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What is This?
Talented Young Writers’ Relationships With Writing

Jill M. Olthouse

Abstract

Through a qualitative research design, the author explored how eight talented young creative writers related to their craft. The construct, “relationship with writing,” emerged as the study’s overarching theme; this theme includes students’ influences, goals, values, identity, and emotions as these relate to writing. The findings indicated identity development and the expression of an authentic self were central to students’ relationships with writing. Multiple positive influences led students to view writing as a means to understand and express their identities. Students valued academic writing, but felt creative writing was more congruent with their emotions, goals, and values. Overall, students’ relationships with writing can be described as positive, personal, and context dependent.

Keywords

writing, gifted, talented, adolescents, qualitative

According to the National Council of Teachers of English publication, “What Research Says About Writing,” writing talent develops through association with a discourse community (NCTE, 2008). When used in reference to writing, the term discourse community describes a group of writers who share linguistic and genre conventions (Bazerman, 2009). Young writers may negotiate different linguistic and genre conventions when interacting with differing discourse communities: the classroom, the school newspaper club, a library writers’ group. A variety of discourse communities and their interactions and shared knowledge form the domain of writing. Individual students interact with the domain, and the interaction of the student and the domain affects the students’ skill development. In this study, I conceptualized this interaction between the individual and the domain as the “relationship” between the student and writing. The central question

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of this study is, “How do talented young writers describe their relationships with writing?” If teachers can better understand how students experience talent development, they may be better able to support the development of young writers’ talents.

Theoretical Framework

The metaphor of “relationship” with writing developed along with the study and functions similar to a “relationship” between people. Just as someone might say, “We have the same goals and values” or “I feel comfortable in this relationship,” talented students could say, “Writing reflects my personal goals and values” or “I feel comfortable with writing.” As the study progressed, “relationship” came to mean the student’s experience of his or her influences, emotions, values, goals, and identity as these constructs related to writing.

The metaphor is influenced by Feldman’s theory of nonuniversal development (Feldman, 1997). Feldman attempted to resolve the tension between conceptions of giftedness as generalized and as specific by placing abilities on a continuum from universal (which all healthy people will develop naturally) to discipline specific (which require the support and structure of a field of study to develop). Writing is discipline specific, and writing talent is a function of the relationship between the individual and the domain.

Literature Review

I used the metaphor of “relationship” to focus on the interaction of the individual and the domain. Much of the existing literature on writing talent includes a focus on the individual personalities of great novelists. Understanding the creative personality is often accomplished through retrospective, biographical studies such as those completed by Piirto (1998, 2002), Kaufman (2001), and Goertzel, Goertzel, and Goertzel (1978). Kohányi (2005) described writers as having depression, mania, and resilience; they are also described as risk takers, resilient, stubborn, persistent, good at self-promotion (Piirto, 1992), and solitary as children (Gallo, 1994). In an interview and questionnaire study conducted with young writers from New Zealand, intrapersonal factors such as intrinsic motivation were found to be of primary importance in the development of young writers, especially when compared with contextual influences such as teacher’s input (Garrett & Moltzen, 2011).

An alternate to a focus on personality factors is a focus on contextual factors. Goertzel et al. (1978) conducted an extensive biographical study of 300 eminent personalities; as part of this study, they separately analyzed the biographies of eminent writers to pinpoint contextual factors such as home life or schooling that helped or hindered the development of writing talent. Some of these findings indicate that creative writers overcome negative contextual influences, or use writing as a way to cope with negative experiences. For example, 67% of fiction and poetry writers described childhood homes as unhappy, as compared with 44% of eminent people.
(Goertzel et al., 1978). In addition, 70% did not like school or do well in school (Goertzel et al., 1978). Creative writers, especially, found little outlet for their creativity in the classroom, because restrictions such as time, grades, and topics limited them. In an interview study conducted by Freeman (1979), creative writers remembered teachers who valued grammar and spelling more than imagination. However, early and frequent exposure to literature may be the most prominent contextual factor that leads to the development of writing talent, especially when in interaction with strong verbal abilities and precocious reading (Piirto, 1992).

The construct “relationship with writing” includes interactions between the person and domain. For example, I examined the interaction between the individual writers’ personal values and the values necessary to be successful as a creative writer and an academic writer. In thinking about these interactions, I identified two other areas of study that have not been typically examined in the talent development literature (emotions and identity) as well as one construct (goals) that has been studied primarily quantitatively (Klassen, 2002; Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 1999). Fox (1988) addressed the role of emotion in writing by using the metaphor of a “battleground” to express how positive and negative emotions fuel writing. Cleary studied negative emotions as barriers to writing in an interview study with high school writers in which high school writers participated in “composing aloud” sessions and discussed the negative emotions that hindered their writing process (Cleary, 1991).

Identity refers to the extent to which individuals define themselves in terms of the domain. Writers interviewed by Day (2002) expressed a strong writerly identity, transforming a view of themselves as “odd” into strength—a unique writerly vision.

Values are abstract nouns with a positive moral connotation, such as loyalty, freedom, compassion, and truth. A contemporary school of thought in composition studies describes writing as being about more than skills; it is about values as well (Berlin, 1982, 1988). In teaching writing, Berlin suggests, teachers are also passing on a worldview. In this study, I investigate whether writers share common values that draw them to writing.

Professional writers, in response to the question “Why do you write?” have described their relationship to writing in complex, metaphorical terms, such as writing as a servant to “a great cold elemental grace which knows us” (Williams, 1998, p. 11) as a search for acceptance and approval (Salter, 1998), as a license to tell the truth (Jong, in Arana, 2003), and as a form of giving voices to the experiences of those whose voices have been neglected (Doyle, 1998). These descriptions fit with the notion of “relationship” as an ongoing process, and it is these types of rich, multifaceted conceptualizations that I wanted to explore with younger writers.

While existing literature includes analysis of personality and contextual factors that contribute to writing talent, the question of the interaction of personality and context is a new question. In addition, this study’s focus on the experiences of young writers is still an emerging line of study with many possibilities yet to explore when compared with the more popular biographical studies (Edmunds & Noel, 2003; Garrett & Moltzen, 2011; Piirto, 1992).
Method

I used a collective case study methodology (Stake, 1995) to understand the phenomenon of “relationship with writing.” In reviewing case studies in gifted education, Mendaglio (2003) described features of exemplary case studies; they address the reasoning process and interplay between various aspects of study design, taking on another’s perspective, and awareness of one’s own perspective. They also avoid generalizing to a population or making causal statements apart from context (Coleman, Guo, & Dabbs, 2007).

Selection of Participants

I selected participants based on intensity sampling (Patton, 1990); in this case, I sought out the students with the most intense, or highest, level of writing talent. Talent was defined by the consensus of experts (Amabile, 1982). These experts were English teachers and professional writers who judged an interscholastic creative writing competition. About 7,500 seventh- and eighth-grade students compete in the statewide creative writing tournament each year. The students in this study were chosen from among those in the top 3% of all competitors. The students selected, 7 females and 1 male, were representative of the gender distribution of the competition. I used pseudonyms to protect participants’ privacy.

Description of Context

The statewide creative writing tournament Power of the Pen (POP) includes district, regional, and state competitions that are organized and administered by teachers and volunteers. School-sponsored teams of about 12 students practice once a week for months prior to the official tournaments. At each competition, teachers assign students to rooms with 6 students and one judge. Students have only 35 min to write a flash fiction story based on the same open-ended prompt. English teachers score these writings holistically, with the most important criterion being creativity. Grammar and spelling generally affect the amount of quality points by only a small margin, but this small margin can change a student’s overall rankings in a vast and highly competitive contestant pool. More prominent judges, who may be local authors, English professors, or journalists, select their favorite stories from those that received high rankings from the English teachers. As the competition comes to a close, students are eligible for three types of awards: individual awards, team awards, and special awards conferred by the prominent judges.

Data Collection

The major sources of data in this study were three-part, semistructured phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2006). Interviews lasted an average of 40 min each, for
a total of 2 hr. The second type of data source was student writing, fiction and academic. Students also wrote a manuscript on the theme “Why I Write” using any format and length desired. The final data source was field notes taken at competition events. I acted as a judge at a regional competition and participated in student and teacher POP focus groups. In addition to developing rapport with the sponsoring organization, the purpose of participating in these events was to understand what qualified as “talent” in this context, and the features of these participants’ shared experiences.

Throughout the interviews, I was able to maintain a positive rapport with the students. I saw myself as similar to them, both from a demographics standpoint and because we shared a love of reading and writing fiction. This helped me connect with students around topics such as books and writing exercises. However, I had to try to bracket my own experiences with writing as separate from the students’ experiences when it came to my data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis follows a modified form of that described by Moustakas (1994). First, I analyzed the transcriptions of the interviews and the essays on the theme “Why I Write” for references to the phenomenon “relationship with writing.” After I had conducted all three interviews with the first student, I identified quotations that pointed to the invariant constituents (or unique qualities) of the phenomenon. I grouped these unique qualities into larger themes. For example, the theme of “Emotions in Relation to Writing” may contain the invariant constituents “joy,” “anxiety,” “fear,” and so on. I then wrote short “thematic portrayals” in etic language that discuss in general how each theme functions. Next, I wrote an “individual textual description” for the student; this is a description of the individual’s relationship with writing, supported with quotations from the interview. I invited participants to review and critique these in-case analyses; minor modifications were sometimes made to the analyses based on student feedback. I repeated this process with each student in turn, completing one in-case analysis before going on to the next.

As I wrote the eight in-case analyses, I kept a journal of possible cross-case themes. I used analytic induction to develop cross-case themes (Glaser, 1969); I modified the cross-case themes as I finished each additional case. I did not arrive at a final list of themes until I had completed six of eight in-case analyses. Even after I identified these themes, I continued to make minor adjustments to subthemes and interpretations of themes. Finally, I wrote a cross-case analysis, describing how these talented young writers relate to their craft. The in-case analyses were completed before cross-case analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1994) to avoid the situation in which cross-case analyses become generalizations that relate to no case. When writing the cross-case analysis, I reread all of the original interview transcripts one final time, and grouped and interpreted quotations according to the themes I had identified: emotions, values, goals, identity, and influences.
Participant Descriptions

_Lily._ Lily is a multitalented high school sophomore who takes all advanced classes, including German. In eighth grade, Lily was the top scoring writer for her grade level in the state, beating out about 3,000 other POP writers. She writes tight prose that begins by creating a general mood, with some specific detail missing to incur the reader’s curiosity. Her stories include a great deal of sensory description and imagery that is specific to the theme or mood of the story. Lily uses sentence fragments and repetition to heighten the drama at pivotal points in the story. At times, Lily uses extended metaphors to tie her story together. For example, in one story, she interwove a scene of two boys fighting in a locker room with imagery suggesting a fight for supremacy between two jungle animals. Although Lily was a successful creative writing competitor and enjoyed writing in middle school, on entering high school, she stopped writing fiction.

_Charles._ Charles is a thoughtful high school sophomore who discusses philosophical concepts with ease. He takes advanced courses and is enrolled in two electives: musical performance and creative writing. Charles travels with a youth orchestra and spends much of his free time in religious studies. Charles won the humor award from POP. Examples of Charles’s humor are a poem about a food fight at school, a story about a teenage boy being embarrassed by his younger brother, and a story told by a dog who is trying hard to earn doggy treats. In high school, his attention had shifted to writing sermons in his spare time. One of these is titled, “The Problem With the Selfish Life.”

_Jane._ Jane is a self-described “loquacious” high school freshman who loves Harry Potter. She compares herself with the fictional Luna Lovegood, a bright but loopy girl who is a member of Ravenclaw, the group of wizarding students who are considered to be exceptionally clever. She chose her pseudonym “Jane Doe” because of its offbeat and somewhat morbid connotation; _Jane Doe_ is a term used to describe an unidentified female body in a morgue. Jane has short blond hair and wears thick black “geek” glasses lined with rhinestones. She keeps a poetry notebook, in which she writes at school and at home. Jane’s poetry is characterized by the use of unusual, specific images often inspired by her personal experiences. Her poetry also exhibits juxtapositions of emotions and connotations. For example, in “Memories,” Jane describes a couch with the “distinct smell of/Cigarettes/Cat-pee/And Beef Jerky” and the “strange bond” shared by a mother and her daughter who sit on the couch. Jane’s poem was selected by a professional poet to receive a POP poetry award.

_Mara._ Mara is a perky high school freshman with a big smile and her hair swept up in a bun in the back. Mara takes honors courses and participates in dance classes two nights a week. She is also an avid reader and writer. Her story, “The Right Decision,” was judged “best of the best” of the state competition, which means it was selected as the very best interpretation of the prompt. Mara is now mentoring her younger sister in POP.

Mara’s writing style is varied. She can write in a serious and dark, or light and humorous vein. In one story, Mara sets up humorous contrasts between an edgy, sarcastic student who has been suspended from school and his relaxed “hippie therapist.”
In another, she describes the emotional roller coaster experienced by a mother who was accused of killing her son, and is now being freed from jail because the actual killer has been identified. Mara creates a parallel between the mother’s experience of being interrogated and the interrogation of the real suspect. Her stories often begin with attention-getting dialogue, and proceed tightly to the climax and resolution. Mara’s stories include descriptive imagery; she especially focuses on trying to incorporate specific, unusual verb choices.

**Madison.** Madison is a current eighth-grade student who lives on a quiet country road. Madison has glasses and shoulder length blond hair; she is soft spoken and smiling, with braces and neon pink rubber bands adorning her teeth. Madison takes finance, careers, and choir as her school electives. Her extracurricular activities include POP, basketball, volleyball, softball, and Future Farmers of America. In her seventh-grade year, Madison was ranked in the top 15 seventh-grade writers at the state competition. Madison’s parents paid for her to take an online college creative writing workshop through the community college. Madison’s stories range from light interpretations to very serious themes. Madison’s favorite writing strategy is personification. She has written as a bee, a cloud, and a cow.

**Chelsea.** Chelsea is a popular high school sophomore with long brown hair and brown eyes. Chelsea attends public school in a small town, and is involved in many school activities. As class president, she is responsible for leading committees and helping to plan homecoming. She takes honors courses and a couple of college courses as well. Her conversational style is very diplomatic and upbeat.

Chelsea competed in POP during eighth grade, made it to the state level, and was selected for inclusion in the Book of Winners. Her strength is writing an engaging storyline and developing plot. Chelsea shared with me a story about a boy who was adjusting to his new school, and a story she had written for a library contest about the kidnapping of a young girl. Chelsea’s imagery was vivid, and her stories were nicely paced.

**Nicole.** Nicole is a freckle-faced high school freshman with shoulder length dark hair and brown eyes. She is the eldest of three sisters. She has attended parochial schools since preschool, and she loves her Catholic high school, where she takes honors courses and is on the track team and in the school band. During our interview, she spoke softly, earnestly, and eloquently about her passion for writing.

Nicole wrote her first book, a children’s book, in third grade as a present for a sister. In middle school, Nicole’s teacher encouraged her to try out for the POP team. Nicole was very successful in POP, making it to the state competition, and having her story chosen for publication in the Book of Winners. In middle school, her history teacher gave her the assignment to invent her own country. Nicole developed a country called SNOWNEN, with its own set of political turmoil, economic development, religious ritual, and cultural practices. From this assignment grew sketches of life in SNOWNEN, and from these sketches grew aspiration to write a novel in middle school. When I spoke with Nicole, she had finished 50,000 words in a novel that she planned to write as the first in a trilogy for middle school readers. Nicole’s writing style includes rich
description, well-paced plotting, and a subtle command of language. Her writing process focuses heavily on visualization and, when possible, revision.

**Darcy.** I found Darcy through a connection with her mother, who was organizing a regional POP competition. Darcy’s mother is an author, and Darcy shares her mother’s love of language. Darcy was on spring break from her junior year of college when we met in a local coffee shop. Darcy is petite, brown-eyed, and has her brown hair pixie cut. Darcy is an older, more experienced writer than the other writers in the study. She demonstrates advanced skills that gave me some perspective on what the younger writers had accomplished and what they had yet to learn.

After competing successfully in POP in middle school, Darcy continued to seek out writing opportunities. Darcy is now an undergraduate creative writing major. Her minor is classics, and Darcy takes a broad range of liberal arts courses ranging from Shakespeare to archeology to business law. The thing that stood out in my mind after talking with Darcy is how much writing she does. When I Googled her name, I found over a hundred articles she had written. Many of these were factual, encyclopedic entries written for web content services. Others were regular columns written for local newspapers. She writes a 50,000-word novel each November, edits and publishes a literary magazine, and earns tuition money writing web content. She had recently published her first short story in a small literary press magazine.

**Findings**

These eight students shared mastery of some of the same skills; they had all developed the ability to write a three- to four-page story with exposition, conflict, imagery, figurative language, and resolution in 35 min; yet, these writers had also begun to develop unique personal voices. Similarly, the ways in which they relate to their craft share common themes, yet each relationship is unique.

**Influences**

Whereas a couple of the students in this study had challenges in childhood, such as childhood depression or living through a parent’s divorce, most students discussed positive family and environmental influences. This stands in contrast with much of the literature on the creative personality. The students’ influences ranged from adults, school curricula, POP, and reading. The primary discourse communities that influenced students were family, school, and POP.

The students had parents and teachers who intervened in their lives to encourage their writing talent, either by nominating them for the POP competition or, in Madison’s case, enrolling her in an online writing course. All students could refer to at least one teacher who influenced them. These teachers were open to student creativity, provided structured practice and serious critiques, and offered emotional support.

School curricula provided varied levels of support for the development of creative writing talent. Students did not remember much writing instruction from elementary
school, and high school tended to focus solely on academic writing. Surface-level features such as grammar and formatting were emphasized in high school, accounting for up to 50% of a paper’s grade.

Middle school was the time when creative writing talent was most nurtured, and the POP competition was an important part of that. Middle school curriculum included more flexibility and personal expression, including experiences such as writing stories and sharing them aloud with the class. Mara described middle school:

Middle school writing was a lot of fun. On Fridays we would share a story we had written. It was like a free for all. You could write anything you wanted, and I would write a story, and sometimes she would give us a prompt and we would sit in a circle. I really liked that. It was really relaxed but we were still getting graded on it. (Mara, personal communication, March 20, 2010)

Students enjoyed the challenge of writing in a time limit for POP. POP was an experience that changed students’ relationship with writing for the better. Some students realized their talent for the first time, and began to feel part of a larger community of writers.

All eight students were avid, advanced, and independent readers. Their writing modeled that of their favorite authors, and some students were inspired by published child authors like Mattie Stepanek, Christopher Paolini, Gordon Korman, and Nancy Yi Fan.

Emotions

Different participants described different emotional responses to writing. Responses included positive emotions such as joy, calm, and pride, as well as negative emotions such as anger, insecurity, nervousness, and frustration. The heights of the positive emotions were seen to justify the lows of the negative emotions. For these students, writing was a conduit of emotions (a way to vent emotions on the page) and a mediator of emotions (or a way to transform negative emotions into positive emotions). Writing could serve a therapeutic purpose. It could also provide a “flow-like” experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Chelsea described how writing was comforting to her when she was younger and her parents were fighting: “When I was younger, writing was kind of like drinking some hot chocolate and relaxing after having a really stressful day, or if you were having an upset day and you were crying” (Chelsea, personal communication, April 25, 2010).

Values

In this study, I asked students to list the values associated with their creative writing and their academic writing. I asked students about their personal values, and whether and how these personal values related to writing. Finally, I asked students whether they
experienced value conflicts connected with their writing. Two themes emerged in relation to values. The first was a subtle conflict between values associated with creative writing and those associated with academic writing. The second theme was that students shared the personal value of “openness,” and this related to their writing.

Students associated creative writing with individuality, freedom, and imagination. Students associated academic writing with knowledge and opinion, but also mentioned were structure, obedience, and perfection. There seemed to be some conflict between the values of academic and creative writing. Lily discussed this conflict:

Well, I’m more for individuality and freedom and stuff like that. I don’t like the structure and obedience of school writing, because I like being myself and I don’t like changing that, and I like how people can show themselves in writing. (Lily, personal communication, February 27, 2010)

Students also talked about their personal values, directly and indirectly, in the course of the interviews. The primary personal value shared by the majority of the students was “openness.” Openness in this study refers to the ability to forestall judgment and embrace the experiences and emotions of others. Students referred to this value throughout their interviews in a variety of ways. Charles referred to it as “being relaxed” when confronted with new or contradictory opinions (Charles, personal communication, February 21, 2010). Jane disdained authors who were “preachy” in their fiction by forcing their values through the story (Jane, personal communication, February 27, 2010). Chelsea mentioned that she particularly enjoyed an assignment in which she was asked to write an argument from a position that she disagreed with. She also discussed “being brave enough to explore other perspectives” (Chelsea, personal communication, April 25, 2010). In her third interview, Nicole said “I try to be very open, like I really hate prejudice, so I try to be open to everyone” (Nicole, personal communication, April 28, 2010). The value of openness related to these students’ writing talent. Students were open to receiving constructive criticism. Openness also allowed them to write stories about a diverse range of character perspectives.

Goals

I used three main strategies to understand students’ goals. First, I asked students about the goals of specific pieces and the use of specific writing strategies. Students also listed and ranked five general reasons why they write. Finally, students wrote themes titled, “Why I Write.”

Students’ description of their goals differed dependent on which of the three responses they were composing. When discussing specific choices in their work, students referred to the influence of instruction and practice. They also considered what would most interest them if they were the readers. When referring to writing in general, goals were more intrapersonal. The four most prominent goals, in order, were expressing emotions, developing talent and mastering writing skills, mediating and processing emotions, and
fun. Student essays reflected the fact that each student had multiple goals for writing. Many of these goals dealt with self-understanding or making connections with others, rather than with competing with others or mastering new skills. Writing was a way to have a voice within a larger community and to come to understand oneself better. An excerpt from Nicole’s “Why I Write” essay illustrates the intrapersonal, emotional nature of these students’ writing goals:

Sometimes I’ll just have one of those experiences that leave me breathless in their wake. It could be as simple as five minutes in a summery field or as long and harrowing as the hardest race of my life, but they all leave behind such an impression in my mind that there’s no question of if I’m going to write it, but when. I’m so filled with emotions that give birth to words that give birth to stories that I can’t not share it. That’s when I write to show the world who I am and what I’ve done. (Nicole, personal communication, May 17, 2010)

Identity

For the most part, the students described themselves as writers and believed writing would continue to be an important part of who they would become in the future. Charles described his identity as writer:

So it’s kind of like I’m taking a part of my beliefs, values, things how I feel and putting it on paper and it’s permanent there, and it’s kind of like I’m taking a part of myself and putting it on the writing because it’s always going to be there. (Charles, personal communication, February 21, 2010)

Although I did not ask many direct questions about identity, identity emerged as a theme central to these students’ relationships with writing. The students’ attempts to negotiate academic and creative writing, and their understanding of academic and creating as coming into conflict, were connected to the development of identity. Through academic writing, students presented their “outer selves.” Writing academically was writing for the “other” because it was presenting the self that you perceive others want you to be—polished, congenial, intelligent, and perhaps somewhat generic—the model student. Academic writing is a positive experience, but it could also become stressful if attention is not paid to the development of the “inner selves.” This includes students’ emotional sides; their inner selves may be flawed, silly, dark, or simply empathetic. Through POP, students explored their emotions and their personality in a way that was still consistent with their academic self-image.

Students’ Relationships With Writing

Students’ descriptions of their relationships with writing were rich and deep, with metaphors ranging from as strong as a “love affair” (Darcy, personal communication,
March 28, 2010) and a “best friend” (Lily, personal communication, February 27, 2010) to weaker relationships like “a tide going out” (Charles, personal communication, February 28, 2010) and the “relationship between the U.S. and Communist China” (Jane, personal communication, February 27, 2010). Overall, their relationships can be described using three adjectives: positive, personal, and context dependent.

First, students had a positive view of writing. In general, they liked to write and viewed writing as a worthwhile activity. They sought challenge and were open to constructive criticism. Second, students’ relationships with writing were personal. Students had intrapersonal, emotional reasons for writing. Third, students’ relationships with writing were strongly influenced by positive and negative contexts. The students were lucky to benefit from a variety of resources: funding, computers, books, field trips, parental interest, volunteer support, mentoring, expert feedback, competitions and recognition, author visits, social networks, and structured practice time.

Discussion and Implications

When discussing implications, I must caution that the results of a small, focused study like this do not automatically generalize to other young writers. A further limitation of the study is that it did not bring in the voices of many male writers, African American, Asian American, or Hispanic writers, or writers from urban schools. This limitation presents the opportunity for future research that specifically focuses on underrepresented groups. In exchange for lack of generalizability, I was able to learn about students’ relationships with writing in-depth, including how students interpreted their experiences. It is possible that some aspects of my findings may resonate with teachers who have worked with similar groups of talented young creative writers.

This study did not echo the many studies that profile creative writers as tortured artists with childhood traumas and mental illness. This may be simply because this was not the topic under investigation, or because these students were young writers, rather than the famous authors profiled in the biographical studies. Yet, these students did emphasize the emotional, therapeutic reasons for creative writing. Their relationships with writing were personal and intimately connected with emotion and the development of identity.

These students did not seem to understand that emotion and identity are important in academic writing as well as creative writing. These young writers did not all plan to pursue a career in creative writing; however, their values and goals in relation to creative writing might also apply to academic writing. Most of these students did not associate academic writing with creativity or the expression of personal identity. The lesson of understanding how emotion and identity inform scholarly and career achievement is an important practical implication of this study for these students.

The second salient aspect of these students’ relationships with writing is that these relationships were heavily influenced by context. POP deepened students’ relationships with creative writing. Although POP is a competitive context, these eight students found it compatible with a focus on intrapersonal goals for writing. Yet at the
same time, when POP ended, the students’ interest in creative writing waned. Nicole and Darcy were two exceptions to this trend. Both shared an important ability—the ability to shape their own contexts to support the development of their creative writing talent. Nicole found time almost every day in her busy high school schedule for creative writing. Darcy started her own publication and networked with other writers to advance her career. Not all students, even talented students, are as independent and proactive as Nicole and Darcy. This study reminds even the most dedicated teachers that the supports they provide may one day be sparse. Teachers can help students learn to shape their own contexts by providing options in assignment design, inviting students to reflect on their goals and educational experiences, and by connecting talented students with outside resources.

The third characteristic of these students’ relationships with writing is that these relationships were positive. A positive view of writing and the value of “openness” certainly propelled the development of these young writers’ talents. The only disadvantage to a positive outlook is that these students were reluctant to critique educational contexts that were inappropriate for their skill levels. An example of this is Madison. She amicably practiced for the state writing tests each week, although she had consistently demonstrated the ability to pass them at the highest level. The permission and know-how to tactfully self-advocate will help Madison, and students like her, to create supportive contexts in which challenging writing instruction is blended with personal meaning.

Conclusion

This study examined the development of writing talent through the metaphorical lens of “relationship.” Talent was conceptualized as the interaction between an individual (including the individual’s values, goals, emotions, and identity) and the domain (the interconnected web of discourse communities and their shared bodies of knowledge). This conceptualization of talent development allowed for a storied examination of the development of young writers’ talents. In this examination, the question of “Why do you write?” was even more important than the question of “How do you write?” because the “why” question fuels the “how” of skill acquisition. This conceptualization of talent development, as a relationship fueled by “why” questions has the potential to provide a framework for future studies of talented writers, but also for future studies of talent in other domains.

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**Bio**

**Jill M. Olthouse** is an assistant professor at West Virginia University, where she teaches in the online Gifted Education Masters and Certification programs and coordinates the Summer TAG Workshops. Her areas of interest are writing talent, conceptions of giftedness, and educational technology.