three sub-questions were posed in this study. The general question was: From the perspective of the young writer, what is the experience of engaging in expression through independent or unsanctioned creative poetry and/or song-writing? The three sub-questions were as follows: In what ways do young people engage in writing practice? Why do young people write and how do they use writing in their lives? What can teachers, researchers, and policy makers learn from the practices of these young people?

### **Organization of Chapters**

This chapter provided an introduction to my research including: the background to the project; historical perspectives on adolescence and identity and identity construction from social and cultural perspectives; the theoretical framework relating to literacy practices and identity work; the research questions; and



organization of this dissertation. The next chapter, Chapter II, presents the literature review including research that guided this study. The literature review included the following domains: conceptions of adolescence and youth in relation to social and cultural perspectives on identity construction; literacy practices and contexts in which young people engage; and unsanctioned literacy practices as a site for identity work. Chapter III includes descriptions of the researcher and participants, as well as the methodology used in this research. Results are presented in Chapters IV, V, and VI; each of these chapters relates to a specific research question or set of questions. These relate in turn to participants' experiences of writing, what writing means to them, the roles writing practice plays in their lives, and their views on school and how it can be more supportive and engaging for young people. Finally, Chapter VII includes a discussion of findings in relation to the literature, as well as implications and recommendations for future research and practice.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to develop and carry out the study, as well as to best understand and interpret my findings, I reviewed literature in the following domains: 1) conceptions of adolescence and youth as related to views of identity construction from social and cultural perspectives; 2) literacy practice forms, including poetry and spoken word, as well as lyrics and music in popular culture; and 3) unsanctioned literacy practices, specifically those outside of formal school activities, as a creative site for identity work.

### **Adolescence, Youth and Identity**

Adolescence as a distinct life period emerged during the 19<sup>th</sup> century out of social changes, such as industrialization, and institutional changes such as compulsory education (Neubauer, 1992). Accordingly, there is evidence in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature and art of a tradition portraying adolescents as confused and disturbed. For example, Dostoevsky's The Adolescent (1874) tells the story of a young man "struggling to gain an identity, due to his unresolved Oedipal conflict" (Neubauer, 1992, p. 80). Edvard Munch's famous painting, "Puberty" (1895), portrays a young girl, filled with apparent anxiety, naked in a room with looming shadows, while Kirchner's "Marcella" (1909-10) conveys in its subject an "underlying psychological conflict" (Neubauer, 1992, p.99). Such evidence constructs adolescence as a distinct life period — and one with a negative tone.

### The Problem of Categorization

The life period of adolescence was invented during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries for social-economic reasons, namely to make way for "adults" to obtain

scarce jobs during economic hard times via a system of compulsory education (Côté & Allahar, 1994; Enright & Lapsley, 1982; Lapsley, Enright, & Serlin, 1985; Walkerdine, 1984). This construction of youth as unruly and adolescence fraught with psychological conflict is used to “other” people in the second decade of life today. For example, adolescents are the targets of mass marketing projects that separate them out as dangerously different, yet exotically desirable. Young people are positioned as “other” from the norm of children and the norm of adults. And, while negative stereotypes and beliefs about adolescents abound, many adults strive to imitate adolescent fashion and lifestyle (Lesko, 1996).

“Youth” and “adolescence” as concepts are as problematic as they are ambiguous. As a life period, “youth” has roots in the work of Keniston (1971), against a backdrop of the Vietnam War and the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s. Here, “youth” was marked by a certain tension between the self and society (Keniston, as cited in Arnett, 2000a), as seen in rebellious movements and student protests. At the same time, during youth, a person was considered to be at a novice phase of development (Levinson, 1978), with the task of building a “stable life structure” (Arnett, 2000a, p. 470). The concept of “adolescence” has its roots in the identification, labelling and characterization of various distinct populations, often those considered deviant, by psychology and other social sciences in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Lesko, 1996). The assumptions about adolescence that arose from this time still have significant impact on how young people are characterized and how the educational system is structured. In this view, talking “about adolescents — their problems, characteristics, and needs — is a central arena for talking about

social expectations for productive, rational, and independent adults" (Lesko, 1996, p.142).

Considering "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000a, 2000b) to be a developmental period is also problematic in the sense that it, like other developmental periods in stage theories, proposes and reifies a trajectory of progression to a defined "finish line" or endpoint. Developmental theory frames self and identity formation as a process, with young people as works in progress (Bucholtz, 2002). Bucholtz recommended a shift from a conception of adolescence to a conception of youth not only to account for the breadth of life experience, but also to "interrogate the concept of adolescence itself, which contrasts and connects etymologically, as well as socially with adulthood" (p. 529). It is important to caution that overemphasis on youth as a transition to adulthood diminishes the agency and import of the cultural production specific to that life period (Bucholtz, 2002; Bynner, 2005). This overemphasis also has the effect of normalizing some characteristics of adulthood without accounting for differences in gender, culture and/or class (Lesko, 1996). In understanding the life course, it is important to consider both individual diversity and structural factors that place constraints on individuals (Bynner, 2005; Elder, 1998).

Bynner (2005) recounted the work of German social scientists in the 1980s, who referred to the extension of the youth phase of the life course and emphasized that adolescence is inadequate to describe the "moratorium" (Erikson, 1968) between childhood and adulthood. Sociologists like Beck (1992) criticized the psychological perspective for individualizing the life course, rather than attending to

underlying sociological processes. Structural processes shape roles and identities given enabling conditions within contexts. For example, "emerging adulthood" is common across industrialized countries, but less likely to exist as a distinct stage in traditional religious communities with collectivist values and social mores that dictate transitions to marriage. Bynner (2005) examined how social stratification and exclusion common in Europe and Britain impact young adults. For example, in Britain there is high economic activity for people ages 14-24, for example, in institutionalized apprenticeship programs and the workplace, and the lowest level of educational engagement at age 18 compared with industrialized nations.

Corsaro and Eder (1990) articulated an interpretive view of development as a reproductive process of socialization. According to them, "a major aim of the interpretive approach is the documentation of peer cultures and the development of a better understanding of their crucial role in childhood socialization" (p. 200). In this view, young people work to gain control of their lives and also share that control within their group. They construct identities within their peer cultures by sharing aspects of their lives, particularly those involving fear and conflict. They also engage with adult culture through resistance to and reproduction of that culture. Of note here is Corsaro and Eder's assertion that more research is needed regarding activities in peer cultures that involve the use of language and that are practiced in settings other than schools, which are the focus of my research.

Far-reaching social and cultural changes such as globalization are changing the meaning of youth and adolescence in many societies (Bucholtz, 2002). Youth as a category is variable across cultures and economic and cultural factors influence

how, and even if, a particular stage, “adolescence,” is experienced (Bucholtz, 2002). Labels like youth or adult may also have strategic uses in particular sociopolitical circumstances. For example, a 16-year old who has committed a violent crime may be considered an adult in the justice system (Bucholtz, 2002). Notions of stages like “adolescence” and “emerging adulthood” look at age as a trajectory or process, with crises and achievements that are essential to each stage. In the context of youth, age is part of people’s experiences, which help shape identity (Bucholtz, 2002). This position is connected to Lesko’s (1996) critique of assumptions about adolescence that result in controlling, problematizing, and limiting youth identity.

#### Highlighting Research that Reflects Identity Construction

Pomerantz, Currie, and Kelly (2004) explored the potential for feminist politics in the “skater girl” culture (i.e., skateboarding culture). The authors reviewed post-feminist analysis and its contention that today’s teenage girls have benefited from feminism, but have not had to engage in the feminist struggle. Against a backdrop of recent writings out of psychology and third-wave feminism, the authors argue that the everyday lives of girls have been excluded from the discussion. Pomerantz et al.’s study investigated the actions of the “Park Gang,” a group of eight girls who asserted their skater identity in a local skateboard park and in so doing had to challenge boys who dominated the skate park. The girls did so by resisting “emphasized femininity” and its subordination of girls to men and boys. The girls’ positioning as skaters showed an awareness of inequality based on gender, and their feminist politics embedded in their everyday lives.

Research documenting young people's constructions of their own identities in terms of subculture identities and resistance to prescribed, stereotyped images of gender and adolescence (e.g., Bucholtz, 1999, 2002) informed the present investigation. For instance, Bucholtz (1999), in a study of young people's communities of practice, found that the narratives of self-called "nerd girls" — members of an "anti-club" — showed not only how young people constructed their own identities in context, but also how they used complex literacy practices to do so. As earlier stated, much research on adolescence has deemphasized young people's own organizations of their experiences.

#### Relation of the Literature to My Study

As evident in the dialogue in the literature, the design and framing of my research is, in part, a response to what has gone before. The literature on identity that most informs my own work is that of Bucholtz (1999, 2002) and Lesko (1996). Exploring youth culture as a community of practice, and language within that culture as the central practice contributing to identity construction (Bucholtz, 1999) mirrors my own research focus. Also, Bucholtz's (2002) critique of existing research on youth as too focused on the more visible subcultures is addressed in my own research, responding to a request for work focused "on the ordinary, everyday activities in which youth engage" (p.14). In my study, in doing this, I recognize the evolution of how this group is named and characterized while aligning myself with social and cultural approaches to identity construction.

In order to explore the experiences of young people who are writers, I chose not to restrict the selection of participants to a particular and arbitrary age group.

First, my purposive or purposeful sampling (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990) was designed to surface the writing aspect of the person, and not the chronological age, developmental stage, or scholastic grade placement. Second, because I set out to explore identity and writing practice, I was interested in how the participants identified themselves in the life course, in the present, and retrospectively through their experiences as writers over time.

### **Literacy Practice and Forms**

In order to foster positive adjustment and success for all young people, educators need to attend to the complexities of identity construction in and out of the school context (Sadowski, 2003). One such theatre for fostering competence may be creative writing — poetry or songs. The act of writing is situated in social practices, purposes, and contexts (Everhart, 1983; Gee 1996) and people's social identities and roles are formed in part by the literacy practices in which they engage (Luke, as cited in Moje, 2000).

Literacy practices, such as the independent writing of poetry or songs, are tools that people use for specific purposes in specific contexts and situations (Gee, 1996; Moje, 2000; Scribner & Cole, 1981). Literacy practices represent ways that people communicate and connect with others, express and document their experiences and feelings, as well as seek to understand themselves and their environment (Camitta, 1990, 1993). The following sections present literature related to forms of literacy practice, specifically poetry, both written and performed, and popular culture including music and lyrics.



### Poetry: Written and Spoken

Adolescence and youth culture has a longstanding association with poetry and poetic sensibility (Neubauer, 1992). Picture a teenager in her bedroom pouring her heart out onto the page, writing poems about lost love. A stereotype perhaps, but the image is easily conjured. In Victorian times, young poet Christina Rossetti was said to have grappled with "a life long struggle with feminist desires" in her work (Canete, 1997). Descriptions of Rossetti's life and works focus on her identity during her youth (Marsh, 1995). Today, a quick search of the Internet reveals many websites for and by young people who write and publish poems and lyrics on the web. A Google search using "Adolescent" and "Poetry" yielded 594 websites; using "Teen" and "Songwriting" 210 websites were found. Teenlit.com features adolescents' publications and highlights poetry as the most contributed genre. Topics of the writing range from relationship issues to social activism and environmental issues. For example the *e-C.H.I.C.* website, whose acronym claims it as "for today's teen girls who are Cool, Hip and In Control," prominently features poems by adolescent girls. A brief scan of a sample of the poems yields content and themes related to identity and gender roles.

The therapeutic effects of writing poetry and other related artistic expressions, such as songwriting, have been documented extensively in professional counselling journals and other related publications (Brooks, 2003; Goldstein, 1990; Leedy, 1985; Lindberg, 1995; Mayers, 1995; Mazza, 1999; Miles, 1993; Phillips, Gershenson, & Lyons, 1977; Van Zuuren et al., 1999; Wadeson, 1981; Walker, 1996). In particular, poetry and songwriting, in the context of music therapy, and other forms of

expression are used extensively in social-emotional and counseling interventions. In one study, a therapist recounted the analysis of an adolescent psychotherapy patient's poetry to mark his progress in therapy (Simpson, 1995). In another study, a special education teacher used songwriting activities with developmentally disabled students and recorded and distributed an album titled "Special Music by Special Kids" (Monagan, 1989). The National Association for Poetry Therapy highlights resources on their website (National Association for Poetry Therapy, 2004). One online source exhorts, "Depressed? Try beating the blues by writing a poem" (American Communications Foundation News Source, 2004).

Writing poetry and lyrics may indeed be an effective means of dealing with the stresses and problems of life. However, the intent of the present investigation was to look beyond the use of writing processes as a way of "fixing" people or problems. Philosophically, the therapeutic approach to writing necessitates problematizing or pathologizing those who practice it. If I followed this path, I would have found a group of people with a problem and used writing as an intervention to solve the problem. Rather, in this study I explored the experiences and writings of young people who write poems and songs and sought to understand from their perspectives, the roles writing plays in their lives. For young people, creative writing may be a form of expression that affords therapeutic effects. Moreover, it may provide a conduit for self-expression and talent, strengthening a personal sense of competency. However, my intention is not to put forth writing as a means of therapy or intervention that helps people achieve success. The present investigation is aligned with Vadeboncoeur's (2005a) call to consider the ways "in which students

and teachers are positioned" (p. 145) within institutions to "better construct alternative environments for students to successfully complete high school requirements" (p. 146). For this reason, I chose to couple young people's descriptions of their independent writing practice outside of school, with their analytical insights into the school institution.

A study by McCormick (2003) used poetry as a means of exploring individual concerns in the context of an urban school, where safety policy served to separate the largely black working-class student population into dehumanizing categories. Based on fashion, peer group affiliation and other socioeconomic and cultural factors, students were deemed either a non-criminal or a criminal. Over five years, the author collected students' poetry, listened to stories, and conducted unstructured interviews with students and teachers alike, while working in a dropout prevention program. She worked alongside another teacher, who was a professional poet, and created open-ended exercises to which the students responded with their poetry. Findings revealed that students used metaphor and personification to articulate and explore the various constraints placed on their identities in the school culture. Students used poetry to make sense of their world. The discussion of identity was drawn from analysis of the young people's poems. As stated by McCormick (2003), "the act of writing... reconfigures the boundary between self and world....The poet moves between experiencing the external constraints of a physical world and composing that experience" (p. 127).

One of the young women writers in the study, Tanzania, was able through her writing to:

...objectify her own entrapment, articulate its conditions, and thereby creates a weapon with which to fight institutional violence...As an act of self-definition, writing poetry challenged the schooling practices that defined teens in unilateral terms. It was, consequently, a powerful tool of self-affirmation. (p. 127)

The writing was completed as part of a school program and these conditions may have detracted from the authenticity of the expression. Asking directly how the students experienced the poetry project, and how meaningful it was for them, would have provided further insight into program efficacy and feedback for improvement from the students' perspectives.

In research with an informal literature discussion group, Blackburn (2005) described how gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youth engaged poetry and other writing practices to do identity work unsanctioned by school, through literacy practices in school environments. In the space of this group, sexual identity was explored through participants' own poetry and other writings as well as through texts chosen by the group. Poetry played a particular role in identity construction by bringing academic tools, and thus, value to discussions of sexuality.

Performance poetry, or spoken word, represents a space created by youth to communicate, educate, and express and construct their identities. The spoken word youth movement was explored in terms of its contribution to identity development for disenfranchised youth by Sparks and Grochowski (2002). Findings of their study revealed that the making public of one's writing or poetry is active engagement in constructing and defining oneself in the world. It is also a site for activism, and

understanding others' perspectives. Spoken word values the courage to speak out and describe lived experiences.

It is interesting to note that several of the spoken word organizers in Sparks and Grochowski's (2002) study were upper-middle-class university students who were practicing alternate rather than normative forms of expression and learning from others from different class, gender, age, and cultural positions as they listened to them speak. Learning from young people who write and engage in spoken word and other literacy based performances is a vital step in informing school practice and policy through writers' strategies for school reform, and through learning how literacy practices can facilitate critical thinking, and connection to others. As such, my study is one small piece that contributes to understanding the venues for expression constructed by young people and how this roles in their lives.

Much can be learned from young people's independent initiatives to express, explore, and deal with life issues through poetry and songwriting. Nevertheless, it is impossible to view young people's own artistic or cultural production free of the context of popular culture and media — a major socialization source.

#### Lyrics and Music and the Context of Popular Culture

Much research regarding media and adolescence has focused either on adolescents' uses of media (Arnett, 1995, 1996; Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2002; Larson, 1995; Pierce, 2006; Rubin, 1993; Steele, 2006; Steele & Brown, 1995) or the effects of media on adolescents (Gresson III, 1997; Kellner, 1997; Romer, Jamieson, & Anday, 2003). Young people represent a viable market share with money to spend on media products such as concert tickets and CDs, so media

producers are eager to tailor products to the tastes and needs of their market (Côté & Allahar, 1994).

Popular media is a pervasive force in society and as such in young people's lives. That media is a pervasive part of culture is illustrated in a study by Novak and Schonert-Reichl (1998) tracing eighth and ninth grade students' participation in a drama project related to social issues. When creating an improvised play on relevant social issues, students chose the format of a daytime talk show to present and discuss peer group and substance use issues. They described the talk show format as one they were very familiar and comfortable with and were able to replicate the form masterfully.

It is difficult to think of popular media, particularly popular music, without thinking of adolescence or youth. Songs such as My Generation by the Who (1969) express the angst of youth being misunderstood and mistreated in a dominantly adult world: "People try to put us down/ Just because we get around/ Things sure do look awful cold/ Hope I die before I get old..." And there are countless examples through the early days of rock and roll through to the "Riot Girl" movement of recent years (Jazz, 2001).

From the most crass commercial product (e.g., Britney Spears) to less mainstream and more meritorious offerings (e.g., Spearhead), the lyrical content of popular music appeals to young people. An Internet search yielded a wealth of lyrics databases (approximately 300), many of which are linked to young people's own homepages, showing evidence of interest in and perhaps identification with lyrical

content. Research has addressed teenagers' and young adults' uses of popular music in various contexts.

In a study of the heavy metal music subculture, the lyrical content and form of heavy metal music alone was found to have a cathartic effect among its listeners (Arnett, 1996). The values and norms of "straightedge" subculture, which evolved in reaction to the portrayal of punk youth as violent and risk-taking, has been studied via an analysis of song lyrics related to the subculture (Wood, 1998). In another study of heavy metal culture, lyrics are used as a window into young people's values and beliefs, and gender roles (Friesen & Helfrich, 1998). These studies add insight into how young people make use of the music and lyrical content in their social and emotional lives, but little attention was given to the participants' own production of lyrics or music, and its impact on their lives.

A study by Moje et al. (2004) of how content area literacy learning can gain from incorporating the various funds of knowledge accessed by young people pointed to music as the most commonly engaged popular culture medium in adolescents' peer fund of knowledge. The data from this study showed "that the youth relied heavily on music as a fund that shapes and represents the texts they read and write, as well as the identities they enact in different spaces" (p. 39). The researchers found that, not only was music a literacy practice among the youth studied, but that the skills used in this practice were highly relevant and transferable to traditional literacy learning. However, they also found that young people do not draw on this fund of knowledge, or their related discursive skills, in the classroom.

This study has implications for further research on identity construction through music as a literacy practice, both within and outside the classroom.

Emerson (2002) studied young black women's uses of popular culture in terms of expression and negotiation of aspects of social identity, including gender. She pointed out that research on Black youth culture and hip hop has predominantly focused on males' experiences, yet the recent popularity of Black woman performers has brought to light the ways young Black women use popular culture in expressing self. Emerson looked at how Black womanhood is portrayed in Black woman hip hop artists' music videos, exploring themes of control and agency. Black youth culture is prevalent in popular media and culture, as evidenced by the emergence of hip hop into the mainstream in the early 1990s. Hip hop productions have been criticized for misogynistic and stereotypical portrayals of women as sexual objects in videos. As such, Emerson (2002) argued that it is vital to examine media as an influential social institution in representing and reproducing ideologies of race, class, and gender.

Recently, women music producers and performers such as Erykah Badu, Missy Elliot, and Lauryn Hill "depict themselves as independent, strong, and self-reliant agents of their own desire, the masters of their own destiny" (Emerson, 2002, p. 116). Emerson added to the existing analyses of the representation of Black womanhood in music videos by selecting a diverse and comprehensive sample of 56 videos, including those by women artists. Content and textual analyses revealed the following. Emergent themes included stereotypical and controlling images that emphasized Black women's bodies, one-dimensionality and social constraints. For example, women were portrayed as unrealistically thin, scantily clad objects of male



desire. Further, in the videos women were often presented under the auspices of highly visible male sponsor or producer.

In 25 of the videos, however, Emerson (2002) found evidence of Black women's agency. Agency was associated with strong identification with Black culture, asserting one's autonomy, and collaborative, rather than hierarchical relationships with production personnel. Emerson concluded that the contradictory aspects revealed in the videos speak to the complexity of the issues. However, she did not speak with young women consumers of the videos to understand their experiences and views of the media products: how they make use of, incorporate and/or resist these messages.

Popular culture produces and disseminates many stereotypes and misconceptions about youth and "adolescents." Research examining young people's uses of media sometimes seeks to balance off such stereotypes by presenting their own views. Along these lines, a burgeoning research area is the exploration of young people's own creation and production of media such as websites and zines (Bell, 2001, 2002; Ferris, 2001). Young people's own production of media represents a means of claiming space and identity in terms of gender, race or culture: "Being ignored by the media and the culture industry was part of what stimulated people to create zines; remaining ignored is often the only way to keep control over the independent culture that is created" (Bell, 2001, p. 58).

#### Relation of the Literature to My Study

Further discussion of independent cultural production, specifically in relation to literacy practices such as poetry and songwriting, follows in the next section. In

my study, I sought to explore young people's writing practice and cultural production, rather than focus upon their consumption of popular culture. Exploration of young people's self-directed writing practice provided insights into collaborative and participatory activities such as group writing projects.

### **A Focus on Unsanctioned Literacy Practices**

Recently, social sciences and cultural studies researchers have investigated young people's self-initiated literacy practices outside of school contexts, including forms of literacy not necessarily valued in school settings or tasks. This type of literacy practice is referred to as "unsanctioned" (Bleich, 1989; Corey, 2001; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004; Moje, 2000; O'Brien, 2001). Such research has addressed young people's uses of vernacular literacy practices such as graffiti tagging and subculture related speech patterns, and has attended to young people's own complex practices. It is noted that the cultural spaces created by youth via such unsanctioned literacy practices as graffiti are often vilified in order to maintain social control (Aguilar, 2001; Ferrell, 1997).<sup>1</sup>

Unsanctioned practices are not given space within school; sanctioned practices often do not connect with people's experiences and cultures in meaningful ways (Corey, 2001). For many students, aspects of their identities "keep them from accessing the codes necessary to succeed in the dominant social and academic discourse communities" (Mahar, 2001, p. 201). Texts chosen for study in schools

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<sup>1</sup> One humorous example of the criminalization of practices like tagging is presented in the Vancouver Police Departments informational leaflet on "Tagging." This leaflet is aimed at identifying taggers and getting them arrested to "keep the streets clean." The leaflet features a cartoon figure "Portrait of a Tagger." The figure wears cool urban clothes, baggy pants, and sideways ball cap — the works. "He" also has some paint supplies under his baggy sleeves. This could be your neighbor's kid on his way to art class.

may be far from the daily experiences of teenage students while the literacy practices with which they do engage their daily experiences are not valued in the classroom (Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien, 2000). Engaging in sanctioned literacy practices may bring academic power, but engaging in unsanctioned practices may bring social power. Additionally, when school environments do not welcome expressions of some identities, those environments become unsafe for identity work through literacy practices and the sanctioned practices are not effective for young people whose public and private identities are at odds (Blackburn, 2005).

To ignore or neglect unsanctioned literacy practices limits both research and educational practice since "nonacademic settings often appear to be the center stages of adolescent literacies and self-expression" (Mahar, 2001, p. 203). Everyday literacy practices may also overlap and/or resemble academic literacies and could provide a bridge between adolescent cultural and identity construction and formal literacy learning (Moje et al., 2004). Attention to unsanctioned practices makes available alternative texts and increases awareness of the interests and needs of learners (Moje et al., 2000).

What forms of literacy practice are young people using outside of school and how can we mobilize this towards resilience and change within school and community contexts? To answer the question, Moje (2000) studied "gangsta" youth in Salt Lake City and highlighted the complex literacy practices created and used by young people "marginalized" from the dominant white middle-class community. She specifically examined graffiti and gang-related tagging. Moje recommended recognizing the sophisticated practices of marginalized youth, as well as strategies

for working with youth to disrupt dominant discourses and avoid the reproduction of stereotypes. Expression through "unsanctioned" independent writing may potentially inform change in schools towards valuing and building upon young people's own practices (Moje, 2000).

### Relating Unsanctioned Writing Practice to the School Context

One example of "marginalization" related to literacy is described by Duke (2000) who noted differences between low and high socioeconomic contexts across 20 elementary school classrooms in terms of print environments and experiences offered to children. Methods included classroom observations and textual analysis of classroom print-based materials for students, library resources, written language and other special activities relating to or including print-based materials. Analysis included the amount of print experience, type of print materials, and levels of student engagement and agency with print.

Results of Duke's (2000) investigation highlighted literacy as a domain through which schools contributed to lower levels of achievement among children from low socioeconomic backgrounds early in the schooling process. Findings revealed that there were more books in high SES classroom libraries. Because there were more resources, there was more opportunity for students to use the resources. High SES classrooms also had more print materials on the walls, and these were more often integrated in classroom activities than in low SES classrooms. Perhaps most importantly, in high SES classrooms, students had more control over the types of books they read, and "a higher degree of authorship in what they wrote" (Duke,

2000, p. 465). They also had more opportunity to write for audiences other than the teacher, and for reasons other than grades.

The one case where the low SES classrooms had more resources than the high SES classrooms was with regards to written language activities in the classroom (Duke, 2000). However, a greater proportion of time was focused on learning literacy versus using literacy to engage in other content areas. This fits with the critique of remedial programs for students with learning disabilities where the content areas are withheld from students until they learn the basics, thus marginalizing students with learning difficulties, and putting them further behind their non-learning disabled peers in content acquisition and engaging in critical thinking (Gersten, Baker, Smith-Johnson, Dimino, & Peterson, 2006). This research corroborates the inequity that was exposed by Duke (2000).

In the face of this kind of marginalization, Moje (2000) emphasized that tagging and gang language are complex literacy practices that could be useful resources for educators to incorporate into education practices. Moje (2000) collected ethnographic and interview data over three years in a school in urban Salt Lake City. She worked with Latino gang-affiliated students to study how gang identities were represented through literacy practices and how young people learn and make use of these practices. Salt Lake City has a predominantly white middle-class ethic with the Latter Day Saints church having a major influence; as such, Moje noted that the marginalization of ethnic minorities was a major factor in the school and the community at large.

Moje (2000) argued that in order to potentially inform and transform educational practice and policy, the practices of marginalized youth must be recognized and not merely dismissed as deviance. The young people in her study "used literacy practices to be part of the story, to claim a space, construct an identity, and take a position in their worlds" (p. 651). Important implications for education and practice include the imperative to support students to use their skills and practices as resources within school. In order for this to be possible, educators must be aware of what youth can do and recognize the sophistication and worth of their literacy practices. Further, a critical approach is needed that involves supporting young people to question not only societal norms and stereotypes, but also their own experiences and positions (Moje, 2000).

In a thematically related study, Aguilar (2000) explored the complex literacy practices of Chicano youth gangs in the Los Angeles area, looking specifically at literacy practices as strategies for resistance and identity construction. She performed a content analysis of over 100 examples of graffiti created by Chicano youth in public spaces. Aguilar collected data by downloading photographs of graffiti posted by Chicano youth on a public website. Findings related to the content of the graffiti revealed enunciations of identity, commitment to and solidarity with the neighborhood, as well as expressions of culture: "For educators, graffiti may display literate competency and raise interesting questions regarding pedagogy" (p. 30). The way that graffiti practice has been passed down from older to younger youth represents a complex form of mentorship.

Aguilar (2000) argued that in order to be a place where literacy is effectively acquired, school must recognize the centrality of identity and affiliation, and offer multiple methods to tap into literacy practices, abilities, talents and accomplishments. She noted that while middle-class youth often have the privilege of having their expressive needs met through structured music lessons and theatre classes, schools must engage and support those students without such opportunities. The need is articulated for schools to extend beyond their own walls and include community; that is, the school needs to be a public space and not simply an institution. The implication is that a teacher cannot assess literacy competency out of context; therefore, it is vital to value the sophistication of unsanctioned practices and find ways to engage and support all students.

Another form of unsanctioned literacy practice is that of zine writing. Zine writing has a long history beginning in the 1930s with fans of comic books self-publishing their reviews of comic book stories (Wertham, as cited in Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004). Today, girls are by far the most prolific zine writers; they explore issues largely ignored or treated in a consumer-oriented, stereotyping way by the popular media. Zines are a powerful expressive medium for young girls, as well as a means for inspiring social and political activism and resistance (Bell, 2002; Guzzetti & Gamboa; 2004; Schilt, 2003).

Gee, Allen, and Clinton (2001) explored how youth use language to construct identities in the contexts of school culture and social class, and how different language styles contribute to constructing particular identities. The specific purpose of the study was to look at how social class is manifest in language by engaging in

in-depth interviews and discourse analysis, to provide “snapshots” of the young people’s language use. Working-class youth, living in a community where working-class jobs were scarce, were contrasted with upper-middle-class students attending exclusive schools. Interviews were conducted with three working-class youth and four upper-middle-class youth. Interviews were used in the analysis, but a textual analysis of actual artifacts the youth created did not occur. Findings revealed that youth from different social classes used different styles of language based on the realities of their lives and the ways they understood the world.

Gee et al. (2001) emphasized that school should be a site for the development of understanding and critique of social processes, and for the engagement of young people in social justice projects. Encouraging and recognizing the authentic value of students’ unsanctioned writing may provide insight for educators on grassroots strategies to achieve this, as well as providing a venue for all, not just the privileged, to be heard and to be successful. Engaging this task requires much of teachers:

In order to understand, and appreciate, the role of adolescent literacy in their classroom, teachers may at times have to set aside their authoritative voice and learn to read both the world and the words of the diverse group of adolescents who make up the classroom mosaics. (Mahar, 2001, p. 208)

School can be a site for expression and discussion of diverse values, and potentially for struggle and social change (Kelly & Brandes, 2001). Teachers can play a key role in facilitating discussions of social and ethical issues, and thus contribute to the preparation of active citizens. Critical pedagogy includes “critical analysis of social and institutional equalities, commitment to principled action and willingness to question one’s own understanding of social justice” (Kelly & Brandes,



2001, p. 439). Poetry and writing may function as a site for discussion, reflection and communication of social justice issues. Engaging issues important to young people, through their own literacy practices, could contribute to discussions and actions since "the best work on the challenges facing youth emphasizes their own acts of cultural critique and cultural production in the face of often untenable situations" (Bucholtz, 2002, p.10). A space must be made within school contexts and curriculum to recognize young people's independent or unsanctioned literacy practices toward positive outcomes (Blake, 2001). As Moje (2000) concluded, youth must be supported to be the authors of their own stories and draw upon their literacy practices as a resource. Moje (2000) also noted that gang practices can have tragic consequences and that the point is not to import such practices into schools, thus recreating negative situations as well as stereotypes.

#### Sanctioned and Unsanctioned: A Critical View

From her study on girls' zine writing, Schilt (2003) emphasized the importance of examining young people's own zines or texts to understand their lives "on their terms" (p. 92). She proposed that, in the context of psychological research that identifies adolescent girls as "losing their voice," (e.g., Pipher, 1994) it is important to explore the experiences of girls who have not lost their voice. In the tradition of research that seeks to understand young people's experiences, rather than view them as passive subjects, Schilt explored the experiences of girls who write zines by conducting "written interviews" with 17 female zine editors between 14 and 20 years of age. In addition, she performed textual analysis of their zines.

Schilt (2003) discovered that "Not being written for an adult audience is the main allure of zine writing, which has the ability to be simultaneously public and private" (p. 79). She also found that zines were a space where girls could speak out against stereotypes and injustice. Zine content ranged from discussions of sexual problems and agency, sexual abuse and self-mutilation, experiences of puberty, to speaking out about sexual harassment. The zine makers also created social networks and connected with others with similar views and concerns. Zines represented an empowerment strategy for and by girls, as producers of media versus consumers of products. Schilt (2003) concluded that teachers must encourage youth to be cultural producers rather than passive consumers, and that more research is needed on how young people, and girls specifically, represent their own experiences (Brown, 1991).

Guzzetti and Gamboa (2004) pointed out the paucity of studies that look at zine writing as literacy practice, and hence they explored the experiences of young women who read and produce them. Their research addressed three questions: Why do some girls write zines to promote social justice and speak out against stereotypes? What influences them to do so? How do they construct and express identities through the use of this literacy practice? A case study approach was used, including interviews with the zinesters and people in their lives, as well as observations and surveys. In addition, the zines were used to triangulate the findings. The zinesters were three girls in an advanced placement program of an affluent middle-class high school. This research adopted a participatory stance that created a space for the participants to be active members of the research project.

Guzzetti and Gamboa (2004) and their young zinester participants agreed that making zine writing an official school activity would diminish its potency and make it artificial. Rather, participants suggested that teachers should be receptive to zines and the "do it yourself ethic" that zinesters embrace. Teachers should incorporate open-ended journaling exercises, and provide students the opportunity and freedom to write about their own experiences. Teachers should become familiar with zines and other independent literacy practices, and even use them as texts in the classroom. Students' own texts can be a starting place to foster a critical approach and to examine social justice and issues of importance to students:

If teachers become aware of who their students really are, what motivates them to read and write, and learn how adolescents develop, practice and refine their literacies outside of school, educators will be better equipped to connect those out-of-school literacy practices to the work students do in school. (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004, p. 411)

School structures and curriculum design based on assumptions about adolescence may underestimate the intellectual capacities of young people (Lesko, 1996). It is vital that educators and education systems go beyond assumptions and understand the lives and experiences of their students.

### Relation of the Literature to My Study

An important objective of my research was to make the connection between young people's independent writing or unsanctioned literacy practice and school practice. That is, providing evidence to support recommendations for making education responsive to and supportive of students' experiences and expressions.

Understanding how youth use expressive forms spontaneously and independently, versus, for example, a school organized poetry publication, supports this research objective.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented a review of the literature that guided the development and implementation of this research. Research reviewed was organized into three sections. The first dealt with conceptions of adolescence and youth as related to identity construction. This section described the problem of categorization and highlighted social and cultural research pertaining to identity construction. The second section included literature on literacy practice forms, including poetry and spoken word, as well as lyrics and music in popular culture. The third section discussed unsanctioned literacy practices as creative site for identity work, as well as providing insight for educational practice.

The following chapter, Chapter III, provides a description of the methodology for this research. It includes three sections. The first section presents a narrative of the researcher as writer and how her experiences of writing informed the present investigation. The second section provides a description of the methodology and includes seven subsections, which address the following in turn: researcher positionality; participant recruitment and selection; participants and contexts; profiles of the young writers; data collection processes; data analysis processes; and representational and ethical considerations. The third section provides a brief conclusion and previews the organization of the presentation of findings.

### CHAPTER III: RESEARCHER, PARTICIPANTS, AND METHOD

My research focus emerged from my experiences as a secondary school teacher and volunteer working with high school students in both curricular and extra-curricular music and creative writing projects. During these experiences, I witnessed many positive social and emotional effects on the lives of young people. The primary purpose of the present investigation was to explore the experiences of young adult writers who, by penning their own personal texts, engaged in unsanctioned literacy practice as identity work in the social, political, and cultural contexts of their lives.

This chapter has three sections. The first section presents a description of the researcher as a young writer. The second section provides a description of the methodology and includes subsections, which address the following: researcher positionality; participant recruitment and selection; participants and contexts; profiles of the young writers; data collection processes; data analysis processes; and representational and ethical considerations. The third section provides a brief conclusion and previews the organization of the presentation of findings.

#### **Researcher as Young Writer**

In order to provide context and to acknowledge my own experiences as informing the data, I included a brief retrospective narrative and accompanying poems describing my own experience as a young writer. Thinking through this exercise allowed me to recognize my own writing practice as a youth and how it might differ from or be similar to the experiences of participants. Further, my approach to data collection included building rapport with participants and revealing

aspects of my own experience. In order to do this, I needed to think it through and get it down on paper.

I was a middle-class kid who did well in school and always liked to define myself as somehow different from the crowd. This explains my choice of punk attire and my hanging around with older “music scene” people in the small prairie city in which I grew up. My apparel was a reaction against the “brand name syndrome” common with the blond and pretty students in the upper-middle-class college town school I attended. My wardrobe largely consisted of ripped up men’s t-shirts, pilfered from my Dad’s dresser drawers, decorated with anti-establishment slogans and skull-and-cross bones artwork applied with black marker. I enjoyed shopping at thrift stores and pawn shops, where I got my leather jacket, and also craftily made my own jewelry out of broken kitchen utensils. While my appearance was often eschewed by my Mom in public, my fashion was vastly more cost-effective than the erstwhile designer fashion addiction that afflicted many of my peers. The performative aspects of clothes and hair aside, being a writer was perhaps the biggest part of the persona I created for myself during my teenage years.

Writing gave me something to do, a niche. I helped edit an “underground” publication — we didn’t call them zines back then — and was in a series of bands. Writing poetry was a means of expressing my feelings and ideas as I experienced relationships (e.g., breaking up with a boyfriend, trying to understand my sister’s marital problems) and engaged in activities that I might now describe as “risk-taking” or stupid. I wrote on my own, independent of school activities; in that way my writing could be considered “unsanctioned” as operationalized in the present investigation.

The independence allowed free expression — I was able to write what I wanted, how I wanted, when I wanted — without censorship.

I remember that I did *not* identify with the following poem, written by one of my high school classmates and made widely available in my neighborhood via the high school yearbook:

Who are you?  
Do you know?  
If you do —  
Could you help me find myself — I'm lost  
I'm confused and scared  
Lonely and worried  
Is this what growing up is about  
I don't like it  
Should I?  
You too?  
Strange, I'm not the only one.  
Together we can conquer our feelings  
Now I like it  
DO YOU?

This poem was from Freeze Frame, the Grand Centre High School 1983 Yearbook. The title of our yearbook was also a title of a pop song from that era by the J. Geils band featuring Magic Dick — oh, how I laughed at that name when I was young. It is interesting to note that this writing could be considered “sanctioned” in that it was written for the yearbook, an “official” school publication. The poem now reminds me of Erikson’s (1968) view of identity development — something that only happens to a young person, something fraught with confusion, something that once settled, forms a single core self. As I reflect upon it, the teen who wrote this poem (I believe it was renowned cheerleader Kendra Smeaton-Cloan) seemed steeped in Erikson’s (1968) view that adolescents are faced with the daunting task of achieving an integrated identity vs. identity confusion. As I recall, I did not feel part of the world

according to Erikson, where people my age, at the time, tried to find themselves through a fog of confusion, angst, and destination-focused exploration. I was not looking for myself, although at times, I did use certain substances to get away from myself. I knew that *who* I was connected to *where* I was. I was the "A" student, the anti-nuke activist on the block, the bad girl who snuck vodka into biology class, the quirky but loving daughter, the person who loved to write and listened to old music. I never felt like I would "grow up" and have the same core identity for ever and always. I did not see adults in my life that way. At any rate, I did not think that one of my poems would be published in the yearbook.

As a younger teenager, I wrote a lot about social issues like protests, anti-nuke lobbying, and consumerism. This poem, written at age 13, describes my preoccupation with the horrors of nuclear war, brought to a stark reality because I lived on an airbase where cruise missiles were being tested as part of an agreement with the United States. My Mom and Dad were both educators who worked for the Department of National Defense as a teacher and school superintendent respectively. Although my protest activities could have potentially compromised their employment, they were both very supportive of me in pursuing this cause. On the base, air raid sirens occasionally punctuated the soundscape and the symbol of the warning brought my fear to life.

Before the Warning  
I think about my life,  
my family,  
the songs I wrote, never to be played.  
I turn around  
and look to the window.  
Moonlight shining,  
still sky,



placid, unchanging.  
 I dream about a sound  
     A humming,  
     never ceasing.  
 The sound increases ringing in my ears  
     I cannot stop it.  
 Before the warning  
     I open my eyes  
     and look around  
 I can feel the tension in the air.  
     I turn off the light  
     and close my eyes  
     at peace  
     I realize  
 that I have no control over history  
     Blackness covers me  
 I have left the world that no longer exists  
 Perhaps the next will hold more hope.  
 I close my eyes, before the morning.  
                     – (age 13)

At this age, all my writing was not doom, gloom and fear of holocaust. I also got great satisfaction from writing satirical pieces mainly focused on the denizens and mores of the town in which I lived. For example, The Ballad of Sue Glutz was a nasty but humorous dig at a particular group of popular but redneck school kids of whom I was probably simultaneously envious and contemptuous.

My writing became more self-focused as I grew older and found my niche within a punk culture. This coincided with more serious involvement with romantic relationships. My work as a poet was to place myself as an individual at odds with "normal" peers at school and express my identity as a member of a community of punk-rockers grappling with issues, relationships and experiences far deeper (as I then thought) than shopping for designer clothes and attending the preppy-infested graduation dance. The following poem, written at age 16 was a romanticized vision of my own life and relationships within the punk culture.

Drugs;

Thirty codeines in two

days corrode your stomach

But the pain must be stopped

Broken teeth

kiss like knives

pierce my tongue

another bar room fight      inside

my mouth

Your tears leave

me dry

Houses;

Thirty in a decade

commemorate your restlessness

Architects

gone awry      Acid

in the chambers

Photographs;

(scenes, like old girlfriends,

review my insecurity

Another nomadic tourist      inside)

of me

Possessions;

left in thirty cities

Leave a few for me

and I might have you in

the physical:      chains,

sweaters, hotel towels

Little to sustain me

with a breathy kiss kept

From;

an un-postmarked letter.

– (age 16)

I must note that I received a fair amount of positive attention from adults for my writing. I performed my songs at school and community events, and published my poems in small magazines. I guess it made me feel competent. At the time, I think it actually made me feel smart. So what if I did not do so well in chemistry; I had a way of putting words together that someone else might not have. When I

engage in writing outside of my academic work, and still to this day, I get a sense of being able to work things out somehow, a way of completing some kind of communication even though no one may read it or hear the song.

It is also important to note that when my family moved just before I started twelfth grade, I enrolled in an inner city school that was known for its arts programs. I had a teacher who was a poet and gave me a lot of credit for my writing. He even nominated me for a school wide creative writing award, which was handed out at an end-of-year assembly. I was planning to skip out of the assembly on principle because the school made us sing God Save the Queen, to which I objected. Mr. Larocque convinced me to stick around so I could accept the award. This is an important incident, because it helps frame how I operationalize unsanctioned in the present investigation. The point is not to denigrate schools and teachers when they are supportive of young people's writing as this "sanctions" it and makes it somehow less potent. This story points to the need for more teachers like Mr. Larocque; teachers who recognize students' writing practice and work to broaden what is acceptable and celebrated in school. Teachers who make it possible for students to bring their own experiences and "selves" into school.

Today, I am interested in how young people express identity and social issues through poetry and songwriting because of my own experience of these forms of expression. For these reasons, I set out to engage participants that would have something to say on these matters. Further, I am driven to find out from young people what it is about the school institution that alienates certain young people and, potentially, find ways to make change.

## Methodology

One general research question and three sub-questions were posed in this study. The general question was: From the perspective of the young writer, what is the experience of engaging in expression through independent or unsanctioned creative poetry and/or song-writing? The three sub-questions were as follows: In what ways do young people engage in writing practice? Why do young people write and how do they use writing in their lives? What can teachers, researchers, and policy makers learn from the practices of these young people? To address these questions, a qualitative approach was chosen because it offers methods that yield a rich understanding of contextual as well as individual factors. This approach "gives the researcher an opportunity to do a thorough analysis, thereby providing a solid base for inference" (Dey, 1993, p. 263).

In-depth, open-ended interviews served as the primary method of data collection. In-depth interviews provided a context for reflection and for questioning our representations and understandings (Kvale, 1996). This allowed for the data to come from the voices of the participants, rather than to be the result of the imposition of research design on their voices. The open-ended interviews allowed me to learn from the participants and for their ideas and experiences to provide a framework for understanding the research questions. Both data collection and analysis were fluid rather than formulaic processes. That is, the interview process was an open one, with guiding questions used to spark, but not to restrict discussion. My goal was to be responsive and to understand their meanings in their own terms. The interviews were done in the participants' own spaces and care was

taken to ensure that they were comfortable with and aware of the implications of sharing their experiences. Further, as data were being generated, I was also undertaking the analysis, which was an iterative, rather than summative, process.

The intent was to look at the diversity of roles that writing may have in the lives of youth who write poems and songs independent of curricular or school activities. These writing practices are often unsanctioned or unsupported by school programs or officials. Moreover, to date relatively few researchers have undertaken qualitative studies of adolescent cultural practice, but have focused on "highly visible youth cultures" or subcultures (Bucholtz, 2002, p. 525). The qualitative interview approach attends to the possibility of diversity of young people who write poetry/songs as well as diversity of the functions the practices play. Dilly (2004), in a review of recent works focusing on the interview method, described this approach as a "continuing conversation with one's self about the nature of how we have learned what we know. Interviews should allow us to investigate, in critical ways, our respondents' comprehensions of their experiences and beliefs—as well as our own" (p. 128).

Finally, I drew on the work of Sondergaard (2002) in developing my methodology, specifically in terms of the discussion of using storyline in analysis, in which participants elaborate on their life stories and thus put forward explanatory frameworks. The analysis of these stories further elaborated the explanatory frameworks put forward by the participants. In seeking to understand the processes by which people understand and categorize events and experiences in their lives, we can look at artifacts such as interviews, and other data, especially data focused

on “descriptions of how a life is lived” (p. 191). The concept of storyline, while not the focus of my analysis, provided a general frame through which to view the experiences of the participants.

Ethics approval was granted by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board (see Appendix A for certificate of approval). Throughout this document, all names of participants and the people whom they referenced are pseudonyms. Pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality, and were created by the researcher.

### Researcher Positionality

The present investigation was informed by cultural studies literature that describes young people’s lives in context from their perspectives, particularly focusing upon their own constructions and uses of popular culture, media, and literacy practices. This perspective understands that people’s practices and the meanings they make of them are shaped as they interact with the material and discursive world (Everhart, 1983; Gee, 1996). Chosen methods reflect the described perspectives by attending to participants’ lived experiences and how they make meaning of them.

Symbolic interactionism is also salient to the current investigation methodologically and theoretically (Denzin, 1978; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). Specifically, communication and social interaction (e.g., in the interview process or in the participants’ communication through writing and related practices) allow people to consider themselves as they relate to others. My personal experience as a writer facilitated participant engagement and data collection as the project unfolded.

While I recognized the importance of not reading my meanings and experiences into those of others, there was a level of shared experience, for example, a love of writing and music, that gave us some common ground for discussion and helped make the conversations “comfortable” and open.

I am aware that the data collection method (interviews), subject matter (writing practice), and presentation of findings (writing) were all uses of language and thus sites for social construction of meaning (Vadeboncoeur, 2005b). I did not want my dissertation research to reify negative discourses surrounding young people by objectifying the participants and posing “my ideas about writing” as a way to impose structure and direction to young people in need of rescue from the “storm and stress” characterized by G. Stanley Hall (1904). Rather, I looked at the current investigation as an opportunity to contribute to understanding how dominant discourses, cultures and contexts impact young people and also how young people, and what they know and do, can impact and inform changes to contexts such as schools. This approach was intended to create a forum for complex exploration and reflective research processes. The focus was on understanding the individual, but also understanding the individual in relation to subculture identification, as well as the cultures of school, and community.

I am also aware that my findings ultimately represent co-constructions built in the context of dialogical process of interviews and discussions. Further, I believe that it is also inevitable that both researcher and participants are, even in small ways, transformed by the interaction. Another possible transformation and one that should be guarded against, is transforming the participants’ experiences into a

mirror-image of my own experiences. Therefore, it was important for me to recognize my own situation and preconceived notions in order to understand the experiences of the participants (Van Manen, 1984). Borrowing from Giorgi (1985), I used a process of bracketing in which the researcher lays out her presuppositions a priori and then attempts to suspend them from interfering with the experiences of the participants. While drawing on personal experience is a meaningful impetus for engaging in research, the challenge resides in taking care not to merely read one's own meaning in the experiences of the participants.

The purpose of the present investigation was to explore the experiences of young adult writers who, by penning their own personal texts, engaged in unsanctioned literacy practice as identity work in the social, political, and cultural contexts of their lives. Rather than focusing upon a visible group or subculture of young people to explore their writing practices, my primary focus of inquiry was broadly defined as youth who write. This choice stemmed from my reticence to take a patronizing stance in, for example, "seeing how poetry can help street kids" or "how kids who are depressed may benefit from my writing intervention." The decision arose after reading an article in which a therapist recounted his exploration of issues of gender and sexuality with youth in therapy (Hodas, 1991). This particular intervention involved using songs as a cue to discussion about sensitive issues. The songs were actually written by the author himself, and thus provided the young people with *his* view of the issues rather than their views. Rather than provide a venue for my expressions, this project examined youths' own conceptions and constructions of the meanings of their own creative expressions in their lives; for



example, what does creative expression “do for” them in terms of identity construction.

### Recruiting and Selecting Participants

The purpose of the investigation was to explore the experiences of young writers, and not to frame writing practice in terms of a particular “subculture.” Therefore, it was important to engage participants from a cross-section of the larger community in terms of socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, and family compositions/living arrangements. Purposive sampling was used to involve participants with specific characteristics, young adults who engage in creative writing, who were chosen on the basis of their select experience in order to maximize what could be learned regarding their combined experiences (Patton, 1990). Diversity was maximized by recruiting from across districts in the Greater Vancouver region.

When I was in the process of connecting and conversing with potential participants, it became clear that the definition of youth with which I began represented a particular set of theoretical ideas, namely Erikson’s (1959, 1968), rather than the way the young people perceived their experience and themselves. Defining youth or adolescence strictly by age range is problematic; social beliefs predict how we are categorized. For example, discourses of development continue to permeate social beliefs surrounding young people and feed into institutional age-groupings (Vadeboncoeur, 2005b). During the early stages of recruitment, the people I spoke with — who clearly had important things to say about the role of writing in their lives — were not in the age range I proposed (16 to 19 years old).

This influenced my decision to broaden the age range of potential participants by reflecting upon the concept of purposive sampling (Patton, 1990). Specifically, the connecting piece that linked the participants together was writing practice and not age. Therefore, I decided to include participants up to and including people in their early thirties.

I used a multi-pronged approach to recruitment, with emphasis on a third-party recruiting strategy with adult workers as contacts. The first step in the process was identifying agencies and organizations in order to introduce the project to potential participants. I compiled a list of community centres in the city with youth programs, youth drop-in centres and outreach agencies, public libraries, and youth arts and writing programs. I visited each location, introduced myself and the project to staff and youth worker contacts, asking permission to put up information posters about the project. Recruitment posters and leaflets were distributed to four inner-city community centres, and two community centres each on the east and west sides of the city. I put up posters in public spaces such as the outdoor community centre bulletin board on Commercial Drive, and in youth centre common rooms (see Appendix B). In visiting the community centres, I spoke with groups of young people to discuss participation in the study. I also met with staff and young people at the Downtown Eastside Youth Action Centre (DEYAS) and the Covenant House branch in my neighborhood. Covenant House is a non-profit outreach facility for street youth. Short-term residential facilities and crisis services are part of their mandate.

I connected with various youth arts and writing programs to promote the project. I participated in the weekly writing class sponsored by the "Leave out

Violence (LoV)" group, a non-profit organization that focused on reducing bullying and violence in the lives of young people and providing social support through creative writing and expression. Young people who belonged to the group attended writing workshops where they shared their ideas and problems, engaged in group discussions about social problems they were experiencing, and practiced the art of creative storytelling through poetry, music, photography and other expressive forms. This particular group was facilitated by a volunteer teacher, who was also a professional photographer, with the assistance of other adult volunteers. They created a social space where food was shared and people could express themselves safely. I invited the young people to participate in the research project and presented information on how to get involved. I described myself as a writer and researcher. During the writing workshop sessions, several young people shared their poetry with me. I was invited to the groups' spoken word event and celebration at the Vancouver Public Library.

Various young people, who saw the poster and contacted me, invited me to spoken word and youth writing events. A group of young women who published a quarterly zine invited me to the launch of their second edition release party at a local club and offered to distribute leaflets about the study during the event. Another personal contact agreed to distribute the flyer on a listserv of young women writers and activists. A notice was also included in the "Events" section of Youthink, a youth writing publication (see Appendix C).

I introduced the project to several teacher contacts in the public school system and obtained permission from the school board to describe the project in

Vancouver secondary schools in order to recruit participants (see Appendix D for information handouts for potential participants). While I successfully obtained permission from the Vancouver School Board to engage student participants, and interest was expressed from individual teachers, the four secondary school administrators with whom I communicated did not wish for their schools to participate. Although they spoke positively about the aims of the project, they stated that their schools were “over-researched” and that taking on further projects represented a burden. Other barriers to participation were that the research did not work with intact classrooms, but rather pulled individuals from class for interviews. Further, the study may not have been overly attractive to school administrators as it emphasized writing practices that were unsanctioned by or outside of school activities; therefore, the study may have been considered to be an inappropriate use for school time.

#### Participants and Contexts

I engaged and worked with a group of approximately ten young writers — six female and four male between the ages of 17 to 30 years old — who actively engaged in creative writing, such as poetry, fiction, music, and mixed media art. Most of the participants resided in Vancouver at the time of data collection. Three of the participants lived in another province at the time of the interviews, and were recruited through personal or family contacts. Two of the Vancouver based participants heard about the project via a poster in a youth or community centre. Four heard about the study via word of mouth and/or listserv message distributed by a friend and coworker who is an active participant in the local arts and music scene.

Another participant heard about the project via another of my friends, a local writer and animator, who was also a friend of her father.

Interviews took place in locations chosen by the participants. Eight of the ten participants described earlier took part in an individual interview, while two preferred to take part in a “group” interview with each other and myself. These two participants were boyfriend and girlfriend, and the group interview took place in one of their homes. Six of the individual interviews took place in local coffee shops; one took place in the family home of the participant’s girlfriend, and another interview took place in my home. An interview with one participant was conducted over the Internet and by telephone, using a combination of email and conversation. This particular participant preferred the online method of doing the interview; it is interesting to note that writing online was her primary mode of creative expression. During the project, I also visited writing workshops, spoken word events, music events — such as all ages punk gigs in halls — and youth drop-in centres. In the process of the project there was limited interaction with adults in the participants’ lives, including teachers and members of informal multiage community networks.

#### Profiles of the Young Writers

The ten writers who shared their time and stories with me were all very different. They were different ages, from different locations, at different places in their lives. Yet they all shared a passion for writing and clearly expressed their experiences, views, and recommendations to me. This section presents brief snapshots of each writer, to provide insight into their words, stories, and experiences presented in Chapters IV, V, and VI.

Sylvain

Sylvain was 21 years old when I met him. He had just moved from another city and was living in a transition house. He had got a job when he got to town and was living out of his back-pack. He got my number from a poster at the Downtown Eastside Youth Activities Society (DEYAS) and called me on my cell. DEYAS is a non profit organization that "helps individuals in Canada's poorest neighborhood survive, get better and make positive changes in their lives. DEYAS programs deliver harm reduction and health promotions services to high-risk, 'street-involved' people throughout Vancouver, but mainly the inner city and east end, where there is the greatest need" (DEYAS webpage <http://www.deyas.org/>, accessed March 24, 2007). We agreed to meet at the Art Gallery steps on a Friday night and he said, "I'll be the one carrying a satchel." We easily found each other and walked to a nearby coffee shop and sat on the patio.

Sylvain was from a middle class family with professional parents, and had quit school and left home. He had struggled with various diagnoses of mental illness but said that he had been off all medication for some time. Sylvain had spent some time in a Catholic school. He had always been able to express himself well through writing, and had kept every book of writing since he began. Of all the writers I spoke with, Sylvain was by far the most prolific on a day to day basis. Although others were engaged in more formal or recognized writing, for example, Marcus had a novel published and Sara organized spoken word events, writing for Sylvain seemed to function as a life line. It is interesting to note that Sylvain, at the time of the interview, had the least access to resources: economic or otherwise. While apparently from a

middle-class family, Sylvain experienced upheaval in his family life during high school as a result of divorce and subsequent addition of an “unsupportive” stepfather. Unsupportive was a euphemism he used that only partially captured the friction and possible abuse alluded to in our discussion of family.

### Sara

Sara was also 21 years old when we met, and a university student working on an Arts degree specializing in English literature. Her middle-class, educated family lived in Montreal; both parents were professionals. She attended a private Catholic high school and was involved in the school newspaper and writing clubs. At the time of the interview, along with three other young women, she produced a zine and live spoken word events. We talked together at a coffee shop on the university campus between classes. She described her social life as focused around creative arts; most of the people she hung out with were involved in writing, painting, or some other expressive form. Sara saw a poster about the project on Commercial Drive at a community centre and emailed me for more information. She also invited me to a zine release party at a local club and we met there as well.

### Marcus

Marcus was oldest of the participants, being around age 30 at the time of the interview. He was a published novelist who was also involved in film and performance art, as well as working full time in an academic institution. Marcus heard about the project from a mutual friend. We met at a local coffee house frequented by writers, artists and students. I was invited to a mixed media fundraiser event at which he was performing in drag. The event included film, comedy, spoken

word and audience participation. Marcus hailed from a rural area in Canada and was from a working-class background. His parents were very young when they had children and he described his family life as fraught with conflict.

### Susan

Susan was a contemporary of Marcus's and also a published writer with two "alternative press" books of mixed media poetry and art. She described her writing as being celebrated by the riot girl movement in the late 1990s. She also collaboratively wrote music, focusing mostly on lyrics, and had performed extensively. Susan found out about the project on a listserv and contacted me to take part. We met in a coffee house in her neighborhood. She described her struggle to support herself solely by her art practice with the need for intermittent "day jobs." Her family background was middle class, and she participated in childhood activities such as ballet. At the time of the interview she was 30 years old.

### Andrea

Andrea was a young adult in her mid-twenties at the time of the interview. She described writing as an integral part of her life and work. She described her paid work as heavily reliant upon technical writing and she described that form of communication as rewarding. She was from a small town in Ontario, and described her family background as middle class and her school experience as positive. She learned about the project on a listserv and contacted me to arrange an interview in a coffee shop in her neighborhood. Andrea also described her recent interest in writing a screenplay.



Bel

Bel saw a notice for the project on a listserv and contacted me via email. We communicated back and forth a few times and she agreed to do the interview online. From a middle-class background, she actively produced zines throughout high school. At the time of the research was in her mid-twenties. She described her current paid work as non-artistic in nature and expressed the desire to reinvigorate her involvement in creative writing. For example, she indicated that she had started to write a blog with a focus on humour.

Brendan

Brendan was 20 years old at the time of the interview. He was Naomi's boyfriend and lived with his Mom in a small prairie city. He has dealt with depression and anxiety for most of his life and at the time of the interview was being treated for it with medication and some therapy. He did not finish high school due to these health issues; however, after a year away Brendan went back and finished his classes at a small inner city alternative school. Extremely bright, he excelled at his classes, especially history and English. In the alternative school, he was publicly recognized for his writing on several occasions. Notably, he was asked to write a regular feature in a local paper on the recommendation of his English teacher. His interest in writing began at around age thirteen. Shortly after the time of the interview, he enrolled in a university journalism program and was working part time in a restaurant. Brendan, Naomi and Cade all lived on the prairies at the time of the interviews, and were recruited through personal or family contacts.

Naomi

Naomi was 17 years old at the time of the interview, and in eleventh grade. She described herself as a good student. From a working class background, her parents were divorced and she lived with her father and stepmother in a rural community. She lived and attended school in another town, about two hour's drive from where her boyfriend, Brendan, lived. She described herself as First Nations. She said that music had always been a major part of her family members' lives. Her mother played guitar, sang and wrote music. Her brothers were both involved in producing rap music. One was an aspiring producer, the other a tattoo artist. She kept a journal, wrote song lyrics, and also enjoyed academic writing. She described herself as a good student, achieving excellent grades.

Cade

Cade, Naomi's brother, was 21 years old at the time of the interview. He lived with his girlfriend's family in a small town. He wrote rap music and poetry, as well as journals. His family was working class and disrupted by divorce. His mother and father both lived in different rural communities approximately two hours apart via a highway drive. His father had a common-law partner; his mother did not. Cade had been living with his mother, who lived in the same community as his girlfriend. He dropped out of school, but was currently enrolled in trade school to become a cabinet maker and finishing carpenter. At the time of the interview, his girlfriend was in her first year at university and they had a small apartment in the city. Drawing was his passion, and he aspired to be a tattoo artist. After the interview, he gave me a CD that contained a couple of his songs.

### Zenia

Zenia was 19 years old when we met. She was in her first year at Emily Carr studying fine arts. Her father was an independent film maker with whom she had been recently collaborating on a mixed media project. Her parents were divorced and both lived in different cities. They were both educated and involved in the arts. At the time of the interview, she lived in a downtown apartment with her boyfriend who was working construction. She attended an alternative school, an experience she found rewarding in comparison to mainstream school. Zenia found out about the project through a mutual friend. Zenia had dinner at our place before the interview. When she agreed to participate in this project, she asked me to participate in the art project she was working on with her father. This involved her sketching and cataloguing all the books on the shelves in our apartment. This was a fascinating project that connected people, the books they read, and their environments.

### Data Collection Processes

Data collection occurred from November 2004 to September 2005. The main data collection process was a semi-structured in-depth interview conducted with each of the young writers. At all points of the process, my goal was to establish an atmosphere of trust and openness; I emphasized the confidential and voluntary nature of the process. Where necessary, consent of parents or guardians was obtained. Participants had time to review consent forms, ask questions about the project, and sign their own consent (see Appendix E for consent forms).

Each participant was interviewed once and the interviews ranged from one to two hours in duration. The interviews were based on the research questions, focused on participants' own lives and writing, and were a space to share their background, "life story" and experiences as a writer. Questions for discussion included: 1) tell me about yourself; 2) describe your experiences as a writer; 3) describe what you feel when you write; and 4) what do you write about? During the interviews, participants were encouraged to inform educators about the importance of self-expression, creativity and valuing the expressions and sophisticated language practices of young people that might not be valued within the school system, as well as what schools and educators can learn and incorporate into school to better support all kids. Questions were adapted for use in interviews with young adults to include retrospective reflection. For a full list of the original interview questions see Appendix F.

In terms of demographic information, participants were asked to do a "pre-writing" exercise, rather than fit their information into the pre-formed boxes of a demographic questionnaire. Participants were encouraged to tell their stories. All but one of the participants chose to do this in conversation as part of the interview rather than pre-writing. Participants were invited to bring samples of poems or songs to illustrate their experiences or ideas during the interview. In addition, I traced my own experiences of the research process in a reflective journal in order to make methodological decisions and to provide a rich account and description of the process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used my reflections to inform the process of analysis and in framing the report of findings.

Most of the participants brought examples of their writing — including poetry journals, publications, or handwritten poems — to the interviews. During the interviews, these artifacts were used to elicit or spark discussion. For example, most of the participants referred to specific writings to illustrate their points in the discussion, or to highlight a particular idea or experience. Several of the participants recited poems during the interview. One gave permission to include the transcription of the recited poem in the text of this dissertation in the form of a quotation.

As previously stated, the in-depth interviews with the ten participants were the primary data source for the analysis. In total, 18 hours of interviews/discussions were recorded, yielding 111 pages of transcripts. Participants were invited to review the transcripts for accuracy. Due to various factors, this was not done consistently across participants. Two of the participants were able to review their transcripts and made minor corrections, for example, they provided the correct name of a band, and their correct age.

### Data Analysis

In describing the choices of methods used in qualitative analysis, it is vital for the researcher to put forth the philosophical beliefs that underlie and guide those choices, as well as any assumptions that are intertwined with those choices and beliefs (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Howe & Eisenhart, 1990). Foremost, this study was conceived and designed from the standpoint that knowledge is co-constructed in context. The participants and researcher alike were part of the research context co-constructing meaning. It is important to recognize that as a researcher, my values and experiences informed the data I collected and ultimately interpreted. As such,

systematic and rigorous analysis methods helped to establish the credibility of my findings (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990) so that the understandings, perceptions, and experiences described in this study are useful and trustworthy for other young writers, educators, and others working with young people (Creswell, 1998).

It is important to understand that my analysis procedures did not simply unfold in a linear way, but rather developed in an iterative fashion characteristic of and appropriate to qualitative research methodologies. Ongoing constant comparative analysis occurred at all phases of the project (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994), and included examination of field notes, journal entries, and observations as well as participants' writings. These artifacts were used to provide background to inform the interview process, and, in the analysis, functioned as illustrative examples of emergent themes or of practices described by the participants during the interviews. According to Merriam (1998) the constant comparative process involves doing exactly what the name indicates, namely "constantly comparing." As the analysis process unfolds, occurrences in the data are compared with other occurrences in the data to facilitate grouping and coding data in order to interpret and understand them.

Analysis of the interviews included a focus on the experiences of the participants and an open-coding process was used that was corroborated by a quantitative content analysis. In general, analysis followed five distinct phases. First, I transcribed tapes of all interviews myself to bridge the contexts of the data collection with the content of the transcripts to further the credibility of the findings (i.e., simultaneously check and remain immersed in the data). As I listened to the

tapes, I kept a running log of theoretical memos including initial ideas around emergent themes and interpretations. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim including pauses, expressions, as well as grammar and idioms used by the participants and interviewer. Line numbers were applied to all transcript documents for use as a reference in analysis. Then, I read through all transcripts to review the interviews and to capture a holistic sense of the discussions. During this initial read, I kept the research questions in mind and recorded analytic insights that informed the coding process (Dillon, 1989). At the same time, I considered my own experiences as writer and looked for patterns and recurrent themes that resonated with the experiences of the participants. During this initial read, I used color-coding to indicate preliminary thematic groupings.

Second, I used open-coding to perform a comprehensive content analysis. I read through each transcript again, highlighting segments and applying emergent codes to each. In total, 336 codes were applied to the data (see Appendix G for initial codes). Single subject analyses preceded cross-case or inter-subject analysis. As previously mentioned, the participants' writings and my own reflections were used to elicit, as well as illustrate, discussion and, as such, informed the data collection and analysis. These artifacts were not themselves analysed in conjunction with the interview data. During the analysis process, I reread the participants' writings and noted convergence with the thematic analysis of the transcript data. A peer researcher, who was also a young poet, assisted with this activity and added his insights to the analysis. Systematic open-coding of the data facilitated the

construction of a preliminary framework to further guide analysis. Codes were recorded on the transcripts alongside theoretical memos and insights.

Third, as a way of organizing the data, I used the following coding scheme identified by Bogdan and Biklen (1992). Data were grouped according to the following coding categories:

- 1) participants' definitions of their situations or experiences;
- 2) activities in which participants engaged;
- 3) events participants expressed as significant;
- 4) strategies expressed by participants;
- 5) relationships and social interactions;
- 6) settings or contexts;
- 7) participants' ways of viewing people or things;
- 8) participants' general perspectives;
- 9) processes or sequences of events; and
- 10) codes relating to the research process itself.

After grouping, I entered all of the coded segments into an Excel table/database by coding category, theme and participant. Line numbers from the transcripts were also included for reference. Evidence in the form of transcript segments was entered into the database. Segments that had two or more codes applied were entered separately for each code. This allowed for comprehensive examination of each code applied. During this process, subordinate codes were combined for best fit.



Fourth, after each of my 336 original codes was sorted into categories, each grouping was reviewed for emergent themes based on its content. Where necessary, new codes were created and a system of color-coding was used to indicate evidence that began in one code grouping and ended up in another. The tabular form facilitated comparison of themes that were grouped under the same code, and allowed for re-sorting and expansion of the list of codes to be inclusive of all data.

Fifth, evidence in each of the ten organizing categories was grouped into sub themes. The dominant code grouping was "participants' definitions of their situations or experiences." Codes related to settings pertained mostly to school contexts and suggestions for improving school experiences as this was a focus of the research. Table 1 shows the number of initial themes that were drawn from the evidence in each category along with the proportion of data that contributed to each category.

**Table 1: Original Coding Categories and Proportion of Data**

<b>Coding Categories</b>	<b>Number of Themes</b>	<b>Proportion of Data</b>
Definition of Situation	14	113/336 (33%)
Activity	4	24/336 (7%)
Events	5	20/336 (5%)
Strategy	1	16/336 (4%)
Relationships and Social Interactions	4	25/336 (7%)
Setting	3	45/336 (13%)
Participants' Conceptions	3	48/336 (14%)
Participants' Perspectives	4	20/336 (5%)

Coding Categories	Number of Themes	Proportion of Data
Process	5	42/336 (12%)
Method	1	4/336 (1%)

During the analysis process, all categories had at least one theme that was moved, re-sorted, or copied to one or more categories. Themes were tested by going back to the transcripts, locating segments that fit in the categories and comparing against all segments in the data table. Appendix H presents the themes that emerged within each overarching code category, as well as an illustrative example quote/transcript segment for each. Assisted by the tabular presentation of evidence, themes and associated evidence were carefully scrutinized within and across coding categories to understand interrelations among them. This process enabled a number of themes to be collapsed or combined, thus allowing for a meaningful presentation of findings. The process allowed for testing out the robustness of the themes drawn from the open-coding process and enhanced the credibility of inferences drawn. For example, a within case profile of each participant could be extracted by sorting the evidence by participant. This also allowed for comparison of data across participants by various characteristics such as age or gender.

#### Representational and Ethical Considerations

As a researcher, I am inevitably a part of and an influence within the process. A systematic and rigorous approach assured the use of every piece of data to understand the complexity of the ideas and issues. Conscientious analysis procedures were used to maximize the credibility of the findings. Rigor comes from

the systematic and meaningful use of all data. During the process, I attended to such questions as these adapted from Creswell (1998): Are the transcripts accurate in conveying the meanings of the oral discourse of the interviews/ discussions? How has my presence and behavior influenced the interview process? Have I considered and examined alternative conclusions? Is it possible to understand the general description in terms of the specific examples? During the entire project I kept a reflective journal to track methodological decisions along the way.

This research also raised issues of ethical responsibility. For example, as the researcher I learned things about the participants that were personal and sensitive. Follow-up strategies were planned for putting a participant in touch with needed services. Debriefing was built into each discussion and interview process. Ongoing access to the researcher as a potential contact for resources/services that may be required or requested was communicated. While it is important to build trust, the researcher's prime responsibility was the safety of the participants.

In engaging in any critical analysis, there are several tensions to note as cautions to the researcher (Moje, 2000). To these, I gave sustained consideration and reflection throughout the course of the research process. Primarily, tension resides in the juxtaposition of attempting to advocate for young people and trying to make space for them to be heard and by the power relationships inherent in academic research appropriating their voices. Caution must be taken to speak *with* the young writers rather than speaking *for* them. Care was taken to incorporate the writers' interpretations of their own experiences and work, as well as my own

interpretations and representations. If research is to lead to empowerment, the methodology must reflect that philosophical perspective (Lather, 1991).

The design of this investigation intended for the voices of young people to emerge as a force to potentially inform practice and policy. How do I make sure this research represents their words and their work? Care has been taken to include the participants in the future dissemination of this work; possible strategies include inviting participants to be co-presenters at a relevant conference, or facilitating publication of their poetry under their sole authorship. Intellectual property issues must be considered and an agreement must be reached in terms of co-authorship in any production of the participants' artistic work.

This research illuminates the lived experiences of young adult writers and is not intended to represent all young people who write songs and poems. This study is one step toward understanding young people's experiences of being writers: a window into their lives and the explorations and representations of their lives in their own literacy practices/art. The findings may inform and challenge educators, researchers and others who work with young people in a variety of contexts.

### **Summary**

This investigation extends our understanding of the experiences of young people by examining the themes and issues that emerge related to their writing practice, the meanings they place on their own acts of and products of writing, and the roles and impacts of writing in their lives. I approached this project from a perspective of care, which has potential to be a context for challenging conventional political and social constructions (Opie, 1992). Understanding young people's own

expressions and understandings of their social and emotional worlds can inform educational practice to best serve the needs of students in attaining positive social adjustment. Expression through unsanctioned or independent writing may potentially inform change in schools towards valuing and building upon young people's own practices (Moje, 2000). The voices, opinions, and ideas of young people represent a force to inform educational practice; in order to maximize the effectiveness of programs and to illuminate young people's lives and experiences, research must attend to young people's own descriptions and perceptions of their experiences (Balen et al., 2006; Hill, 2006; Zaslow & Takanishi, 1993).

The next chapters, Chapters IV, V, and VI, present the results of the study. Each of these chapters addresses a research question or set of questions. Chapter IV addresses the general research question: From the perspective of the young writer, what is the experience of engaging in expression through independent or unsanctioned creative poetry and/or song-writing? It also addresses the sub-question: In what ways do young people engage in writing practice? Chapter IV elaborates upon the participants' discussions of life stories as writers, inspirations, views of themselves as writers and of writing in general. Chapter V addresses the question: Why do young people write and how do they use writing in their lives? It includes a comprehensive description of how the participants used writing in their lives: what the processes, experiences, and expressions of writing "do for them," relating specifically to identity, self-reflection and expression including writing as a tool for social action. Chapter VI addresses the question: What can teachers, researchers, and policy makers learn from the practices of these young people? It

details the participants' experiences in school and their recommendations for making school more supportive.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS—EXPERIENCES OF WRITING

Participants were asked to describe their experiences of writing throughout their lives, that is to “tell the story” of themselves in relation to writing. This chapter addresses the general research question: From the perspective of the young writer, what is the experience of engaging in expression through independent or unsanctioned creative poetry and/or song-writing? Further explicated are findings regarding the next research question: In what ways do young people engage in writing practice? Findings relate to the participants’ descriptions of their experiences of writing throughout their lives and how they frame these experiences within their larger life contexts. The findings in this chapter also relate to events and processes throughout the participants’ lives. Participants discussed early writing experiences, how they have grown as writers over time, inspirations and motivations, as well as current descriptions of themselves as writers. This chapter is organized into five sections, which present findings related to the following: 1) participants’ early writing experiences; 2) participants’ descriptions of becoming writers; 3) participants’ current experiences of being a writer; 4) participants’ inspirations and motivations to write; and 5) the form and content of the participants’ writings.

### **Early Writing Experiences**

Participants were asked to discuss their early writing experiences and talked about when they started writing independently and what they did at the time. There was variation in experiences. Some writers, like Cade and Bel began writing seriously around 14 or 15 years of age. The forms both used could be described as

related to youth culture: Bel was involved in zine production and Cade was writing hip hop. Brendan, too, described his first writing around age 14:

For me I guess I started I actually really started when I was in Prince Rupert staying with my friend Juan. The first semester of Grade 9. I had written before. But not really anything. I'd written half a page and then I'd quit. Or journal stuff for school. But then on the way back on the bus trip back, the thirty-three hour bus trip, I wrote this thing about, I called it "Nothing Else to do on the Bus" and it was this stupid 8 page thing and it was just telling about my time in Prince Rupert and the things I had done. Basically a big long journal entry because I had nothing else to do on the bus. And I guess that's how it started. (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 20-27)

For Brendan, the start of writing was associated with a transition; he was returning from a one-month stay with a friend's family in another province. He had gone there so that he could attend a different school; it was an attempt to give Brendan a fresh start in a new place away from the troubles he was experiencing in school at home. It was the first time he had spent any significant amount of time away from his Mom and sister, and he ended up returning home before the end of semester.

For others, their writing practice began in early childhood. For example, Zenia described her first writing projects as collaborative ones with her father, who is an independent film maker. The process was connected with story telling and Zenia recalled her first experiences around age three or four:

I couldn't write so I couldn't write my own stories so my stories had to be recorded by someone else. So I don't think I could have been very old. I remember I used to make these little books with drawings and make them into books. Then I'd tell the story to my dad and he'd write it into a book. They were really bizarre crazy ideas 'cuz we'd just make them up to go with the pictures. So the pictures were like scribbles and a person walking into a scribble and just really weird stories. (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 59-65)



Similarly, Sara's earliest memories related to her writing were connected with story telling and family relationships:

I think I was definitely one of those people even before I could write words I used to we used to have these different colors of construction paper and I used to draw pictures and tell stories out loud tell my [little] sister the stories. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 10-12)

Like Zenia, Sara's motivation to create and express preceded her ability to read and write.

Early writing experiences were also connected to friendships. For example, Susan described the relationship with her best friend that began when they were nine years old. They were both creative and their birthdays were three days apart. They remained friends into high school and Susan identified her friend as "sort of a bad influence." She got into shoplifting and was "really outside of things." Susan mentioned that her friend left home fairly early and became a punk rocker who was somewhat an outcast. Susan remembered worrying about being associated with her friend at times for fear she too would be ostracized. Nevertheless, their relationship was largely based on shared creative activity. She explained:

When things were really good with our friendship, we did comics together. We developed our own comic. We were very creative. We'd watch "SCTV" and were just really unusual. I remember she was always really ahead of everyone else. She would get into bands five years before anyone else had even heard about it. (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 292-296)

Participants linked their earliest writing experiences to their current lives and situations. For example, Andrea related her earliest writing experiences to her current field of environmental studies. She went to the same Catholic school in Ontario for all 13 grades. Starting in kindergarten, she engaged in the practice of

"daybooks" in which students were encouraged to record thoughts, drawings, ideas, and activities every day:

Probably I was about 10 or 11 you know your first diary. Or no even earlier than that we did daybooks in grade one or kindergarten. I remember doing daybooks where you'd just write something everyday, whatever you want and you draw a picture or describe the picture. It's actually fun finding them now and wow look at my daybook from grade 3 it was spring and I was looking at the leaves. You think about the different especially when I was a child and now I'm outside a lot and I have to observe what's going on seasonally or climatically or geography and everything. It's pretty dynamic actually. I would as a kid I was very attuned to the weather and season and outdoors so everything I wrote about especially journaling was about the outdoors and my relationship to it. (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 24-36)

Andrea described how her early interest in the environment was expressed in her early writing practice, which was a part of her daily school routine. Others also related their earliest writing experiences to their current situations. Marcus related his vocation as a novelist to his goal of writing a novel in the fifth grade:

The first time I decided I wanted to write I sat down with my mother's typewriter and I decided I would write a novel because we were invited in school to write a little book and they would bind it. In grade five. That was in grade five. So I was about eleven. And then I started writing seriously in grade seven. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 10-15)

While Sylvain also recalled that his writing started in earnest during the elementary school years:

Since elementary school I've always written and it was always a strong point in my character regardless of how I was educated. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 43-44)

Sylvain commented that writing was an integral part of his life, despite the lack of support at school.

The communities where people grew up were either described as supportive or unsupportive of individuality and creative expression. Several described their communities as closed in terms of expressing difference. For example, Andrea noted:

I was raised in Eastern Ontario in a town which has always been quite economically depressed and is very working class. And is very provincial in that typical Ontario wasp-y way. A very conservative place and you are not supposed to stand out. (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 450-453)

In contrast, Sara ascribed the general acceptance of and engagement in artistic activities as being part of the affluent university town where she resided at the time of the interview: "I think it's the whole university thing. The people I meet out here they paint or play music. So it's something I just add my own thing to" (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 50-51). She described the city in which she grew up as less accepting of arts and more focused upon entertainment and getting ahead.

### **Becoming a Writer**

Participants discussed how they became writers and also how they changed as writers over time. For example, subject matter and form changed over time for participants. In elementary school, participants tended to write about activities and topics of interest. For example, in elementary school, Andrea wrote about places she went with her friends, and her activities in trying to stop littering. As she got older — into high school — she wrote more about personal issues and was more likely to describe her writing as a means of emotional outlet. The form her writing took also changed with this transition, shifting from journal/daybook to poetry. The following quote captures these changes in Andrea's writing practice over time:

No like I don't know maybe it went through fits and starts. I'd be really prolific if I sat down and had time you also as a kid had other responsibilities and not oodles of time. Now I can go the night and not do my dishes and do them in the morning. But as a kid you had to have everything done before you went to bed. And so I don't know there were just different constraints on your life. I did maybe when I was a teenager between the ages of 14 to 19 when I left home I probably wrote upwards of 30 poems. I'd write them and then I'd edit them and there's probably stuff. You know what I can't even tell you thirty poems. Maybe more. Enough to do a book (hard cover journal book with poetry written in it). (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 216-224)

Andrea noted that her writing became more personal because she realized she was able to keep her writing private and have control over how to share her work.

Similarly, Bel switched focus of her zine from pop culture and activities to emotional and personal issues:

At first I wrote a lot about music and movies that I liked. At first it was just about having fun and telling people which bands I thought were cool. Later I wrote about more personal issues like body image, relationships and depression. (Online interview, April 2005, lines 64-67).

Participants described an increasing sophistication in their writing practice over time. They noted increasing sophistication in form, process and/or content across their interviews. For instance, Cade described how his writing transformed from imitative and simple to more sophisticated and based on his experiences, especially difficult or painful experiences:

I think it's changed. It used to be I don't know, my brother would rap and I'd listen and then I'd kind of make up my own stuff. But now it's progressed from like that where I just make little songs that are like a minute or something to songs that have more meaning. I don't know. Past experiences really bring up a lot for songs. Hard times. (Interview, May 5, 2005, lines 201-204)

Sylvain described how his writing became more sophisticated with time. At age thirteen, he began using rhyming and hip hop conventions in his poetry to give it "some kind of form." He described his early poetry as "blunt displaced rage" and noted: "as I'm getting older instead of merely describing the feelings there and putting them eloquently or rhyming them I try to incorporate an example and a lesson" (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 193-194). The evolving sophistication in Sylvain's writing included a movement from being about and for himself — a way to work through or release his own emotions — to having a motivation to communicate and share experiences with others who may benefit from relating to his work.

Other participants described the transition from high school, when they were living away from home, as a freeing up period during which writing came more easily or more readily. For example, Susan likened this transition to a floodgate opening:

It was just like a massive buildup and then by about age 21 or 22 something happened. There was a trigger. Kind of a low-grade series of events. Sort of accumulated and then there was a definite unblocking...I really started writing probably around, I know I did stuff as a teenager uh some poems and I always kept a diary but I didn't really start getting that angst out 'til my early 20s then it was sort of a deluge I guess, an unblocking I suppose. (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 36-41)

Like Susan, early adulthood was a time when expression became more fluent for Sara. Both writers also saw their writing as continuing from youth in terms of issues or emotions being expressed; however, something happened that allowed it to come out more easily after high school was officially over. Sara said: "A lot of that writing was carried over from my adolescence, but I wasn't able to express that until I turned 20 which I think is really interesting" (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 233-234).

Writers also described increasing confidence in the ability to write and in an identity as someone who is a good writer. Zenia reflected this theme and also described the fact that she had better, more supportive teachers in later high school as in part responsible: "As I got older I got better teachers and stuff and got more confident in my writing. So now, there's this one girl in my class and she's like you're the English whiz" (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 89-91).

### **The Writers "Today"**

During the interviews, the writers described their life stories including descriptions of themselves as writers in the present. At the time of the interviews, two of the participants were pursuing careers in writing. Marcus was publishing a novel; Susan was publishing two books of poetry. Sara and Zenia were pursuing higher education in fields related to writing or arts, and actively engaging in collaborative writing and arts projects. Naomi and Brendan were still in high school at the time of the interview. After, Brendan has enrolled in a college program in journalism. Bel and Andrea were in the workforce working in ostensibly non-arts related jobs, but both were involved in creative writing projects such as blogging or writing a screen play. Cade was not working or in school at the time of the interview, but spoke of his art, music and writing as keeping him "from being lost," a sentiment shared by Sylvain who was then employed but living in a youth shelter.

Participants described the impact that their writing practice had in their lives. For example, Andrea found a way to carry her strategic use of writing into her professional life:

It's really good to be able to find an occupation that has a creative aspect to it. Or you can take a look at it from a creative point of view. I

think most people look at their job unfortunately as really monotony and not an outlet. There's elements of that to my job but for the most part I feel luck because I do get to write. It's not super creative writing it's pretty technical and formulaic in a way but at the same time I do have a venue to state my opinion. That's what writing is. Even though sometimes they veil it with fiction and other characters. It's really just the writer's statement of how they see the world. (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 95-101)

Andrea described writing, whether creative or technical, as an opportunity to express her views and make a place for herself in the world. For Cade, who relied on art, music and writing to maintain emotional stability in his life, creative expression was also something he enjoyed and described as an ideal to strive for into his adult life:

I can see in the future with my art, I could become a tattoo artist and my brother is taking music production in school and wants to open up his own recording studio. And he wants to record all his music and his friends' music distributed...I think design stuff is a big key in my future....It's an ideal. (Interview, May 5, 2005, lines 163-165)

These two examples highlight not only the impact of writing on the participants' lives, but also how they incorporated writing practice into their active construction of identity.

For others, writing was described as a vocation. In Canada, it is not easy to make a living writing and publishing and people often have to find day jobs. Marcus worked full time at a university library, and pursued his creative life after work. Susan survived by producing and selling art (e.g., paintings) and other works she characterized more as crafts. Susan described a persistent feeling of not fitting in to the "normal" world of nine-to-five work, and expressed the same sense of straddling two worlds when talking about how she defined her artistic work:

I don't even know if I've ever identified myself as a writer because I mostly do I just say that I do visual art as well. People would just call me an artist. But then when I get really tired of the art world. I don't like

the way it functions and how it's set up, and then I decide "I'm a writer." (Laughs). But then I don't really fit in there either. I definitely fall between the cracks. But I'd definitely say that I'm more of a poet. (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 219-223)

She described her writing practice and creative vocation as extremely challenging, yet was fully dedicated to its pursuit. Marcus described his struggle with self-reflection and self-doubt in putting his creative work out there:

Um I do still grapple with it. I sometimes worry that I'm not as bright as I want to be. And I spend a lot of time comparing what I do with what other people do. And sometimes that works in my favour and sometimes it doesn't. So I got this motto that a friend gave me she got it from her counsellor it's "Compare and despair" and I try not to compare so I don't despair because it's not a competition. On the one hand it can fuel me to work harder and be a better artist. But more often than not it just torments me because I can't do everything and I don't want to do everything. And yet every time I see something I wish I could have done that or done it better. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 133-140)

Marcus described the core of this struggle as reconciling creative work with the competition and comparison that is a part of pursuing writing as a profession.

Participants also spoke of how their writing practice was useful to them in other pursuits, whether creative, job related or personal. Zenia had come to use writing as a way to develop ideas for her art practice:

Zenia: Since the way I use writing right now informs my art so I guess it's really helped me because it's helped my art practice and that's what I want to do. I want to make my art better. So if my writing helps make my art better then it helps everything.

Helen (Researcher): How does the writing connect to your art?

Zenia: It helps me get ideas or like from a small idea build it up and take it back down. Most of my sketch books are so boring because it's just like writing. Usually it's like "Oh! You have a sketch book! Can I look at it?" and there's nice pictures and sketches of people but mine are just coffee stains and stickers and newspaper clippings and tons of writing. (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 258-267)



She described her writing and art practice as inextricably interconnected; she used writing as part of the formative process of creating visual art. For others who were out in the workforce, writing was an important part of the work they did. Even though Andrea described her writing she does as technical and related to environmental engineering, she noted the act of documenting her observations and interpretations was a means of impacting her environment.

The participants talked about themselves as having the desire to explore and learn about new things and ideas. A common view included understanding themselves as artsy or slightly different from others because of their creativity. As Marcus noted, this was sometimes seen in a positive light and sometimes a distinct challenge: "I was always very artsy, and I was an odd little kid. I was very creative in a blue collar town" (Interview, February 11, 2005, line 54). The theme of feeling distinct from others was also echoed by Susan, who viewed herself as not quite fitting anywhere. This was a theme that ran through much of her interview. In terms of her art practice, she described her genre, which combines the visual and textual in collage form, as being neither one nor the other form:

I've always felt like I've been an outsider with everything. I guess I've always been a bit scattered. I mean a lot of people would look at this and say Oh yeah totally scattered, kind of random and fragmented. Just doing a bit of everything. I think in your early 20s you're investigating a lot of different venues for expression. (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 114-118)

For Susan, the way she combined writing and visual art practices was a statement of her experience as being "outside" the typical pattern. She wove her identity into her creative practice and constructed the new form from aspects of herself.

Another theme that ran through the participants' perspectives of self was that of describing their experience of surviving difficult situations or periods in life. The theme of surviving was most commonly described in terms of having come through to the "other side" and being able to put it into perspective. For example, Andrea discussed this idea while looking at her poetry from high school:

You look at it now and it's like wow so much melodrama. And I'm so happy there was that time in my life. Some things just have to happen. Storms sometimes have to come so that the calm comes after. But I don't know I'm just glad it's over. There were happy times I can't say it was totally dark all the time. But there definitely were struggles and important lessons that I had to learn. (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 205-212)

Andrea explained that she had attempted suicide when she was in high school. She reflected that she was glad that she had experienced and gone through that time in her life. She described her writing during the time as "cathartic, therapeutic and it was really comforting in a way. It helped me get through some tough times and issues that were coming up for me" (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 210-212).

### **What Inspires and Motivates the Writers**

Participants spoke frequently about what inspired them to write throughout their lives, as well as their motivations for writing. Participants found inspiration from looking up to and identifying with famous writers or lyricists, from popular media such as movies or music, or from experiences related to family and family relationships. Finding inspiration from one's experiences of emotions was also a thread that ran through the data. Inspiration was a topic that the writers elaborated upon during the interviews. This was a topic that seemed to inspire reflection during

the interview process itself unlike other questions where writers were more certain of their responses.

Participants spoke of being inspired by reading the works of other poets and identifying with their lives and issues they wrote about. For example, Andrea described how she identified with famous writers and the ideals or ideologies they represented. She noted that this was an important inspiration:

I was just trying to, maybe a lot of reading like I was obsessed with Jim Morrison for a while reading Aldous Huxley. Trying to sound really profound and whatever in my writing. I think everybody goes through that (laughter). (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 200-203)

Like Andrea, Sara spoke of her identification with the beat poets and aspired to incorporate their visions into her own writing:

Well, I remember reading Howl for the first time when I was fourteen. We were just on the computer and I heard of the beat poets so I started with that. And I'd never heard of Alan Ginsberg but I printed it off and it was like all these crazy words, but I didn't get it (sort of laughing at self as a teen). But I loved it I was so taken with it. So I think I would definitely say, everyone has culture heroes but I always tended to love Bob Dylan — my Mom loved Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen— that whole sensitive kind of. I was always very taken with that all. I just got...I identified with it all. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 66-72)

Both writers looked back on these motivations with some self-deprecating amusement and described them in terms of their early commitments to cultural icons, or “culture heroes” in Sara’s words. For her writing practice today, Sara was wary of depending too much upon modeling herself after the writers whose work she admired for fear of her writing being “derivative or unoriginal.”

While some writers found inspiration in identification with poets, others described popular media, such as movies or music, as a catalyst for writing. Unlike

poetry, which was more of a model for their own writing, music or movies were more directly inspirational. That is, watching a movie might trigger an idea or listening to music might create the right mood to write. For example, Naomi stated: "Listening to music also inspired me because I like singing. It goes along with the lyrics" (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 13-14). For Brendan, epic movies and fantasy-based videogames provided inspiration:

The reason I do now, I guess is like I watch movies, read books and I'll see something really cool that'll get me going. Like Lord of the Rings or any action movie or with that opera sounding music. Epic kind of thing. It just makes me want to write something of the same caliber. (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 31-34)

Another use of popular media was exemplified by Bel's use of music magazines for materials she included in her own zines: "I used to spend tons of time looking through old books and magazines for cool pictures that I would then cut up and paste on the template" (Online interview, April 2005, lines 73-75). In addition, music and movies were also sources of content in her early writing.

Family was described as related to encouragement or influence on writing practice. For some participants family created a supportive context where ideas could be shared. For others, family relationships were restrictive or controlling. Susan described her ongoing struggle with choosing a creative life versus what was deemed a "normal" life by family members:

But I think in my mind, it's the way I was brought up, like my grandfather just always worries about me because I always had this precarious lifestyle just sort this ongoing struggle just to put myself out there. So I think I've tried to be normal like I said. I tried to get certain skills to be able to do both. (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 349-353)

Sara, too, described some pressure from certain family members to pursue a career that is apparently more stable than writing or artistic pursuits:

My family is very half and half. The ones who are in my family more frowned upon are the ones doing their own sort of thing. My dad is very creative he's a sculptor — he's a dentist. Dentistry is very in-depth. I'm at the point in school now where I'm should I try to make money or should I try to do what I like. My father and sister are both great with their hands, they paint, sculpt. I'm not artsy in that sort of way. I was kind of like a quiet kid when I was younger and I think that's what got me to write more. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 97-102)

The tension Sara described in doing her own thing rather than following a more conservative path was ameliorated by her strong relationship with her mother. Sara described her mother as supportive of her writing. During her high school years, Sara did not readily share her work with her mother, but once she started university in another town she compiled a special book of poetry for her mother. She illustrated the front cover with an outline drawing of her open hand, symbolic of their connection:

[My Mom] is very emotional so it was hard to — so she cried through the happy ones the sad ones whatever. But I never liked to share my stuff with her. You know Mom daughter thing relationship. I'd more like to give her a stack of poems and then leave and let her enjoy them and then if we talked about them. Yeah she's very supportive of me and what I do. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 89-93)

It is interesting to note that Sara described her mother as supportive, and not as interfering or intrusive in terms of Sara's writing practice.

Other participants described their family relationships and the sharing of artistic activities. Several of the young writers had parents who were also artistic or worked in creative fields. For example, Zenia's father was an independent film maker and she was immersed in a creative household:

It was probably a pretty big influence but um seeing as both my parents were pretty creative and open to different types of learning and stuff like that me and my brother would hang out with older people a lot so compared to other people our age we knew about way different things than they did. That's what happens when you're five and you're hanging out with thirty year olds. You're going to talk about different things. (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 317-321)

Bel mentioned that she accompanied her Mom to the office on weekends and used the photocopier to put her zines together. Cade, Naomi, Marcus, and Brendan also had family members who they identified as artistic or creative. In Cade's case, he collaborated with his brother on music projects. Naomi played music with her Mom when they lived together. Marcus noted that even though his family was struggling financially and emotionally, his mother was "artsy and craftsy" and was always working on sewing projects or other creative activities. Brendan described the first time he was away from home as an impetus for creative writing. The long bus trip he described earlier was a time where he was stuck in a large metal tube hurtling down the road, and it gave him a chance to reflect and concentrate on getting his experiences down on paper.

Others described inspiration more specifically to tapping into their own emotional states and situations. For Susan, inspiration was "mostly mental states. I mean I was a big fan of Sylvia Plath and Sexton of course. Yeah I was reading a lot of their stuff at that time. Just a lot of turmoil definitely" (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 61-62). Susan described a period of "unblocking" during which her writing was prolific:

I didn't really have a lot of control over what was happening. I wasn't like "I'm going to do a whole bunch of work right now." It was more it just overtook me. I definitely was obsessed. I guess I felt really crazy a

lot too. I would just work 15 hours a day just reassembling and yeah it was weird. (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 145-149)

This description illustrated the feeling of not being in control of her inspiration.

Rather, her process was not something she tried to do; it was something she just did; it was part of how she lived. Zenia spoke about her process and inspiration in a similar way, and characterized her writing as almost a mystery to her:

I remember the place I was but I don't remember my state of mind. I remember the position I was sitting in and the way I was sitting and I was looking out the window and the chair I was sitting in everything like that but I don't remember what I was thinking about or my process....It's like it had to come out of somewhere and it just chose you. (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 184-187)

Andrea spoke about the importance of retaining the uninhibited way of creating art in which children engage. She argued that young people and adults would be healthier if the natural act of creative expression were encouraged and developed beyond childhood: "Yeah it can happen. I think everyone needs to do it. We all do it when we're kids right. We're all doing artwork when we're kids" (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 466-467).

Participants also described their inspiration as coming from their experiences and the world around them; they connected their experiences to emotional states and to their writing practice. Emotions sometimes provided inspiration to write, and at other times made it difficult to write, as Brendan discussed:

For me personally it depends how extreme it is. If I'm really depressed then I won't want to even though I know I should write it would make me feel better, but I can't. But if I'm extremely happy then I won't really want to sit in and write. (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 151-153)

Inspiration was something that could arise out of everyday experiences or feelings, as Cade said, "Even smallest thing you can write about; everything you can write about" (Interview, May 5, 2005, line 230).

### **Form and Content: How and What the Writers Write**

The writers chose various forms of expression, including poetry, music, fiction, spoken word, collective publications (written together with peers), zines and "chapbooks<sup>2</sup>." As previously stated, they also described changes over time in the forms of expression they chose. Poetry was one form that all of the participants have created. For some, poetry was the mainstay. Sylvain started writing poetry when living in a downtown crisis shelter:

I was living in a downtown crisis shelter called Avenue 15, and like I'd said, I'd always written about my thoughts in an editorial format. But when it became sort of an art form for me was when a friend of mine that I'd met in this shelter — named Jason — read me some of his work. He was a few years older and I saw how these concepts could rhyme and still have so much meaning. That it wasn't just pretty decoration. That it was a different level of expression. At first it was very simple; very nonchalant, somewhat hip hop style of writing and that itself that rhyme format layered itself into the writing I was already doing. But he gave me my first book as well and each book that I've had I have a few of them, has been a gift from a friend. I've never bought a book. And when I don't have a book, like I'm scribbling on napkins at restaurants. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 515-524)

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<sup>2</sup> This definition of chapbook was available on Wikipedia: "Chapbook is a generic term to cover a particular genre of pocket-sized booklet, popular from the sixteenth through to the later part of the nineteenth century. No exact definition can be applied. Chapbook can mean anything that would have formed part of the stock of chapmen, a variety of pedlar. The word chapman probably comes from the Anglo-Saxon word for barter, buy and sell. Chapbook is also a term currently used to denote low-cost hard copy production, particularly of poetry. Poetry chapbooks tend to focus on a specific theme, story, or form to unify the entire book. The genre has been revitalized in the past 20 years by the widespread availability of low-cost copy centers and the cultural revolutions spurred by both zines and slam poetry, the latter generating hundreds upon hundreds of self-published chapbooks that are used to fund tours" (Available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapbook#Modern\\_chapbooks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapbook#Modern_chapbooks), Accessed March 31, 2007).



He noted that he never wrote a piece longer than one page. His writing was lyrical and during the interview he broke into lines of his pieces with natural cadence as though that was the clearest way to express his ideas:

I don't know it's all poetry. I call it poetry. It doesn't have to have like a dependent scheme. It's all spontaneous. I have I don't punctuate so people have trouble reading my writing. I have to recite because I have a cadence to the way it flows that I acknowledge but which I don't often use periods or commas unless they're like necessary. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 70-73)

Sara's form was also primarily poetry. She described it as the most natural form for her. She aspired to write a novel and had taken part in a contest where people write a novel over a long weekend. It was one of the hardest things she had ever done:

I love to read I really get into novels. I know that one day I'm going to sit down and do that. I think it was humbling in a way, I think importantly because you can't just do everything well all the time. This stuff is hard it takes real work. People dedicate months years of their lives to do a great piece. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 249-253)

Poetry was also described as "punchy" in that it is short and packs in a lot of emotion and symbolic imagery — almost like a picture that is worth one thousand words. This was expressed eloquently by Sara during our interview:

The point of poetry is that it's short and it just punches you with feeling and that's what I like to get out of it when I'm reading a poem and the same thing when I'm writing one it's just even if it's a symbol or image that's been used before, it's like this is what I'm feeling about it. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 163-166)

Sara recognized the romantic aspect of writing, yet outlined a poetic craft that required practice and reworking to achieve the appearance of simplicity:

It's definitely more romantic: the pen and paper. If you have a vision of a poet that's what it is. But I think the reality of it, I mean especially

like...studying poetry every word can't be gratuitous every word has to be so perfect and exact and you get more of a sense that you're creating a poem rather than just fluid thoughts going through your head sort of thing. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 25-29)

Participants' views of writing ran the gamut from being hard work that requires refining a skill to a natural predilection that we are all born with but lose with progressive immersion in organized society. Findings reflected a belief that expression and creativity are inherent in human beings, and it is important to nurture and develop these natural abilities through art, words, music and other forms. For example, Susan stated that "everyone needs to do [art]" (Interview, February 18, 2005, line 404). Sara echoed this in her comments:

Just forcing you to write gets you in the habit. Most people I know here write even if they're not trying to publish or even want to show anybody. It's just a natural thing to do you have a pen and paper and a heart you just have to do it. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 279-281)

It was clear, however, that writing was also considered a skilled form of expression that developed with practice.

Perspectives on writing also included the importance of including or valuing various forms of written expression. For example, tagging and lyrics, multi-media work combining visual and textual and performance, were amongst the forms discussed. Further, expression was thought of as more important than perfection of form, as Andrea put it: "There's so many ways of doing things that don't have to be polished. It's actually more interesting [that way]" (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 341-342).

Cade's form was primarily hip hop, although he also wrote poems and journal entries. His journal included drawings, many of which were designs for tattoos.

Brendan described his main form of writing lately as journal entries, but he also had written a screen play. He seemed to minimize his accomplishment of writing a screen play when I expressed that I was impressed:

If I were to put it together in sentence form it would probably only be 15 pages. And then I've written stories mainly. I had to write a short story for school not long ago. But I sometimes just type random things on the computer. Like little random page stories. I don't have any of them now. But I used to do that and I used to write poems. Actually I did write some small poems on random objects. Like salt and old people. Not objects but just things. (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 55-60)

Andrea also said that she was experimenting with writing a screen play for a film. Writing in the daily life of her paid work included writing reports, observations and other documentation doing environmental research. Zenia's writing was also inquiry-based and documentary in nature; it was connected to her art practice.

A major aspect of the participants' writing practice related to public expression or "getting the word out." For example, Sara was a co-creator of an independent local poetry and art zine. She contributed poetry to the zine and the group organized live spoken word events to launch the quarterly release. I attended one of the events at the Marine Club and spoke with Sara before the gig. When I asked her if I could put flyers for this study on the tables, she said, "Of course. It's all about cross promotion." The show included poetry readings, live music, and other performance art. It was attended largely by college age writers involved in the university scene, but there were neighborhood bar regulars, members of a slightly older art scene (in their 30's, 40's, 50's), and several parents of performers. In fact, the contributors to the zine were mostly local, but for this particular issue, there were several contributors from Europe; the call for contributions was on their website.

Others shared or distributed their writing through self-publication. Bel wrote the content for her zines, assembled and produced them and found ways to distribute them publicly: "I'd have to staple the issues by hand then I would bring them downtown and put them at record stores. I'd occasionally take them to all-ages shows and hand them out" (Online interview, April 2005, lines 75-78). Similarly, Susan put together chapbooks and mailed them out to published writers to see if there was interest in her work. She was her own publicist and wanted to find ways to share her expression with a broader audience. During the interview, Sylvain emphasized his love of sharing his poetry, and in keeping with that read several of his poems to me. He mentioned that he published one piece of poetry annually on an online poetry forum.

Other activities for sharing writing included getting together with friends to co-write, to critique each others' work, and to basically act as a community of practice. For example, Sara described her community and the important role it performed in providing a critical sounding board:

My roommates, I show them almost everything and you know they're pretty harsh critics. If you are trying to get your stuff out there. I guess I wouldn't say I was totally focused on that. Even if you want to test the waters, if people don't respond to it, there's a problem. Not that you have to cater to an audience. We don't really have audiences now. If even the people who love you and know what you're getting at don't get it then I think you have to revise it a little more. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 153-158)

Cade's community of practice was online, as well as in his home town. He entered recordings of his songs online, as well as used instrumentals that others put there. In addition, Cade stated that he gathered regularly with a group of friends, and sometimes his older brother, to play and record music.

Participants engaged in various activities that they described as related to their writing practice. Some activities were other creative or artistic practices, while others were more social or personal. For example, Andrea described the burgeoning of her writing as coinciding with experimentation with drugs such as marijuana. This made sense in the context of working through emotional problems and situations — a major role of writing in her life at that time. She also engaged in creative activities at school such as drama, and was working on a screen play. She described these venues as connecting her ideas over time: “I’ve got ideas that I’ve already kind of put the ideas down. Like when I was in school. We had to do creative exercises in drama where we would have to plan out a play” (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 326-328). Both Marcus and Susan were involved with drama in school, yet found writing to be more personal and accessible.

Two other activities that emerged as connected to writing practice were reading and drawing or other visual arts. Reading, like writing, was a safe place to escape, as well as a sort of sounding board for working through difficult situations. Participants could relate to what characters in novels were going through. Susan cited Judy Blume’s novels about puberty as an example. Further, reading was also described as a means of learning and developing as a writer. Susan stated that she continued to read young adult novels and was fascinated by that genre. She described a period of her life between her youth and the “present” when she did not read fiction:

When I was younger, a kid of 12 or so, I’d go to the library and take out 25 books. I remember walking home, because I was alone most of the summer, so that’s what I did. I just read all summer. And I’d read into the night too....I’ve definitely felt myself back in that world. I’ve started

reading more and more and more because I just stopped I couldn't find anything to read either. I was just reading magazine articles, just really quick things. But I was working at a bookstore for a few months and I was reintroduced to what was out there again and I was blown away. (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 274-279)

For Zenia, reading was related to her writing and art practices in that it provided a broad range of knowledge and empathy for others' experiences through understanding the characters.

Writing and music were also described as connected activities. For example, the structure of hip hop provided a vehicle for poetry. This was true for Cade, and was evident in Sylvain's early work. For Susan, applying and reworking her poetry as lyrics in collaborative songwriting and performance was a means of sharing her words. Listening to music was also a related activity. Music was inspirational given both its lyrical content and emotions expressed, and as a means of identification with youth culture. Besides music, engaging in consumption of other media, like movies and video games, was also related to creative expression. Production of media was connected to the participants' writing practice in such forms as comic books, online zines, and scripts.

What people wrote about and expressed through their creative practice included writing about emotions and emotional situations, relationships, as well as self-exploration. Sara described her practice of writing about emotional situations and using the writing process as a way to work through and understand it:

I tend to write when I'm emotional mostly really sad. It's not so much when you're going through something that you write about it. It's after when you start to think about what happened and have a little time and now I'll write about it. In the last year I write pretty much almost everyday. Now after my homework it's what I like to do at night most of the times. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 41-45)

She described the content of her writing as emotions-based and about situations and experiences in her life with which she was trying to cope, understand or work through. She characterized this daily writing practice as therapeutic and useful to her.

Writing about relationships was something that resonated with most of the writers. Susan described one of her early poems as a metaphor for her relationship with her father:

An expression of sort of one was about a ballet dancer and sort of being controlled like a marionette. It was just a direct expression of my experience at the time 'cuz I had my Dad was very controlling. I was in ballet too. (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 45-48)

Besides depicting issues in her own relationships, Susan also used family relationships as a focus for a comic strip she created that was both idealistic and satirical simultaneously:

It's funny actually. Mine was about a huge family with no mother. Just a dad and all these kids. And I think the dad was really short and had glasses and he was really gentle and kind of a pushover and the kids ranged from 17 to a baby. I would draw the whole family as getting smaller. And they were rich they were millionaires or something. Just this total "utopic" family world situation. It was weird. (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 300-304)

She described the fictional family she created as a means for playing out family scenarios that might provide an alternative to her own family dynamic, or to work out solutions to issues in her real family situation.

Others wrote about friendship and romantic relationships, such as crushes on classmates, or documented things they did with their friends, such as parties or

relationship discord. Much of Andrea's writing was about doing things with friends, and in retrospect she was surprised that this was a central focus for her:

Um boys I liked crushes I had. Oh I did this with my friends. Or I'm going to go here on this day. I would have talked to someone who'd say we're going to take you to the movies on Monday or something like that. Could you ask your mom if you could come with us your friends' parents if they liked you or whatever activities or whatever if you were excited about it? That would be basically what it was. It wasn't anything super profound. Even when I think about when I read back on it and think about what I was going through at that time. Um I'm surprised that there wasn't more evidence of what actually was going wrong in my life and what was happening to me. (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 59-66)

In looking back on her writing from her high school years, she expressed surprise that it did not for the most part reflect the difficulties she was experiencing at the time. She reflected that it was perhaps the process of the writing, and not necessarily what she was writing about, that was helpful in working through issues.

The next chapter presents findings related to how the participants used writing in their lives.



## CHAPTER V: RESULTS—HOW THE WRITERS USED WRITING

The findings presented in this chapter address the research question: Why do young people write and how do they use writing in their lives? More specifically this chapter describes contextual and individual factors across the diversity of roles that writing plays in the lives of young people who engage in independent or unsanctioned writing practice.

The findings presented emerged from the data that fell within the category relating to the participants' definitions of situations or experiences. Initial analysis yielded 14 separate themes that demonstrated the participants' views of themselves in relation to the topic, that is, their definitions of themselves as writers and the role writing has played throughout their lives. These initial themes related to roles that writing plays in the participants' lives, and can be found in Appendix H. Initial themes were collapsed into five meaningful categories, based on thematic analysis. These five themes are writing as: 1) a context for identity construction, self-reflection, and documentation of identity; 2) an emotional outlet and a "safe place" or refuge; 3) a way to "be heard", as well as to achieve recognition; 4) a means of connecting with and understanding others; and 5) a context for learning and teaching, exploring ideas, as well as expressing beliefs and making an impact through social action/activism. The themes are presented in the order of importance to the participants based on depth and proportion of information provided in the interviews. Each theme is discussed in turn in the remainder of this chapter.

### **Constructing Identity, Self-reflection and Documentation**

Writing as a way to express oneself, as a way to grow as a person, as a means of constructing one's identity, or as a means of identifying with a group emerged as a major theme in the interviews. Andrea, in describing the experience of recording her own story commented, "You just...have to let it write itself but at the same time I think to write about it is really good, to get it through your head and help you understand it better" (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 317-319). Marcus, who had chosen writing as a livelihood and published a novel, described the role writing played in his life during high school:

It was a big part of what I was doing in high school was sort of writing myself into existence or writing my existence into the world. Both I guess, not or, but and. And it's carried. Now I feel that I'm doing that as well for other people. Creating spaces that are space for other people to inhabit. Because that's what books did for me. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 286-290)

Bel, who started writing zines when she was in her early teens, and still included "zine writer" on her résumé, likewise commented on writing as instrumental in becoming who she was: "I think it played a huge role in the development of my self-confidence and identity. I expressed and formed so much of my personality through writing" (Online interview, April 2005, lines 56-57). Andrea echoed the importance of expressing oneself through writing:

I think that it's really important for people to write. I don't think they realize how important it is for them. Even informal like journals. Not so much for posterity but more for a spiritual thing at that kind of level. Personal growth. (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 444-446)

For Andrea, the practice of journaling was not only an emotional outlet, but she also defined it as a process of personal growth and self-understanding. For Brendan,

writing allowed him to be an active participant in his own experience, rather than a passive consumer of a particular medium: "It almost makes me feel like I'm actually in there instead of just watching an actor on the screen or reading words in a book or playing a character in a game" (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 115-117).

Other participants described writing as a major part of their lives and identities as a young person. For example, Susan stated that she always identified with being an expressive person: "[It's] just something that I was connected to. No matter how hard I try I can't seem to get away from it. You know, I've tried to be normal. I've tried to go to school" (Interview, February 18, 2005, line 329). She went on to comment that throughout her life and into adulthood, she had consistently expressed herself through poetry, and had decided to pursue it as a livelihood despite financial and other challenges such as lack of family support for a life as an artist. Marcus attributed aspects of his identity and personality to his practice of writing. From late high school to university, he described his writing practice as a process of self-reflection leading to self-understanding:

And I would guess that it also really helped me certainly when I got older and hit later high school and my first years of university I spent a lot of time trying to figure myself out. I was coming out of the closet and I was moving out on my own. And I was trying I think it helped me be self-reflexive. It helped me look at who I was and how I interacted with people and what I felt and what I thought. I think it was all, I don't know if it was the catalyst for that type of personality trait, but it's certainly been a big part of who I am — to be very self-aware.  
(Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 255-261)

Sylvain described writing in his life as a way of forging his identity and developing a direction for his life. As with Brendan, writing appeared to give Sylvain a sense of power over his own life and what happened to him:

It's almost like writing my history as I go. I don't want to battle the days anymore; I don't want to see the hours fall apart. I just want to see cohesion and let myself slide down the path most natural to me. And I think that humanity is really derailed itself so that life becomes not an expression of that path but a struggle to find the path in the first place. And writing for me is my direction, is my road signs, is my cumulative momentum. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 104-109)

While he described his life as a struggle at times, he considered writing to be a "salvation." Cade, who at the time of the interview was living with his girlfriend's family and working part time, noted of his writing practice: "I think it plays a very big part in my life. If it wasn't for music or art I'd be lost" (Interview, May 5, 2005, line 179).

Participants described how writing had contributed to their identity construction. The theme of writing and the self was characterized by the definition of writing as being an anchor: something that was ever present as a means to maintain sanity and personal integrity. For Sylvain, writing was

...spawned of a need a basic need in my day to day life; I've been considered insane, I've been considered deviant, I've been considered whatever that thing is that moves peoples tongues to curses. Yet I can polish up nice, I can be civil, I can participate in both schemes and travel in between them through writing and having that avenue. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 386-390)

He asserted that he would never be one of those people who lamented the fact that they hadn't written anything for years; he stated that he would maintain this connection through his writing.

Another perspective on writing and the self that resonated with participants was that the process of creating was central or integral to the self. For Zenia, this was exemplified by how important the process of creating was to her: "It's probably the act of it. I'm a very process based person I guess. The act of doing, of making, of

creating. That matters more than what is created" (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 149-150). The writing process and not the product was what counted for identity construction. The act of creating was a way to construct identity; the product or the piece of writing did not necessarily exemplify or illustrate the writer's identity. Sara described writing as integral to her sense of self: "I hope to write forever even if I don't do it professionally. Some people do music or paint. I think it's who I am more than anything" (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 264-265). She described a self-motivated need to write and to "create something even if it's only meaningful to myself."

For others, being a writer was not so much an integral part of his or her identity; but rather it was described in terms of an activity or occupation. For example, Andrea never considered herself a writer in any way, but in looking back at the volume of poetry and journals she created, she realized that writing was a big part of who she was. Brendan and Naomi also discussed that being a writer was not a major part of their identities. Again, they described writing as something they *do*, not something they *are*:

Brendan: I don't think it's a really big part for me. I mean I like it and it's a big thing, but I don't think writing words on paper or typing is really can really make a person like that big a part of their identity. Other than they can convey their emotions better than most. If you just express it doesn't matter if you can write. So no I wouldn't say it's a big part of my identity.

Naomi: I don't think it's a big part of my identity either. I just write down some things that I'm thinking. I have a little booklet, I'm not sure if you've seen it. It's one of those Hilroy duo tang thingies. It's just filled with random lines and how I feel and if I hear something that somebody says, I'll just write it down. (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 188-197)

Views of writing included the process of taking fragments of images and ideas and reworking them into a unique form: "making it your own thing." In this way, writing was a "filter system." Writing was also described as a way to claim a space for the self and for refining one's own view of self.

Being a creative person was a means of forging an identity as an artist, different from others and unique. Marcus described using this aspect of his identity as a means of using his difference to his advantage socially:

You're not encouraged to be bright in school by your peers. Your peers resent you for being brighter than they are. Especially when you're an effeminate guy in a small town. It was easy for them to think I was different because I was really different (laughs). I was very popular and charming and silly and goofy. And it gained me a great deal of a certain kind of acquaintance. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 213-218)

Marcus became known as an entertainer who was flamboyant and amusing. This was a facet of his identity that he claimed protected him from ostracism. For Sara, being creative also set her apart from the general crowd during high school. However, her best friend in school was also creative, even though she did not have space to express it because of family pressures:

My best friend was a wonderful painter but her mom pushed her to go into science. She refused to write her last set of exams and now she's in art school. Besides from her no one was artistic. People were into getting high. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 216-218)

In her new community at university, Sara found that she had more in common with friends and acquaintances and she found that gratifying.

Another theme within the category of participants' perspectives and conceptions that warrants specific attention was that of "authenticity." This theme was woven throughout the findings. Participants spoke of writing as a way to

express the reality of their lives, or that which was authentic. Participants explicitly used the terms "authentic" and "authenticity" to describe that which was rooted in their lived experiences. Further, the importance of expressing lived experiences in one's writing was seen as important to one's integrity. For example, participants referred to examples from pop music or the media where artists' expressions were viewed as inauthentic. Susan noted that the cover on the version of her poetry book distributed by a publisher was not true to her vision. She showed me a copy of the book, on which she had applied stickers and original artwork to "re-make" it authentic. Being true to one's experiences was the marker of authenticity for Cade in his work. He described his older brother as having been through more in his life:

I don't know his is hip hop his has more deeper emotions, he's gone through way more stuff than I have so he knows more about it too. He's more qualified. Um it's kind of hard. 'Cuz Eminem did all that stuff, his Mom and all that. You have to base your music on your own way through life, your own experience. (Interview, May 5, 2005, lines 69-74)

Sara too spoke of the importance of remaining true to your own voice:

The problem with that you get a lot of people, I even notice it in myself sometimes you've been reading a lot of Ginsberg or Cohen and you find yourself writing in that style which can thwart your own voice a little bit. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 136-139)

In order to "write one's own story," a person needed to value his or her individuality and lived experience. Something that was not always fostered in school. The desire to live an authentic life and be able to express himself was also paramount in

Marcus's experience:

I was living a very duplicitous life because I was a closeted homosexual. So again there was that whole wanting to be authentic and seen and not having the resources or the wherewithal to be noticed and seen for myself in my entirety....So much of my writing life

has been about the struggle for authenticity. Feeling like a real valid person in the world. And it really comes out in my work, in my experience of my work. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 203-209)

Expressing identity in writing was considered to be a strategy in terms of using this form of documentation and expression as a space for growth, developing a sense of self, and a place in the world. This strategy was exemplified by Marcus's use of writing about his hometown to understand the actions, motivations, and contexts of people from his past who hurt him. The theme of writing as a response to one's environment was also considered a strategy. Reflecting upon and writing about one's own sphere of influence emerged as a way to understand, for example, what was going on in school, at home, or in the world.

Many participants, especially as they discussed their writing practice during their later teen years, described aspects of self-reflection or self-understanding that emerged. The process of writing created a space for contemplation, for slowing down and reliving or recounting an experience, as described by Andrea:

I think in a way it's also given me something to write about to show the world. How each and every one of us has a story. Really if you really look at it. You just have to kind of um sometimes you have to let it write itself but at the same time you I think to write about it is really good to get it through your head and help you understand it better. (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 315-319)

Self-reflection was also evident in Cade's explanation of how writing facilitates self-understanding by providing a place where he could "talk to himself:"

I'm a very emotional person. I don't have to have all my feelings build up inside me. I can like I don't know I'm I can write down my own person have my own conversation. It sounds stupid (laughs) I can talk to myself and understand myself better. (Interview, May 5, 2005, lines 149-152)



Self-reflection through writing contributed to self-awareness, which Marcus explained was the result of engaging in writing throughout his life:

That self-awareness has led to a great deal of self-improvement. I think writing has been a really big part of that because writing is about investigation for me. It's about mysteries and puzzles and solving those mysteries and puzzles. Some of them are metaphysical mysteries and it's helped me gain a certain degree of perspective. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 261-265)

For Marcus, self-reflection and "self-improvement" were connected with learning and exploring ideas. Like Brendan, who said that exploring the unknown in his writing gave him the freedom to come up with his own answers, Marcus's exploration gave him perspective and self-understanding. Sylvain described his writing and his poetry as a "struggle to understand myself through symbols" (Interview, February 4, 2005, line 104).

The writers also described writing as a way to document their experiences or, indeed their identities: "I sort of rely on my writing to remember myself to know who I am" (Sylvain, February 4, 2005, lines 111-112). Several of the writers talked about documentation in terms of an act of remembrance, or as Sylvain noted earlier, a strategy to remember: to remember who he is, to remember and document his existence. In conjunction with giving poetic form to the act of remembering, the experience became less painful somehow and more meaningful in a practical way (i.e., to learn from it), rather than remembrance tied to regret: "I can remember that for a lesson for a piece of my history instead of for regret instead of for revenge or remembrance or something that I haven't dealt with" (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 193-194). Writing as a personal documentation strategy was also used by Zenia who described her writing practice during her high school years: "[I used]

journals, recording events that I went to or people that I saw or what happened. Not too much making up stories. Things that I wanted to remember for myself"

(Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 82-83).

The act of documenting was also seen as a comforting act or one that could reduce anxiety. For example, Naomi explained that she wrote every night before bed and that it helped her sleep "because it's getting all of my ideas out on paper" (Group interview, May 4, 2005, line 89). Andrea explained how she documented the "most important stuff," and that her journal was a space to keep "my poems I came across or just quotes, it's like my life, my journal, you know" (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 281-282).

Putting words on paper — making them visible — was another aspect of writing as documentation. For Sylvain, who would sometimes lose pieces of his writing, he likened putting his words on paper to writing himself into the world. The documentation, not the document, was what mattered most:

I've left poems that I would have loved to have kept and cherished in restaurants, dining rooms, bars. Because they were loose-leaf because they weren't solid. And just left them behind regardless of what I thought of the work. This is how I know that that writing has been seen. That makes a difference. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 525-528)

For some writers, the act of documentation was described as a response to the environment. For example, Sylvain and I discussed his views of forms of public documentation, like graffiti that we saw when we walked from the art gallery to the coffee shop:

That's what the writing on the wall is. That's somebody who wanted to say something to somebody sometime. An inspired thought that was inspired by a situation and yet it becomes written but almost out of

context. They are writing what they were feeling about or what they wanted to throw in somebody's face but it's displaced. Who knows if that person will ever see it? So mine is more immediate and it's like a response not a latent reaction. Responding to my environment in whatever way I can. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 380-386)

For Sylvain, writing was a way to respond immediately to his environment, to things that happened, and to situations. In this way, it was possible to have power within his own situation. He described his process this way: "[I] focus the line of sight to zoom onto something and pull it from the surrounding environment" (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 298-299).

For others, writing was a regular activity and was a response to daily life. For example, Andrea described her early journaling practice, not as a self-reflexive exercise, but more as a running record of what was going on in her surroundings: "I didn't really write it as a journal where you'd reflect on every day it's more like stuff that was going on in my head and in my sphere of influence" (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 282-283).

### **An Emotional Outlet and a "Safe Place"**

Participants described writing as an emotional outlet or a way of expressing feelings. All of the participants described their writing of poetry or journals as connected with emotions, whether as a means of working through emotional issues, or in terms of needing to feel a certain way to be inspired to write. Andrea spoke of dealing with a difficult time during her middle school years, when she attempted suicide. Her best friend had given her a journal book to encourage her to write out her feelings and work through her depression. Looking back, she stated of her writing:

I think she saw this book as a way to give me an outlet to put my feelings in and thoughts down to try and help me to get through that time. It was cathartic, therapeutic and it was really comforting in a way. It helped me get through some tough times and issues that were coming up for me. (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 298-300)

Andrea described her writing at around age 16 as "dark" and replete with anger towards her parents. After the interview, without the tape recorder on, Andrea showed me her poetry book and continued to speak of sensitive issues of suicide and anger towards parents. She described the writing as a way to express the anger in a non-violent or harmful way. She said she expressed violence and anger through poetry and these feelings were "cathartically expressed through writing so that they would not become action" (Field Notes, February 20, 2005).

Similarly, when I asked Cade about his history with writing and music, he stated, "It was a way to release stress in our family. Not everybody could always talk to each other and let their emotions out" (Interview, May 5, 2005, lines 22-23). When he was growing up, his mother played guitar and family members frequently got together and partied and played music. At the time of the interview, Cade was keeping a journal filled with poetry and drawings. Of writing and drawing as an emotional outlet, he commented: "I don't know just a way to express myself so I wouldn't get mad. I'd just put my feelings into it" (Interview, May 5, 2005, lines 36-37). When I asked him how his visual artwork related to his music and writing, Cade said, "I think that it's more a physical way of releasing some type of feeling" (Interview, May 5, 2005, lines 139-140).

Participants used writing as an emotional outlet, for example a positive way to release anger. The act of writing was also described as cathartic by several

participants. Sylvain described his writing practice this way: "Writing for as long as I can remember has always been there it's always been my outlet. And I've been fortunate enough to have always collected my work and always kept what I've written" (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 46-48). Like Cade, Sylvain's writing was a way to get anger out of his system:

A lot of my earlier poetry was merely blunt displaced rage because like both my hands have been broken in fist fights...I was always punished to the full extent of either the law or my parents. So I was taught that to lash out was just not possible and that you do that and you're just hurting yourself to hit somebody in anger. And so a lot of it came out in my writing instead. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 165-169)

Others stated that they needed to experience an emotion or emotions in order to be able to write. For example, Brendan noted, "I have to write when I have something [to write about]. I can't just say 'oh I'm bored I'll go write' — I can't do that; I have to have an emotion" (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 159-160). For Sara, the most inspiring emotion was sadness:

I tend to write when I'm emotional mostly really sad. It's not so much when you're going through something that you write about it. It's after when you start to think about what happened and have a little time and now I'll write about it. In the last year I write pretty much almost everyday. Now after my homework it's what I like to do at night most of the times. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 41-45)

She noted that high school is "when you start thinking about things. It was just nice to know that I was thinking about things....I guess I always felt I felt powerfully" (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 127-128). Sara highlighted the importance of feeling strong emotions in order to be able to write expressively, and despite the pain of certain emotions saw the experience as worth it in order to identify as a creative person.

Bel spoke about her early experiences writing zines during junior high and high school. She described the process as a "great outlet:"

Later I switched to a more "emo" [i.e., emotional] type of format. I used my real name and wrote more about personal experiences and less about the bands that I had crushes on. I wrote about more personal issues like body image, relationships and depression. (Online interview, April 2005, lines 45-49)

Likewise, Susan described her early writing experiences as a means of dealing with emotional and personal issues. Her practice of compiling chapbooks and zines corresponded with dealing with family issues and grappling with her own sense of self: "I noticed with these little books that I would make there's so much repetition. It was just working through things. I was trying to process my life up until that point" (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 149-150). While using writing as an emotional outlet, especially during high school, was described as positive and even necessary, Zenia pondered whether her outlet might have been partially an escape:

I don't know it was kind of like an escape to whatever was going on. If I couldn't deal with it or if I didn't know anyone or didn't have any friends. I was just like in my own little place. So I don't know if that helped me or hindered me. It might have made me not need to have friends or to go and whatever. But it got me through lots of stuff so I'm glad that I did it. (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 141-145)

Writing was also described as a "safe place" or refuge, especially in relation to painful or difficult emotional issues. For Andrea, her journal was a private place to confide and document things she did not want to share with another person, but still needed to release: "As I got older it got more personal because I discovered that I could write things down and hide it and no one would know what I wrote" (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 54-55). For Bel, even though she made her writing public by distributing her zines, she "started out using a pseudonym which made it a bit

easier in terms of expressing opinions" (Online interview, April 2005, lines 41-42).

This bought her freedom of expression and experimentation with forms and ideas without fear of personalized critique. Marcus described his writing practice throughout his life as largely about finding a safe space to exist authentically:

People who stand out are held up for ridicule so...I had to put my creative life somewhere and I couldn't put it on the street so I put it down on paper. And I lived it in books. I read a lot. I was a big, big reader because it was escapist. I escaped from the people who made fun of me. And my abusive parents and it was just available it was the medium that was most available to me. It didn't cost anything. It was pen and paper. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 57-62)

Marcus described writing as a way not only to escape or find shelter, but moreover as place to live out his life and identity.

While writing brought safety and privacy, the participants were often self-reflexive about the aspect of escapism that characterized their writing practice. For example, Zenia described her use of writing and drawing when she was uncomfortable to avoid social contact during a year she was on a student exchange in a new city living with a new family:

I'd have lots of breaks when other people didn't so I'd just sit there with nothing to do. So I'd draw pictures or write stuff. When I was home from school with these families I didn't know at all (on the exchange) and you're living in their house and by their rules so you're like "I'm going to bed" and go to your room and do whatever. That's where it happened the most. Just when you're by yourself. (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 154-158)

For Sara, writing was the one thing she really remembered about her high school years; she remembered writing as a comfort. Zenia was ambivalent about whether the art of escapism was a positive or negative thing for her:

It was kind of like an escape to whatever was going on. If I couldn't deal with it or if I didn't know anyone or didn't have any friends. I was

just like in my own little place. So I don't know if that helped me or hindered me. It might have made me not need to have friends or to go and whatever. But it got me through lots of stuff so I'm glad that I did it. (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 141-145)

### **Recognition and "Being Heard"**

"Everyone likes to feel "/>

That year when I was in the alternative school, I got a hundred percent on an essay and my teacher was like "did you write this?" and I was like yeah it's my essay and he was like "No did you write this?" and he thought that it was copied and I was yes I wrote it. He's like okay you wrote this okay it's one of the best essays I've ever read. Thank-you and then he gives it to me and walks away. And I was what the hell what was that how did I get 100% on an essay?! And then I read it over again and I'm like "I wrote this?! This is good!" (laughs). (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 173-179)

Similarly, Brendan recounted his experience of his writing ability being recognized by a teacher. At the time, Brendan had gone back to an alternative school to complete his grade 12 courses. In elementary school, Brendan had excelled academically, but he had difficulty making the transition to high school. He was being treated for depression and an anxiety disorder. He explained that he found the smaller alternative school less stressful. He noted:



In the beginning of the school year I was really doing well in my English (as I always do — laughs) and the teachers actually discussed together they wanted me to write a weekly article in the *Star Phoenix* about activities going on in the school each week or every two weeks or something like that. (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 331-136)

Unfortunately, school policy did not permit Brendan to undertake this newspaper project because he was not a regular full-time student, but rather was attending the school with special permission to complete his credits. He did not let it dishearten him though and commented that “it was flattering even though I couldn’t do it. It was nice. Promising” (Group interview, May 4, 2005, line 140). Brendan spoke of his plan to enroll in a college journalism program the following year, if he could obtain a student loan.

Brendan and Naomi were boyfriend and girlfriend and writing was a common interest that connected them. They had both faced difficulties in their lives. Brendan had been through a period of treatment for debilitating anxiety and his school attendance suffered as a consequence. This caused his grades to suffer and he fell behind and was held back a year, which exacerbated his anxiety and depression. Naomi had been through some difficult family situations, with her father and mother splitting up, and had a difficult relationship with her stepmother. Both Brendan and Naomi were recognized as bright students with writing talent. Both described this recognized talent and competency as something that kept them both going, as well as being a shared interest. During the interview, they both discussed instances where their writing was recognized:

Brendan: I knew she liked writing a bit. I knew she liked it. I know she has about a hundred journals. But I didn’t know about the paper thing. Well I did actually I just forgot.

Naomi: I just kind of got to know that he liked writing a lot so it's just at the back of my head.

Brendan: Maybe we're each other's inspiration. (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 178-183)

I observed that both were obviously proud of each other and they held hands during this part of the discussion.

The experience of being publicly recognized for his poetry was the impetus for Marcus to send out his writing for publication. His first poem was published in a queer newspaper, which contributed to his sense of authenticity:

When I hit grade was it grade 12 or grade 13 it was my last year of high school I won the Carleton University high school writing competition for poetry and then I started sending poems out to get them published and I took a great number of years and I had my first thing published. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 33-36)

He continued to publish his writing and described the publication of his first novel as a significant event, which made him feel "visible... that was the first ... really acute taste of that experience of feeling both exposed but also seen. Authentic" (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 115-116). For Sylvain, the sense of recognition for his work was not tied to intellectual property or copyright ownership. He said those things were not important to him. The core reason for writing was his need to communicate, to relate and to be heard. Sylvain discussed how he shared his work, and was interested in connecting with other writers who shared their work at spoken word events and publications:

I publish a piece annually. It's an amateur writing contest basically and so you make your submission over the internet [www.poetry.com](http://www.poetry.com) and if you type my name into the website then the work I've published there will pop up and you just send it in and it's a competition basis so if you're published you're published and if you're not you're not. They

copyright it for you. Make it your work whatever. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 231-235)

Sylvain spoke of his writing practice in terms of an important on-going experience that contributed to his future. He spoke of plans to enroll in university as a mature student:

Because I understand if I want to achieve something through a public institution, a university that there's going to be some standards that I will have to meet. Requirements that I will have to be able to walk through to be able to come out with what I want. But I hope that through my own publications, my own resources my own life that that'll just transpire. That will come out of me because it's there to come out. And so far that's what's happening. This is a culmination of that very thing. It's going somewhere I just don't know where. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 583-589)

Sylvain described his writing as a means of moving forward in his life and for making a space for himself in life to be valued.

Another prevalent finding, related to but distinct from achieving recognition, was that of the writers' use of writing as a way to be listened to or to be heard. The writers described the use of writing in school as a way to get a message across. Sometimes, the desire to have a voice was related to a personal issue or need to be understood. In other cases, the use of writing was to express a belief or ideal. Sylvain described how he used school writing assignments to communicate ideas about which he felt strongly, but that this practice was controversial:

Mostly in school writing took the form of essays and mostly editorial style pieces that I would write because I wanted to say something that would be construed inappropriate in a classroom but which I could write out and leave haphazardly in a teacher's path. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 355-357)

He spoke of his use of writing as a positive and effective way to give voice to personal issues and social issues:

I don't think I have an option because if I didn't do that then that well-spring whatever that thing that it comes from would express itself somewhere else in my life or might manifest negatively in my life without having an avenue for that sort of expression. So I think we're all doing it regardless of whether we write, sing, and advertise, it's all stemmed from this basic need to be heard. We all really want to hear what everybody else is talking about and we make movies and all sorts of other things. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 391-397)

He characterized the need to be heard as universal and inclusive of all expressive activities, not just writing.

Writing practice as a means of expressing talent or creative ability was also reflected in the interviews. On some level, participants recognized their creative talent or their ability to communicate through artistic expression. For example, Brendan described his enjoyment of writing humorous pieces that made people laugh. His essay about a bus trip that was three days and nights long was one of the first pieces he showed his Mom, who thought it was hilarious. The journalistic piece had a segment about the perils of "Bus Ass," a medical condition with symptoms of flattening from bus seats. During the interview, Brendan explained, "It was the first time my Mom realized that I could write worth a damn." (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 144-145). He went on to say part of his motivation to pursue a career in writing was because he "likes being able to create something that would entertain" (Group interview, May 4, 2005, line 146).

### **Connecting With and Understanding Others**

Participants described their writing as a means of connecting with other people, a way to communicate or to reach out to others. This played out in different ways for different participants. For some, the act of writing was an act of communication, and the purpose of it was to communicate a particular message. For

others, the act of writing was a shared activity with other writers; the act of writing connected people.

For example, for Bel, being a zine writer meant being a part of a community that was creativity-based: "The other great thing about zines was the network of people it opened up. I met and corresponded with a lot of people via my zines" (Online interview, April 2005, lines 49-51). Sara also described being a part of a community based on shared interest in creative expression: "Most of my friends write as well and we get together and give each other feedback" (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 45-46). For Marcus, the practice of writing had always been connected with finding a sense of community. He emphasized that both the content of his writing and the act itself contributed to his being connected to others:

I think a lot of my work has been about finding a home, about finding a community and a safe place. And building space and building community so I think it did it for me then and it's just continued to do that now. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 274-276)

Likewise, Susan described her motivation to engage in writing as a way to connect with others and quell a sense of isolation:

I think yeah deep down inside. That was the whole point of doing it. That's why I started making those little books. Out of the desperate need to connect. Just like I feel so messed up and I want. I guess I should really um revel more in the fact that people can relate to that because I just feel so isolated and alone. (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 134-137)

Engaging in writing projects or hanging out with other writers was a way of building a peer community. For example, the community of zinesters was a way of networking and making friendships for Bel. Creating zines together was not only an

activity, but also a way of creating intimacy in friendship through sharing emotional content in the writing:

My first zine was a collaboration between myself and a friend. We rented a post office box and would receive mail from people from all over. I actually ended up dating one of my classmates! And I am still friends with one of the girls that were in my class and at the time my zines inspired her to create her own which was very flattering. Often zinesters would put ads for other zines in the back of theirs so we would send them all over the place. Then we'd end up with pen pals from all over the place. (Online interview, April 2005, lines 102-105)

Sylvain also described how working with others had informed his creative expression:

Some of my favorite occurrences have been meeting musicians who have an incredible talent for instrumentation and using my words and I find that because a lot of my poetry is in cadence and when I try to recite loud and make sure that everything is picked up on the recorder and with the traffic and everything, I don't get to say it how I would like to. But I find with talented instrumentalists they find the rhythm and they pick up and that their music and like I sang in the Calgary boys choir for a few years when I was a soprano and I still sing for my own enjoyment and then I find through their instrumentation I can turn my words into song and that is always such a powerful thing for me when it happens that it's like I would dearly love any opportunity for that so I definitely will look into this. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 603-612)

He expressed interest in connecting with other participants in this project for opportunities to share work. Sylvain summed up the impact that writing had on his relationships as being a positive force: "I don't know exactly how or why I started but I know that the product of that has been beneficial to my life and to my friends and the people around me" (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 64-66).

Sylvain described a form of writing he was practicing at the time of the interview; he wrote a message on a sticky note in a public space like a restaurant and left it on another person's table. While he described this form as one of his "anti-

social habits," at the core of it was a desire to reach out to others in a world that had become impersonal: "Almost like my little snippet...that thing you wished you could have said" (Interview, February 4, 2005, line 358). He defined writing — including poetry, an editorial, or graffiti on a wall — as a meaningful way to have a voice in the world, something that he described as a need for everyone.

While writing for some represented a way to connect with others and be part of a community, participants also described the need to communicate so that others could relate to the ideas or feelings conveyed in their writing. When discussing the importance of writing as a form of communication, Naomi commented, "Maybe somebody could see your quote and they could relate to that" (Group interview, May 4, 2005, line 231). She noted that lyrics from music she listened to had the effect of helping her to deal with emotional situations. In this way, the act of writing closed the loop and made the participant not only a recipient of communication — or a consumer of others' words or lyrics — but a creator of ideas and a producer of expressions that could potentially reach someone else.

The act of producing an original piece of writing, a communication, was described by Sylvain as an important way to contribute to the world. He commented that even if no one read the writing in his lifetime, it is "out there" and meaningful unto itself:

I think something somehow it's out there. It's part of the fabric of everything that was and is coming and those brief moments of surety of peace of Zen of solace I believe radiate outside of me regardless of whether I share the piece with somebody that it's just out there doing what it does. And so it's almost I feel that I'm contributing by writing. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 152-156)

Sylvain described his writing as a means to make him connected with the world and with others: "...to share that and for people who share an experience with me to have a part in that for them to have contributed a line or a thought or a sentence that they spoke or that I expanded on" (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 105-106).

Participants' experiences pointed to the use of personal creative writing as a communication strategy. Sara described her process and the form of her poetry writing as a creation inherently meant to be shared: "Even if, when if a poem's read it's on the page so just seeing the layout of it and the spacing you're conscious that you're creating art rather than just for yourself" (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 36-37). Along with connecting with others, reflecting upon and understanding others also was evident in the data. For example, Marcus described an interview he did with a book reviewer on radio after his novel was published. His book was set in the rural locale where Marcus grew up and presented people from his past in a sympathetic way, despite the fact that they did not treat him well:

[The reviewer] said I'm really surprised by your novel because it's a small town novel and it's about all these people who you say weren't very nice to you and it's a very tender novel and a very sensitive portrayal of these very small-town small-minded people. I would have expected that somebody clever bright witty and who had your experience to write something bitchy and why didn't you? And I said because I wasn't writing the book to criticize the people I grew up with. That would be easy. I was writing the book I think to understand them. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 267-273)

The process of writing was in part an exercise in empathizing with people who were antagonists in his life. This perspective, as Marcus put it, was one of taking another's perspective and understanding possible origins of behaviors. It seemed that the process of written expression gave a person a time and space to reflect. It



invited someone to understand, rather than to simply react out of pain or revenge. This was echoed by Cade who wrote rap music with his older brother. The process of writing together and reading how the other described a situation in their writing provided insight into the other's perspective: "A perspective of the way a family member experiences can be so different than how they lived it or how they see the world. It's totally different from the way *you* see the meaning" (Interview, May 5, 2005, lines 233-236). One reason that Sylvain said he wrote was because "we're all sort of struggling to understand one another. We're taught that our words have a meaning to them and there's a text and a script which we all understand but really we don't" (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 103-105). Writing was described as a way to make meaning and to extend understanding to others.

Connecting or reaching out to others was a major theme in the way that the participants described writing in their lives. It is interesting to note that their ability to write made it possible for the young writers to broaden their scope of relationships and communication beyond their immediate context. That is, as Naomi noted, the act of writing a thought, an idea, an experience created the potential for connection and the possibility that someone could read and benefit from one's written words. Sylvain described the act of writing in almost spiritual terms as a contribution to a collective recording of experience. Andrea described her life experiences as a catalyst to writing and as a catalyst for communicating with others: "I think in a way it's also given me something to write about to show the world, how each and every one of us has a story" (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 315-316).

### Learning, Teaching, Exploring Ideas and Taking Action

"I feel that I'm leaving a little moment of understanding" (Sylvain, February 4, 2005, line 151). Participants talked about their experiences of learning through their writing, as well as exploring ideas and using their writing as a way to teach others. For example, Sylvain described a goal of his writing as sharing his own experience so that others could learn from it. He described the movement in his writing practice from purely an emotional outlet for himself to a more altruistic goal of putting ideas out there that may be beneficial to others going through similar challenges: "But as I'm getting older instead of merely describing the feelings there and putting them eloquently or rhyming them I try to incorporate an example and a lesson (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 193-194).

For Brendan, who had a keen interest in science fiction and fantasy, a major inspiration for writing came from exploring the unknown and questions that could not be easily answered:

I actually have another motivational thing. Things that can't be answered by anyone. Like mysterious things like the universe. Like Donnie Darko — that movie — well I thought all that stuff before. But that movie itself it would be nice to actually be able to convey ideas about things that nobody has the answer to. So just the mysteries of the unknown is kind of an inspiration. I guess space, life, how we got here is an inspiration. Even though I don't really write about anything like that, but it makes me wonder and want to write about it. But I don't know how because I'm not intelligent about it. (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 294-300)

Not only was writing a way to postulate about and try to understand complex scientific questions, exploring ideas in uncharted territory gave Brendan a sense of ownership over the ideas: "Because I know no matter how crazy my ideas that I

write down if I ever do no one will ever be able to say 'that's not correct' because no one knows" (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 317-319).

In high school, one of Zenia's favorite books was Brave New World by Aldous Huxley. She described a book report that she wrote that compared and contrasted three different books of her choosing. She chose Brave New World, Orwell's 1984, and another book that on the surface did not seem to fit, but had a similar theme. She described the process of looking at discordant ideas and seeing commonalities amongst things that may not fit together on the surface. She also talked about how these works of science fiction "show the world in a totally different way but it's at the same time maybe it's like that now. It switches your thinking around. I like books that do that, that make you think in a totally roundabout way than you're used to thinking" (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 248-249). At the time of the interview, Zenia was a student at an art college; she described her art practice as integrally connected with her writing. She described her practice of using writing as a way to explore an idea in an iterative way: looking at the particular instance and then broadening out to the general and then back again. For example, Zenia described a project she was working on in which she was exploring stains:

I started doing research asking people: What do you think about stains? Just taking that and thinking about what is a stain how does it work how does it function in our society? And they're like what do you mean? The stain on my clothes? ... They don't really know what to say. Just tell me something about them? Most people would correspond it with something on their clothes so it's something you want to get rid of and you don't like it but it's there and you try and cover it up or you try and remove it. So that's like one part of it. Then I go from that what else can it be? What gives you stains? Or what can be stained? Your soul your mind your body your clothing. Just with that the writing helps you string things together or broaden them or make them smaller. (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 288-296)

Zenia described her writing practice as more process- than product-oriented — a way to explore multiple facets of a seemingly simple object, feeling, or idea.

Participants discussed expressing ideas and ideals that they felt strongly about in terms of social action or activism. For Bel, being a zine writer and working with other young women was where she developed her beliefs and became a feminist and activist: "I don't think I would be as interested in feminism if it weren't for zines (Online interview, April 2005, lines 120-121). For Andrea, writing was connected to environmental issues from a young age:

I remember writing about picking up all the trash in the park across the street from my house. I thought it was bad there was litter and in the summer time I'm going to do that all the time pick up trash everywhere. And that's what I did for a long time. I used to be the litter police. When I think about journaling that's probably my earliest journaling in the daybooks at school. (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 40-44)

Andrea continued her work in environmental issues into her adult life and worked as an environmental engineer. She described her writing for her job as one of the most rewarding aspects, even though it is not creative writing. She discussed that her early journaling contributed to the skills needed for the kind of documentation and writing she did in her job.

For Sylvain, writing practice was connected to activism. During his youth, he spent time living on the streets and lived in crisis shelters. In an urban shelter, he started writing poetry in his early teens. A friend who also lived there gave him a journal for writing. Sylvain brought this book with him to the interview, and said that every book he has ever used for his writing has been from someone who means something to him.

When we started our interview, we had something to eat at a coffee shop and then talked about the importance of whole foods and shopping for good food and nutrition. We noted that this is becoming less prevalent. There are more packaging and fast food corporations that dictate our poor health. We talked about the importance of buying whole ingredients, not prepackaged ready-to-eat foods, and how cooking for others and eating together was a community building and relationship building experience. We discussed community kitchens and the anti-poverty youth action organization with which he was involved. Years back in his home town, he volunteered with an organization that helped feed people on the streets:

I did volunteer work...I also did their graffiti stenciling as well all over the city. And uh we've had a few stencils we actually had a full page feature in the Calgary Sun where the police had photographed all of the stencils and the Sun had printed them on the big page saying like when you see this is what you're seeing don't be confused this isn't a tag this isn't some kid this is people trying to say look. And we go around to all the restaurants downtown get all of the stuff that they were going to throw away. Like their stock that was no longer servable and go down to the drop in centre cook it all up in a big pot and go down to the park and feed whoever was hungry. I actually had a poem I wrote about that. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 28-36)

During the interview, Sylvain spoke his poems to illustrate his points and said that he liked to share his poetry. This poem was the one he mentioned that he wrote about poverty and life on the streets:

If I can maintain my frame of sanity long enough  
 Then I'm certain things could progress beyond  
 the continued protest of my ego mind  
 A soul we are given but its worth is what we must search for  
 finding more misery becomes the mystery of our heart-felt pursuit of  
 happiness  
 we will start on this journey hands in our pockets  
 reaching for what there is to give

each time my finger clutches greedily a dime  
I stop turn and drop it from a lack thereof I profit  
for the man who will stoop to retrieve what I leave  
must truly have need. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 197-208)

We were sitting together at an outside table on a busy street. During the time we sat there, we had conversations with several people who were ostensibly street people. At one point, my scarf fell on the ground, and a man picked it up and gave it me; Sylvain gave him a muffin.

As participants discussed their experiences and life stories as writers, they also provided recommendations for making schools engaging and supportive. The next chapter presents findings regarding the young writers' experiences in relation to the school context. The writers described situations in which the school context supported them, and aspects of school that were unsupportive of them and represented barriers to their success.

## CHAPTER VI: RESULTS—THE WRITERS' WORDS ABOUT SCHOOL

One of my goals for this research was to inform educational practice. Due to the prevalence of school in young people's lives, much of the discussion during interviews focused upon participants' experiences in school, how the school setting or individuals in that setting were supportive or unsupportive, and what strategies or advice the participants had for making the school system a positive place for others like them. The participants were eager to discuss the topic of school, both in terms of positive and negative influences and aspects. School age people spend one-third of each day and two thirds of each year in school, so its impact was not surprising. This chapter addresses the third research question: What can teachers, researchers, and policy makers learn from the practices of these young people? Findings are presented in three sections: 1) supportive aspects of school; 2) unsupportive aspects of school; and 3) participants' recommendations for making school more supportive.

### **Supportive Aspects of School**

For participants, experiences of being supported in school revolved around a teacher who cared about, listened to, and recognized them as individuals. It is important to note that those participants who had a strong relationship with a caring teacher discussed the importance of those teachers being recognized for their work by the school or system. Supportive work done by teachers involved both classroom and content related work, such as creating assignments that allow students choice

in content or form of writing, as well as providing mentorship, counsel, and encouragement on a personal level.

One particular aspect of classroom activities that participants described as a positive influence on their writing was being assigned a poetry or other personal writing project. Often, the assignment was in high school — for example, grade 10 English for several participants — and involved writing poems entirely of their choice. Naomi described how the combination of learning a poetic form, like free verse or haiku, coupled with complete freedom on subject matter was motivating:

I just took a creative writing class last block and my creative writing teacher told us to try and write limericks and haikus and things like that. If you can't go with the examples I've given you just go your own way and use your own thoughts and come up with your own stuff. That was enough motivation right there. (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 345-348)

In addition, encouragement and honest, constructive criticism from teachers on such assignments emerged as important support mechanisms.

Supportive teachers — either on an interpersonal or practice-based level — were probably the most important support across participants. For example, Sara described her experience:

In terms of teachers, I guess everyone has had one good English teacher. And the good thing about high school is that you're trying to write academic — they every once in a while you get to write something like your opinion or perspective. So I remember writing a few of those which was nice. I wrote one in grade 10 about wanting to be a writer at that time. I don't remember what the assignment was but my teacher was really encouraging — "you must continue on...you should read the *Unbearable Lightness of Being*" not that what was it called? (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 177-183)



In Sara's case, the teacher regarded her as a fellow writer and not just a student, evident in the sharing of important books and collegial encouragement. Susan described the impact of supportive teachers in elementary school:

I actually just had a flash of being in grade five or six and anytime I had a teacher that really was supportive of the creative writing that's when it would happen. That's when it would flourish. I think that would go with everything. (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 201-203)

Marcus's experience with the teacher who provided emotional support as well as encouragement was a huge positive influence in his creative life:

A lot of the teachers had pet students that they took care of. Ellen took care of me. There was another woman, Fiona North, who um was this crazy hippy. She had a cottage on the island where she spent her summers. They'd smoke pot and she read lots of Freud and come to class and talk about it. And she would read Northrop Frye. She was really big into Northrop Frye and Joseph Campbell when I was there. She was constantly learning and constantly blown away by things. She would grab her hair in the middle of class when she was excited about something. Her mind was constantly being blown away by things. So there were very. I had very enthusiastic English teachers who were really interested in the kids and were really there to teach and they were very interested in language and books and ideas. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 171-181)

For Marcus, an important event involved the supportive teacher who listened to him and connected with him through sharing his poetry. While he did not identify the event as coming out, in retrospect he reflected that she was most likely the first person he told that he was gay through his writing:

[This teacher was] really instrumental in keeping me sane and productive and engaged in something. Recognizing. I was telling her for years that I was a homo before I told her which was great because she already knew. She could have easily been the first adult I told. I could have easily told her I think. But I just chose not to. But I felt that safe with her. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 220-224)

Further, teachers who provided a challenge to students and thus displayed a belief in their ability while nurturing their skills were considered to be particularly supportive.

The individual support that teachers provided often went along with structural factors, as Marcus explained:

I had a really fantastic English department in my high school. We had some of the best English teachers in the city. It's a little corner of the world and I happened to land in it. It was good for me. They had these advanced writing or advanced arts opportunities that you could meet after school or at lunchtime. One of them was a writing thing. If you were interested in writing you could go there and meet other kids who were interested in writing. The teachers would teach you again and give you advanced learning and so I did that. Not a lot. It didn't last very long but it was an extra opportunity to do things. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 171-180)

Similarly, Andrea described the supportive nature of her school as one where teachers had intellectual freedom to adapt the curriculum, and the school district had sufficient funding. For Zenia, attending her final year of high school in an alternative school was a formative event. She noted:

I finished grade 12 and then went on exchange for a year and I went to a school in Toronto that was an alternative school. The teaching methods were different and you were friends with the people (teachers) and they were really cool and you got to know each other and stuff. The learning environment was so different that I probably learned so much more in that year than in all my other years of high school. (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 110-114)

She emphasized that living away from home and being in a school environment where students were treated like people was a turning point.

A relationship with a caring teacher was described as necessary for encouraging a person in their creative writing and, moreover, in their positive social

adjustment and success at school. Marcus described the "Ellen Kinnon" effect; he argued that his teacher saved his life:

She had an amazing influence. Could recognize me for who I was. Supported that. [When that happened] I would excel. Yeah and you know with the writing, I had a good writing teacher, a good drama teacher. Even in academics I got support. I just felt like I was seen as an individual and that's what kids need. (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 373-377)

Susan echoed the importance of a caring teacher who recognized and encouraged creativity and expression. One of the first teachers in Susan's school career that exemplified this was in elementary school:

What helped for me was when a teacher would just take an interest with you and then support that. It's almost like I would work to please. I had a really good teacher in grade 4 — she was a puppeteer and that's what we did. We all made puppets and we put on a traveling show at one point. But the puppeteer that just created another world and I was just so in love with all that. And the teacher was so amazing. I just felt that's where my creativity was at that point. I would help with the sets and I just wanted to be really involved with that. (Interview, February 18, 2005, lines 361-369)

Susan described the activities in this teacher's classroom as engaging and encouraging of her creativity. She described her sense of involvement and investment creative activities such as building sets and working and collaboratively developing performances.

Zenia described herself as the kind of person who wanted to learn and wanted to be at school, so she got a lot out of her educational experience. She noted that school was more important for kids who may fall through the cracks, and that a caring teacher could prevent someone from falling through the cracks: "I was always kind of like friends with teachers. I remember one teacher my grade four teacher he was a writer and he was really cool" (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 214-

215). Zenia also described how the personal relationship with one teacher provided her with a sense of accountability to attend school:

Sometimes when I'd skip school I'd feel bad because I was friends with my teachers; "I should go to Jerry's class, Jerry would want to see me in class today." You call them by their first names you have relationships with them so it's a lot different than this person who's so far above you. I think that helps you learn a lot more and if you were having trouble the teachers really cared and wanted to figure out why. (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 121-125)

In sum, when a teacher demonstrated care and respect for a student, treating him or her like an individual with unique circumstances and needs, that teacher had a positive influence. This was exemplified by Marcus's teacher Ellen, who he described as unafraid to address the "uncomfortable" including the realities that students might be experiencing. She encouraged people to speak frankly and not to hold themselves back simply to maintain behaviour and expression deemed appropriate for school:

What was also really helpful about Ellen in our grade 10 class she had somebody blow up a condom and throw it around the room and we were all encouraged to bat it around and she was very much. She was a single Mom who had been a nun for a while and she had worked part time in a strip club working at the bar, so she was very colorful and we knew this about her. She was very formidable, she was very manly she spoke her mind she was really blunt. So all the rough kids got along with her fantastically because she spoke to them in a way that they really respected and she was not afraid to talk about uncomfortable things. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 351-358)

What seemed to be integral to the relationships described was the humanizing force of the teacher. That is, the institutional position of authority was not central to the identity of the teacher in these cases. Rather, the teacher presented him or herself as an individual, not as an extension of the institution, with feelings and concerns not unlike the young people.

### Unsupportive Aspects of School

Participants all described unsupportive aspects of school. Experiences of school as unsupportive related largely to the institutional nature of school, and how individual teachers often were instruments of the institution. Interestingly, while all participants discussed the issue critically, and many described negative incidents or experiences related to school, they largely chose to frame the critique in the form of recommendations for change, rather than focusing upon the negative. One of the most salient ideas raised was that of the damaging nature of social comparison inherent in the school structure and activities. Marcus explained that these structural factors were realized in the social actions of teachers and peer groups: "I think most people are and it's even more acute in high school because you're held up to such ridicule and criticism all the time. It's all comparison" (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 322-324).

Sylvain spoke about getting kicked out of school as an important event in his life as a writer:

But what school gave me was angst, something to write about. I got kicked out of my last high school, Bishop McNally, for writing a, not a limerick, but it had a bawdiness to it that would be called inappropriate and it was my ideas of why I chose to go to a Catholic School. I started in public school, got kicked out of a few of those. My stepfather was baptized, so I thought let's give it a shot. Catholic high school. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 548-553)

Not only was his writing one of the reasons for his expulsion from high school, but also his feeling of being outside and derided by school gave him inspiration and subject matter for his writing. Later, Sylvain ended up dropping out of another school at 16, and was, at the time of his interview, doing independent course work.

Sara, who experienced success at school and went on to university, also described an event at school that contributed to her desire for expression.

As one of the editors of the student newspaper, Sara decided to publish a satirical piece that did not show the popular "student council" kids and school spirit in a good light. As a result, the school administration closed down the paper. She explained:

The way the student government system worked [there was a] "Head Boy" and a "Head Girl." I edited [the paper] with another guy and girl. It was a small school and we knew the Head Boy and Girl before they'd been elected and we found them pretty inept for the most part ... [We had to prepare] ... editorials. The Head Girl, we got her to write something in her own words which was kind of incriminating. Not that she'd done anything wrong; it just showed her genuine lack of interest in the student body. We just asked her to write about what you think about. She did and it was ridiculous and of course she didn't want us to publish it. We did a few things that were a tiny bit controversial a tiny bit exciting. I look back on it now and it was pretty tame for the most part. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 199-211)

This event created in Sara a spark to write about provocative things that made people think about political issues.

For Cade, who did not perform well academically and was not a student valued by the teachers in his small town high school, trappings of his artistic life were vilified in school as "gangster culture," though there was little of this activity in his Prairie town of 500 residents:

I'd get in trouble from the teachers for wearing my headphones, writing or playing my music. I don't know music didn't have much space in school. I did my own thing. The teachers didn't seem to like this type of songs. I think the teachers don't really like it because of the image of the culture that it represents. It's like a different culture. It's our music pretty much. (Interview, May 5, 2005, lines 97-105)

As stated earlier, the role school played for Sylvain in terms of his writing was to create angst and thus give him something about which to write. He described school

as unsupportive and teachers as not listening. Even though Sylvain sought to communicate his situation and express his ability in school, his attempts were ignored. I asked him about how his writing was received:

Helen: Were you able to at any point able to form it so they would accept it. Did they ever accept any of your own styles?

Sylvain: No I was always told to follow the course work.

Helen: Did you bring it forth?

Sylvain: I was constantly writing, constantly leaving pages behind.  
(Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 563-570)

He summed it up by saying, "I was never given an avenue through school to do anything with my writing. Anything that has ever come of my writing has been entirely of my own volition through life" (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 576-577).

Out of these experiences, both of support and of lack of support, the participants put forth suggestions and recommendations for how school could be more supportive of all students. The next section presents a summary of these recommendations.

### **Participants' Recommendations for Making School More Supportive**

The recommendations that participants generated are organized into structural and individual factors. Structural factors included broad, systems level issues, as well as factors relating to the school organization. Participants recognized that individuals interact with structural factors, and that individual action may influence systems change from a "grassroots" level. For example, one teacher's practice may contribute to a curriculum change. When asked how he would teach and reorganize schools, Brendan responded: "Well, I'd want to do things that weren't

in the curriculum, things that people are interested in. Just more choices and more variety and things that can appeal to more people that might make them want to go" (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 554-555). He gave an example of an effective teacher in his school:

Like that one teacher we got to write essays on anything we wanted. We got to write a review on anything, any book. We could write a review on a restaurant even. A campsite or anything we wanted. And when it's something you're interested in or feel strongly about it comes more naturally and you learn better. I think if they put in more things that people actually like other than just boring, well in my opinion boring, then it would be a little better. Like in a history class, have a little more options about what people can study. (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 555-563)

Participants felt that teachers faced challenges in having to adhere to a rigid curriculum, and suggested that the school system must be more flexible to permit them to bring their own life experiences, and those of their students, into the classroom.

Andrea recommended a structural change in schools so that teachers have more freedom in the content and methods they use:

Let teachers have more control of the curriculum. A more general curriculum with goals at the outset like I think there's always something in the public school system for kids who learn differently. Maybe they need some help, more one on one. There were things like enrichment with kids who learned fast. They went to that to do special projects. Do their own thing and learn at their own pace. (Interview, February 20, 2005, lines 373-377)

Other recommendations on a structural level included the implementation of multi-age classrooms rather than grouping people because of year of birth. Zenia suggested that in the arts or work worlds, the most effective groupings include people from different generations that can share experiences. Bel reflected that



grade groupings were not the best way to approach learning. Further, she suggested writing projects should not be perfunctory exercises, but should be real creative production, such as what was experienced in artists' and writers' communities outside of school:

I think that approaching student writing positively is a good start. Perhaps instead of a student paper teachers could organize a zine-type of publication. Creative writing classes as an option are a must for Grades 8-12. It was only offered for grade 12s at my school. (Online interview, April 2005, lines 140-143)

An important recommendation on the individual level was for teachers to encourage, care, and challenge their students in their writing practice. Part of this included:

[The need to] encourage people to feel deeply and feel sad sometimes and work through that in writing is great. I don't think it should be marked assignments or anything. I always liked when they had ten minute writings even in a journal even if a teacher would never look at it. Even if you had 15 minutes a week in English class and have that for yourself. Look through that book after a time and look back at what you wrote and just have that for yourself it wouldn't have to be marked or looked at by anyone else. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 273-278)

Above all, the most salient recommendation was for teachers to encourage, care for, and listen to students. For example, Marcus made several recommendations about how schools could foster the Ellen Kinnon effect for other students. Moreover, the need to notice and understand difficulties students might be facing in their personal lives was highlighted.

Participants' ideas for school reform provide practical recommendations for the classroom. They also are powerful ideas to inform school policy in a broader sense. For example, participants suggested that providing choices and freedom in

writing assignments is vital to supporting expression and writing practice. In short, participants' recommendations involved reforming school to "deinstitutionalize it," as Brendan suggested: "There should be more alternatives though. It's so like really — I don't know the term — cut and dried" (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 549-550). Further, school boards should routinely include young people on advisory committees, not just those who are in school, but those who have dropped out, like Sylvain, or found a more positive climate in alternate schools, like Brendan and Zenia. The following guiding principles were generated from a thematic analysis of the recommendations suggested by the participants:

- 1) value the experiences of everyone, not just the "star" pupils;
- 2) value non-traditional, non-scholastic forms of expression and literacy practices;
- 3) engage teachers who value all students and appreciate diversity in ways of knowing;
- 4) empower teachers to be able to go outside the curriculum;
- 5) remove the artificiality of age divisions in terms of arts expression;
- 6) support teachers to connect with students through better funding, smaller class sizes, or new models of instruction; and
- 7) encourage young people to critique media and produce their own media.

A full list of the writers' recommendations, along with illustrative examples and strategies for implementation, is included in Appendix I.

## CHAPTER VII: DISCUSSION

This chapter contains a review of relevant findings related to the participants' experiences of writing and being writers, how they used writing in their lives, and their experiences in school and recommendations for improving education and making school supportive for all young people. This research explored how young people define and understand themselves in social contexts, and how being a writer contributes to their construction of identity. It also examined what young people write about, the forms their expressions take, how they interpret what they write, and what social, political, and interpersonal concerns shape their experiences and the written expressions of those experiences. The purpose of the present investigation was to explore the experiences of young adult writers who, by penning their own personal texts, engaged in unsanctioned literacy practice as identity work in the social, political, and cultural contexts of their lives.

In this chapter, I discuss the findings described in the three previous chapters. I explain the limitations of this research, and discuss implications for educational practice. Finally, I close by describing implications for future research.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Ten writers — six female and four male, between the ages of 17 – 30 years old — participated in in-depth interviews about their writing practice and experiences. Data was collected via semi-structured in-depth interviews with young writers. Participants' experiences of writing and of sharing creative expressions, as well as the impact of these activities on their lives, were examined. The interviews included discussions of recommendations for schools regarding how to be more

supportive and inclusive of young writers. Participants articulated recommendations that addressed structural and individual factors.

The findings concerned the participants' experiences as writers, and were organized around one general research question and three sub-questions. The general question was: From the perspective of the young writer, what is the experience of engaging in expression through independent or unsanctioned creative poetry and/or song-writing? The three sub-questions were as follows: In what ways do young people engage in writing practice? Why do young people write and how do they use writing in their lives? What can teachers, researchers, and policy makers learn from the practices of these young people? Writing was discussed most commonly in relation to the participants' experiences as writers and what writing had afforded them throughout their lives. The remainder of this section presents these findings as related to previous research.

#### Writing as a Site for Identity Construction

Writing as a means of constructing one's identity, or identifying with a group, emerged as a major theme in the discussions. Participants spoke of writing as a way to express that which is, in their own words, authentic in their lives. For example, Marcus stated, "So much of my writing life has been about the struggle for authenticity — feeling like a real valid person in the world. And it really comes out in my work, in my experience of my work" (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 111-113). The notion of authenticity has important pedagogical practice and policy implications. In the interviews, participants used the terms "authentic" and "authenticity" to describe that which was rooted in their experiences. I approached

authenticity as meaning "rooted in one's lived experience," and recognized that one's perspective of "authentic" might well draw on dominant ideologies or discourses.

Brodkey (1994) described her desire in her late teens to be associated with cultured literature as a struggle to leave her working class persona behind and take up a "middle class fiction where art transcends class" (p. 534). This perspective was shared by several of the older participants, and one of the younger male writers from a working class background. Brendan derided the "poser" aspect of wanting to be perceived as an artist and noted that some people seem to think that identifying as an artist excused them of being "rich and ignorant about life" (Group interview, May 4, 2005, line 301). Brendan argued that art needed to come from experience, and talked about the hypocrisy of a wealthy pop music artist who hailed from a privileged background yet claimed to identify with working-class experience through his music.

Further, the importance of expressing lived experiences in one's writing was seen as integral to one's integrity. This was illustrated by Brendan: "Like if you're writing about health and you've never had any family that's been sick. It's just not authentic. But with John who's sister's dying of cancer then it's more real" (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 292-293). This resonates with other studies of identity, including Pomerantz et al.'s (2004) exploration of skater girls known as the Park Gang. The Park Gang actively worked to resist the clone-like trendy girls who used their inability to skate to meet skater boys. The Park Gang took pride in being "alternative" (Pomerantz et al., 2004, p. 553). They took pride in making risky moves and "wiping out" to set themselves apart from the "Bun girl" femininity. The popular,

trendy girls in this study were called "bun girls" by the skater girls in reference to their standard hairstyle (pulled back in a bun). The skater girls positioning as skaters showed an awareness of inequality based on gender. This is consistent with the findings of my study in the participants' self-identification with writing as a strategy for articulating an identity that was "alternative" to that prescribed by the dominant discourse. This was reflected in Marcus's explanation of how his identity as a writer changed from elementary school to his current identity as a writer:

I think comparing myself to other people often discredits my own experience. But it's certainly a lot better I recognize it and it's certainly a lot better than it ever was. Which I think goes hand in hand with being more publicly recognized. (Interview, February 11, 2005, lines 157-159)

It is important to understand how young people use writing or art forms spontaneously grounded in the meaningful issues of their lives (Klingman & Shalev, 2001). The graffiti wall created by young people as a memorial to the assassinated Prime Minister Rabin was a spontaneous artistic and literacy-based expression of grief and political issues by young people. Similarly, unsanctioned writing, such as poetry and songwriting, was authentic to the writers in that it was not organized by authorities or well-meaning adults.

In fostering expression through writing, educators must take caution that young people's work remains their own. For example, tagging, spoken word or zine-making do not magically become "cool activities" because a teacher who believes she is "cool" imposes them as a school assignment. That would be akin to, as Sandra, one of the zine makers in Guzzetti and Gamboa's (2004) article, stated, "I think doing a zine in school would be like a cool band being played on MTV. You just

don't want it. It becomes safe. It becomes accepted, mainstreamed" (p. 408). Similarly, Brendan spoke of the importance of writing from a place of personal experience: "If you haven't lived it, it seems so processed. Like those boy bands. They don't write it. Like Back Street Boys and N'Sync, that I *don't* listen to" (Group interview, May 4, 2005, lines 270-271). Brendan made sure that he provided the disclaimer that he does not listen to boy bands.

Scholars contend that it is important to take a structural approach that critiques psychological developmental frameworks in understanding identity (Bucholtz, 2002; Bynner, 2005). The notion of agency provides some flexibility within structural constraints, and this is an important direction for research. In keeping with Bucholtz's (2002) view of identity as fluid and changing over time, the concept of agency is changeable across contexts and time. A future research direction would include further exploration of how young people adapt effectively to situations and engage in creative identity work. For those participants in my study who were not from advantaged, middle-class backgrounds, perhaps writing and creative expression represented a site of self-directedness and for building competency. Building upon young people's own practices may foster that competency so that they may carry into other aspects of their lives.

#### Writing is a Way to Release and Work through Emotions

Writing was discussed by all the participants in this study as an effective emotional outlet. This tended to take the form of stress release, or as a process of working through emotional issues or problems. Participants also described writing as a means of emotional release, or a way to positively deal with negative feelings. This

is congruent with Arnett's (1996) research on how young people used heavy metal music in their lives. For the young "metal heads," listening to heavy metal music was a cathartic experience.

Writing functioned for others as a "safe place" to retreat during difficult times. Brodkey (1994) described her view of herself at this time "as a little girl who leaves her mother's house to travel the neighborhood under the protective mantle of writing" (p. 528). The theme of writing as a safe place, a refuge, and a way to express ideas or oneself in a mediated context surfaced in my study as well. To Brodkey, writing provided a sort of freedom: a "passport" to neighbor's houses. It is also notable that this activity occurred outside of school "when the older children were at school" (p. 528). Similarly, for participants in my study, such as Cade, writing was an outlet in the absence of "having anyone to talk to" (Interview, May 5, 2005, line 149). Others pointed out that experiencing emotions was necessary to be able to write well.

In seeking to understand the links between early and later life adjustment, Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, and Tellegen (2004) concluded what might seem obvious. Having strong friendships, academic success, and not getting in trouble with the law during "adolescence" predicted having a good job and better relationships in later life. They shed light on the links between early competence and later life adjustment, but do not examine the subtleties and underlying issues. At the risk of taking a panacea approach, the results of the present study point to writing and creative expression as a forum for dealing with relationships: an outlet for emotions that may have a cathartic effect and reduce negative conduct. Further,



unsanctioned writing may be a bridge to academic success or recognition for those who might not be acknowledged as "the best students" in traditional academic realms like math or science (Blackburn, 2005; Egan-Robertson, 1998; Moje, 2000).

For some of the participants here, writing practice was described as being used explicitly as an emotional outlet or release, in fact, as a positive way of releasing anger. Hagan and Foster's (2003) ethnographic research found that young people with high degrees of negative emotionality, especially anger, are more likely to engage in aggressive behavior, which further contributes to distress, and that delinquency is related to depression in later adult life. Further, this research found that life after completing acts described as delinquent, is marked by emotional distress (Hagan & Foster, 2003). Indeed, Sylvain recounted his experiences on the street and engaging in frequent physical conflicts. He described his earlier writing as a way to displace the rage, and his recent writing as addressing broader issues:

For example, the best way to explain how it's changed is just to read a really old piece and a new piece. And a lot of my earlier poetry was merely blunt displaced rage because like both my hands have been broken in fist fights living in Calgary. I was always punished to the full extent of either the law or my parents. So I was taught that to lash out was just not possible and that you do that and you're just hurting yourself to hit somebody in anger. And so a lot of it came out in my writing instead. And so my writing is sort of hard to read from that age, so you'll have to bear with me a bit but this is a really old piece from 1999. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 163-170)

Sylvain described his writing as a catharsis, as well as a positive release and reflection avenue that included the ability of being able to communicate with others: "I used to punch walls, now I write on them" (Interview, February 4, 2005, line 171). It is important to encourage exploration of emotion through poetry and direct it to understanding issues of social inequity in a positive way. As Sylvain coped with

anger through poetry, at the same time he was able to communicate the larger issues to others in the service of social activism.

### Writing is a Context for Connecting with Others and Understanding Self

Results of one study on identity with young people showed that competent and well-adjusted individuals demonstrated higher levels of reflectivity, clear goals, and mature relationships (Blatt & Blass, as cited in Shulman et al., 2005). Results of my study indicated that writing and writing practice were ways of reaching out to others, communicating with others, connecting with others, and creating action to achieve social goals such as environmental activism. Further, writing was, for some participants, a way of working through difficult family relationships, and applying a reflective perspective on relationships. Findings of the present investigation indicate that writing was also characterized by the metaphor of an anchor: something that will always be there as a means to maintain sanity and personal integrity.

The importance of the quality of personal relationships in later life adjustment was prominent in the literature on the transition to adulthood (e.g., Arnett, 2000b; Roisman et al., 2004). In Arnett's (2000b) study on Generation X, happiness, especially salient among those from families of divorce or that had a lot of conflict, was tied to quality relationships in peer groups. For several of the participants in my study, writing was a way to cope with these types of conflicts — by giving an escape and a release of emotions — and a way for understanding relationship issues and why people behave the way they do in relationships. Marcus's discussion was particularly relevant to this theme. He suggested strategies for supporting young people to write and work through such issues. Many of the young adults in Arnett's

(2000b) study looked at their future optimistically in terms of relationships — ensuring that they would not go down the same path as parents in conflict-ridden marriages. Writing was a way to reflect upon and give perspective to relationship issues and approach these issues in a personal way.

Findings of the present investigation included descriptions of the influences of relationships with family, friends and peers, as well as with caring teachers on the participants and their writing. A relationship with a caring teacher was identified as being integral to providing support for expressing talent as a writer, and encouraging creativity. Moreover, a relationship with a caring teacher connected to the theme of writing to be heard and have a voice. For Marcus, it was the “Ellen Kinnon effect” that enabled a turning point in his life. By reaching out to Marcus through an interest in his writing, Ellen was able to provide emotional as well as creative support. Indeed, Noddings (1988) asserted that it is vital for teachers to approach their work with an ethic of caring; fostering quality relationships with and among students is a necessary foundation for education.

Findings of the present investigation relating to relationships and connecting with others are reflected in Guzzetti and Gamboa’s (2004) work with zine writers. Like the zinesters in Guzzetti and Gamboa’s study, Sara, Susan and Bel, all zine writers, described the peer support that came from engaging in collaborative writing practice in keeping with the intrinsic rewards for writing practice found in the zine study. These rewards included strengthening personal relationships, enjoyment, “staking a place in the world,” as well as expressing themselves, their views, and identities. As in Guzzetti and Gamboa’s study, the collaboration among members of

an affinity group was a powerful motivation and benefit. Defined by Gee (2001) in terms of a community of practice, affinity groups are based on common language and collaboration. This connected with Zenia's explanation of hanging around with all age groups early in her life, and how she saw this as connected with her writing practice:

If you can be with older people when you're younger you'll always be able to talk to anyone. Cuz I can have a conversation with a fifty year old or a four year old, it's just another person. It's not something like, "what could I talk to them about? They wouldn't be doing anything that I'd be doing." (Interview, May 19, 2005, lines 329-332)

These were people bound together by a common interest in art and creative pursuits. The group was held together by something beyond the normative reference point: "what people my age do." Writing and creative expression may be a force to bring people together and a means of fostering perspective taking and understanding others beyond one's own reference point. Writing and poetry may be a means of constructing, reconstructing, and recounting experiences and of documenting experiences. Further, writing was a form of expression that perhaps is a way that people "bring themselves out" or reach out to others (Blackburn, 2005; Moje, 2000).

In times of transition, an exploration of identities might be intensified. Kinney (1993) found that the transition from middle school to high school broadened the choices young people had in school for peer group affiliation. That is, middle school students who were considered "nerds" found peer group affiliation and a community of practice with other young people with similar interests. School-supported extra-curricular activities were found to foster community among young people in peer

groups. Communities of practice that young people develop through their unsanctioned writing practices may have a similar, and potential stronger effect, as they are not bound by the strictures of school; they do not start and end when “the bell rings.”

### Writing is a Context for Expression, Learning, Teaching and Action

Participants discussed their writing practice in terms of expressing ideas and ideals that they felt strongly about and were often related to activist projects in which they were engaged. Findings also related to participants' experiences of learning through their writing, as well as exploring ideas and using their writing as a way to teach others, sometimes related to social action. Another prevalent finding was that of writing to be listened to or to be heard. For example, the use of writing in school was used as a way to get a message across. Sometimes, this came from the desire to have a voice around a personal issue or need to be understood. In other cases, the use of writing was to express a belief or ideal.

Arnett, Ramos, and Jensen (2001) found that young adults were more likely to rely on the “ethic of autonomy” when making moral decisions or in defining their value system. Haidt, Koller, and Dias (1993) found similar results in Brazilian college students, but that their working class counterparts referred more often to the “ethic of community.” These findings potentially inform future research by providing a framework for examining the ethics expressed in participants' writings and discussion of their writings. The writers in my study discussed their politics and worldview in the interviews and noted these as an important source of subject matter for writing. Sylvain, who was both from a working class background and was at the

time of the interview living in a shelter and working a low-wage job, expressed the most community-referenced ethics during the interview and in his poetry. He expressed altruism, as well as collectivist values, when describing his previous work in community organizations and in his perspective on how he could contribute through engaging in this research:

That's what it's all about. But I'm glad that I came to sit with you guys tonight. I hope that everything said and experienced in this conversation will help to define what you're doing. Because what you're trying to search for is what we're all searching for. And it's what all of this is about. So hopefully if my search and my direction can help define that in some sort of day to day reference, then it'll help other people to do the same. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 489-493)

Like Duke's (2000) account of lower SES elementary schools and their under resourced position compared with affluent schools, particularly in terms of print materials, gang affiliated students in Moje's (2000) study were graduates of low SES elementary schools. They engaged in complex literacy practices despite the inequities of schooling, like the authors of the "Dusk to Dawn" wall, described by Sylvain. The print environment in the homeless youth drop in centre was likely not well funded. However, the young people there created their own print environment by creating a poetry and graffiti wall in the space. It is interesting to note that Sylvain also spoke about the second-hand book he was currently reading that he had found at the youth shelter. These two examples point to incredible resourcefulness.

Sparks and Grochowski (2002), in the discussion of the spoken word movement, described the process of making public one's writing or poetry as active engagement in constructing and defining oneself in the world. It was also a site for activism, and understanding others' perspectives. They concluded that "as a space

of possibility poetry slams also provide an educative venue where young people are both teaching each other about their life worlds and learning about spoken word as a form of poetry" (p. 13). Learning from young people who write and engage in spoken word and other literacy based performance is a vital step in informing school practice and policy through writers' strategies for school reform, and through learning how literacy practices can facilitate critical thinking, and connection to others. My study is one piece that contributes to understanding the venues for expression constructed by young people and how this functions in their lives.

Sara was the co-founder of a poetry zine with two other young women. I met her at the regular spoken word event that they put on with the release of each issue of the zine. She described the spoken word events as a place where anybody can say what they want, and be heard. She described the zine in similar terms:

If you look at our cover art...they were on the grotesque side because it's easier to do something like this than it is to do something that's well-crafted. [The title represents] ultimately the blank canvas you want on the grotesque side...a little distorted, a little outside mainstream. A zine is not anything that's every going to get up there or be a thing that a lot of people are going to see. You can have the liberty to do more what you want. (Interview 2, February 11, 2005, lines 285-291)

For Sara, and other participants, engaging in making their writing practice public in their own "non-mainstream" space provided a venue for freedom of expression, as well as the potential to get a message across.

### Writing in the Research Process: The Researcher's Reflections

This study foregrounds writing as an important social practice for the participants specifically, and for youth generally. Writing is also an important social

practice for the researcher. This section foregrounds my reflections relating to writing practice, as well as key events and literature that helped frame this project.

My first literature professor said that all writing is autobiography, especially fiction. This idea was spoken about by several of the young writers. Brendan talked about the advertisement on a billboard being part of the person who made it. Fivush (1998) discussed language as allowing children "to engage in a new form of interaction, joint reminiscing" (p. 483). This area of inquiry influenced my thinking, but because I came upon it too late in the research process, not my analysis, was the concept of joint reminiscing. The act of interviewing was one of joint reminiscing. The content and the subject of the interviews were interconnected. We were reminiscing about reminiscing, as writing was a documentation of the autobiographical project. The writers talked about their own writing practice as documenting their lives and themselves. Writing offered a venue for reflection that allowed the author to consider him or herself at a particular time, but also as an actor that will exist beyond that particular page. "In terms of autobiographical memory, it is through the process of discussing one's personal experiences with others that one comes to understand those experiences in new ways" (Fivush, 1998, p. 484).

Language is instrumental in autobiographical memory in that it allows a means of expressing memory, as well as a way to organize a framework for personal experiences. Fivush and Nelson (2004) explained that autobiographical memory implied being able to place the memory of a specific event on a specific point in the timeline of one's life. Autobiographical memory serves social and cultural



functions, just like art or poetry or literature. In my study, writers talked about relating to others through writing, evocative of creating a shared past with others. This fits with how language functions through autobiographical memory to facilitate intergenerational communication of history, "the bedrock of human culture" (Fivush & Nelson, 2004, p. 577). The participants in my study used poetry to do so, for example, one participant mentioned "I am writing my self." For him, the process of writing poetry encouraged the construction of identity by explicitly recording on paper his reconstructions, reflections on, and understanding of, events and feelings. For all of these writers, the process of writing was important than the final product.

During a local mental health film festival that was offered as a public and health professional education program, many of the films focused on acclaimed poets or artists or musicians who had struggled with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and other psychiatric conditions. Great pathos was engendered as the protagonist moved through the torture of illness and social ostracism to a state of artistic genius and almost deity like status. This type of complex and non-linear story was often made seamless and linear through film editing and production processes.

There was something depressing about the storylines presented in some of the films. In This Beggar's Description (Tétrault, 2005), the main character, Canadian poet Philip Tétrault, was struggling with alcoholism, lived sporadically on the street, and had a reduced life expectancy, but Leonard Cohen was his friend and rated his poetry as top notch. In another film The Devil and Daniel Johnson (Feuerzieg, 2005), the main character had also struggled with mental illness, but had become a legend in the alternative music scene, revered by industry and artist

alike. Not to denigrate his accomplishments and talents, nor do I mean to minimize the seriousness of his health issues and what that has meant in his personal life, but the storyline was a Cinderella inspired one. It made the reality for those without the possibility of being remembered in published verse or recording even more depressing.

Given that context, what I want to avoid here is presenting writing as what Sondergaard (2002) referred to as a fairy tale storyline that miraculously brings people out of problem spaces. "You're screwed up, but you're a poet" is not particularly useful as a means of engaging people in writing, or as a prescription to deal with one's depression. The participants with whom I spoke expressed themselves through writing. Some were considered accomplished writers. Some were published. Some hoped to be. Some wrote because it was helpful to them. Some saw it as part of a career path. For the participants writing was a verb, and not a noun; all identified the process or practice of writing as more important than the product. Authenticity and competency was fostered through the process of doing writing, not by the assessment of the product. Perhaps educators can learn from their stories and their concrete strategies for pedagogical practice and school reform.

The findings of my study also resonate with Brodkey's (1994) description of her early experiences of reading avidly. She raised a caution against defining literacy only in terms consumption and devoid of production. In schools, literacy programs are generally focused on reading to the exclusion of writing and creating one's own texts. What is it about the young writers I spoke with that helped them

make the leap from reading to writing? Was it a sense of self-direction? Were they encouraged at school? Encouragement and mentorship by a teacher were described as instrumental to successful writing practice by several participants. Susan and Sara both spoke about not writing as much, or as well, during their high school years, yet described a burgeoning or explosion of expression after leaving home. That is why it is particularly salient to study young people, away from school, and discuss what they have done independently during school and after school in the adult world. This allows for a point of comparison of the two contexts.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study relied upon the recollections of the participants and their descriptions of experiences across time. While my method was informed by the literature on narrative and autobiographical memory (Fivush, 1998; Fivush & Nelson, 2004), the design did not account for this in a systematic way. I asked participants about their early writing experiences, and how those had influenced their current writing practice; however, in the analysis, I did not adequately account for the interview itself being a collaborative act of recollection.

Another limitation of this study resulted from participant selection. The challenges experienced recruiting students in schools necessitated a back-up plan. This involved various recruiting strategies, such as visiting community centres and word of mouth through personal contacts. As a result, the participants were a diverse group: they ranged in age, lived in various provinces, and engaged in different schooled and unschooled contexts. This diversity also contributed to the richness of the data, yet it limited my ability to focus the study upon how

unsanctioned writing works within the school system. Because the participants were different ages, some had more years of writing experience to draw on, as well as a longer frame of reference for retrospection. This was not adequately accounted for in the analysis. In addition, various factors impacted my ability to present participants with findings and ask them to provide feedback.

The intent of this research was to be exploratory in nature, providing rich descriptions of the young writers' experiences. Guided by what findings of the present investigation revealed, future research could include further analyses based on various theoretical perspectives. For example, this could include an analysis such as that undertaken by Gee et al. (2001) who looked at how social class was manifest in language by engaging in in-depth interviews and discourse analysis with youth. Young people from different social classes used different styles of language based on the realities of their lives and the ways they understood the world. Another direction may be to pursue a systematic discourse analysis of transcripts to provide snapshots of the writers' language use during the interviews. This form of analysis would have provided additional depth. Additionally, a grounded and systematic textual analysis of the writers' works, the artifacts collected for discussion but not as data, would have provided additional insight.

### **Implications for Educational Practice**

Teachers, researchers, and policy makers can learn from the practices of these young people. Implications for educational practice flowed from the participants' recommendations, the findings of this study, and related literature. Implications for educational practice are presented in the following passages.

There is a need to look at alternate, unsanctioned practices, value their sophistication and find ways to engage and support all students. According to Aguilar (2000), "Not all students have access to the acquisition of academically valued literacy practices, which grants membership into an academic community" (p. 8). In fact, a person who engages in unsanctioned practice while refusing to engage in sanctioned practice may be expressing resistance. Certainly, my findings reflected this in the experiences of several of the writers who were "punished" for producing inflammatory or inappropriate writing in school. The implication follows that a teacher cannot assess literacy competency out of context. Aguilar (2000) also noted that in order to be a place where literacy is effectively acquired, schools must recognize the centrality of identity and affiliation, and offer multiple methods to tap into literacy practices, abilities, talents and accomplishments.

Connecting young people's own writing to the curriculum allows for some measure of authenticity in school and moves toward situated practice (Lather, 1991), which is engaging and empowering. Appropriating young people's forms of expression and turning them into classroom assignments minimizes the authenticity of the form. However, one strategy may be to actually use students' own writing as texts in the classroom. For example, one could teach writing by using students' poems, in addition to published texts, to demonstrate literary techniques, or as discussion starters about social justice or ethical issues. This practice encourages students to tell their own stories, shows the talents of those who might not be the traditional academic success stories, gives insight into young people's lives, and encourages literacy in terms of construction of texts in addition to reading others'

writing. Just as literature and creative writing professors often speak the old chestnut, "Reading extensively is excellent training for being a good writer," literacy experts espouse writing as excellent training for being a critical reader (Brodkey, 1994).

It is important for education to extend beyond the school to include family and other relationships in the community. Collaborative practice with multi-age groups, including different levels of experience, allows for informal mentorship and building community and competency through writing practice. For example, this study indirectly brought young writers together with more established writers, through informal networking (i.e., participants sharing collaborative writing opportunities via the researcher). This represents a potential for mentorship, as well as sharing skills and cross-promotion of arts-based or activist projects. Making school a site for inclusion may create opportunities for fostering community through arts practice.

School should be a site for the development of an understanding of social processes, a critique of those processes, and engagement of young people in social justice projects. Gee et al. (2001) highlighted the current state of school reform, which is focused upon math and science, when it should be focused upon social justice in a time when the gap between rich and poor is widening. Schools should not be a site of competition, but rather should work to cultivate humanity and democracy (Kelly, 2003). Encouraging and recognizing the authentic value of students' unsanctioned writing may provide insights for educators in grass roots strategies to achieve this, as well as providing a venue for all, not just the privileged, to be heard and to be successful.

To that end, teachers should familiarize themselves with zines and other independent literacy practices and use them as texts in the classroom. Like the zine makers in Guzzetti and Gamboa's (2004) study, the participants in my study also suggested that teachers be receptive to the writing practices — such as zines and spoken word — of students, and allow for freedom of expression and form in writing assignments. It is especially important for teachers to encourage young people to write about their own lived experiences:

If teachers become aware of who their students really are, what motivates them to read and write, and learn how adolescents develop, practice and refine their literacies outside of school, educators will be better equipped to connect those out-of-school literacy practices to the work students do in school. (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004, p. 411)

This resonates with the findings from my study. For example, Marcus spoke about the "Ellen Kinnon" effect in which his teacher engaged in discussion and a relationship around his independent writing practice, becoming a mentor to him and contributing to his remaining connected to school.

For the participants in my study, language was a major part of how they constructed and represented their identities. Findings emphasized that writing practices functioned as a site for discussion, reflection and communication of social justice issues. This underlines the importance of teaching and encouraging students to critically examine texts, and to explore their identities in writing, reading, and discussion activities. It is a responsibility of educators to pick up on young people's practices and try to reengage students in school who are disadvantaged in terms of semiotic capital. Holding up their work in the classroom and studying it as a text is

one individual, classroom based strategy that can be taken up by teachers immediately.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This research indicates several follow-up studies that may extend or translate the findings. Foremost, the insight into the participants' writing experiences and writing practice has provided direction for further in-depth investigation on specific forms and content of writing practices and their interconnections. For example, a follow-up study may explore spoken word practice specifically. In addition, exploration of gender, class, and ethnic identities in relation to writing practice represents an important extension to this research.

Further investigation of and with teachers who engage in critical and social justice pedagogy in the context of unsanctioned literacy practices may shed light on practical strategies and best practice models. This type of investigation may include documenting and evaluating what teachers and educators are doing formally (e.g., adapting curriculum) and informally (e.g., mentorship and relationships with students). This type of research may provide strategies and best practices for educators to adapt and incorporate into their own practice.

Aguilar (2000) argued that it is difficult to study unsanctioned literacy practices in schools, but rather it is important to study these practices in the communities and lives of the young people. Understanding young people's communities of practice in zine making, and other collaborative arts and writing projects, such as bands and spoken word collectives, may provide models to adapt in schools. It is important not only to value the texts that young people produce, but



also the innovative collaborations in which they engage. Further, researchers should actively engage young people in action research projects and support them to construct research questions that could ultimately inform educational policy and practice. Student-driven, collaborative research has potential for promoting their art and writing, creating a space for social action and activism around students' priorities, and building capacity and interest in research for young people.

During the interviews, participants occasionally made comments on the process or method. Themes that emerged across the interviews included participants' relating to similar experiences as the researcher, such as experiences at school or in writing activities. A sense of potential surfaced around contributing to educational practice by virtue participation in this type of research project. For example, Sylvain said that his writing had made his life different and that "those feelings are becoming more and more important to me each day and the reasons to share them. The reason for deciding to tear your number off the page" (Interview, February 4, 2005, line 221). At the end of our discussion, I expressed my respect for Sylvain, his writing practice and his desire to contribute:

Sylvain: I'm glad you're doing what you're doing. And it makes me that much happier to be doing what I'm doing.

Helen: I really appreciate it. I enjoyed spending this time and I learned a lot.

Sylvain: You made it enjoyable.

Helen: ...I really learned a lot from your work and I appreciate it.

Sylvain: That was my hope so I'm glad to be part of it. (Interview, February 4, 2005, lines 708-718)

Sylvain's approbation was gratifying, but what it really foregrounded for me was the importance of engaging people in research related to their lived experiences. As with writing practice, it is through the process of engagement in, and not the product of, research that meaning is co-constructed.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Ethics Approval Certificate



If you decide to participate, we will ask you to provide us with the names of two or more language arts or writing teachers who would be willing to invite us in to their classroom to discuss the project with their students.

Students who have parental/guardian consent and who wish to participate in this project, will be asked to participate in two individual interviews and will have the opportunity to participate in a group discussion. In addition, they will be asked to share samples of their poetry or songs with the researcher. Each interview will take approximately one hour during regular class-time and responses will be audio-taped. The group discussion will take approximately one to one to two hours. We will work with teachers to make sure he or she does not miss out on any important work. In addition, participating students will be invited to contribute their writing to a collection of students' poetry/songs.

In the next few days, Ms. Helen Novak Lauscher will be contacting you to see if you are interested in participating. At that time, she can also answer any questions that you may have. Also, we would be more than happy to come and talk to staff members at your school about the project prior to a decision being made.

Thank you in advance for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Kim Schonert-Reichl, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor

Helen Novak Lauscher, M.A.  
Doctoral Candidate

## Appendix F: Interview Questions

### Poet Project Interview Process

Thanks for taking part. Your voice will contribute to informing educators about the importance of self-expression, creativity and valuing the expressions and sophisticated language practices of adolescents that might not be valued within the school system.

Particularly interested in the independent or unsanctioned writing young people do – what they express, etc. and what schools and educators can learn and incorporate into school to better support all kids.

Also, what's emerged is that this project may be an impetus for some of the youth towards supporting their writing. E.g., participation in a 'zine or other compilation that recognizes their work and starts a networking process – getting young writers in touch with more experienced writers for mentorship, connections, etc. E.g., Bleach Mag and one youth I interviewed.

This session will be an open conversation about your experiences of writing as an adolescent and now. Feel free to take it where you want it to go and also to not answer any question you don't want to answer or feel uncomfortable with. Feel free to illustrate your points with excerpts of your writing, etc.

Any questions before we start.

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1. Tell me a little about yourself – whatever you're comfortable with. E.g., your connection to writing through your life to now.
2. When did you start writing? Why did you start? Why did you write? What did you write about back then? What kind of things did you express with your writing?
3. What was your experience of writing or being a writer during adolescence at that age?
4. What would you say writing did for you at that time? What was at the core of why you wrote?
5. What was your process?
6. Did you do any writing at school or within school sanctioned activities? Did you see all of your writing experiences as connected? E.g., your writing for school and your independent writing?
7. Was there any support for your writing in school? Describe. If not, why do you think not?

8. Did you know others who wrote? What was your peer community? Was there a particular person who you saw as a mentor?
  9. Was there a particular piece that defined or represented who you were at that age? What was it about? Would you like to share it?
  10. Did being a writer affect who you are today? In what ways?
  11. What's your experience with writing now?
  12. Why do you write now? What part does writing play in your life now?
  13. Do you have any suggestions for how schools could support young writers?
  14. Anything else you'd like to add?
- 

Would you be interested in being contacted to take part in a focus group discussion with other participants in the project? As the project has emerged, this could be a way to bring young writers together with more experienced writers –

Possible contribution to a collective publication or 'zine that comes out of the project. I see this as a way to use this project as an opportunity to support young writers to develop their writing and make connections. Contact info?

Build into the process the ability for participants to verify findings, and to receive a copy of the final report, be invited to an interactive presentation of the collective work.

Thanks for your time.

## Appendix G: List of Initial Codes from Open-coding of Transcripts

1. A way of getting feedback on oneself
2. A way of reducing isolation
3. Act of writing gives insight into self - self-reflection
4. Adolescent poetry seen as corny
5. Always felt like an outsider (identity)
6. Art as communication of ideas and beliefs
7. Art takes something from the environment
8. Assertion of self and place in life
9. Authenticity can be harmed if you judge your own work on others' terms – schools do this
10. Authenticity of one's experiences - hard times
11. Brings cohesiveness to life and self
12. Brought writing to school in an inappropriate way
13. building identity through act of writing
14. centre self in writing (write my life)
15. Clear way of expressing ideas
16. comfort of introspection
17. Communicating with others, reaching out, relating
18. Communication - Writing your story to show the world
19. Communication is two way and complex
20. Community of writers – relating to other writers
21. Community of writers – relating to others (Dusk to Dawn)

22. Connected to each other through writing (peer connection)
23. Connection of writing to music
24. Connection of writing to reading
25. Connection with friend who supported writing and encouraged her to write through hard times
26. Connection with friends – close friend put a book together to support her writing and framed poem
27. Connection with good teachers
28. Connection with other forms of expression/art
29. Connection with peers – friend gave him book
30. Connection with peers – wrote comic book with friend (about family life)
31. Connection with teacher – early grade – puppeteer teacher – creating another world
32. Content – dark themes
33. Content – relationships and friends
34. Content – wrote observations of relationships
35. Content – wrote stuff that was going on in my head and sphere of influence (16)
36. Content of poem – metaphor of ballerina marionette being controlled (early teens)
37. Content of writing – more personal issues as older adolescent
38. Content of writing – wrote about environment, weather – attuned to nature
39. Content of writing (feelings)
40. content of writing (love, sadness, issues, personal)

41. Content of writing went with experimentation with drugs
42. Context affects creativity
43. Contradiction – authenticity comes with the downside of exposure
44. Cooking, eating and sharing analogy to writing
45. creativity is enjoyable
46. Culture does not support creativity
47. dealing with relationship issues
48. Development as a writer - as older go beyond feelings to examples
49. development as a writer - changes over time
50. Development as a writer – evolved
51. Development as a writer - started at 13 with poetry
52. Development as a writer – wrote more in late adolescence – after left home
53. Development as writer - started at 11 with love poems/crushes
54. Development as writer – started in crisis shelter
55. Development of writer – Mom was creative
56. Development of writer "rewriting the self" from adolescent corniness
57. Discourse on metaphysics of writing
58. Divided self – normal vs. the creative
59. Doesn't self-identify as writer per se – poet
60. Drawing as a way to depict inner mental state
61. early 20's – time for investigating different venues for expression
62. Early writing experiences
63. Element of judging of work

64. empower kids to build skills
65. empower kids to express themselves
66. Encouragement in school important
67. Enjoyment through writing
68. Excitement and passion
69. Experiences as inspiration
70. exploring ideas through writing
71. Expression as social activism
72. Expression is a natural thing
73. expression of self and identity
74. extreme emotions block writing
75. Family relationships – Aunt was teacher – important to change education system
76. Family relationships in poetry
77. Feeling exposed but seen
78. finding and expressing a path
79. Form - self-published books
80. Form of expression – hip hop – media influence
81. Form of expression – spoken word, rhyme and cadence
82. Form of writing – journaling
83. Form of writing – screen plays
84. Form of writing – screen plays and drama exercises
85. Forms – combination of visual and words
86. Gifted program – specialized but created some isolation

87. Having someone read my poems was a salvation
88. Helped deal with issues at home
89. Home life influenced behaviour
90. Home life tumultuous
91. How I use writing
92. Identification with Canadian Culture
93. Identified as expressive person, entertainer
94. Identity – defined self as artsy
95. Identity – defined self as smart kid
96. Identity as a writer – always a strong point in my character
97. identity as a writer – culture and cool
98. Identity as writer – admired Robertson Davies – clippings of articles
99. Importance of reading as a way of learning writing
100. important for teachers to value people's ideas
101. Inspiration from media and other writers (Aldous Huxley, Doors)
102. Inspiration from reading throughout life
103. Inspired by other writers (Plath, Sexton)
104. Institution - school makes isolation more acute as it emphasizes social comparison
105. Learning confidence and self-esteem
106. Learning to write – process
107. Life was duplicitous – closeted homosexual
108. Living in world of words might have hindered social development



109. Making your own thing
110. means of connecting with peers and community
111. Means of imparting knowledge and understanding
112. Means of taking ownership of ideas
113. Media as inspiration
114. Media connection – content of writing fantasy
115. Media influence - media can write you if you're not careful
116. Media influence – negative – contributes to blue print
117. Metaphysical discussion of writing
118. Metaphysical discussion of writing - ephemeral, symbolic
119. Method – act of discussion is a mutual learning
120. Method - sees project as a way of contributing and helping others
121. Method code – talking about cookie and sharing ideas
122. Method Positive view of project and connection
123. Mood effects creativity
124. Opportunities to be listened to
125. Other forms of expression
126. Other forms of expression - music was a break from writing
127. Other writers as inspiration
128. outlet and awareness for political issues
129. Outlet for personal issues and angst
130. People all have potential for observation
131. Perseverance needed to pursue writing for a living

132. Poetry as a clear way of expressing ideas
133. Positive feedback and reinforcement for writing in school
134. Positive feedback and reinforcement for writing in school - Grade 10 poetry assignment)
135. Process – culmination and explosion
136. Process – don't have a lot of control – it overtook me
137. Process – fits and starts
138. Process – just doing it is important
139. Process – reworking until perfect
140. process of creating
141. Process of writing – one page per piece
142. Process of writing - spontaneous and fast
143. Reading – young adult novels
144. Reading and writing both safe spaces
145. Reading as a place to find self
146. Reading as an escape
147. Reading as an outlet
148. Reading as part of expression
149. Reading is a way of coping with personal issues and self-development
150. Reading is part of process
151. Reading lyrics - can see the perspective of the writer "somebody was going through that"
152. Reading one's writing gives insight into self - self-reflection

153. Reading/writing as respite, escape
154. Recognition of layers of understanding and multiple interpretations
155. Recording thoughts and experiences
156. Reflecting back – described writing as full of melodrama
157. Reflecting back – surprised not more evidence of family problems
158. Relationships – connecting with other artists, musicians
159. Relationships and family
160. Relationships and family – people give me books to write in
161. Resilience required to write and keep going
162. Revel in the fact that people can relate to one's writing
163. School – can write academically
164. School – forum for different types of expression
165. School - involved in creative writing
166. School - kicked out for writing
167. School encouraged writing
168. School gave me angst and something to write about
169. School not supportive
170. School not supportive
171. School supported kids who write to get together and share experiences
172. School supported skills and organic processes
173. School system as supportive
174. School system as supportive - encouraged life long learning
175. School system as supportive because it was progressive, holistic, inclusive

176. School not accepting of writing
177. Self as writer – fueled by competitiveness
178. Self identity – invented a genre
179. Self- rewriting self by adding personal touches to own published book cover
180. Self-critique of early writing (angst)
181. Self-motivation to write
182. Self-recognition
183. self-reflection
184. Self-reflection – fear of hubris in own writing
185. Self-reflection and self-understanding
186. Self-taught
187. sharing and critique of writing
188. Sharing writing – publish online
189. Silence equals death
190. Social comparison can inspire but it is tormenting
191. Strategies for schools – chapbooks
192. Strategies for schools – deinstitutionalization - expressing things that aren't  
"appropriate" in school
193. Strategies for schools - deinstitutionalization – mixed age groups
194. Strategies for schools - deinstitutionalization – teacher reached "rough kids"
195. Strategies for schools – get away from blueprint schools
196. Strategies for schools – give kids focus for energy and create a physical thing  
that is yours

197. Strategies for schools – systems approach – teachers should have more control of curriculum
198. Strategies for schools - value different learning styles and ways of expression
199. strategies for schools to support writing
200. Strategies for schools to support writing – take an interest and support kids
201. Strategy for school – important to let kids go at it
202. Strategy to capture the creativity that we express as children
203. Structure and peer groups at school not supportive
204. Structure of school worked as allowed one to go from one activity to another in periods
205. Supportive English department with enthusiastic talented teachers
206. Supportive teacher inspired people to come up with own ideas and valued their experience
207. Supportive teachers were impetus for writing
208. supportive teachers, mentors, adults
209. take writing very seriously
210. Teacher as mentor
211. Teacher as personal connection
212. Teacher as positive influence – recognition of self
213. Teacher encouraged imagination
214. teacher encouraged to write a lot and make it make sense
215. Teacher encouraged writing
216. Teacher kept him engaged and sane – safety

- 217. Teacher saved my life
- 218. Teacher -student relationship as reciprocal
- 219. Teacher -student relationship as reciprocal
- 220. Teachers as life long learners – learn from kids
- 221. Teachers encouraged kids to express ideas and think critically
- 222. teachers need to understand social problems kids might have that interfere with learning
- 223. teachers should challenge students to explore their ideas
- 224. Teachers supported kids to open up, develop own voice
- 225. Tough teachers who support writing process
- 226. Trying to be normal
- 227. Trying to process my life
- 228. using media as a model (e.g., Joe's rant)
- 229. Venue for writing in school – described as fortunate
- 230. Way of defining own experience as authentic
- 231. ways of dissemination, distribution and sharing
- 232. working out issues through writing
- 233. Worried about others' evaluation of himself
- 234. Write for remembrance
- 235. Writing about family relationships
- 236. Writing about mental states
- 237. Writing and one teacher were the place he could be authentic
- 238. Writing as a conduit amongst one's different identities (as seen by others)

239. Writing as a goal
240. writing as a learning experience
241. Writing as a means of communication
242. Writing as a means of self-understanding
243. Writing as a part of self
244. Writing as a positive force in one's life
245. writing as a process
246. Writing as a process of figuring myself out
247. Writing as a release for anger
248. Writing as a response to the environment
249. Writing as a safe place to reveal and hide at the same time
250. Writing as a venue to state opinion and self
251. Writing as a very personal thing
252. Writing as a way of achieving accolades, recognition
253. Writing as a way of being recognized for self
254. Writing as a way of being understood
255. Writing as a way of bringing attention to issue – opening people's eyes
256. Writing as a way of connecting with others
257. Writing as a way of connecting with others
258. Writing as a way of documenting and remembering
259. Writing as a way of explaining one's self
260. Writing as a way of finding community and safe place
261. Writing as a way of making a contribution

- 262. Writing as a way of piecing together fragments of self
- 263. Writing as a way of reading situations and relationships
- 264. Writing as a way of reducing isolation
- 265. Writing as a way of understanding others
- 266. Writing as a way of understanding relationships
- 267. Writing as a way to be recognized
- 268. Writing as a way to deal with stress
- 269. Writing as a way to express talent
- 270. Writing as a way to initiate reciprocal communication – reaching others
- 271. Writing as a way to prove self-authenticity and worth
- 272. Writing as a way to record and conceal the personal
- 273. Writing as a way to take ownership of experience
- 274. Writing as a way to take ownership of expression
- 275. Writing as admission, confession, self-revelation, self-awareness
- 276. Writing as an act of self
- 277. Writing as an activity – something to do
- 278. Writing as an expression of joy
- 279. Writing as an expression of self
- 280. Writing as an expression of surroundings
- 281. Writing as an outlet for anger and rage – sublimation
- 282. Writing as an outlet for emotions
- 283. Writing as an outlet for feelings – suicide attempt
- 284. Writing as an outlet for talent



285. Writing as an outlet for violence and aggression toward others (parents)
286. Writing as communication
287. Writing as communication of an idea, a feeling, a political culture, identity
288. Writing as communication of an idea, a feeling, a political culture, identity
289. Writing as communication of ideas
290. Writing as communication with outside world (mailed chapbooks to writers)
291. Writing as exposure of self
292. Writing as means of building self and other understanding
293. writing as means of finding control and power
294. Writing as memory
295. Writing as part of self
296. Writing as personal growth
297. Writing as private – could disguise self on outside – slipped writing in to class presentation on authors
298. Writing as safe place to express difference
299. Writing as salvation
300. Writing as self-awareness
301. Writing as social activism
302. Writing as social activism - environmental concerns
303. Writing as way of teaching by example
304. Writing as way of understanding others (perspective taking)
305. Writing can be displaced, misunderstood, out of context
306. Writing gave me space to express self

307. Writing helped get through storm
308. Writing helped me survive feelings of isolation and define self
309. Writing in school
310. Writing in school – essays and editorials, way of making a point
311. Writing is a means of empowerment
312. writing is different through different ages of life
313. Writing is hard
314. Writing is hard – people need a challenge
315. Writing is hard work
316. Writing kept me stable
317. Writing my existence into the world
318. Writing myself into existence
319. Writing occurred in conjunction with "unblocking"
320. Writing process – a filter system
321. Writing represents hope and a way to rise above
322. Writing through life – always felt connected to it
323. Writing through life – considers self lucky to have job that incorporates this  
kind of communication
324. Writing through life – job includes writing
325. Writing through life – massive buildup to 21-22 when expression came out
326. Writing through life – personal journals 10-11
327. Writing through life – poetry began at 13-14
328. Writing throughout life

- 329. Writing throughout life – daybooks started in kindergarten
- 330. Writing throughout life – early 20s was when could really express self
- 331. Writing throughout life – started 10-11 with diary
- 332. Writing to entertain
- 333. Writing to give back – activism
- 334. writing was accessible form of expression (cheap, private)
- 335. Wrote about anger, suicide
- 336. Zines as a form of writing

## Appendix H: Coding Categories, Themes and Illustrative Examples

<b>Coding Categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Illustrative finding</b>	<b>Ref.</b>
Definition of Situation	Development of self and identity through writing	It was a big part of what I was doing in high school was sort of writing myself into existence or writing my existence into the world. Both I guess, not or but and. And it's carried.	Marcus 11/02/05 lines 286-88
Definition of Situation	Communicating and connecting with others with writing	That was the whole point of doing it. That's why I started making those little books. Out of the desperate need to connect.	Susan 11/02/05 lines 143-45
Definition of Situation	Creative expression helped me understand others	And I said because I wasn't writing the book to criticize the people I grew up with. That would be easy. I was writing the book I think to understand them.	Marcus 11/02/05 lines 272-74
Definition of Situation	Writing as an emotional outlet, release, working out feelings	It was a way to release stress in our family. Not everybody could always talk to each other and let their emotions out.	Cade 05/05/05 lines 22-23
Definition of Situation	Writing as a response to the environment	what school gave me was angst, something to write about	Sylvain 04/02/05 lines 548-49
Definition of Situation	Self-reflection through writing	I can write down my own person have my own conversation. It sounds stupid (laughs) I can talk to myself and understand myself better than other people can I think.	Cade 05/05/05 lines 150-52
Definition of Situation	Writing fostered recognition, actualization, assertion of self, authenticity	[this teacher] had a huge influence just being able to share my something that was very precious to me and very intimate and very self-revelatory and be encouraged and appreciated and understood.	Marcus 11/02/05 lines 207-09
Definition of Situation	Writing as a way to be heard, understood, listened to	And I often in a conversation will just blurt out a line from one of my poems and that's how I express myself period. To the world to people. The words that I use have very personal meaning to me. I don't say that something is what it is because the person will know what I'm talking about. I say what it is and hopefully they'll understand me, what it is to me.	Sylvain 04/02/05 lines 85-89

<b>Coding Categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Illustrative finding</b>	<b>Ref.</b>
Definition of Situation	Writing for enjoyment, and as an activity	It gave me an outlet I really needed. It gave me something to do because there wasn't a lot to do	Marcus 11/02/05 lines 247-48
Definition of Situation	Writing as a way to express talent, creativity	I had to put my creative life somewhere and I couldn't put it on the street so I put it down on paper.	Marcus 11/02/05 lines 58-59
Definition of Situation	Writing to express ideals or for social action, activism	I remember writing about picking up all the trash in the park across the street from my house. I thought it was bad there was litter and in the summer time I'm going to do that all the time pick up trash everywhere. And that's what I did for a long time. Not on a consistent basis I haven't done it for a long time	Andrea 20/02/05 lines 40-44
Definition of Situation	Learning, teaching, exploring ideas through writing	So just the mysteries of the unknown is kind of an inspiration. I guess space, life, how we got here is an inspiration. Even though I don't really write about anything like that, but it makes me wonder and want to write about it.	Brendan 04/05/05 lines 296-99
Definition of Situation	Safe Place, Hiding place, escape	When I did write 'zines it was a great outlet for me. I started out using a pseudonym which made it a bit easier in terms of expressing opinions and what not—it was sort of a bit of a shield.	Bel online lines 35-37
Definition of Situation	Remembrance, documentation	I sort of rely on my writing to remember myself to know who I am	Sylvain 04/02/05 lines 112-12
Activity	What I write about	I'm writing about what I feel. I write at a million miles an hour. I don't have neat writing because my thoughts are not neat.	Sylvain 04/02/05 lines 118-19
Activity	Other activities related to writing	Well when I'm reading I get inspired to write. I'll see bits of text or a word that's really beautiful. And I'd say that taking that stuff would be like writing a poem from that. But I was going to say that when I was younger, a kid of 12 or so, I'd go to the library and take out 25 books.	Susan 18/02/05 lines 272-75

<b>Coding Categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Illustrative finding</b>	<b>Ref.</b>
Activity	What forms I use	Every now and then I write a poem. Mostly just hip hop stuff	Cade 05/05/05 lines 122
Activity	Sharing work with others	The other great thing about 'zines was the network of people it opened up. I met and corresponding with a lot of people via my 'zines	Bel online lines 42-44
Events	Key Connection with Friend	My friend gave me this book. It was supposed to be my birthday present she gave it to my six months after my birthday though. Some of the starting poems are hers. And she wrote me a note. So yeah she started writing. It was to encourage me to write. I had shown her some of my writing and she liked it so she was trying to encourage me to write. Because I was going through a dark time too.	Andrea 20/02/05 lines 287-96
Events	Key Connection with Adult	When I hit about grade 11 she said I still really want to read your poems because I really like them but I think you've exceeded my ability to critique them. I think you're doing just fine. Keep doing them and give them to me and I really like reading them.	Marcus 11/02/05 lines 329-32
Events	Represented Family Relationship in a piece of writing	one was about a ballet dancer and sort of being controlled like a marionette. It was just a direct expression of my experience at the time 'cuz I had my Dad was very controlling.	Susan 18/02/05 lines 46-48
Events	Event at School	I got kicked out of my last high school, Bishop McNally, for writing a not a limerick but it had a bawdiness to it that would be called inappropriate and it was my ideas of why I chose to go to a Catholic School	Sylvain 04/02/05 lines 549-52
Events	Life Events and Decisions	I tried to kill myself when I was 14 or 15 and I went through a really hard time after for a couple of years.	Andrea 20/02/05 lines 296-97

<b>Coding Categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Illustrative finding</b>	<b>Ref.</b>
Strategy	How I use writing	I'm a very emotional person. I don't have to have all my feelings build up inside me. I can like I don't know I'm I can write down my own person have my own conversation. It sounds stupid (laughs) I can talk to myself and understand myself better than other people can I think.	Cade 05/05/05 lines 149-52
Relationship and Social Structure	Community of writers and practice	And most of my friends write as well and we get together and give each other feedback.	Sara 11/02/05 lines 45-46
Relationship and Social Structure	Connection with Friend(s) and peers	I keep "zine editor" on my resume. It was a very exciting and formative part of my life. It was cool to be part of a community that was made up of people in my age group and that was creativity based.	Bel online lines 103-05
Relationship and Social Structure	Connected to caring teacher	expressed that teacher "saved his life in high school"	Marcus 11/02/05 line 201
Relationship and Social Structure	Family relationships	both my parents were pretty creative an open to different types of learning and stuff like that me and my brother would hang out with older people a lot so compared to other people our age we knew about way different things than they did	Zenia 19/05/05 lines 317-20
Setting	School as unsupportive	I'd get in trouble from the teachers for wearing my headphones, writing or playing my music. I don't know music didn't have much space in school. I did my own thing.	Cade 05/05/05 97-98
Setting	School and teachers as supportive	I finished grade 12 and then went on exchange for a year and I went to a school in Toronto that was an alternative school. The teaching methods were different and you were friends with the people [teachers] and they were really cool and you got to know each other and stuff. The learning environment was so different that I probably learned so much more in that year than in all my other years of high school.	Zenia 19/05/05 lines 110-114

<b>Coding Categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Illustrative finding</b>	<b>Ref.</b>
Setting	Strategies for schools to be supportive	I'd want to do things that weren't in the curriculum. Things that people are interested in. Like that one teacher we got to write essays on anything we wanted. We got to write a review on anything, any book. We could write a review on a restaurant even...And when it's something you're interested in or feel strongly about it comes more naturally and you learn better. I think if they put in more things that people actually like other than just boring, well in my opinion boring, then it would be a little better...just more choices and more variety and things that can appeal to more people that might make them want to go.	Brendan 04/05/05 lines 553-62
Participants' Conceptions	Views of Self	I was always very artsy	Marcus 11/02/05 line 43
Participants' Conceptions	Views of Own Writing	I'd definitely say I'm more of a poet. Which is kind of in between because poetry is more visual	Susan 18/02/05 lines 223-24
Participants' Conceptions	Views of Writing in General	even the smallest thing you can write about	Cade 05/05/05 line 230
Participants' Perspectives	Connections of Writing to other Forms	Some of my favorite occurrences have been meeting musicians who have an incredible talent for instrumentation and using my words and I find that because a lot of my poetry is in cadence	Sylvain 04/02/05 lines 603-05
Participants' Perspectives	Influences on Artistic Expression	I just took a creative writing class last block and my creative writing teacher told us to try and write limericks and haikus and things like that. If you can't go with the examples I've given you just go your own way and use your own thoughts and come up with your own stuff. That was enough motivation right there.	Naomi 04/05/05 lines 344-47
Participants' Perspectives	What it takes to be a Writer	It kind of goes hand in hand good writers are good readers too. Not just of books but of situations.	Andrea 20/02/05 lines 85-86



<b>Coding Categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Illustrative finding</b>	<b>Ref.</b>
Participants' Perspectives	Writing and the Self	You have to base your music on your own way through life, your own experience	Cade 05/05/05 line 184-85
Process	Why I write	Because I know no matter how crazy my ideas that I write down if I ever do no one will ever be able to say "that's not correct"	Brendan 04/05/05 lines 316-17
Process	Inspiration and Models	I remember reading Howl for the first time when I was fourteen. We were just on the computer and I heard of the beat poets so I started with that. And I'd never heard of Alan Ginsberg but I printed it off and it was like all these crazy words, but I didn't get it....But I loved it I was so taken with it	Sara 11/02/05 lines 66-69
Process	Early writing experiences	ever since elementary school I've always written and it was always a strong point in my character regardless of how I was educated	Sylvain 04/02/05 lines 42-43
Process	Changes in writing associated with ages	At first I wrote a lot about music and movies that I liked. At first it was just about having fun and telling people which bands I thought were cool. Later I wrote about more personal issues like body image, relationships and depression.	Bel online lines 55-57
Process	Me as a writer today	I also like doing autobiography and stuff about myself.	Naomi 04/05/05 lines 466-67
Method	Participants' reflections on the research process	I'm glad you're doing what you're doing. And it makes me that much happier to be doing what I'm doing.	Sylvain 04/02/05 lines 707-09

## Appendix I: Recommendations for Making School Supportive

Level	Recommendation	Illustrative Evidence (Quote)	Source
Classroom	Empower students to express creativity and issues through writing	I think chapbooks are fantastic idea that I wish I'd have known about in high school. The idea of creating a project and chapbooks are great because you only have to give them to people that you want to give them to. I know schools do little anthologies and you get a whole bunch of people there but for some people I think that's great for some kids who are more stable or more bold and don't mind other reading their work. But it's not good for the timid and it's not good for the emotionally vulnerable and its not good for the frightened and the shy. But chapbooks do the same thing but it's all of your work and you photocopy and bind them and put a little a cover on them. It's a great way to focus your energy and it's a physical thing you can keep that you can hold that's a really embodiment of yourself a bit of you that's materialized in the world and you can share it with whomever you choose or not. Even if you only made one chapbook one little precious book that's yours that you hid in a tree you know. I think that to me would have been a great gift if somebody would have said look at these. These are other chapbooks that people have done. Look at how cute they are. I think that's easy and helpful.	Marcus
Classroom	It is important that teachers go beyond surface of apparent "subculture" to see students' creativity.	I'd get in trouble from the teachers for wearing my headphones, writing or playing my music. I don't know music didn't have much space in school. I did my own thing.	Andrea
Classroom	It is important to allow all students a space to express their creativity and experiences	Like John said about those animators they all get out of the school and they all know the same skills, meanwhile there's the older guys who are more creative. These new guys are like by the book. It's like that. let people be more creative and use their own writing ability. Rather than just marking it "oh this is wrong."	Brendan
Classroom	It is important to allow all students a space to express their creativity and experiences	I think the essay writing. It's just kind of good to know anyways, but there should be more interesting things taught.	Naomi
Classroom	It is important to allow all students a space to express their creativity and experiences, while building skills	If I was to teach writing in school, I would teach them the basics of writing and then I would introduce a few types of poems and give assignments that they can write whatever they want – school appropriate of course. Just let them get their thoughts on paper and have them develop their own skills.	Naomi

Level	Recommendation	Illustrative Evidence (Quote)	Source
Classroom	Listen to students and understand their real issues rather than overreacting out of prejudice	On a side thing, I heard about this kid from the states (of course) I think Texas and he wrote a story about zombies taking over a school. The school was empty but these zombies just overran it. And his grandparents phoned the cops on him and he got arrested for this story. There were no names mentioned. No students. Just a total work of fiction. Zombies. And they arrested him. I just know bits and pieces facts wise but that's what I heard. But for me, teachers for me, in my experience, are supporting and they push you in the right direction.	Brendan
Classroom	Provide private spaces for students to express themselves and to "be listened to" and "heard"	If they had a little box where they knew somebody was reading the poems. Like drop them in a box and I'll take them home and read them. And just say those are great. Have somebody tell you your work is great once a week. That's all you need. That goes a long way. Tell me what line you liked.	Marcus
Classroom	School must address diversity and offer alternatives to reach the maximum number of students	There should be more alternatives though. It's so like really I don't know the term. Cut and dry.	Brendan
Classroom	School must address diversity and offer alternatives to reach the maximum number of students	That'd be a great way to do writing in school. To get them to do the pictures and make up the stories. Or do it in groups. Some people do the drawing and the other the stories	Susan
Classroom	Support creative writing throughout the school years in forms that respond to popular media and publications such as zines	I think that approaching student writing positively is a good start. Perhaps instead of a student paper teachers could organize a 'zine-type of publication. Creative writing classes as an option are a must—for Grades 8-12 (it was only offered for grade 12s at my school).	Bel
Classroom	Teachers should be creative in addressing diversity and offer alternatives to maximize interest and learning	Well, I'd want to do things that weren't in the curriculum. Things that people are interested in. Like that one teacher we got to write essays on anything we wanted. We got to write a review on anything, any book. We could write a review on a restaurant even. A campsite or anything we wanted. And when it's something you're interested in or feel strongly about it comes more naturally and you learn better. I think if they put in more things that people actually like other than just boring, well in my opinion boring, then it would be a little better. Like in a history class, have a little more options about what people can study. I've been in a few where you can choose what you want to study, but not in all of them. Just more choices and more variety and things that can appeal to more people that might make them want to go.	Brendan

Level	Recommendation	Illustrative Evidence (Quote)	Source
Individual/ Teacher	A teacher can be a mentor, providing encouragement, support and "listening to" her/his students	And that's part of the nature of being a kid is you're comparing in order to learn but it also is really hard on your ego. I think giving kids the opportunity to be encouraged and listened to are two really enormous gifts that I got.	Marcus
Individual/ Teacher	Encourage expression and recognize students as individuals	Encourage people to feel deeply and feel sad sometimes and work through that in writing is great. I don't think it should be marked assignments or anything. I always liked when they had ten minute writings even in a journal even if a prof would never look at it. Even if you had 15 minutes a week in English class and have that for yourself. Look through that book after a time and look back at what you wrote and just have that for yourself it wouldn't have to be marked or looked at by anyone else. I won't ever forget that. She had an amazing influence. And every teacher that I had that could see something. Could recognize me for who I was. Supported that. I would excel. Yeah and you know with the writing, I had a good writing teacher, a good drama teacher. Even in academics I got support. I just felt like I was seen as an individual and that's what kids need.	Sara
Individual/ Teacher	Honour students as individuals with abilities and ideas to express; provide authentic experiences vs. artificial school exercises	What was also really helpful about [teacher] in our grade 10 class she had somebody blow up a condom and throw it around the room and we were all encouraged to bat it around and she was very much. She was a single Mom who had been a nun for a while and she had worked part time in a strip club working at the bar, so she was very colorful and we knew this about her. She was very formidable, she was very manly she spoke her mind she was really blunt. So all the rough kids got along with her fantastically because she spoke to them in a way that they really respected and she was not afraid to talk about uncomfortable things. And high school was all about these really weird things that go on. And instead of stepping around them you were allowed to verbalize that stuff and it made it so much more sane and it was really rare. She was one of the few people who didn't walk around the uncomfortable stuff but addressed it head on. I think that was one of the great things. You just mentioned something to that effect that you were allowed to talk about your experiences to what was happened and things that were [deemed] inappropriate and that was really helpful. Yeah.	Marcus

Level	Recommendation	Illustrative Evidence (Quote)	Source
Systems	Adequate funding to reduce class size will pay off in the long run by supporting students' success	There was a time when there was a lot more money in the school system. It was mainly a working class area but there was always enough to go around. For everybody. But it wasn't excess at the same. So they were good times optimistic times. And there's also a small farming area so there was a bit of innocence to it too. It's bigger now but it was pretty small when I was growing up. (Waterloo) R: Were the classes small? A: Yeah they were. They wouldn't be as small as say Montessori school. But the classes got bigger as I got older. In the high school I went too. The university often put on percentages on kids' scores so they could apply there. They'd compare them with other schools. Because some schools they'd actually take points off. Some would stay the same. And some they'd add. What they consider from their experiences of having kids from those schools. To kind of like what regimen they'd been through and the things they know they can do better. I think that's something about the area and the education system.	Andrea
Systems	School should mirror social context in diversity of age groups to reduce artificial competition and to maximize social adjustment	It's the most important to create a change when people are younger because you learn how to learn when you're young. If you try to get people to tell you how they want to learn when they're in high school, then there'll be two different ways that people are going to tell you. So it matters that you get more feedback from younger kids. At the same time they don't know how to express themselves but they want to. It depends on your parents. It makes a big difference if you're like out of the household and your parents aren't around.	Zenia
Systems	School should mirror social context in diversity of age groups to reduce artificial competition and to maximize social adjustment	Some classes that are split classes. I was usually in split classes. I'm assuming that the older kids are the lower half of that class and the younger kids are the higher of that class. How do you teach a class of that many levels? So it's more like independent learning. Plus people working with each other and less comparison because there isn't 30 people who are all supposed to be doing the same thing at the same rate. So let's compare them and see who gets the best grades. Who knows how to do it and who doesn't. I don't know how you can fix that because that's the way the North American system is set up. I don't know what other systems are like really.	Zenia
Systems and Individual Interface	Account for diverse learning styles	Just about special ed and like it also has a lot to do with teacher-kid ratio. That too. Oh the blue-print. If you use a blue-print education there's going to be a lot of learning styles that fall on one side or another and beside. You kind of have to allow for new ways. That's where I think the split grade helps as well.	Andrea

Level	Recommendation	Illustrative Evidence (Quote)	Source
Systems and Individual Interface	Education and assessment must be rigorous in order to support students' success and for quality assurance of teaching and school system effectiveness	I think all teachers should be like that – tough. Because a lot of people are just sailing through school now with mercy passes and they get out of school and they're working and there are people who are completely illiterate. I guess in the States (of course again) laughs. There is a large illiteracy rate of graduates now because they just sail through and are not held back.	Brendan
Systems and Individual Interface	Honour students as individuals with abilities and ideas to express; provide authentic writing experiences vs. artificial school exercises	My school also did this thing once a year all the schools in the area got together and brought in a poet for a one day workshop. So we submitted work to the poet in advance and then we showed up all the different people we all went to one school and there were 12 of us and we were the 12 writing geeks and...we got a workshop. I did that a couple years in a row with Mary De Michele one year and Garry Geddes the next. And that was really exciting because they were real poets and they had real books and they gave us real feedback. They treated us like we were poets. It was fantastic.	Marcus
Systems and Individual Interface	School policy, curriculum and teachers must be responsive to diverse needs and not "blueprint" or "one size fits all."	A: If you're going to use like a blue-print school system. And this is from someone who's never done any education theory by the way. But when I think back to the way we were taught it's like..	Andrea
Systems and Individual Interface	Student assessment should be formative rather than punitive	B: Instead of a big ugly red X. If I was a teacher, another small thing, I wouldn't use a red pen for marking. I'd use purple. There's something about the red X is just kind of disturbing. N: It sticks out and when you see it you say oh crap I got it wrong.	Brendan/ Naomi
Systems and Individual Interface	Students need to be supported and challenged to learn	And people see it as some evil thing, like I failed grade five can't go to grade 6 or I failed grade 11 math, but I think they should be tougher. N: The teachers? B: Yeah the teachers with marking. N: People need a challenge	Brendan/ Naomi
Systems and Individual Interface	Students need to be supported and challenged to learn	Teachers should challenge students a little bit more with their writing to explore their ideas a little better.	Naomi