

**Memoir Writing as an Education Tool: Implications for Student Voice and Identity**

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## **Abstract**

Memoir is a genre of writing often overlooked as a valuable pedagogical tool. Through employing qualitative research and methods, this study explored the potential benefits of teachers introducing memoir in their classrooms. Research questions included: How can memoir writing serve as a pedagogical tool to encourage students to write and care about their writing? In what ways does the memoir writing process support students in exploring their identities? How are students encouraged to discover their voices when writing a memoir? By implementing an eight-week memoir-writing unit in a seventh-grade classroom, the teacher-researcher collected data as students read, listened to, wrote, and shared memoirs to learn about and practice the genre. Data collection methods included open-ended in-depth interviews, student questionnaires, artifacts, participant observations, student journals, and the researcher's journal. Analysis of these multiple data sources illustrated how students wrote memoirs to learn about themselves and their worlds, and appeared motivated when doing so. The findings also drew attention to the importance of teachers being writers, too, and instituting routines and rituals to help students see their lives as full of invitations to write. Not only did using "I" in their writing make writing enjoyable for the students in this study, but it also engaged even the most struggling of writers. Implications for teacher-researchers and teachers of memoir writing are discussed.

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## CHAPTER ONE: THE JOURNEY BEGINS

### The Teacher Who Inspired Me to Write

*She always rushed through the door just as it was swinging behind the last student, red-cheeked and sweat causing her reddish-brown bangs to cling to her small forehead. Her plump body moved surprisingly quickly up the few stairs and across the stage, coming to rest, to plop down in her purple swivel chair beside the wooden desk. Out of breath, she would ramble up her coke bottle from an oversized purse, chug what I considered an amount quite impressive for such carbonation, placing the little amount left firmly and squarely in the corner of the desk. As her hand reached up to fumble the keyboard from a sitting position, I would always marvel at how systematic, yet how unorganized, she was. This routine: arriving last minute, fatigued, with coke and loose papers, never seemed to fail itself. She seemed robotic; we watched the same process day by day, wondering where she came from and where she went after. In essence, she resembled a bit of a bulldog: her jowls a bit too loose for what I saw to be a face of experience and history, further creviced by wisdom and determination. But despite all this, I admired her, loved her, and idolized her. I truly did, especially the odd familiar feeling of comfort I felt when in her presence.*

*I was mesmerized by every move she made, hypothesizing her thoughts, hundreds of thousands of letters sustaining her vision in quiet, marvelous distraction. A poet inside the body of a cuddly Shar-Pei, masking her brilliance to all but those who went searching for it – like I did. And it is this quality, this camouflage that sparked my desire and passion for uncovering secrets and lost treasures, of things you didn't know existed but could be found, that I can thank her for. From her, I learned the art of discovery, and she*

*pursued my thoughts with inexhaustible reason: always wanting me to take one step further into the dark caverns of the four walls of my psyche, to peel off the 3-D layers to unearth the rhythmic pulsations of the foremost organ in my chest. In picking up the pen or touching my fingers to a keyboard, my pulse would race, forcing blood through vessels and causing a small 'high' in my thoughts as they touched down on paper. And while she only existed in the fast-paced reality of my life for some few months, I have much to thank her for. If it wasn't for her, I would never have recognized myself as the lost puppy I was; never knowing the body I inhabited, the mind I held custody of, the qualities I represented, the thoughts and feelings I kept buried six feet under. But she challenged me. She helped me to discover memoirs. And in finding memoirs, I found myself.*

I was first introduced to memoirs in my third-year *Life Writing* university course. For the first time in my sixteen years spent in school, I felt myself wholly reflected in what I was learning. I was learning about me, after all. When I reminisce about my introduction to memoir writing to people I meet, I am often asked why I speak so highly of that course and the professor. The memoir above attempts to emphasize how I feel about memoirs and how writing memoirs was a process I found personally gratifying and liberating. I have since learned that others who took that same course shared similar feelings. "It's exciting!" "It's easy." "It's useful." "It's fun." "It challenges me." These are all comments I have heard my peers say. It seems that many of us walked away from that course believing that memoir is a genre of writing that is, in some way, useful and valuable to our lives. Unfortunately, I do not think university should be a person's first exposure to this process.

The word *memoir*, derived from the French word *mémoire*, is the study of memory. I appreciate Natalie Goldberg's description of memoir: she states,

Memoir gives you the ability to plop down like the puddle that forms and spreads from the shattering of a glass of milk on the kitchen floor. You watch how the broken glass gleams from the electric light overhead. The form of memoir has leisure enough to examine this. (2007, p. xix)

Memoir is a meditative exercise. It asks writers to examine their experiences and memories in search of meaning. Even more, it requires that writers select specific memories and reveal their significance to their lives. Goldberg (2007) says a memoirist must write sideways "by using the deepest kind of thinking to sort through the layers", (p. xxiii). Memoir writing is thus not only personal writing that contains "I," but writing that requires an author to engage in an in-depth exploration of a small memory to discover how they are linked to their earlier selves. When writing a memoir, a person is on a quest to understand, to discover meaning in the small moments that they can remember.

This is a study about the experiences elementary students have when engaging in the memoir writing process. Using qualitative methods, I analyzed students' experiences writing memoirs to explore the potential benefits of teachers introducing memoir in their classrooms. This study also illustrates how the education system is often organized in ways that, at times, limits the creative and introspective liberties of young student writers. Through this study, I explored how memoir writing can be used as a tool to engage young student writers, encouraging personal expression beyond that which is often permitted with the ever-increasing demands of a stringent curriculum.

Since entering the *Social and Cultural Contexts* stream of a Masters of Education program, I have increasingly read about how memoir writing embraces many aspects of identity including those related to race, culture, gender, and ethnicity. I read literature of how writing memoir has benefited many individuals both marginalized and oppressed. I quickly recognized the lack of studies and, thus, the benefit of me conducting research exploring the writing of memoirs in elementary schools. This study contributes to a small but growing body of Canadian research that highlights the importance of individuals exploring the mundane and trivial happenings of their lives alongside the significant events through their writing.

In this chapter, I provide the background information for this research, explain the purpose of the study, and the questions to be explored. I describe in detail the memoir-writing unit used to produce and collect the data, as well as briefly outline the literature and my rationale for conducting generic qualitative research. I conclude by defining the concepts of identity and voice, and discussing the challenges of the study.

### **Background: The Missing “I”**

Graves (2003) maintains that, “children want to write,” but can only do so, “if we let them” (preface). I think a problem in schools is that some teachers who have a responsibility to teach writing do not think that all students can write well. These teachers often view writing as some tremendous feat that only few overcome and even less master, saving writing for the ‘special’ students, those who exhibit signs of excellence and independence. When students announce they, “don’t know what to write,” it is often because teachers have given them the topic to write about. Many teachers have lost faith in their students ever becoming self-governing and self-motivated. Students are often

treated as in need of care, guidance, and direction. Gleason (2009) states that historical assumptions of children's vulnerability conceptualize them as, "need[ing] to be taught, trained, disciplined" (p. 128) and further as, "lacking the power and competency to drive social change or to produce important knowledge" (p. 131). In believing students to be naturally dependent, some adults continuously intervene in students' writing, providing instructions and strategies that push students to conform while abandoning their original pursuit. However, it is during adolescence that students begin to grow and learn a lot about themselves. It is imperative then that students be provided opportunities to explore their identities and voices. Calkins (1994) states she believes, "adolescents very much need to write about the poignant, turbulent events of their lives" (p. 174). By writing memoirs, students may be encouraged to choose their topics and take responsibility for their own writing.

When I look back on my schooling experiences, I cannot help but be reminded of the nauseating feeling that held tight to the pit of my stomach as I approached a teacher's desk. I would mumble more or less inaudibly, "Am I allowed to use "I" for this assignment?" At the same time, the first-person was my most treasured point of view; I recognized it was often deemed inappropriate, less commendable, lax, and at times, even egocentric. I struggled to stay connected using third-person pronouns. To my dismay, I often stared back at a piece of writing I felt detached from and as having no life. It wasn't until third year of my undergraduate studies when I encountered a teacher who wholeheartedly welcomed personal reflection and a course that pivoted on "I" when I felt engaged and personally connected. It was here that much of the motivation behind this research was inspired. Finally, I was encouraged to examine notions of self and uncover

the complexities and boundaries of my identity, an identity embodied by me, yet foreign at the same time. It was here I discovered that writing could serve purposes other than a means to an end. The process became what mattered, where exploration and asking questions of the self led to new insights about one's identity. I found myself in a constant state of feeling on the edge of my seat, eager to learn more about my shifting identity and unearth feelings and memories long repressed or forgotten. This all came about through brief memoir writing exercises.

Finding the memoir writing process to be both refreshing and, at times, soothing, I started to question why the many teachers I had before had not recognized or perhaps believed in its benefits. Behind pages on pages of written memories, my passion for memoir grew and I found myself constantly wondering, *how might have the experience of learning about and writing memoir changed my outlook on writing as a young student writer?, could I have become more engaged and interested if permitted to reflect on myself, to include "I" in my writing?, and further, how might memoir writing benefit young student writers today?*

A gap appears to exist between students' natural curiosities for writing and their desire to be personally connected with how writing actually serves students in schools. Students' interests have been abandoned in many elementary school classrooms in place of conformity and structure. In the teaching of writing, Cremin (2006) states that organization and compliance have taken precedence over meaning, creativity, and purpose. Writing is often being taught as a step-by-step process with an end goal in mind. But how many students' minds actually work in such a linear fashion? Graves (2003) argues that the

pressure to follow such linear succession needs to be abandoned and, instead, writing should be embraced as the messy undertaking it is.

Graves (2003) states that students are often made to feel as if they, “rent their writing” (p. 162). By having the topic they are to write about often chosen for them and being provided a thorough set of instructions of how they are to write, students may abandon their voices in order to imitate the step-by-step process taught. Students often write to make their teacher happy. By ignoring their voice and valuing that of the teachers, Graves (2003) says the writing process is presented as, “a lifeless, mechanical act” (p. 227). Mechanics are often put before intention, and conventions trump information. Cremin (2006) finds it problematic that little emphasis is being put on writing from the, “inside out” (p. 417). Rather than writing what they want to, students’ feelings and experiences are often far removed from the topic they are told to write about. More time needs to be given for students to feed their natural curiosities to write.

Memoir writing is a subject worthy of study, as many children may be leaving schools believing writing carries no significance to their lives. Graves (2003) asserts that, “the easiest place for any writer to begin writing, including you, is in writing about something you know” (p. 12). Although memoir has often been labeled as self-centered, Graves (2003) suggests that self-centeredness should not be frowned upon. Rather, he argues that by making themselves the main topic, students are more apt to enjoy the subject and continue to grow in their writing. It is important, then, that “I” become central to the writing that takes place in the classroom. This study explores how memoirs, although a somewhat underappreciated genre of writing, are a tool that classroom

teachers can use to not only motivate students to write, but to also help them feel connected to what they write about.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research is twofold. The first purpose was to explore the benefits of the memoir writing process with elementary students. By exploring the experiences and personal insight of both teachers and students, I hoped to come to an understanding of how self-awareness or ‘mindfulness’ can be fostered through writing memoirs and help students, “explore the ambiguities and complexities in their own lives” (Denton-Borhaug & Jasper, 2014, p. 121). Inherent in this goal was my desire to support students to develop agency in their writing in order for them to discover their own voices and identities. It was my hope that by gaining a sense of ownership over their writing, students would experience growth in self-awareness in learning about themselves and their world.

The second purpose of this study was to contribute to a growing volume of Canadian literature on memoir writing and education. I hope the findings of this qualitative study will enrich and, perhaps, even shift the current understandings about the relationship between students and their writing for the students and teachers involved in the research. Many researchers suggest this relationship deserves increased recognition and closer examination (Calkins, 1994). My aim was to explore the writing experiences of students in order to bring light to the potential benefits of writing memoirs, as well as challenge the current curriculum structure for writing that silences students’ voices and limits their freedom in writing.

I want to demonstrate to teachers and policy makers that memoir writing is a practical pedagogical tool that may help students discover meaningful things about themselves. Memoir writing encourages students to question, consider, expose, and explore areas of grey in their identities. These areas of grey are where students may find meaningful personal connections to their writing, and are what teachers need to include as a daily exercise in their classrooms. Students should be presented with opportunities to brood over the question, “who am I?” in their writing.

### **Research Questions**

The central questions of the study are:

- A. How can memoir writing serve as a pedagogical tool to encourage students to write? To encourage students to care about writing?
- B. In what way does the memoir writing process support students in exploring their identities?
- C. How are students encouraged to discover their voices when writing a memoir?

The following sub-questions were also explored:

- a. What is the role of the teacher during the process of memoir writing?
- b. What must educators at all levels, from parents to administrators, know about the process of memoir writing in order to support students writing development?

### **The Memoir-Writing Unit and Me**

It was difficult to imagine what the memoir-writing unit would look like. As time drew nearer to when I would enter the classroom as teacher-researcher, my anxiety grew. I had ideas of what I wanted to do, but I did not have a concrete plan of what would

happen each day I visited the classroom. I expected that if my supervisor knew this, she would be annoyed. Instead, when I shared my feelings with her, she explained how she had never imagined I would, “deliver a package in isolation of knowing the students” (Research Journal, 03/31/16). While I had ideas, once I entered the classroom, the memoir-writing unit evolved as my role as teacher-researcher shifted and my relations with the participants grew.

I first learned of Sacred Writing Time (SWT) during my placement as a practicing teacher. SWT is founded on a belief that students need to be given time to write every day. By scheduling uninterrupted blocks of time for students to write daily, SWT encourages students to value their writing while also building their fluency skills. In the classroom where I taught, students were given freedom to write whatever they wanted every day for the first ten minutes of class. Soon after, they would have a ‘Share’ session where students could volunteer to share what they had written that day or from a previous day. The classroom teacher usually displayed various prompts (i.e. journal, story starter, creative piece) during SWT to give support to students when writing. One day, I added a memoir-writing prompt to the classrooms SWT program. The response was extremely positive. Each day, more and more students chose to respond to the memoir-writing prompt, as well as share their memoirs with their peers. The students appeared delighted with the addition of the memoir prompts, and I watched as the community in the classroom strengthened as students learned more and more about each other. The students in this class had learned to value their ten minutes allotted to them every day to write. With the positive response I saw students have to SWT and Share, I decided to

implement this same routine into the memoir-writing unit for this study, with only minor adjustments.

Sacred Writing Time in this study was allotted to student participants every morning of the memoir-writing unit as a time for students to practice writing memoirs. SWT was often between 15-20 minutes long and took place right after the morning announcements. I encouraged students to try to write for the full time. During this time, students could choose to continue a memoir already started or could start writing a new memoir. Each morning when students entered the classroom, there were three memoir-writing prompts on the board for SWT. I explained to the class that the prompts were only displayed as ideas for writing and encouraged students to write a memoir on whatever they wanted. Students wrote all of their memoirs from SWT, as well as ideas and strategies for writing memoirs discussed throughout our lessons in their 'Writer's Notebook,' a book I gave each participant on the first day of the memoir-writing unit. A few times throughout the study, I collected students' Writer's Notebooks to comment on their writing, placing a 'Two Stars & A Wish' sticker on one of their memoirs to provide feedback on their writing. I hoped that by being given time to write freely about their memories and demonstrating that I cared to read their writing, students would come to value SWT, as well as their Writer's Notebooks. The last ten minutes of our 100-minute language block was always allocated to a share session, where students were invited to share a memoir written with the class.

Following SWT, I taught a mini-lesson aimed at introducing students to a new concept or strategy based on their needs. Each mini-lesson was intended to improve student writing and simultaneously develop approaches to writing that would help

students to effectively evaluate and improve their thinking and writing. In these writing workshops, students often shared written work in progress and received constructive feedback from peers, the classroom teacher, and me. During the daily mini-lesson, students were also encouraged to take notes in their Writer's Notebooks so they could refer to what they had learned to inform their later writing. The mini-lessons I taught throughout the unit regularly mimicked those of writing guru Nancie Atwell found in *Lessons That Change Writers*, such as "The Rule of Write about a Pebble," "Questions for Memoirists," and "The Rule of *So What?*" I often used my memoirs, as well as the memoirs of other authors, during these mini-lessons to demonstrate and encourage students to become critical readers of others as well as their own writing. Although I recognize reading and writing are inherently connected and many authors (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 2003) highlight the importance of the writing-reading connection, due to the nature and limited timeline of this study, my emphasis was on the writing process. During the mini-lessons, we read a variety of memoirs as an avenue into and scaffolding for teaching the writing of memoir.

Gibney (2012) stresses that the best way to help students to learn to write is to participate in the writing process alongside them. By writing and sharing my memories with the students, I hoped to demonstrate how memoirs could be made out of the everyday 'stuff' of our lives. For instance, I often selected ordinary incidents in my life to write about that I felt the students might relate to. Although I believe in the importance of writing when you ask your students to write, given my complex role as teacher-researcher, I did not always have the privilege of writing alongside the students. Instead, I took pride in the personal upkeep of my own Writer's Notebook, writing short memoirs

at home and in my spare time. Many authors (Calkins, 2004; Graves, 2003) stress the importance of good teacher modeling and teachers demonstrating their learning for their students. In addition to explaining to the students that my memoirs and my Writer's Notebook were very special to me, I also freely shared my notebook with the students. Moreover, students who were absent one day would often ask to see my notebook to catch up on a mini-lesson they had missed. It is important to note that while I entered the classroom as an outsider, I became a, "someone familiar" (Tilley, 2016, p. 31) as the students became more familiar with me through my presence in teaching in the classroom and by hearing my personal stories. The degree of distance between the participants and myself was thus lessened through my positioning as both teacher and researcher. Alongside teaching mini-lessons, participating in writing, and sharing my memoirs, I also collected data through methods which will be described in Chapter Three.

Initially, I thought about what the classroom teacher's role during this study might be. I hoped the teacher would engage in the writing process and demonstrate her own learning of the genre of memoir. Throughout the memoir-writing unit, Charlotte, the teacher, was present in the classroom at all times. She demonstrated her willingness to be a learner, too, and shared her thoughts and feelings about writing with her students. I believe that her role as both teacher and learner was imperative to the success of this study, and both enriched the memoir-writing unit and made learning a new genre of writing enjoyable for her students.

### **Framework of the Study**

The literature on critical and writing pedagogy informs this study. Leading authors of writing pedagogy emphasize the importance of writing having strong roots in

personal experience (Atwell, 2002; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 2003). Abandoning the pressure to have identifiable steps that instruct students how to write from beginning to end, these authors point out that it is the writing *process* that is essential. Here, writing is viewed as a fluid exercise. This perspective encourages teachers to provide students with meaningful time to write, whereby students can take a seed idea and grow it into something else (Calkins, 1994, p. 7), rather than pushing students from one activity to the next.

*Critical pedagogy*, informed by critical theory, involves questioning and challenging the passive acceptance of what appears natural or inevitable (Hinchey, 2010). McLaren (1989) describes how a teacher engaged in critical pedagogy values individuality and the empowerment of students so they can change the things negatively affecting them. Critical educators encourage students to ask questions about and challenge power.

A critical writing pedagogy, when embraced by classroom teachers, can assist teachers in supporting their students to question, explore, challenge, and to identify with their writing. In this framework, writing is perceived as a tool for students to use to analyze and critique issues important to their lives. Memoir writing, a contemplative practice, asks an author to reflect on and analyze his or her past experiences. Authors often adopt a critical lens attempting to come to some understanding of their purpose, values, and even problems. Denton-Borhaug and Jasper (2014) state *memoir* is specifically suited to three goals of critical pedagogy: encouraging students to recognize hegemonic forces in their lives, assisting students to deconstruct privilege and reconstruct alternative forms of democracy, and motivating students to do something about

‘injustices.’ Coupled with a progressive view of the writing process, critical pedagogues can maximize students’ agency in their writing by encouraging them to ask questions about their lives and exploring with them how they are connected to the world at large.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative studies can offer comprehensive understanding of students’ thoughts and feelings towards the memoir writing process. Caelli, Ray, and Mill (2003) state that *generic qualitative research*, “seek[s] to discover and understand the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved in a similar experience” (p. 3). For that reason, I utilized generic qualitative methodology and methods to explore the research questions listed earlier.

I used qualitative methods including: face-to-face individual interviews, participation, and observation. Researchers engaging in generic qualitative research combine various qualitative methods (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003). Qualitative researchers are *interpretivists*, believing that meaning is constructed both socially and experientially. How we understand others, our world, and ourselves is subjective to whom we are. A researcher cannot be a neutral observer. Instead, a researcher’s values are embedded in decisions made at all stages of the research process (Tilley, 2016). It is important that researchers be critically reflexive: how a researcher views the world may not align with how others view the world and thus, he or she may question the decisions of others. In my attempt to explore memoir writing as an important tool to help in the teaching of writing for elementary schools, I include the voices of others in this study.

## **Identity, Voice, and Its Challenges**

I do not think of identity as a static concept. Rather, I agree with McCarthy and Moje (2002) when they state that *identity* is a dynamic social construction and that there are multiple possibilities for identity that individuals perform, “depending on the spaces they are in and the relationships they enact within those spaces” (p. 230); therefore, an individual’s identity shifts and a person may represent him or herself in multiple ways. McCarthy and Moje (2002) also explain that race, gender, and social class play a role in identity construction. However, the pressures of the dominant culture often threaten how individuals choose to represent their identity. As a result, McCarthy and Moje (2002) call for a classroom pedagogy whereby teachers engage students in resisting an identity imposed on them, and provide opportunities for students to make sense of their shifting identities. Adopting a critical writing pedagogy when teaching the genre of memoir thus invites a writer to call into question and make sense of his or her multiple identities.

Calkins (1994) states that, “we cannot write well if we are afraid to let our individual voice stand out from other voices” (p. 143). Writing takes courage. In fact, Newkirk and Kittle (2013) describe a *writer* as, “a person with his skin off” (p. 22). This is especially true for memoirists. The key to writing a successful memoir is finding your voice as a writer. Voice in memoir is the author’s distinct personality coming through. This genre asks the writer to ‘be yourself,’ something Newkirk (2013) and Kittle argue is difficult for students when writing has often been treated as a, “form of discipline” (p. 28). With so much emphasis on the mechanics of writing, students have often not felt ownership over what they say in their writing. Teaching memoir with a critical writing pedagogy aspires to support learners in having the confidence to develop their own

writing voice. Further, by adopting a reflective voice, memoir asks learners to immerse themselves in critical self-analysis.

For the purpose of this study I aligned my thinking with both writing pedagogy and critical pedagogy, as memoirs call forth writers to reflect on their past experiences and explore their identities. As the literature suggests, there have often been limited ways in which students are able to connect to their personal experience through writing (Cremin, 2006). As the writing process is often highly structured in the classroom, I decided to focus this research on a pedagogical tool that starts with students' everyday experiences and understandings as triggers to energize them to write.

## CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review is divided into three sections. In the first, I explain the critical theoretical framework for this study, and describe critical pedagogy and writing pedagogy, as well as explore how this framework can support the teaching of memoir writing. Next, I identify themes that emerge from the literature on the teaching of writing and the teaching of memoir. In the third section, I discuss research that has been conducted in the field of the teaching of writing related to the focus of this research.

### A Critical Writing Pedagogy

Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes, “the practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire, 2000, p. 34)

**Critical theory.** Patricia Hinchey (2010) describes *critical theory* as a school of thought that nurtures alternative visions by, “open[ing] our minds to possibilities we once found unimaginable” (p. 13). She explains that critical theory is a social theory founded upon critique, specifically oriented towards inquiring into and challenging structures of injustice and inequality. A principle aim of a critical theory is human liberation; those individuals utilizing critical theory are often striving to uncover and explain what is wrong with current social realities by asking questions such as: whose goals have these decisions served? Who have they not served?

Critical theory recognizes that unequal power relations exist in society. Kincheloe (2008) states that in order to overcome ignorance and challenge the way things are, all knowledge must be acknowledged as biased; thus, critical theories encourage us to question what we know and how we understand knowledge. What knowledge is privileged? Whose knowledge is valued? Knowledge cannot be viewed as neutral or unchanging. Instead, it must be looked at for what it really is: an ever-changing, flexible, unique construct that varies in time and place. Hinchey (2010) states that “the lens of critical theory refocuses our vision of the place we’ve lived all our lives” (p. 13). Critical theory encourages individuals to view events from multiple perspectives. This means knowledge must be constructed in ways where multiple voices and worldviews are legitimized (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). Used in educational research, critical theory tries to serve equity by challenging consensus views and disrupting norms.

Critical theory critiques the idea of identity being static, instead understanding identity as fluid and socially constructed. Critical theory is a useful lens for exploring questions that lead young writers to question assumptions and widen their perspectives. Used in memoir writing, critical theory invites individuals to ask questions about and critically examine how their past experiences are linked to their larger social worlds.

**Critical pedagogy.** A teacher’s choice of pedagogy, or method and practice, art and science of teaching, determines how he or she sets up the environment in which students will learn. Further, through their choice of pedagogy, teachers decide whether they lead, guide, or direct their students in their education. Critical pedagogy is the teaching philosophy I chose as a framework to explore the research questions for this study. I chose this pedagogy for the reason that it invites students to question, challenge,

explore, and discover for themselves who they are and how they exist in relation to the world.

A critical educator is a problem-posing teacher. Shor (1993) explains that a *critical educator* encourages individuals to question ideologies and challenge domination. This is done by achieving what Freire defines as *critical consciousness*: a way for individuals to, “exercise power over the material and ideological conditions of their own lives” (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006, p. 121). Students are viewed as ‘subjects’ of their own lives rather than, “‘objects’ in the stories of others” (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, p. 120). A student who demonstrates critical consciousness engages in critical thinking, reflection, analysis, and action. Kincheloe (2008) explains that when promoting critical consciousness, a critical educator must encourage students to make decisions and include students’ voices in their pedagogical approach. Critical pedagogy is thus student-centered, and asks students to be active in their own education.

Engaging in a critical pedagogy entails challenging traditional paradigms. Critical educators need to step outside their comfort zones to express their emotions, feelings, and personality and encourage their students to do the same (Ornstein, 2007). Kincheloe (2008) states that a critical educator is driven by love, respect, and justice, and, “seeks to assuage human suffering” (p. 9). Students are encouraged to ask “why?” take positions on debates, and take action against the social, political, and economic oppressive elements in their lives (Ornstein, 2007). Critical pedagogy is thus about co-learning, and requires authentic communication between teacher and students. Rather than passing down certified knowledge from higher powers to the minds of students, teachers practicing a critical pedagogy take student knowledge seriously (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 15).

In doing so, teachers who choose critical pedagogy as their teaching philosophy strive for the empowerment of all individuals.

In adopting a critical pedagogy, Ellsworth (1989) suggests teachers must be careful not to assume that everyone's political agenda is the same. In an institutional role, teachers are in an automatic position of authority. Critical pedagogues should question the power imbalance between themselves and their students. Ellsworth (1989) points out that this does not mean attempting to bring students, "'up' to the teachers level of understanding" (p. 306), as this would simply perpetuate relations of domination. Rather, both students and teachers bring their interests to the classroom and these must be valued. Ellsworth (1989) states that, "all knowings are partial" (p. 310). Data collected in this study aimed at exploring students' identities and voices is also partial. Ellsworth (1989) points out that data collected is influenced by the speaker's, "conscious and unconscious assessment of the risks and costs of disclosing their understandings of themselves and of others" (p. 313). Although researchers cannot fully 'know' the experiences of others and their understanding can never be complete, they can strive to paint a picture that is descriptive and transparent.

**Writing pedagogy.** Atwell (2002) says writing in the classroom should not be viewed as anything other than, "disorderly, demanding, frustrating, satisfying, and definitely nonlinear" (p. 36). She states that in order for writing to be meaningful, there should be an itch the writer is trying to scratch (Atwell, 2002). Initially, in scratching an itch an individual may experience some unease and urgency. In time, however, Romano (2011) suggests there is a 'feel-good' reaction of fulfillment and exhaustion once you are done. Therefore, as one's language tumbles out on paper, it should not be expected that it

form some orderly and spectacular piece. Instead, teachers and students alike need to embrace the writing process as the complex adventure it is. Authors Nancie Atwell (2002), Lucy Calkins (2004), Donald Graves (1995), and Tom Newkirk (2013) contend writing should not be viewed as a step-by-step process, but rather embraced as a craft just like any other, a craft that involves discovery, challenge, artful expression, personal investment, passion, and commitment. Rather than writing about a general idea or topic, Atwell (2002) explains students should be encouraged to use paper to think about and write something specific to their lives. Therefore, the classroom agenda needs to allot time for students to use writing to notice, wonder, inquire, and connect.

In *A Place Called School*, John Goodlad (1984) conducted a study asking the question “What do adolescents value most in schools?” The findings suggest social relationships were the most valued, while English was rated the least interesting subject. Kinloch and Ozier (2011) would argue that a strict focus on skills and functions in writing led to these findings; they state that a sole emphasis on the product of writing leaves students feeling pressured to perfect their writing and leaves no time for creativity or risk-taking. Atwell (1998) states that a focus on conventions can, “distract readers and interfere with meaning” (p. 251). At the same time that Atwell (1998) is not dismissing the importance of conventions, she suggests they should come second to purpose; she states that, “when students believe that what they have to say is important, both within their lives and beyond them, they care about how their words go down on the page” (1998, p. 250). Consequently, it is vital that teachers provide students time and encouragement to express themselves in their writing, as it is only when students

successfully bring meaning to their words that they become concerned with whether or not they are well received (Atwell, 1998).

Calkins (2004) describes writing as a process by which individuals use words as blueprints for something even more significant. She states that, “writing allows us to hold our life in our hands and make something of it” (1994, p. 4). Calkins (1994) emphasizes that when individuals are encouraged to write about and for the people that matter most to them, as well as about the issues and experiences of their lives, they care about their writing. She explains the writing process as needing to be connected to students’ experiences in order to avoid writing with, “emotional neutrality” (Calkins, 1994, p. 17). Instead, students should be encouraged to use writing to *think* and *feel* (Calkins, 2004). Students’ beliefs, emotions, struggles, desires, and voices should be central to their writing. Atwell (2002) reflects Calkins’ emphasis on the importance of including sensory detail; she states that in order to make a meaningful connection between the writer and reader, the reader must be able to ‘see, hear, and feel’ what is going on inside the writer’s head and heart. Therefore, writers must be encouraged to include their thoughts and feelings of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch (Atwell, 2002). Accordingly, authors Atwell (1994) and Calkins (2004; 1994) both stress that a teacher of writing must encourage students not to stray from the use of “I.”

**Connecting pedagogies through memoir.**

*Why memoir? It means the world becomes yours. If you don't do it, it drifts away and takes a whole piece of yourself with it, like an amputation. To attack it and attack it and get it under control – it's like taking possession of your life,*

*isn't it? – Ted Hughes*

What is a memoir? Virginia Woolf once said, “a memoir is not what happens, but the person to whom things happen” (cited in Calkins, 1994, p. 401). Identity is, then, central to writing a memoir. Rather than describe a chronological ordering of events, a memoir’s purpose is to explore closely the significance of an event as well as the thoughts and feelings the author experienced in that moment (Calkins, 1990). Responding to criticisms that memoir writing cannot be ‘authentic’ or ‘true,’ Barrington (2007) puts forth the concept of *musings*, which is an author doing a lot of thinking about his or her experiences, “bringing retrospection to bear on the events” p. 110). This retrospective process grants writers permission to interpret their life stories in order to make sense of their lives. By thoughtfully reflecting on how they are anchored to past experiences, individuals can choose to use their voices and enact their identities in multiple ways. However, while interpretation and speculation are taking place, memoirs are not fiction. A memoirist must resist the desire to reinvent memories to make them more appealing to their audience or fill gaps in memories lost or erased. The memoirists’ job is to shape, select, and add focus (Barrington, 2007), thus seeking clarity and understanding of their identity.

Critical pedagogy and writing pedagogy can be linked through the process of writing memoirs. Atwell (2002) states that when writing a memoir an individual can, “isolate a problem, use writing to generate and consider options, and work toward a solution” (p. 64). A memoir allows individuals to craft their own impressions of the events of their lives. Through writing, a memoirist interprets, challenges, inquires, rejects, and embraces. Such musing provides individuals an opportunity to explore their identities and voices. Even more, in uncovering and bringing meaning to ones’ memories,

individuals become in control of their writing and, thus, in control of how their lives are portrayed. Importantly, a teacher must be cognizant and sensitive to the vulnerability memoir writing entails. Atwell (1998) states that as a memoirist is exposing him or herself on the page, it is imperative a teacher demonstrates care, compassion, and understanding.

### **Emergent Themes**

In reviewing the literature on the teaching of writing as well as the teaching of memoir, I recognized three emergent themes: (1) using writing for self-exploration and meaning-making (2) writing as a site of resistance, and (3) teachers-as-writers.

Although some of the literature examined and discussed in this section does not include student participants, these authors continue to demonstrate how writing, specifically memoirs, has not only proven to support various individuals in exploring their identities, but has also encouraged these individuals to challenge inequities and give volume to their voices. This process of (re)affirming their identities as they desire has been proven valuable for a diverse range of individuals, including, but not limited to, those in schools.

**Writing as meaning-making and self-exploration.** Many students gain great satisfaction when reflecting and writing about their lives. In fact, this was the most prominent theme to emerge when reviewing the literature. Authors Ansbach (2007), Atwell (2002, 1998), Calkins (1994), Graves (2003), Kirby and Kirby (2010), Kraus (2009), and Richardson (2001) all demonstrate writing promotes self-awareness, specifically through the use of “I.” Atwell (2002) goes so far as to suggest that in using “I”, students find answers to their constant questioning of, “What can writing do for

me?”, thus discovering that writing promotes exploration and an awareness of self. Even more, as adolescence is a time of struggle between extremes, “fast and slow, blissful and tortured, seeking and shunning” (Calkins, 1994, p. 157), the literature suggests teachers provide opportunity for students to linger over the events and emotions of their lives and discover their interests and passions. Calkins (1994) states teachers must support students in writing to, “probe into, puzzle over, muse about, imagine, [and] feel” (p. 490).

Graves (2003) states that a sense of self is promoted when writing from first person point of view. By using “I,” students are able to discover meaningful things about themselves, reflecting on their past experiences and having ownership of their voices. Further, writing a memoir can encourage students to view their past from different angles. Ansbach (2007) explains to her students that memoir is, “taking a moment from your memory – holding it up to the light, looking through it, turning it to see where the shadows fall” (p. 32). In doing so, individuals gain insight into their identities and may come to some new understandings. Additionally, by writing about and reflecting on their lives, individuals can begin to figure out what the events of their lives *mean* (Atwell, 1998, p. 335). By asking themselves, “What experiences of my life are worth capturing? Which stick with me? What do they *mean*?” (Atwell, 1998, p. 338) they start to see patterns and find significance in what were once trivial and mundane events. Atwell (2008) says that memoir helps writers discover the truth about themselves.

Richardson (2001) provides an example of using writing to make meaning of one’s experiences as well as educating others about those experiences. She (2000) explains how writing is a process of discovery, a way of finding out about and analyzing yourself and the world. Fostering self-reflexivity, Richardson (2000) outlines how

memoir writing in particular engages individuals in a process through which they can learn to nurture their own voices. Having experienced a severe car accident and being told she had, “lost access to [her] brain” (p. 33), Richardson (2001) found renewed access to and control over her voice through writing. At the same time she felt helpless to control the changes her body was suffering from, Richardson (2001) developed a feeling of control when writing to make sense of her experiences of mind and body trauma. Writing provided a space for her to organize and control the language she had difficulty orally articulating. Later in her academic career, Richardson (2001) also used writing as a method of inquiry to resist the assumptions of age-related incompetence. Rather than silencing her voice by ‘fading into the woodwork,’ Richardson (2001) continues to use her voice to learn about and create meaning for herself and her world through writing.

There are many criticisms of memoir writing: that it is trivial, narcissistic, meager psychoanalysis, too expressive, and even that it is a weak attempt at confession. Atlas (1996) describes the genre of memoir as literary confession whereby writers confess, “in public to an audience of voyeurs” (para. 4). Suggesting that memoir has eradicated any possibilities of privacy and instead promoted, “unbridled candor” (para. 5), Atlas strongly labels memoir as a dysfunctional confessional genre. Kraus (2009) and Kirby and Kirby (2010) refute these criticisms. Kirby and Kirby (2010) state memoir is not just literature on oneself, but is, “the honest unfolding of human struggles and triumphs from which important lessons are learned” (p. 23). Kraus states that while the memories are already there, a memoirist must still engage in research of the significance of those memories. In fact, such research is the primary aim of memoir writing. In *Growing Up* (1982), Russell Baker states, “life is a braided cord” (p. 10). It is important that children take the time and

are provided the opportunity to try to make sense of this cord. Kirby and Kirby (2010) suggest memoirists even ask questions for which they do not have an answer. Memoir is thus about doing research. A memoirist uses this form to, “experiment, solve problems and riddles present in their lives, pose sometimes unanswerable questions, and advance hypotheses and *what ifs* about their lived experiences” (Kirby & Kirby, 2010, p. 23). This research can even extend beyond the self to include submerged meanings in family documents and artifacts (Kraus, 2009). Therefore, memoir must be embraced as a process of discovery. By reflecting on how they are linked to their earlier selves, memoirists are supported in making sense of their experiences and identity.

**Writing as resistance.** While memoirists are required to examine their lives closely, they are also encouraged to inquire into how their lives are linked to the destiny of a much larger world. Denton-Borhaug and Jasper (2014) suggest memoir is an important bridge between the personal and political. As a memoirist develops self-awareness and growth in consciousness, he or she is also prone to develop the personal strength to confront challenging situations (Denton-Borhaug & Jasper, 2014). This critical ‘mindfulness’ is supported by writing, specifically writing that engages emotion freely and where a sense of ownership and control is fostered. Writing is a site of resistance, a place for individuals to address any tensions between their purposes and that of the social, political, cultural world they live in.

A memoirist must engage in critical self-reflection when selecting and assigning meaning to a memory (Mack, n.d.). As the *author* of his or her own experiences, Mack (n.d.) explains the writer’s identity is open to interpretation and revision through writing. This can be of benefit to individuals who dislike the label assigned to them by others and

wish to be represented in a different way. In fact, Mack suggests that as the author of his or her own experiences, a memoirist can, “think, feel, and act differently,” thus positioning him or herself as desired and rejecting the status quo. Buss (2006) provides a specific example of using writing to call into question and challenging normative labels. Further, Buss (2006) demonstrates the importance of memoir in supporting authors in gaining perspective about and resisting having an undesired identity forced upon them.

Buss (2006) explored how discursive acts of memoir writing can lead to greater conscious agency in one’s life. She highlights Katie Tarbox as an example. Although Tarbox was already a victim of sexual abuse, she experienced further tyranny following the attack when people created meanings of her experiences for her. Specifically, she was labeled promiscuous and, thus, as having instigated the assault. However, through the hindsight of memoir, Katie was supported in struggling for agency and creating meaning for herself. Through being reflexive in writing her memoir, Katie was able to recognize how she had involuntarily fallen victim to sexual abuse. In particular, Katie was able to observe the seductiveness of her perpetrator, how the disembodiment of cyberspace easily manipulates and confuses, and how vulnerable one is on an athletic out-of-school trip. Overall, through, “conscious agency” (Buss, 2006, p. 19) of writing the memoir *Katie.com: My Story*, Katie was supported in exploring her feelings of guilt and taking control over how her past was represented.

**Teachers-as-writers.** One issue that exists today is students’ lack of motivation to write. Boscolo and Gelati (2013) state this lack of motivation can be attributed both to the rigidity of the writing tasks assigned by some teachers, as well as writing being delegated as a solitary activity. If educators and administrators were to inquire as to the

reasons why some students may be becoming disengaged and unmotivated with writing, perhaps they would recognize the need for students to view writing as worthwhile. Nolen (2007) suggests that in order for students to view writing as a worthwhile activity, writing needs to happen within a, “literate community” (as cited by Boscolo & Gelati, 2013, p. 292). Rather than being a solitary act, literate communities encourage students to, “develop their identities as writers through writing activities in which they are involved with teachers in producing worthwhile material” (Boscolo & Gelati, 2013, p. 293). Various authors (Cremin, 2006; Deegan, 2008; Graves, 2003; Newkirk & Kittle, 2013) contend that when teachers write, students are motivated to write also. Boscolo & Gelati (2013) suggest it is not enough to make the subject interesting to motivate students to write, but teachers must also make writing interesting by sharing in the writing process alongside their students. Less emphasis must be placed on the product and more on the process in order to help students value their writing.

A reoccurring question that emerged from the literature was, “who is a good writing teacher?” Atwell (2002, 1998), Calkins (1994), and Graves (2003, 1995) agree that a good writing teacher is one who writes. Atwell (2002) asserts that in order for students to recognize what writing can do for their lives, they must observe how writing has served the lives of adults. Teachers can gain insight into the experience of writing by writing themselves and subsequently, relating their knowledge to students in order to help them (Atwell, 1998). Newkirk & Kittle (2013) state that “seldom do people teach well what they do not practice themselves” (p. 27). Just as one cannot explain the conventions of the English language without him or herself having before experienced and practiced with words, teachers cannot effectively be teachers of writing without having before

explored writing themselves. Teachers must thus be willing to engage in the writing experience with their students, to accept that they will always be learners too.

Students often resist writing because writing has been treated, in the past, as a place to expose one's knowledge of spelling, grammar, and conventions (Calkins, 1994). It is important, then, that teachers demonstrate how writing can be meaningful to their own lives in ways other than as a performance. Calkins (1994) suggests teachers also need to take risks in exposing themselves on the page when asking their students to do so. Importantly, this sort of sharing is one step towards building a community of learners in the classroom. Just as Atwell (1998) suggests teachers can learn a lot about their students by, "opening [the] curricula to young adolescents' preoccupations, perspectives, and growing pains" (p. 85), students, too, feel more connected to their teachers when teachers share in the writing process. Graves (2003) contends sharing pieces of writing becomes a key element in the writing process, whereby both teacher and students invite each other to hear about their lives and ways of living in the world.

Atwell (1998) describes the benefits of 'taking off the top of her head,' of showing her students what she is thinking and feeling. By inviting her students to hear how she thinks as an adult writer, Atwell models the joys of discovery in writing and also demonstrates her passion in the field. Graves (1995) reinforces her modeling in stating, "being a writer yourself is perhaps the most important thing you can do to help children learn to write" (p. 10). Importantly, it is essential teachers do not limit their demonstration to the joys they experience when writing, but must also demonstrate how teachers struggle in their writing too (Graves, 2003). Even more, by sharing their writing,

both teachers and students are able to identify the elements of an ineffective and an effective memoir. Together, they can then help each other improve in their writing.

Lastly, Graves (2003) stresses that a teacher must consistently be familiar with the research on the teaching of writing. New theories are constantly arising for which a student, teacher, or whole classroom may benefit from. While it is imperative a teacher listen to his or her students in order to share in their worlds and meet their needs, a writing teacher can also engage in research outside the classroom. Not only must a writing teacher write, but he or she must remain open to the ideas of both students and other teachers.

### **Studies About Teaching Memoir Writing**

Evident in the literature was an emphasis on journal writing and personal narrative; however, there were very few studies of memoir writing in elementary classrooms. I did discover some studies on the teaching of memoir similar to the research I conducted. To illustrate what research has been conducted in this field, in this section, I review the teaching of memoir writing studies, as well as a study where a teacher embraces a critical writing pedagogy.

In the first study examined, two teachers and one university researcher engaged bilingual students in a 12-week unit of study on the genre of memoir (Espinosa, 2006). The intention was to create spaces for bilingual students to bring their lives and interests into the curriculum. Espinosa (2006) highlights how in this study, ESL students were encouraged to write about stories that mattered to them. One student in particular, Galo, told his story of trying to juggle kitchen glasses. While at first his draft included minimal detail, gradually Galo employed the writing techniques modeled by his teachers,

including adding detail, exploding a moment, and dialoguing in two languages. His growth as a writer suggests both teacher modeling and matching language and experience with writing were extremely valuable practices. By making students' lives, experiences, and languages a central part of the writing process, students were able to use their prior experiences as entry into a new and challenging curriculum (Espinosa, 2006). Further, embracing a *situated learning theory*, whereby learning is best achieved through engaging in social practices, the students in this study collaboratively brainstormed and improved their writing. As one student shared a memory, his or her memory often sparked another student to recall or uncover forgotten memories (Espinosa, 2006). This study illustrated that by writing about memories that mattered to them, students both affirmed whom they were and grew in their identity as writers.

Researcher Van Sluys (2003) spent time in a K-2 classroom to investigate students' writing processes. After meeting a second-grade student named Wera, Van Sluys (2003) was inspired to produce a narrative article reconstructing three scenes of Wera's writing. I focus on one scene in particular, the scene in which Wera used her life experiences and knowledge to construct a memoir. Van Sluys (2003) entered the classroom to observe during students' writing workshops. During this observation she noticed Wera, a recent immigrant from Poland, using writing to help her shape her identity between two diverse social and cultural worlds. Wera's memoir, "My Trew Life," depicts a young girl attempting to hold on to her family relations in Poland while writing about her struggle to understand English and not having friends in America. Van Sluys (2003) observed that Wera, through writing, was able to draw on her life experiences. Writing memoirs helped Wera to feel included and valued in her new

classroom culture. Van Sluys (2003) states Wera was using her *funds of knowledge*, the experiences, knowledge, and relationships that constitute who she is or might become to construct her memoir and her identity in her writing. Through writing her memoir, Wera was able to find a link between her social and cultural worlds. Van Sluys (2003) concludes that rather than being forced to abandon one culture, Wera constructed personal meaning by converging two worlds. Ultimately, memoir writing was shown to support students in trying on new identities and acted as a gateway for inclusion and acceptance.

Gibney (2012) outlined the details of how she implemented a memoir genre study in her sixth-grade classroom. Using a writing workshop approach, Gibney (2012) taught mini-lessons throughout the unit to, “raise an issue, demonstrate a useful skill or strategy, or focus the students’ attention on an author’s technique” (p. 244). While Gibney (2012) recognized memoir as being, “an accessible genre for all students because everyone has a story to tell” (p. 244), she still engaged students in brainstorming mini-lessons to awaken their memories and develop resources as springboards for writing ideas. Further, she demonstrated in mini-lessons how to outline a plan for a memoir, how to engage an audience with effective leads and powerful conclusions, and the importance of using sensory details. As Gibney (2012) stated, “Students need to read the genre to write the genre” (p. 245) and thus, memoir books were used throughout the unit to explore the characteristics of memoir. She embraced her role as a learner alongside her students at the same time she challenged them to unearth, “hidden gems from the past” (Gibney, 2012, p. 246). Inspired by Calkin’s (1994) idea of a *writing community*, Gibney (2012) encouraged her students to share their memoirs with the class and shared her own

memoirs frequently. Through sharing, both the teacher and the students were motivated to improve their writing. Gibney (2012) concluded that even struggling writers were motivated in knowing they had an authentic audience with whom they could share their work. Not only did Gibney (2012) demonstrate that writing as a teacher is important, she also illustrated how a memoir genre study enriches the classroom culture, as both teacher and students learn about each other beyond the classroom walls.

Reflecting on a writer's workshop of Grade 3 students, Lewison and Heffernan (2008) explored how a critical writing pedagogy encouraged students to explore the social and personal perspectives of important issues in their lives. Attempting to move beyond recycled topics to social and political issues of justice, Lee, the classroom teacher, introduced students to 'social issues books.' Lewison and Heffernan (2008) characterized these texts as "disruptive" (p. 443), as they unsettle conventional storylines by drawing attention to difference. Students were encouraged to make personal connections to the issues presented in the books. Students composed their own stories illustrating their experiences of personal and social oppression and domination, such as being taunted or isolated on the school playground. Lewison and Heffernan (2008) described how students' stories, or their "social narratives," often blurred real life and fiction by drawing on "their lives, the lives of their classmates, and the lives of literary characters" (p. 458). They found that this form of social narrative helped students feel comfortable in writing about sensitive topics tied to race, ethnicity, gender, physical appearance, and ability. A fear of judgment seemed to be displaced. For example, some third-grade boys felt safe to resist the 'boy code' of no crying in their social narrative writing pieces. By illustrating a male character crying, these boys were able to

demonstrate a strong emotional response to incidents of bullying (Lewison & Heffernan, 2008). In conclusion, this study demonstrated that a critical writing pedagogy can introduce students to “what writing can do” (Lewison & Heffernan, 2008, p. 438). Specifically, social narrative writing encouraged students to use writing as a form of social action to make their personal and social issues visible and analyze those issues important to their lives.

In Ontario, it is not uncommon for a city classroom to reach a capacity of almost 30 students in one room. At the same time teachers strive to meet the expectations of a demanding curriculum, some students may receive a good deal of attention while others slip through the cracks. Even more problematic, sometimes the 30 bodies in a classroom are looked at and treated as being one unified body. By choosing to embrace a critical writing pedagogy as his or her philosophy, a teacher endeavors to recognize and understand the multiple identities that exist in and impact the classroom culture. A teacher engaged in critical writing pedagogy is dedicated to practices of self-empowerment and helping students to find significance in the particulars of their lives. Calkins (1994) states that “[writing] is being conscious of living” (p. 4). By encouraging students to look at their lives from different angles and to ask questions, this critical educator can help students use writing to “figure out who [they] are, through glimpsing and reflecting on who [they] were” (Atwell, 2002, p. 9). As the literature suggests, writing memoirs can support students in representing and interpreting their everyday worlds.

### CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCHING MEMOIR WRITING

In this chapter, I outline my methodology and methods, and describe my research process. To rationalize my choice of methodology and method, I begin with an explanation of my epistemological position as a researcher, which starts with my personal use of memoir writing in my daily life. I outline key methodological tenets of generic qualitative research. I describe my participants, ethical issues unique to generic qualitative research, and the challenges of conducting respectful research with children in schools. I list my research questions, and outline my data collection and analysis procedures. I conclude this chapter with a review of the measures I took to ensure the trustworthiness of my study.

#### **Epistemological Awakenings: Why I Write and How Writing Serves Me**

##### Didn't Fit In

*I twisted my body side to side to gain perspective of my reflection, my portrait image and my side view. It wasn't hard to see what they saw; the dull coloring of my cheeks, the unbroken transition from collarbone to waistline, a lack of acclivity betraying my desire to mask my platonic spirituality from the world. A few stray wisps of hair freed from a tightly held back ponytail revealed my outdated sense of fashion, my passion for the invigorating and informal settings of green horse pastures, wheat fields, and forests. Nonetheless, my whimsical understanding of life in the country did not translate well into an urban backdrop. Instead, the very things I cared for most were viewed as uncultured, unrefined. Making friends was introduced as a new challenge for me, a challenge magnified by my lack of cultural awareness in a world of crimson lipstick, espresso eye shadow, and summertime bronzer. It had been my decision not to follow my childhood*

*friends to the appointed school for the ninth grade. Unfortunately, I had not anticipated the many meager attempts I would take to be recognized, unfailingly falling short of expectation, of acceptance. I unhesitatingly picked up the thin tube of black mascara, an independent and unpracticed purchase in an attempt to fit in. I carefully folded and refolded layers of Kleenex, nestling them in the inner pads of a bra both nonessential and borrowed from my older sister. A quick glance towards the mirror confirmed my ineptness. I hastily discarded the Kleenex and rummaged for my sisters blush. I drew a thick streak of primrose across my narrow cheekbone, pierced my ears with a set of large dangling earrings. They felt heavy and foreign, my ears being unaccustomed to any additional weight or ornament. A wave of promiscuity swayed my confidence and for a fleeting moment, I was assured my costume would result in companionship. In fact, it did. I made friends and merged in what was then considered 'popular' and 'chic'. I exhausted myself to parallel the rapidly shifting trends and increasing pressures of a favorable reputation. I had less time to satisfy my nature loving self, and spent more time trying to fit in. This pressure gained snowball momentum and led me down a path I would travel for years to come, a path that distanced me further from home and closer to a world where acting and costume were paramount to my survival.*

*Epistemology, how individuals know what they know, is the basis for which they claim knowledge. Epistemology influences how researchers engage with their data (Carter & Little, 2007). Researchers' understandings of what constitutes knowledge directly influence the methodology and methods they choose.*

I write to make sense of things, to come to some understanding of my identity, relationships, emotions, and worldviews. I write because I feel good doing it. Usually, an

idea for a memoir springs into my mind and I feel compelled, fervent to pursue that idea on paper. When I finish writing something, I save it in the 'My Writing Pieces' folder on my laptop and know that I have come one step closer to attempting to question, uncover, link, mold, and discover who I am and why I am that way.

Engaging in a close read of the above memoir, one can recognize that I was experiencing identity confusion in a new environment both unfamiliar and disparate to me. This memoir captures my emotions as a developing teenager, reflecting on the transition from a rural elementary school to an urban high school. I felt estranged in the city, where simple appreciations of fragrant hay and knowing different types of trees had little to no value in conversations or building rapport. Instead, individuals seemed more concerned with the latest brand names and their ripening sexuality. Moving into this new social sphere, I felt alienated and incompetent, even somewhat ashamed at being uneducated in modern things such as fashion and media. My self-confidence quickly diminished and I could no longer look in the mirror and see myself anything other than an outsider, an outsider both unpopular and obsolete. My body image, being flat-chested and having no sense of fashion understanding, led me to want to fabricate a new 'me' that would fit the urban societal mold deemed appropriate and 'cool.' Applying makeup, wearing earrings, and an attempt to stuff my bra were only the first steps I took to try to fit in. Feeling confused and distressed in my attempt to identify with a non-rural context, I rejected the pastoral identity most natural to me. However, in the process of writing this memoir, I was able to gain an aerial perspective and recognize my efforts as temporary, being a social performance to appease my audience.

For me, memoirs have served as a remedial process. They have provided an opportunity for me to survey my past experiences in order to gain perspective on my identity. I believe that students experiencing identity confusion may also benefit from an introspective writing process, by using writing to “re-see, reshape, and refine [their] thoughts” (Calkins, 2004, p. 222). In the above memoir, I was able to sift through my emotions, ultimately identifying the characteristics of my identity I valued and those imposed on me by others, making sense of the discomfort leading me to feeling pressured to act. I believe students too can use memoir to make sense and give meaning to their identities. As Caelli, Ray, and Mill (2003) claim that *qualitative research* is a process that seeks to discover and understand the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved in a similar experience, I feel that qualitative research is (for me) the most appropriate way to access the lived experiences of students when reflecting and writing about their lives.

### **Generic Qualitative Research**

In this study, I align my use of generic qualitative research with Caelli, Ray, and Mill’s (2003) definition of what generic qualitative research is not; it is research that, “is not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known qualitative methodologies” (p. 4). Instead, the styles that generic qualitative research may take are numerous, given that it can combine various established methods and deviate from the rules, guidelines, and assumptions of any one. Given its flexibility in terms of form and language, conducting generic qualitative research is a growing trend in the research world (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003).

Kahlke (2014) explains that critics of generic qualitative research have labeled it as *atheoretical*, lacking literature and instruction as well as being a form of ‘method slurring.’ Various authors, however, have provided counterarguments contending that although the boundaries of generic qualitative research are less defined, researchers who choose generic qualitative research can ensure rigor and quality by making certain their research questions, methodological choices, and research methods align (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Kahlke, 2014; Merriam, 2009). Kahlke (2014) argues that an overreliance on methodological conventions can keep a researcher from thinking broadly about his or her research. Conversely, generic qualitative research encourages the researcher to become a ‘research artist,’ drawing from the strengths of various methodologies to approach his or her research from new and interesting angles (Kahlke, 2014). As with all other methodologies, a researcher who chooses to employ generic qualitative research must be reflexive, consider the ethical implications of his or her research, and make clear the reasons for any research choices within the study (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Kahlke, 2014; Merriam, 2009).

When I first thought about the research I would conduct, I immediately knew I wanted to be immersed in the research environment. I did not want to stand on the sidelines *attempting* to remain neutral and objective. Instead, I had interesting questions I wanted to explore and I wanted that exploration to be collaborative, for students and teachers to discover together. When it came to fitting these questions to an already established qualitative methodology, I found the fit always to be awkward. However, generic qualitative research is malleable (Kahlke, 2014). As Merriam (2009) states, it focuses on, “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their

worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 23). Therefore, it aligns with my epistemology of the importance of seeking to explore the perspectives and worldviews of others and oneself.

### **Study and Participants**

This study took place over the duration of eight weeks. I entered the classroom as teacher-researcher during the students’ 100-minute language block, usually three times a week, to implement a memoir-writing unit aimed at introducing students to a new genre of writing and encouraging them to explore their voices and identities.

The participants in this study were 16 boys, 6 girls, and their teacher (Charlotte) in a seventh-grade Catholic elementary classroom considered to be in a low socio-economic neighborhood. The Principal, prior to entering the classroom, told me that the class was diverse. One factor contributing to the description of the students being diverse was the students whose first language was not English. It was my hope that by writing and sharing memoirs, students would become attentive to and value the diversity that made up their classroom.

### **Ethical Considerations**

“I don’t know where I’m going from here, but I promise it won’t be boring”

– David Bowie

#### **Obtaining consent.**

*It’s funny how experiencing a set back can physically stall you. It’s sad too. I move slower lately, wake up more tired than before I went to sleep and I seem to have a bleak attitude about things. Everything seems less vibrant, colours are dull and conversations seem either daunting or strenuous. It really IS sad. It is sad to be this close*

*to the end, to have put in THAT much work and to feel it is almost easier to quit*  
(Research Journal, 11/01/16).

Obtaining consent was no quick or easy task for this study. In fact, when I had finally re-gained momentum after a 28-day trip to Southeast Asia, no longer relying on pot after pot of strongly caffeinated coffee to kick my jetlag, I received a response from the school board I had applied to do my research in two weeks before Christmas. The email began with, “We regret to inform you...” My proposal had been denied. Suddenly, I felt as if my world were crashing down around me. My head filled with words labeling me as being a ‘failure,’ ‘incompetent,’ and ‘dumb.’ I forwarded that email to my supervisor having written one sentence: “I am so confused.” I could not understand why my proposal had been denied. Could they not see how important this was? How meaningful this could be for students? I hit a dead end and didn’t touch anything related to my research for over three weeks. Unexpectedly, it took the passing of David Bowie to set me back in action. On the day his passing was announced, I wrote in my journal, “It’s time to get going, no point in standing still,” at which point I made some minor changes to my research plan and applied to another school board. Three months after having received that first burdensome email, my proposal was granted approval.

Even before applying to school boards, I first sought approval from the Brock University Research Ethics Board. After I obtained permissions from both Brock University (REB File No. 15-109) and the school board, I approached the school Principal to seek permission prior to inviting the teacher and students to participate in my study. I sent out a letter of invitation and informed consent forms to the teacher participant, as well as to each student participant and his or her parent/guardian. Being

that the majority of my participants were under the age of 18, in addition to an assent form for minors, Parent and third-party consent forms were sent to the parent or guardian of each child asking permission for their child to take part in the study.

A potential risk existed that the students may have felt obligated to participate because they knew that their classroom teacher had already agreed to participate. To minimize the risk of the students feeling obligated to participate, I had discussed this possibility with the teacher in advance. When describing the study to the students, I specifically indicated that the teacher knew that not everyone might agree to participate – and that this was okay because they could choose to continue with their regular writing activities or write memoirs, but their material would not be included as data in the study. By asking students to assent themselves to participate in the study, I hoped to provide an additional opportunity for them to review and ask questions about the process before agreeing to take part in the research. Only after having received permissions from all 22 students and their parent/guardians did I begin to collect data for this study.

**Confidentiality.** To protect the identities of my participants, to the best of my ability, I assigned pseudonyms to all participants as well as altered other identifying characteristics when necessary. For example, although parents consented to excerpts and/or quotations from students' journals and questionnaire responses being included in the reporting of the results, I was cautious in citing students' words. I made changes to the text to eliminate potential identifying information such as descriptions of places s/he has lived, attended school, or names of friends, family members, and peers. The name of the school and school board where I conducted this research was also not made public.

Additionally, I had informed the teacher, students, and parents that they had the right to withdraw at any time from the research process and could do so without any penalty.

**Risks of researching children.** Before beginning this study, my supervisor reminded me that doing school-based research would be much different from doing research in any other site. She pointed out the challenges that come with researching children. As mentioned above, getting access was one, having the added steps of asking permission of the school board and the adult gatekeepers. Further, Punch (2002) identifies several methodological issues an adult researcher may have when researching children. She points out that in an adult-centered society, children are often marginalized. They are perceived as being less experienced than adults and, thus, adults control much of their lives, oftentimes imposing their views on children and rejecting anything different. Most research environments, particularly schools, also contribute to unequal power relations, as they are spaces organized and controlled by adults (Punch, 2002).

Attempting to minimize students' feelings of being controlled by an adult researcher, I approached this study with the goal of fostering a classroom culture where each individual felt valued and in charge of his or her learning. I asked students to agree to participate in the study themselves, providing an opportunity for them to ask questions before agreeing to participate. I welcomed students' views, worldviews, and opinions while trying not to impose mine on them. I reassured students daily that there were no right or wrong answers. In *Doing Respectful Research*, Tilley (2016) stresses the importance of researchers being critically reflexive, as ethical issues can emerge *in situ* without warning and it is imperative that the participants stay informed. By maintaining a researcher journal, I strove to be critically reflexive and question my role as well as my

relationship with the students I was researching. I daily recorded rich and full accounts of my thoughts and feelings throughout the study.

At the same time I attempted not to impose my views, I recognized that I was not a neutral participant in the study. I have strong feelings about memoirs. I agree with Atwell (1998) that teachers need to demonstrate passion in their fields. I believed that by demonstrating my love for writing memoirs, my students would also love memoir writing, too. Students would feel inspired to take a risk and be vulnerable in exposing and exploring their identities on the page. In asking students to write about their lives, I was careful to respect their choices of what to write about, recognizing that what one values varies between individuals.

### **Doing Respectful Research**

Tilley (2016) states that in order to be respectful, the researcher, “must be critically reflective, considering the potential for both harm and good possible from the research act” (p. 4). Through charting my learning journey as a new researcher in a journal, I have strived to constantly monitor my study, including both how the study influenced me and how I influenced the study. I continually questioned how my role as teacher-researcher affected the research process, as well as remained aware of, so as not to abuse, the power I had as observer over the observed. I attempted to create an *audit trail* (Carlson, 2010) by recording observation notes both during and after each lesson. In my journal, I documented my thoughts and feelings at all stages of the research process, for example: “I am wondering: are students getting bored/tired of writing memoirs? What is the key length that a unit should be to both give the students enough time to understand and practice the genre *and* stay engaged?” (05/17/16). By asking myself questions, I

attempted to maintain an informed critical eye. Even more, I turned a critical reflexive lens on the data by including my thoughts and feelings in data collection, analysis, and reporting of the research. Specifically, through reflexivity, I attempted to bring any past experiences and biases to consciousness that may have influenced the study and include them in the inquiry process. For example, I asked, “will my passion and belief that memoir writing can serve as a remedial process outweigh the beliefs students actually have themselves about the memoir writing process?” (Research Journal, 12/11/15). Using a critical reflexive lens, I strove to engage in a credible research process that produces trustworthy data.

**Reciprocity.** Harrison, MacGibbon, and Morton (2001) describe *reciprocity* as, “the give and take of social interactions” (p. 323). A researcher who is concerned with the power relations in the researcher-researched relationship attends to reciprocity by helping those involved to empower themselves (Harrison et. al., 2001). I agree with Tilley (1998) in that I envision respectful research as constituting, “reciprocal relationships from which both researchers and participants benefit” (p. 7). I outline below how I had planned to do respectful research so that my participants would benefit, as well as how possibilities of reciprocity became visible during the inquiry process itself.

The obvious possibilities for reciprocity in the initial stages of this study were that the students might benefit by participating in a new experience with writing and developing new writing skills, and that these experiences had the potential to inform the classroom teacher’s future practice and contribute to the literature that informs educators. I also outlined the minor risks associated with the study in the consent and assent forms. However, reciprocity is both unpredictable and complex; therefore, opportunities for

reciprocity developed as the study progressed. Not long into the study, the teacher participant expressed her interest, as well as the interest of other teachers in the school, in receiving a copy of the memoir-writing unit I had implemented. She stated that she would like to teach the same unit the following school year. Although I had not anticipated putting together a folder of all the resources that went in to the memoir-writing unit to pass along to other teachers, I welcomed this opportunity as it arrived, excited that other classrooms might benefit from being introduced to writing memoirs.

### **Researcher Assumptions**

I acknowledge two main assumptions that underpin the present study. The first is that making sense of one's experiences is a valuable opportunity for personal development. My experiences with memoir and striving to be mindful have led to this belief. Thich Nhat Hanh says, "In order to heal others, we first need to heal ourselves. And to heal ourselves, we need to know how to deal with ourselves." Dealing with one's self, what I interpret as coming to know and understand the actions of one's mind and body, is a mindfulness I strive for when writing a memoir. As mentioned earlier, I write to make sense of things. I write hoping that I will come to some new understanding of my identity and see into why I do the things I do.

At times throughout this study, I would question my role as 'expert memoirist,' as I have often heard others refer to me. Yes, I write in my daily life, when I have time that is. I *enjoy* writing. When I discovered the genre of memoir, I felt overcome with a feeling of relief; I now knew a place I could go to unscramble, rejoice, reminisce, grumble, and even rage. Memoirs seemed to welcome all of my qualities, whether good or bad. Memoir allowed me, encouraged me even, to find out about myself: who I was, who I

am, and who I might become? But can one expect this level of self-inquiry of young student writers?

I take issue with how children are often viewed as incapable of experiencing complex feelings. In fact, I would argue that adolescence is an extremely difficult time as students are learning a lot about their identities. Calkins (1994) believes, “adolescents very much need to write about the poignant, turbulent events of their lives” (p. 174). I, too, believe students can benefit from writing to discover meaning about oneself. Therefore, the second assumption underpinning this study is my belief that memoir writing can promote self-awareness during adolescence. Grant (2014) states that a qualitative researcher must acknowledge that, “multiple factors, including [researchers’] personal narratives, shape the data [they] produce and [their] interpretations of [the] data” (p. 2). Watt (2007) further stresses that researchers must be reflexive, meaning they must, “take stock of biases, feelings, and thoughts, so they can understand how these may be influencing the research” (p. 84). Here, I am purposefully drawing attention to my bias and use of memoir writing, as well as how I have faith in young student writers’ abilities to explore all of their feelings including anger, frustration, disgust, confusion, joy, and affection. It is thus likely that my personal belief that memoir writing is useful for self-exploration and development has influenced how the data for this study has been collected, analyzed, and reported.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected over the eight-week block from the following five sources. First, the majority of the data came from journals, which included my research journal, but also the journals of students. The second source of data came from my participant

observations. Artifacts such as student memoirs, teacher memoirs, and teacher comments were also collected and analyzed. The fourth set of data was collected through student questionnaires, and finally, responses from in-depth open-ended interviews with the classroom teacher provided a fifth set of data for the study. In attempting to understand what meaning the memoir-writing unit had for the individual participants, I illustrate in the Findings section of this paper both the students' and teacher's points of view and experiences using their words gathered through the collection of data. What follows is a description of these sources of data and how I used them in this study.

**Journals.** The first source of data came from my research journal. In my research journal, I describe and comment on my research journey at various stages during the process of completing my research. Through the exercise of, “observing myself observing” (Ellis, 2004, p. 10), I organized my thoughts, opinions, and emotions and practiced self-reflexivity in order to potentially add another layer of analysis to my understanding of teaching writing and observing others write. Tenni, Smith, and Boucher (2003) state that in order to maintain rigor, researchers must write about ‘the messy stuff,’ what they may prefer not to write about. In my journal, then, I provide rich and full accounts of my experience as teacher-researcher, including my self-doubts, mistakes, embarrassments, and inconsistencies. For example, I reflected in my research journal by writing, “Is it cheating that I am writing my memoirs at home? Should I write them here during Sacred Writing Time? Would they (the students) benefit?” (04/12/16). This journal entry highlights the struggles I faced as teacher-researcher and the challenge of attempting to teach and collect data at the same time. I wanted to write memoirs

alongside the students, which I did at times, but I also needed to observe the students writing.

I also collected data from the journals of students. Calkins (1994) suggests teachers institute rituals to aid students in seeing their lives as invitations to write. Therefore, at the beginning of the study, students were given a notebook in which they were asked to keep all of their written memoirs, as well as jot down strategies, ideas for future memoirs, and comment for the duration of the study.

**Participant observation.** Over the course of this research, I recorded participant observations as a second set of data. Punch (2002) states that participant observations treat students in a way that they can display their competencies. I recognize that simply by being in the classroom, I may have influenced those whom I was studying. Therefore, in order to maintain consistency, I attempted to follow Tjora's (2006) recommendation of keeping descriptions and interpretations separate. When recording observations, in as much as possible, I separated the descriptions of what I saw and my interpretations.

Tilley (2016) explains that the role of a researcher as observer is reflected in the strategies he or she uses to observe in the context being studied. These strategies rest on a continuum that the researcher may choose from. She explains how a researcher may choose to observe from a, "distanced perspective by directly observing and having no intentional interactions with people and context, or choose a degree of involvement as observer-participant who is partially or more fully involved in the context" (Tilley, 2016, p. 116).

My role as observer-participant shifted as I became more comfortable in the research site. At first I observed from a distanced, uninvolved stance while

simultaneously maintaining my role as teacher. I constructed field notes using pen and paper from a desk at the side of the class, casually lifting my head to glance around the room or walk over to a student with his/her hand up. I recorded significant events as well as the mundane of classroom life. But just as Tilley (2016) noticed in her research, I began to discern that as I became more involved, I felt note-taking interrupted the flow of interactions I had with the students. I questioned whether students would think I was inattentive and distracted. As a result, I started to keep more mental notes to write down later, sometimes recording a single word or phrase while students were writing. I would go home and immediately record the lesson's happenings using my shortened versions of note taking and my memory as a guide. Although it required much more concentration observing from this more involved stance, and was thus more challenging, I believe it helped me in building rapport with the students. I was better able to focus on teaching and demonstrate to students that I was there when they needed me.

**Artifacts.** A third data source came from other personal documents such as student memoirs, teacher memoirs, and the teacher comments on students' written work. In conjunction with the journals and observations, these documents were collected to help me organize representations of students' educational and relevant life experiences to examine them for recurring patterns or themes. Excerpts from the students' work are reproduced in this paper as the students wrote them.

Tilley (2016) states that, "Data-collection plans can shift as research proceeds, and what was originally designated to be secondary data can become primary, and vice versa" (p. 46). I had approached this study unsure of whether or not the classroom teacher would want to participate in the memoir writing process. After only the first lesson, it

became clear to me that Charlotte was not interested in sitting back and watching me teach. She loved teaching and appeared just as eager about writing memoirs as I did, “like I could throw that up there and do nothing and mark papers at my desk or I can show them that I put writing as a priority too and that I, not even a priority, that I just like to do it” (Interview #1). The memoirs in her Writer’s Notebook provide much more insight than expected into the memoir-writing unit, as will be discussed in the Findings section of this paper.

**Questionnaires.** A fourth data set resulted from two student questionnaires that were distributed to students during the time of their regular language arts class: one during commencement of the study, and a second one when the study was nearing completion. These questionnaires consisted of a series of questions and prompts intended to gather information from the participants regarding their thoughts and feelings about writing in general and writing memoirs specifically. Below are a few examples of questions that were included:

- “Do you think writing is important? Why or why not?”
- “What do you enjoy writing about most?”
- “Choose one word to describe how you felt during Sacred Writing Time.”

Each questionnaire took 15-20 minutes for students to complete.

Reflecting on the process, I am unsure if I would recommend using a questionnaire to capture students’ thoughts and feelings of a unit. Although the student questionnaires did provide some insight into how students felt about writing memoirs, the responses written by a few students did not capture the details that I observed in class. Although it may have been that the questionnaire gave some students the opportunity to

be honest, I watched as a select number of participants rushed through the questionnaire. Charlotte commented how, “many students see a page they have to fill in and immediately feel exhausted” (Research Journal, 06/01/16). In hindsight, I believe conducting focus groups with students would have provided data that better represented students’ responses to the memoir-writing unit.

**Responses from in-depth open-ended interviews.** A fifth and final source of data came from responses to in-depth open-ended interview questions I asked the classroom teacher regarding her experiences teaching writing in an elementary classroom. Tilley (2016) describes *in-depth open-ended interviews* as being somewhat unstructured, whereby the researcher prepares questions intended to initiate a conversation with the participant. This loosely structured style of interviewing grants freedom to both the interviewer and the interviewee to explore additional points and guide the conversation in other directions, if desired. The in-depth open-ended interview format, then, was a data collection method well-suited to the critical research I conducted.

I chose to include the classroom teacher as a participant in hopes of collecting thicker and more descriptive data than I may have gathered with my teacher perspective alone. I interviewed the teacher once before commencing the study, and once at the culmination of the research study. Rather than arranging a formal interview, I intended to engage the teacher in a casual but focused conversation to encourage spontaneity in her answers, facilitate deep reflection, and to allow for further questioning based on the shape and direction our conversation took. Below are a few examples of open-ended in-depth interview questions I asked:

- Please describe your language program. What is the driving philosophy of this program?
- How do you feel students responded to the addition of the memoir-writing element to their language arts class?
- Do you think the memoir-writing element supported students in exploring their identities? Explain.
- Has memoir-writing element encouraged student voice? Explain. What about those students' voices often unheard?

The interviews I conducted were very exploratory and flexible in nature. Although I had developed interview questions as a guideline for the conversation, I often moved away from those original questions to ask follow-up or clarification questions. The teacher participant seemed eager to share her past teaching experiences, as well as her expectations and overall opinion of the memoir-writing unit I implemented. As Watt (2007) and Grant (2014) suggest, I documented details surrounding our interview conversation, attending to nonverbal communication (i.e. body language) and addressing the possibilities for power dynamics within our interaction.

Data from each of these five methods will be discussed further in the Findings section of this paper.

### **Transcription**

Transcribing is a challenging task. I found the process to be both time-consuming and tedious. As the researcher controls what is written, what is said, and what is left unsaid, no two people would transcribe the same tape in exactly the same way. Tilley (2016) explains that, “Transcripts produced are at least twice removed from the actual

conversations recorded and interactions observed” (p. 135). In this way, a transcript actually represents a researchers’ *interpretation* of the meaning a participant may have intended. Tilley (2016) states that, “transcription work provides opportunities for preliminary analysis” (p. 135). It was during the process of transcribing my interview with the classroom teacher that I noticed repetitions and thought of questions I wished I had asked. Hence, it is important to be reflective during the process by asking questions and keeping in mind the interpretive nature of transcription (Bird, 2005).

In preparing to transcribe, I decided on the conventions before doing transcribing to maintain consistency. I asked myself “how am I going to represent things?” and then chose to use the transcription conventions Tilley and Powick (2002) outline. In order to present flowing data, I did not include most background sounds or noises as I felt they did not serve my research (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Selective sounds, the tone of the speaker, demonstrative expressions, and punctuation were transcribed (Tilley & Powick, 2002). When presenting data in the final write-up, I chose to remove repetitions and linguistic tics (i.e., “you know,” “umm,” etc.) in hope that I could make reading easier for the audience.

### **Data Analysis**

*Day after day has gone by where I have told myself, ‘I will get something done today,’ ‘I will be productive today,’ and yet still I found myself at the end of each week hopeless and at a standstill. This file, this journal, used to bring me peace at the end of a day’s lesson, where I could quietly reflect on all that had happened in that day’s 100 minutes in the classroom. Reflecting had not only allowed me to organize my thoughts but also helped motivate me for the next lesson, driving what strategies I would resort to*

*or include next... Today I read Watt's article. I was relieved to read that my feelings of stress and anxiety were not unique to me. This task of data analysis is not something that I need to start now and finish quickly. In fact, I have already started. As a new qualitative researcher I at first didn't recognize that I had been doing data analysis at different stages of the process. Data analysis takes time and I can't rush it. I do however need to work on it. Watt has motivated me to start now with writing in this journal again, a place I can be honest with myself and express my thoughts and feelings about the processes I go through as I conduct this study (Research Journal, 07/18/16).*

“Writing is not linear”: I often heard this phrase from my supervisor, reminding me that writing takes time when the tasks before me seemed so daunting I would freeze. She would emphasize the importance of getting my ideas down on paper, and would encourage me to just start writing, as it is only there she said that I would begin to make sense of my thoughts! This was the best advice I received during my three-year master program and applies to data analysis the same. Watt (2007) states, “since analysis takes place throughout the entire research process, a study is shaped and reshaped as a study proceeds, and data is gradually transformed into findings” (p. 95). Data analysis takes time and, thus, the process should also be viewed as iterative. At times, I felt so overwhelmed by the piles of data I had collected that I would push everything aside and was unable to move forward. I questioned myself: “did I collect too much?” But as James (2012) states, “crafting is hard work; it involves repetition; it takes time” (p. 569). Just as I have wrestled with my memories; selecting, speculating, and assessing in trying to come to some understanding of *why* what happened, happened as it did, a qualitative

researcher must wrestle with data, too. Below I highlight how the iterative process of data analysis required rigorous craftsmanship and patience.

Kahlke (2014) points out that in order to construct themes, a researcher must get close to the data. Thematic analysis formed the framework that guided my analytical process in this study. Clarke and Braun (2013) describe *thematic analysis* as an “accessible” and, “theoretically flexible” (p. 120) method of qualitative data analysis. This method is commonly used in qualitative research to identify, analyze, and code themes or patterns in the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013). For effective use of thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) state that a researcher must decide whether data analysis will be constructionist or essentialist/realist, inductive or deductive in nature, what exactly counts as a theme, and whether analysis will include rich description of one entire data set or simply a detailed account of a specific aspect. In planning how to analyze the data, I decided that I would first code the interview transcripts, believing that they would provide a thorough overview of the complete unit. When analyzing the interview transcripts, the procedures I conducted were as follows.

With the transcripts in hand, I listened to the interviews to verify the recording against the hard-copy. I analyzed transcripts in chronological order by first applying the a priori codes I had developed from the research and interview questions, specifically looking for recurring words. I then attached emergent codes to the transcripts as they developed, thus growing my list of codes. These emergent codes were then applied during a second round of coding, in which I returned to the first transcript to see if I had missed any important data in the early stages. Finally, I collapsed codes together

whenever it made sense, specifically when codes were similar, and constructed themes based on the final codes.

When I shared these final codes, what I thought constituted the ‘finished product,’ with my supervisor, she pointed out numerous things I had skipped over. In my journal, I questioned myself: “How could I have been so blind? Why did I miss so much?” (07/26/16). Tilley (1998) states that when analyzing data, the themes a researcher imagines emerge while others remain unearthed. In debriefing with my supervisor, I recognized that my role as teacher-researcher, and my shifting position from ‘outsider’ to ‘insider’ as I built relationships with both the classroom teacher and the students, kept me, perhaps subconsciously, from wanting to code certain things I felt the teacher may have not wanted me to. “[My supervisor] reminded me of my role as critical researcher to see everything, not just what I want to see now that I have finished the memoir unit” (Research Journal, 07/27/16). With her encouragement, I returned to the transcripts to contemplate the conversations/words I had not coded before. Looking specifically at this outlying data, I asked myself, “Am I being open-minded? Why didn’t I code this before?” Additionally, I also highlighted sections that I thought I might later like to quote in my major research paper like, for example, the teacher directly describing her thoughts and opinions about writing in general and memoirs specifically.

After coding the interviews, I coded the other data, keeping in mind both my research questions and the list of codes (both a priori and emergent) I had derived from the interview transcripts. I coded all other data by hand. I found that coding by hand helped me to slow down and look more at individual words. I bracketed a word, sentence, or paragraph and then wrote the code in the margins. Based on the data analysis, broad

themes were developed related to relevant aspects of the memoir-writing unit that I explored in this study. Finally, I refined the broad themes into more distinct subthemes that revealed students' patterns of thinking and acting as they used memoir writing to question, explore, reveal, interpret, link, shape, etc. and these subthemes informed the findings of this study.

When analyzing the students' Writer's Notebooks, I recognized that in each student's book, there were specific memoirs and other things written that would be important for me to include in this paper. This was the data I concentrated on. In order to condense the pile of papers I would need to sift through to begin writing, I copied what I thought was important to my research from each student's notebook into one Microsoft Word document. All other data were not transferred into this document. This document allowed me to access what I thought was important and had coded in each students' Writer's Notebook with ease.

I approached analyzing the student questionnaires by looking at all student responses for each question one-at-a-time. The student responses that I coded as significant to this research I then again copied into a Word document for each question. I then made further notes/comments about each question based on my researcher thoughts and feelings in the margins of this document. For example, I commented, "some students wrote that memoir promoted positive feelings in them."

I approached analyzing my researcher journal by highlighting by hand things I felt were important to include in this paper. I made further comments in the margins to record my thoughts and feelings based on new insights that arose as I reread my reflections. For example, I highlighted questions I asked myself in my research journal and commented

how, “By asking myself these questions and further discussing them with the teacher I was able to keep the unit and research moving forward” (08/28/16).

### **Establishing Credibility**

I have taken various steps to ensure the credibility of the data I collected. I have checked my interpretations with the teacher participant, I have included the voices of both teacher and many student participants, and I have used multiple data sources, and strategies, listed below.

**Member checking.** To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, I asked the teacher participant to verify transcripts for their accuracy, a process known as *member checking* (Carlson, 2010). Through this process, I provided the teacher an opportunity to clarify, question, and discuss with me additions and/or deletions of the transcripts before coding. I provided guidelines for member checking, informing the teacher of how written and spoken languages are constructed differently. I wanted to ensure the teacher participant knew what to expect before reviewing the transcript. I also provided choice of how she wanted to engage with the transcript, either by receiving a hard-copy of the transcripts or electronic copies.

I had anticipated that the teacher participant might want me to make some changes. Instead, after a few reminders in which I thought she wanted extra time to look the transcript over, she said it, “looked good.” The teacher participant consented for me to use her words as I had transcribed them, not wishing to make any changes. Given that the teacher participant and I had regular debriefings during the time I spent in her classroom, I believe she put her trust in me to represent her respectfully when reporting on the data I collected.

To increase the credibility and rigor of my study, I included multiple data sources apart from the experiences I had teaching the memoir unit. As mentioned and described above, these data include the classroom teacher's interview transcripts, students' questionnaire responses, and both teacher and student Writer's Notebook's. These additional sources not only allowed me to provide *thick descriptions* (Tracy, 2010) to help place the reader in the context of the study, but also to support me in engaging in self-reflective questioning whereby I could attempt to keep my biases in check. Finally, I also sought to form mutually supportive social relationships with the participants in my study in order to ensure the reciprocity Harrison et al. (2001) assert are essential to establishing credibility.

My experience conducting this research, although challenging, was both positive and rewarding. As a new researcher *and* teacher, I grew alongside my students during the memoir-writing unit. With the added experience of teaching memoir writing, I believe I became a better, more knowledgeable researcher, teacher, and writer. I enjoyed giving mini-lessons on memoir writing and loved watching students practice the genre. Further, I cherished the moments spent listening to the students' and teacher's memories as well as sharing my own with the class. I feel that the experience was very insightful for the students, the teacher, and myself and I am grateful that I had the opportunity to share my passion for writing with others. In the next chapter I draw on students' words in an attempt to illustrate what purpose memoir writing served for student participants and what effect it had on their voices and identities.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

*Talking with my mom on the phone today, I described my feelings of exhaustion to her. I told her how I feel overwhelmed by the volume of data I collected and feel at all times stagnant in my research, being unable to move forward as I feel it is all important. I also told her that I am concerned that the strong passion I feel towards the subject could interfere with doing good quality research and that maybe what I had expected to happen didn't happen at all times. She responded by saying lawyers, whether they believe the accused to be innocent or guilty, must make a case as requested by that person. It is their job to use what evidence they can gather to support the case of that person who has hired them. She suggested I do the same. I must be a lawyer and focus on answering my research questions using the evidence I have gathered. Not all evidence will be useful. While I cannot shut my opinions off, I can separate them from the evidence (Research Journal, 09/24/16).*

In coming to the final stages of writing, I felt overwhelmed by the volume of data I collected. I needed to constantly remind myself to return to the focus of my research questions and address those using the data. Tilley (2016) stresses the importance of staying close to the intention of the research questions in keeping on-track and moving forward in the most appropriate direction. Knowing that I could not address everything, I began to look for the rich data representing participants' experiences of the memoir-writing unit. Some of the findings came as surprises to me, while others did not. What follows below is an exploration of themes that surfaced across all sets of data. I use the data to address my questions and make connections to current understandings of writing in elementary classrooms in the literature.

Five main themes emerged when analyzing the data. Firstly, the data revealed that as students started to write about what they wanted, they became more confident in themselves as writers. Students also used memoir as a way to write to find out more about themselves and their worlds. As a result, it was evident in the data that through the process of writing memoirs, students were encouraged to find their writing voice. In effect, the unique personalities of the students in the classroom became more visible and a community of writers was fostered. Finally, the importance of teachers writing alongside their students was clearly evident in the data.

### **Writing What You Want**

At the beginning of the memoir-writing unit, students struggled in writing independently. They appeared hesitant, perhaps feeling unaccustomed to being asked to look back and write thoughtfully about isolated moments in their lives. Students often asked, “How do we start?” (Research Journal, 04/08/16), and once having started writing, they would stop to reference a dictionary or request further instruction from the teacher. However, as students began writing about memories that they were interested in, they appeared more confident and independent during the writing process.

In our first interview, Charlotte had warned me that her students had not often been given the opportunity to ‘just write.’ It did not come as a surprise, therefore, that many students would ask, “What do you think about this so far?” when writing their memoirs. One morning during Sacred Writing Time (SWT) Marco asked me, “If I chose the animal one, can I do two animals?” These student comments hint at the lack of confidence they had in themselves as writers. At the beginning, many students seemed to

want further instruction and need constant reassurance from either Charlotte or I when writing their memoirs.

Anto is one example of a student who at first lacked confidence and motivation in writing. Each morning for Sacred Writing Time, I put ideas for writing memoirs on the board. I constantly emphasized that these prompts were only jumping off points and encouraged students to write whatever they felt like. Sadly, this was often seen to be very challenging for some students. In particular, Anto struggled to write independently. During Sacred Writing Time, I would often watch as he glanced around the room at his peers' pencils moving. It was only when I approached his desk and with continual probing that he would actually begin writing. One day early in the memoir-writing unit, I also wrote in my research journal, "Anto came up after class and asked if his six-word memoir was okay. When I asked him what it meant he said his Mom told him to write it" (04/20/16). It became clear to me that Anto felt his success as a writer depended on following instructions. However, as students became more familiar with the genre of memoir, we watched as they grew in their confidence as writers. Many students began writing about things that mattered to them. Anto particularly surprised me when he shared a very touching memoir at the end of the unit with the class about losing his uncle:

*My heart was beating, I was sweating, I dozed off into space And only heard my heart, beat, and beat, and felt the sweat Falling down as I thought how cruel the world could be I looked back at my dad and mom they were crying so was my sister. It was an awful night but all I can say is that on saturday on the 21<sup>st</sup> my uncle died from lung cancer, my uncle died I thought How, who, when I said*

*angrily to my parents. From lung cancer My dad replied and were going to the U.S.A. for his funeral. I nodded sadly, then I thought of my uncle..."*

The fact that Anto stood up in front of his peers and independently chose to share such a personal moment in his life is what I consider noteworthy. His sharing completely moved me. Charlotte, too, commented how prior to their introduction to memoirs, she, "wasn't seeing output like that from [the students]" (Interview #2).

At the start, I watched as students' familiarity with traditional forms of writing also filtered into their memoirs, sounding more like essays and having invested little emotion or feeling. Instead, students seemed to focus on forming introductory sentences and including supporting details when writing their memoirs. Lily, for example, wrote:

*The best present I have ever gotten is my trampoline. I had wanted a trampoline for so long like since I was four and one day when I got home from my aunt's my dad told me there was a surprise in the backyard and when I got back there, there wasn't anything until i saw a big box! It was my trampoline but my dad said that I have to help him and my uncle put it up.*

In this memoir, one of the first that Lily wrote, she uses the prompt, "Tell about the best present you have ever received" to begin her memoir. Her writing quickly skips from detail to detail while barely touching on her emotions. A reader would have many questions. This ordered approach to writing was common among many students at the beginning of the unit. However, with more and more practice, examples, and me encouraging them to write freely and unselfconsciously, students gained more confidence in the process of writing memoirs and seemed to stop writing what they thought they *should* write and focused on writing what they really *wanted* to. With the help of their

‘Memoir Worthy Experiences’ list – derived from Atwell’s (2002) mini-lesson, “Questions for Memoirists” – which was aimed at capturing a variety of significant moments in their lives, students became increasingly comfortable in bringing their personal experiences into their writing. Their memoirs began to include their family members, their pets, their hobbies, and friends outside the classroom. As a result, their memoirs were better developed and more unique. Here are a couple of examples of Lily’s writing later in the memoir-writing unit:

*I was six years old and I was waiting for what seemed like forever until the phone rang. It was my dad he said “He’s bigger than you think, do we still want him?” “Yes” my mom said. So the waiting began again. Im really impatient I just wanna meet him. Just hurry up dad I thought. Finally after a long boring time of waiting my dads big blue truck pulled up. When he came inside, I saw him, my dog!... I’m 13 now 6 years later and Fraser no longer chews teddy bears, eats mail, pees in the house, or humps people. He can get very annoying with his obnoxious bark but he found his way into the family and I don’t know what I would do without him.*

In another memoir, she writes: *‘Daddy!!’ I used to yell every time I jumped into my dad’s arm’s and he spun me around. Ya that’s right I’m a daddy’s girl. Always have been and always will be.* Lily demonstrated significant growth as a writer. Her later memoirs became much more personal as she embraced her thoughts and feelings. Like many other students, her passions began to be reflected in her writing. In turn, I was able to distinguish the diverse personalities Charlotte had told me were present in her class. Even more, Charlotte commented how some students ‘surprised’ her. When involved in the

process of writing memoirs, students were not only supported in writing about what they *wanted* to write, but also were excited about writing.

**‘Feel good’ writing.** I had not anticipated the significant effect memoir writing would have in improving some students’ self-esteem. In fact, this was one of the main findings to emerge from the data. In Questionnaire #2 responses, many students wrote that writing memoirs helped to show them that they were better writers than they thought. Charlotte commented on how by using their memories as resources to write, students were thinking, “I can do this, this is a story about myself” (Interview #2). In fact, the more I saw students immerse themselves in their writing, the more confident they became as writers. Many students wrote of moments when they were proud of themselves, such as Alister, who wrote about his first soccer goal or Alec, who wrote about the challenging song he learned to play for his piano recital. In reminiscing about moments of accomplishment and hard work, students were encouraged to write positively about themselves. Cooper exclaimed, “I got to read and right about cool things in my life and hear about other peaoels life” (Questionnaire #2). Charlotte commented how Amara even, “came out of her shell” (Interview #2) and shared her writing with the class. Amara expressed her feelings about sharing her memoir in the second questionnaire, “I got to tell people my stor. I felt proud.” As Amara had rarely participated throughout the school year, Charlotte declared that this was a big step for her.

Through the memoir unit, Ashad, a student who had been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, was also encouraged to bring his interests into his writing. He often wrote about his toys, such as his collection of “Yo-kai Watches”:

*Will my mom goT me A yo kai watch To aND with The medals. I really LikeD iT very much. aND iT LooeD Like The other waTchs buT it's A LiTTLe big AND iT has. A clock ThaT is a siTger. Will All I have is Whisper JibaN YaN komauson Noko UNdy PanDil b3-NK1 Swoon TaTTeiTall Azure DragoN WallDeN PanDaNoko and MeNy more. aND I goT The New Yo Kai watch LaND on my iPAD. It was really FUN.*

Charlotte commented that, “To see Ashad go up and put his name up [on the share board] ... Those were the big moments when you saw those people put their names up”

(Interview #2). Ashad demonstrated both confidence and enthusiasm when he went up to share his stories with the class. In his Questionnaire #2 response, he wrote, “Sharing made me happy! I could tell everybody about my weekends and my family.” Charlotte appeared very proud of his participation. Even more, she explained how the boost of student participation that we witnessed by many also, “spread to other subjects”

(Interview #2). It may be concluded that students’ confidence as writers grew as they began to write independently about what they wanted in their memoirs. As a result, Charlotte commented, “I’m not fighting to get some of them to participate anymore” (Interview #2).

### **Exploring ‘Self’ in Writing**

Through writing memoirs, students were encouraged to discover meaningful things about themselves and their worlds, often from new angles. For example, Chantal presented herself as being very self-assured in class. She prided herself on being a perfectionist, doing well both in school and in sports. However, in some of her memoirs,

Chantal depicts a more vulnerable side to her identity. In her memoir about forgetting to feed her pet fish, Chantal recognizes the irresponsibility of her error. She writes,

*My mom told me I had to feed Chubs every day. I did, but sometimes I forgot. 2 weeks later, I woke up and had a staring contest with him, he didn't seem as happy. When I got back from school, I was going to go see Chubs so we could have another staring contest but he was upside down. I thought Chubs was being silly, but he didn't move. I called my mom and she told me Chubs died because I didn't feed him. I felt really irresponsible. Chubs was my first and last pet.*

Through the process of writing this memoir, Chantal was able to reflect on what she had learned about herself from her experience having a pet. She realized that she, too, makes mistakes and is not at all times perfect. In another memoir, Chantal explains how nervous she was before her swimming competition. Charlotte had only known Chantal to be extremely confident, as this was the identity she proudly presented in class. Therefore, in reading her memoirs we were able to see a different side to Chantal, through her understanding of herself that was not perceptible in the classroom.

Calkins (1994) encourages memoirists to ask themselves, “How does this fit into the whole of my life?” and, “How are these stories connected?” (p. 411). Writing a memoir thus requires an author to explore how they are linked to their earlier selves. In his memoir, “Goofball,” Anto highlights his confusion and the struggle he went through as an ESL student:

*We all sat down looking around the room noticing there all small compared to me then when the teacher called everyone name but mine so she came to me and said what is your name I said “Anto” then I heard a knock on the door the teacher*

*opening it I see my dad say “What are your doing here” in Arabic then I replied “This is my class room” in Arabic as well “No it’s not this is ELKP” All the sudden my heart sunk looking around one more time seeing eyes of the kids.*

In reflecting on his previous schooling experiences, Anto was able to explore his emotions as an English Language Learner new to the school. It may be concluded that through writing memoirs, students were supported in engaging in self-analysis by using “I” in their writing. Furthermore, this self-awareness also helped Charlotte and I to discover meaningful things about the students.

**Thinking critically about relationships.** Students draw from a pool of personal experiences when writing memoir. It is important to memoir writing that teachers do not close doors to what students can write; rather, teachers need to work with the complexities and ethical implications that may arise when students choose to disclose certain information, keeping in mind they have a legal and ethical duty to report abuse and/or neglect of children and youth to protect them from harm. As teacher-researcher, I was sensitized to my responsibilities and committed to students’ well-being throughout this study.

Writing memoirs encouraged students to think critically about how their sense of self is connected to their relationships. Students’ Writer’s Notebooks provided a space for them to criticize, deconstruct, and reflect on their experiences. As I analyzed their writing, I found many examples of students using their memoirs as tools to think critically. Sibling relationships are often complicated: at one moment you are fighting over who drank the last bit of chocolate milk, and the next, you are sitting side-by-side playing Nintendo 64, taking turns of who gets to be Princess Peach. Evan’s relationship

with his little brother was no different. In one memoir, Evan wrote about the challenges of being the older brother:

*I knew he would blame me. He blamed me for everything. He blamed me when he was bored. He said I wouldn't play with him and I would be forced to play with my annoying brother although I did five minutes ago.*

Although Evan often felt irritated by his little brother, he was also able to recall moments of joy, such as in his memoir "The Realization":

*"Duggee hug!" I shout as I see a little boy running at me full speed. I see a huge, gleaming smile cross his face and his blue eyes, I think of how excited he must feel. I see his long, brownish blonde hair blowing in the wind and his short legs running as fast as they can go in the overgrown grass... I hear his cute laugh getting closer and closer until he stops sticks out his tongue and plans the angle that he will jump at and jumps hoping for me to catch him. I stretch out my hands, close my eyes with fear and just hope they catch him. I feel his weight dragging me down and realize I caught him. "Duggee hug," I whisper as I squeeze him tight.*

When Evan first asked me to read this memoir I was touched by how visible his feelings of affection were for his brother. It was very clear that his brother meant a lot to him. When asked what his favourite memoir was in the student questionnaire, Evan explained how this memoir, "The Realization," was his favorite because, "it reminds me how I love my brother and how much he loves me back" (Questionnaire #2). Such a realization and a love for a family member was not an uncommon theme in students' memoirs. Lily also remarked how through writing her memoir "For the Better," she was

able to see, “that I don’t hate my brother as much as I thought I did” (Questionnaire #2).

In the following memoir, Lily writes how her brother had broken her training wheels, but after relentlessly helping her practice without them, she was able to ride without them:

*Although my brother may get me mad, sad, or angry at times. I know he’s there for me, and that he’ll protect me, but also be there to have good times and make new memories.*

Part way into the memoir-writing unit, I introduced students to Nancy Atwell’s Rule of ‘So What?’ This rule asked students to subtly show the purpose of the memoir they had chosen to write. The Rule of ‘So What?’ encouraged students to find deeper meaning in their memories. In my first conversation with Preshanth, when I entered the classroom, and several conversations thereafter, he explained to me that his family did not get along. He wrote memoirs that pessimistically illustrated his family relations, from the time his Mom said he did not do the dishes right to being forced to go to church. The fact that *me and my family don’t like eche ore* was a common theme across his memoirs. However, with the introduction of the ‘So What?’ rule, Preshanth was encouraged to uncover a happy memory with his family to write about. In his memoir about going for ice-cream with his family, Preshanth writes, *It’s nice to go some where whit your family especially if you don’t get along all the time. Love your family.* By looking for the significance in the subject he had chosen to write about, Preshanth was able to see how he and his family did have good moments where they all got along. By writing memoirs, Evan, Lily, and Preshanth were all supported in critically reflecting on what meaning a specific memory had to them, in effect, discovering how much certain people in their lives meant to them.

Charlotte explained that by writing memoirs, she felt she was able, “to really know [her students’] hearts a little bit more” (Interview #2). Although she had already developed a good rapport with her students, she commented how some of her students surprised her in their memoirs. Through reading and hearing their memoirs, Charlotte gained insight into her students’ relationships beyond those that she viewed daily in the classroom. During our six-word memoir activity (Smith, n.d.), Bradley wrote, *Dad and Mom heartbroken, two homes*. Although Charlotte had been aware that Bradley’s parents were in the midst of a divorce, Bradley had not yet shared the news with his classmates. It was during this six-word memoir activity, when students were asked to pick something impacting their life significantly, that Bradley chose to share the reality of his parents’ divorce. Although he did not go into further detail about how it was affecting him emotionally, sharing the news with his classmates could be viewed as the first step to coming to terms with his new situation.

Many students’ feelings about their families were even more vivid in their memoirs. For example, Aaron’s relationship with his Dad was very clear throughout his Writer’s Notebook, specifically in his memoir about the first time his Dad showed up for Christmas:

*I was waiting anxiously but a bit nervously. I see many cars go bye. Then I saw ‘the one’ and all my nevousnes was gone. ‘He came after all!’ I thought as I waited on the couch for him. Finally after what felt like forever, There was a knock on the door. My mom opens the door and there, standing there was my father and his girlfriend.*

In this memoir, Aaron emphasizes his uncertainty that his father would show up. Later in the unit, he records two ideas for experiences worth writing about: *When I had to give my*

*cat to my father and How my dad abandoned me for 8-9 years of my life.* A hint of anger can be detected in these sentences. In comparison, Aaron later writes, *Let's be honest, With out my mother I would be lost.* Aaron continues to write about sharing happy moments with his Mom, such as when she helped him get ready for his first day at a new school, and the time she watched his hockey team win the last game of the season. Through reading his memoirs, I could clearly discern Aaron's feelings towards each of his parents, specifically how he saw his identity as being dependent on his Mom while recognizing his Dad's more limited attendance. Similar to Aaron, Antony's special bond with his Aunt was clearly evident throughout his notebook. In his memoir "A New Life," Antony vividly describes the childhood he had been experiencing when living with his biological mother. He wrote:

*It was a very dark day in March. I woke up to lights outside. I looked out the window it was my aunt tasha? I tried to go open the door. But I saw the house was trashed. I went over toys, couches and a mattress. I opened the door. She said something. I don't remember what it was but I went with her.*

Contrary to the confusion and disarray described of this house, Antony later writes a memoir about his favorite place: his room at his Aunt's. In this memoir, he describes all of the nice things his Aunt has bought him over the years. He is happy with his living situation at his Aunt's, the place he now calls home. In a way, Antony is able to take control of his past through writing. He independently creates meaning of his past experiences and compares them to his more recent situation. Through the process of writing a memoir, Antony was supported in reflecting on his painful memories to see how he had emerged from a troubling situation. His gratitude towards his Aunt having

taken him in and lovingly raising him is very clearly depicted in his memoirs. Antony writes, *She is now my fan my support my everything... She is my #1 admirer. When I grow up I want to be like her.* Through hindsight, he was able to create a memoir that demonstrated his survival.

It was evident in this study that memoir supported students in critically reflecting on their identities, as well as how their identities are linked to members of their family. Students commented in their Questionnaire #2 responses about how they found this process of reflexivity to be comforting at times: *It gave me a good way to exprese myself and get things off my mind* (Preshanth), *It soothed me at times, it was relaxing* (Antony), and, *Writing memoirs took a lot of wate off my back* (Cooper).

### **Whose Voice is Being Heard?**

As students became more and more familiar with the genre of memoir through practicing writing, sharing, and listening to memoirs, the unique voices in the classroom became more pronounced. At the beginning of the memoir-writing unit, the same few students were the only ones to volunteer to share their memoir with the class. However, within a week, more and more students began wanting to share their memoirs. It seemed that as students became more invested in their writing, often writing about moments of accomplishment or pride, they became more comfortable sharing. I watched as initial feelings of nervousness turned into newfound confidence. Evan confirmed my thoughts in his questionnaire response when he wrote, *When I shared my memoirs in class it made me feel nervous at first but as I got into my memoir I would feel excitement.* In fact, many students' responses to Questionnaire #2 demonstrated they had feelings similar to Evan: *I often shared, it was a little scary being in front of everyone but was fun sharing memories*

*with my friends (Emma), It was fun learning how to pour your soul out a little bit and open up to things that you never really said before (Trinity), and I loved the memoir-writing unit because not only did it make my love for writing greater but it showed me a talent that I have (Evan).* After analyzing the data, I began to notice how writing memoirs not only supported students in reliving moments where they were proud of themselves, but also helped many students to discover that they were good at writing.

Writing memoirs was particularly helpful for students whose first language was not English, more than ever so for Cooper. Cooper had recently emigrated from Mexico and was new to the school. Both Charlotte and a few other students explained to me that Cooper, for fear of being laughed at for his broken English, did not feel comfortable talking in front of his class. In fact, Cooper had even broken down in tears when presenting his informational speech on Mexico. Charlotte mentioned how the memoir-writing unit helped her to see students who may have been previously at danger of slipping through the cracks. Cooper's struggles as an ESL student were clearly evident throughout his Writer's Notebook. He wrote, *I was proud of my self at the beging of the school year because I undsod the math and I achuley finished something and now everthing is so hard and all the homework I get never gets done.* For our six-word memoir activity, a project created by *SMITH Magazine* (Smith, n.d.), students were challenged to capture the story of their lives in just six words. Here were a few of Cooper's six-word memoirs: *Funny and smart but always wrong, Quwiet and shiy but verey lowd, and I go outside but stay behind.* Not only was his teacher able to detect his feelings of distress through reading his memoirs, but also, the six-word memoir activity was extremely valuable for Cooper as he was able to express his feelings as an ESL

student in just six words. But this activity was only the beginning for Cooper. In our final Share Café, Cooper surprised Charlotte and me both when he shared a memoir of when his Dad finally asked him to drive the tractor:

*I was waiting my whole life to hear my dad say, “Cooper I want you to drive the tractor to the field.” I jumped with joy when he finally did. I used to ride with my dad during harvest season. I loved the feeling of being up so high in a big machine. I felt big. I climbed up the ladder into the tractor. My dad showed me the controls. He got in his truck and told me that he would guide me there. So I was supposed to follow that little truck in front of me. I was a bit shaky. I was scared I might crash the tractor, maybe into the ditch. I was nervous because it was my first time. We used to live on a dirt road so there was not much to crash into. Now we live in the city with no fields and no use of a tractor. But this is the only tractor I ever drove myself. I was so proud of myself. I felt like I did something new and exciting....*

Cooper was proud of himself when he drove his Dad’s tractor. Even more, when translating this moment of independence into writing, Cooper was able to share his memoir to the class with confidence. Cooper did not break down. Charlotte commented on Cooper’s extreme growth: “I think when he returned to his desk this time it wasn’t a release of emotion like, ‘Oh my god, I’m finally done this, I’m sobbing’ it was more like, ‘I succeeded’” (Interview #2). When Cooper returned to his seat, I watched as his peers patted him on the back.

Cooper was able to discover his voice through writing memoirs and confidently used his voice to share his experiences; he was not the only one. As the community of

writers evolved in the classroom, students could be heard encouraging each other to find their voices, saying, “Alec, come on, aren’t you going to share?” In addition to Cooper, Charlotte commented on how many students whose voices weren’t often heard volunteered to share their memoirs. And when they did share, Charlotte pointed out “It was just so organic” (Interview #2). She explained that students have a much more fluent read of their memories compared to when they read their speeches. Perhaps students were more fluent when sharing their memoirs because they were more comfortable sharing a memory of their own rather than memorizing information that they needed to present.

**Humor.** When re-reading the students’ Writer’s Notebooks in the beginning stages of data analysis, I could not help but keep thinking and even wrote in my researcher journal: “These students are so funny!” (06/11/16). The ability of writing and sharing memoirs to amuse one’s audience so that there is a communal response of laughter was never a finding I had anticipated. However, Atwell (1998) states that memoirs call for strong language, including humor, so that students do not become bored when telling their own or listening to other’s experiences. The student participants in this study repeatedly used humor as a method for engaging an audience while exploring their voices. Evan was one of the many students whose memoirs were often underlined with humor. In his memoir “The Only One,” Evan questioned why when he stands proudly each morning and sings the national anthem, his peers remain silent. Evan comically depicts the matter

*I can’t seem to find out why people don’t sing. If it’s because their afraid they’ll mess up and look silly then there is nothing to worry about because you already look like a goof ball just standing there what difference would it make if you sing!*

Many students often used wit in their writing to capture the audience's attention while, at the same time, attempting to comprehend an experience. Elijah's memoir, "Come and Go," is another good example of this. He writes about when his friend Brian told him he was moving:

*Me and him have a lot of things in common. We like the same video games, anime, and more! But lets start from the beginning when he told us. \*Rewinding Sound\* "Guys im moving during Christmas, which is soon." Brain said while we were working on math. "WHAT!" I Yelled while being quiet. "Please be a joke! Hahaha! Haha?" "Jaxon he is not joking, he told us last year!" Aaron said while coming out of no where. I was surprised, I was not informed! "Brian is a refugee, he has to go." "Well thats just stupid! Canada is a FREE country!" I said. \*Back to the present\*.*

At the same time Elijah confesses his confusion over his friend being deported, he covertly demonstrates the strong feelings of friendship he had with Brian. Although Elijah was clearly distressed by having a good friend move, he keeps his memoir playful by using literary techniques such as exaggeration and oxymoron. Parker, similar to Elijah, also reveals his feelings of affection towards his little brother while maintaining his role as 'class clown' in his memoir, "What Is It?" He writes:

*"What is it?" I asked. "He's your brother" my mom replied. The 'thing' sitting in front of me was short and fat. It had a bald head and spit bubbles that hung out of his mouth. "This thing?" I asked. "Yes, that thing is your brother." I didn't understand. I thought everyone was born the way they were and that they did not change, all my friends brothers were older and cool or the same age and lots of*

*fun. This thing didn't do anything but sit and sleep. I poked him to see what he would do... Its arms were smooth to my fingers but the part I noticed was the way its arms jiggled...Now that was 11 years ago and my brother is bigger now and not as bad and doesn't blow spit bubbles as often. Today we look back on that moment and I think it's funny but my brother thinks it's abuse. Now we play together all day. My brother is one of the most important people in my life so I'm glad 11 years ago I got my jelly rolls.*

Parker used his humor as a way to tell a personal story that also elicited both an emotional response and a good laugh from his audience. Overall, many students in this study used humor to engage the listener at the same time as they attempted to come to some understanding of their experiences in their memoirs. Even more, this humor contributed to a positive classroom culture where students and teachers could laugh together. Overall, it may be concluded that by writing memoirs students were encouraged to discover their writing voice and often used humor as a strategy to do so.

### **A Community of Writers**

As the memoir-writing unit progressed, the meaning of the word *community* shifted for the participants in this study. At the beginning of the study, it became clear to me that many students in the classroom did not see writing as connected to their lives beyond that of securing employment. When asked why they thought writing was important in the first questionnaire, a common thread across the majority of student responses was, "You will need to write if you get a job." Even more, many students said they felt writing had little significance, as they weren't planning on becoming "a famous author."

Listening to each other's memoirs became a way for the students in this class to connect. Having previously been a Grade 3 teacher, Charlotte often remarked how callous adolescents could be. She warned that eye rolling and name-calling were not uncommon in her Grade 7 class. As students began writing and sharing their memoirs, however, their interactions took on a tone altogether different from that of what Charlotte had initially described. When it was time for 'Share,' students would rush to their seats, seemingly eager to listen to the stories of those who had written their name on the board that day. I often watched as Alister shut the classroom door, attempting to eliminate the hall noises that could make listening difficult. During Sacred Writing Time, I would watch as students exchange their Writer's Notebooks, inviting a peer to read what they had written for that days prompt. One time when Anto was stumped on his memoir, Charlotte heard Evan turn around and ask, "When you wake up in the morning what's the first thing you think about? What did you hear in Egypt?" (Research Journal, 04/22/16). I watched as the students Charlotte had warned me could be catty and bitter at times display genuine interest, helping each other with writing their memoirs. In the culminating questionnaire, many students provided reasons for why 'Share' time was one of their favorites: *Sharing made me feel more open and onest* (Parker), *It made me feel like I got closer with the class and not scared to say anything* (Antony), and *It was fun because you get to let people know you a little more* (Trinity). These comments contrasted sharply with their questionnaire responses completed before students had been introduced to writing memoirs. When asked whether or not they share their writing with their peers or family members prior to the memoir-writing unit, students responded by saying they rarely shared their writing *unless it's an assignment* (Lily) or *only if the*

*teacher says we have to* (Chantal). Charlotte later commented, “I just think they worry too much about what their friends are going to say. I think they dropped that a little bit” (Interview #2). One conclusion might be that the memoir unit provided opportunity for students to learn about each other’s lives beyond the walls of the classroom and, thus, enriched the classroom culture.

There were, however, a few students who did not share a positive view on writing or sharing their memoirs as did their peers. One morning, as Marq entered the classroom and saw the three memoir prompts on the board, he exclaimed, “I got nothing because I suck” (Research Journal, 04/25/16). That same day Parker commented, “I have a boring life” (Research Journal). In hearing these students’ remarks, I was reminded that some students struggled to find a memory that they thought was interesting enough to write about. Aaron explained, *Sometimes you can have it easy and write something you know by heart but other times it can be difficult because you can write about something you have trouble remembering* (Questionnaire #2). Selecting a memory and revealing its significance is not always an easy task. I wrote in my research journal how I, too, found it difficult:

I’m finding these small prompts to be even somewhat challenging to me.

Actually, why sugarcoat it? They are hard. Plain and simple. Being given a sentence and being asked to write something, anything, on it isn’t easy work. It takes patience, time, but also concentration. (04/19/16)

Although some students did find writing memoirs to be rather challenging, I felt that writing memoirs also provided students opportunity to be honest and voice their thoughts,

especially in their Writer's Notebook. For example, Alister wrote a memoir explaining his struggle to decide what to write about:

*We followed our basic routten and began writing, but there was one problem. I didn't know what to write! I was sitting there I looked at my list of things to write about, no it didn't seem interesting. I didn't think it would be this difficult.*

Chantal also used her Writer's Notebook to write honestly about how she was feeling:

*Here I am. Sitting at my desk, lost and confused. I don't know what to write about. I don't want to write. I just want to sleep, or watch Netflix in bed. That's all I can think about. 'It's easy to write a memoir' but for me its not because you have to describe everything. It's very difficult.*

Not only did memoir provide a space for students to express their honest feelings, but students at large also used the genre to explore strong emotions and critique certain issues important to their lives. Elijah wrote about his distaste for math, and Preshanth wrote about being forced to attend Church with his family: *It's so boring all we do it sit and sit keen it never changes how long do we stay there 45 min an th it's so repetvit there is no way Im going.* It may be concluded that in this classroom critical writing pedagogy, specifically memoir writing, created a safe space where students could express their frustrations without fear of getting into trouble.

**'Let 'Em In' (student-teacher relationship).** Emerging from the data was an emphasis on the importance of student-teacher relationships. Charlotte commented in our interview on how she, "share[s her] life with [her students]" (Interview #1). This statement was confirmed as the unit progressed and Charlotte shared a diversity of experiences with her students, from the time she lost her Dad to the first time she went

into labor. I watched as Charlotte intentionally broke down the understanding that some students may initially have had that you can only write about funny moments. She demonstrated a critical pedagogy by modeling how to relocate personal memories in order to critique and analyze issues important in your life. She encouraged her students to, “recognize that small moments can be big moments” (Interview #1) by sharing her memories. Further, Charlotte commented how by sharing her world with her students, they were able to, “see their teacher in a different light” (Interview #2). She often willingly let down her guard as the central authority figure in the classroom, inviting students to see into *her* world. For example, she once shared with her students how she, too, had at times been an unengaged and distracted student. She described a past experience that involved having had a side conversation with her friend during class when the professor asked her to identify one line that would summarize the poem they had been discussing:

*Nabbed. That’s what teachers do best, they prey on those who are not paying attention and I certainly wasn’t. I broke out in a cold sweat. My heart pounded. I could hear the florescent lighting buzzing. It was amazing how quiet a room with 80 university students could get. I said, “Ummm.” I looked down towards my text, a used book I had gotten for 50% off. It had one line underlined in pencil. I read the line out loud. The professor stared at me. “Charlotte... you are absolutely right... This line is perfect. It truly sums up the poem in one beautiful line. Well done.” Scotty leaned over, “Dodged a bullet there Walker (Charlotte).”*

Through sharing this memoir with the class, Charlotte demonstrated that it is only natural to make mistakes. She exposed her imperfections and brought light to them, in effect,

encouraging her students to do the same. Later in the unit, Parker shared his memoir “Book Worm” with the class:

*I'm a book worm. I've always been a book worm and I've always got in trouble for being a book worm. Can you believe it? Getting in trouble for reading at school! As far as I can remember, I've only got a handful of memories were I got away with it. I had just opened a fresh book. It had yellow pages. Everything I saw told me this book had been through a lot. I began to plunge into this book. I had got in trouble for reading before so I checked. “Okay you need to fix this and this” Mrs. Walker (Charlotte) said to a student at her desk. She seemed busy so I read on and on. Until minutes past soon minutes turned into half an hour and still I read then I heard her say, “Parker do your work instead of talking” I thought was I talking? no I was reading. Then it hit me Parker W. had been talking, she was talking to him. I was so happy, I mean not about Parker but about the fact I got to read some more. I continued to read (as you can probably tell I have issues) and read until about 3 min later Mrs. Walker (Charlotte) said “Parker put the book down and get to work now!” Oh so close just 2 more minutes and I would have been done my book, oh well.*

Charlotte shared her memoir and fostered an environment that welcomed laughter. As a result, Parker felt comfortable in sharing a candid memory of himself in which he blatantly broke the rules. When Parker read his memoir to the class, Charlotte’s laughter could be heard among her students.

Being a newcomer to the class, I was a bit uncertain of when or what I should share with the students. I often questioned, “To what extent should I share? At what point

can students that I just met handle listening to my painful memories? How will I know when they are ready? When I am ready?" (Research Journal, 04/12/16). On one particular day, I took a leap and shared a very personal memoir with the class:

*He drives mindfully, his "in need of cream" hands wrapped evenly around the steering wheel. He's talking. About what, I'm not really sure. But I should probably be listening. I know I was a few blocks back. It's one of those luminous days, when the sun has at long last popped its head out from some fluffy white clouds and there seems to be people everywhere. After a long winter you stop thinking about the many people behind the frosty windows and firmly shut doors of row upon row of houses. Your thinking becomes sluggish and your eyelids always feel a bit too heavy. But as we roll to a stop, as the light turns cautiously yellow, her hair knocks the wind out of me. The dull curls resting lightly at the stem of her neck and the slightly stooped shoulders almost cause me to choke. A stone forms in the pit of my stomach and I feel if I don't breathe, I'll surely throw up. But my eyes are solidly glued to her figure on the corner. I can almost hear her comforting laugh, the laugh that welcomed me off the school bus each day for over 8 years, the laugh that I so dearly wanted to listen to the last time I saw her. I almost call out, "Margaret!" I feel immobilized yet at the same time I want to fling open the door and run to her. He's saying something and I can't hear. It must be her yet at the same time I know that's impossible. I crane my neck yearning to catch a glimpse of this woman's face, hopeful. I miss. He's talking more excited now and I still don't know what he's saying. I'm trying to catch my breath. They come in sharp, painful and my body feels numb. Why? Why her? She*

*was perfect. She was patient, calm, fun, loving. She was everything good and everything right. She was always there. I try to remember this and not the frail woman I saw last. I try to remember Sloppy Joes, clay crafts, bright lite, Tetris, potato bugs, The Young and the Restless, Rocky road bars, birthday cards, the climbing tree. We're driving now and the radios on and I'm still not listening. My mind's somewhere else. I let the sun settle in to rest on my eyelids, heavy, feel my belly rise and fall, rise and fall. Horror washes away as I recall her swift movements in the kitchen, her attentive voice on the telephone. I feel grateful. The panic passes and I repeat quietly, "You're like a mother to me", "You're like a mother to me", "You will always be like a mother to me".*

I was not sure what response to expect from the students when I shared this memoir. But in the next few days, I felt my role in the classroom begin to shift. While the students had given me a warm welcome on the very first day, the more memoirs I shared with them, the more I felt they no longer viewed me as being exclusively 'the researcher.' As mentioned earlier, I shifted into being more of an 'insider' than an 'outsider.' Students began to ask me more questions and some even came to me just to talk. As well, different names began to show up on the 'Share' board. I believe that by sharing my memoirs, I invited students to see into my world and as a result they began to trust me. Charlotte exclaimed how students are, "curious about their teachers" (Interview #2); feeding students' natural curiosities and sharing personal memories was found to foster an environment of both trust and openness.

I often heard Charlotte helping students with their memories. Given her close relationship with her students, she was able to help them craft their memoirs in a way that

they could better reflect the unique personalities in the classroom. For example, when Kya had written some ordinary basketball phrase for her six-word memoir, Charlotte probed, “What are *you* like in basketball?” Having previously been her coach, Charlotte knew how assertive Kya could be on the court. In the end, Kya’s memoir read, *You push, I’ll push back harder*. Through this activity, it became clear to me that the relationship of the teacher and his or her students has a significant impact on both the quality of the students’ writing and whether that writing captures a student’s individuality.

Although pushing students to improve their writing becomes a much more onerous task when you do not *know* the students personally, it is not impossible. I often probed students by asking questions and by sharing my experiences. For example, Trinity once asked me to read her memoir of her first time jumping her horse. As I was reading, I noticed that her story sat quite lifeless on the page. I knew there was more. I grew up riding horses and could recall the feeling of butterflies in the pit of my belly as my horse and I approached a jump, the feeling of my fingers nervously digging into my pony’s matted mane, and the exhilaration as we finally soared over the cross rails. As I recounted these feelings to Trinity, her eyes lit up and it was clear to me she knew those same feelings. Later when I read her edited memoir, I was not surprised to see the added detail and depth. Although I am aware some could reason that Trinity had copied me, for me, it was clear in reading her memoir that she had not. Trinity did slow down the moment jumping as I had, but her memoir also captured the experience as it had happened for her:

*I started to trot up to the jump. I remembered I was very distracted that ride. I remember the warm summer air in my helmet and my red sunburnt skin burning in the late afternoon sun. My thoughts were soon interrupted by the rapid*

*increase of Holly's speed. I quickly started playing with her reins to try to slow her down, but it was too late. She rocketed 3 feet before the jump and soared 2 feet over it. Luckily, I stayed on for the jump but we landed with a hard thud. After landing she went into a full gallop, I was not prepared and I had bad balance. Holly slowed down and I jolted off the side of her, hitting the hard ground face first!*

Trinity clearly describes her error here in being distracted and thus allowing the horse to approach the jump too quickly, resulting in a clumsy jump and her hard fall. She later writes:

*I looked down at her to try to figure out what she was thinking, every second we were getting closer and closer to the jump. I stayed focused this time and I held her back so she wouldn't over-jump again. I was concentrating on her every movement. We came up to the jump I prepared myself and she just floated over it. I sat there in the air for a few seconds thinking about life and how quickly it could end if this moment right now ended badly. My heart pounded thinking about it. We went over the jump perfectly. I felt proud.*

Trinity writes about an experience altogether her own, a memory in which she learns the importance of planning for the jump and staying focused. In writing this memoir, Trinity reflected on both the challenges and excitement she had jumping for the first time; my role had only been to inspire her to want to tell more by sharing in her excitement and passion for horses.

In conclusion, the data demonstrate that the memoir-writing unit helped to foster a community of writers in the classroom where both teacher and students felt they could be honest and enjoyed listening to each other's memoirs.

### **The Teacher Who Writes, Too**

One fear I had pursuing this study was that the teacher participant would not share in my love of writing. I had read about the importance of teachers engaging in the writing process alongside their students, and thus wondered whether my passion alone could be enough to encourage students to want to write. Fortunately, Charlotte displayed genuine enthusiasm towards the memoir-writing unit, fervently writing in her Writer's Notebook during Sacred Writing Time, carefully crafting her name on the board under "Share" each day to volunteer to share her memories, and jumping in to help individuals generate ideas or enrich whole class conversations. Using the following memoir, a memoir Charlotte shared with the class at the beginning of the unit, I attempt to provide the reader with a glimpse into Charlotte's willingness to disclose her many thoughts and feelings with her students, however difficult the experience may have been:

*Bear was old. He was 12. Most yellow labs do not live this long. His snout was grey, he limped when he walked and he groaned when he tried to get up. He had trouble maneuvering the stairs and often fell down them. He was a senior dog who had lived with us for our entire childhood. He was my hairy brother. The one place Bear did not appear old was in our pool. This dog was as graceful as a swan gliding through water. He used his tail as a rudder and would swim back and forth for hours... One day Bear was swimming with my dad. I was upstairs studying for an upcoming exam. I needed a break, so I put on my suit, got a towel*

*and decided to join them. As I walked up the basement steps to my patio and pool, my dad looked at me and said, "Well, it's finally happened." I looked at him puzzled. He continued, "Bear crapped in the pool." We both looked at each other and started laughing. It was the kind of laugh where tears stream down your face and your belly hurts afterwards... I lost my dad a year later, Bear 6 months after. A great memory that I cherish.*

When Charlotte read this memoir to the class, she bent over in uncontrollable laughter before she could even tell us what her Dad had said. We sat on the edge of our seats, her contagious cackles sending a ripple of giggles throughout the classroom. Her pause felt like eternity, each of us waiting to find out what he had said. When she finally read it, the sentence, *Bear crapped in the pool*, the students' screeches and snorting could surely be heard through the halls of the school. It took quite some time before Charlotte caught her breath and the laughter quieted down, but the atmosphere was further transformed when she shared her next few sentences.

In our first interview, Charlotte told me that she liked to write. Further, she stated that through sharing her pieces, she hoped students would feel motivated to both share theirs, as well as access more complex feelings and emotions. The memoir above is only one of many examples in which Charlotte shared an experience with her class that revealed an assortment of feelings. Throughout the unit, she explored moments of sentiment, wit, sorrow, frustration, and contentment. When the students were writing, she was writing. When students shared, she appeared absorbed in their words, nodding her head, laughing, and always providing a positive remark or asking a question as they returned to their seats. Without such modeling, I am not sure how openly the students

would have received this unit. Charlotte stressed, “I think that they need to see you writing at your desk” (Interview #2). This study demonstrated the importance of teachers participating by writing alongside their students.

At the same time I recognize the importance of teachers being writers, too, teachers must be careful to balance their role as teacher and writer. On the first day of our unit, I had handed out colorful Writer’s Notebooks to the class. Charlotte had picked out a blue one for herself. When I was teaching the mini-lesson to introduce students to new strategies to write an effective memoir, Charlotte followed along, making notes and asking questions. When it came to ‘Share’ time, I would listen intently as Charlotte demonstrated the concepts that we had just learned (i.e. the rules of zooming in, including your thoughts and feelings, and ‘So What?’). It quickly became obvious to me that Charlotte could be classified as an “A+” student. She was a natural writer and, even more, a skilled presenter. She had a strong personality and thrived in her leadership role. I often watched as she proudly sang O’ Canada and repeated the Apostles’ Creed loud and clear each morning. I noted in my journal how her, “voice was strong against the shy and hesitant voices of her students” who stood “silent, watching, waiting” (04/08/16). While Charlotte welcomed me warmly into her classroom and participated in all areas of the study, I feared at times that she might be influencing the memoir-writing unit, and how I taught it, too much. I questioned if students were intimidated by how effectively Charlotte could capture her audiences’ attention, fearing they might not do their own memoir justice or get the same positive response from their audience. I wrote in my research journal,

“Many students are now asking Charlotte to read their memoir to the class for them. Is this a good thing? For some I think 100%. But now Kya and Aaron for example are asking when they had read them themselves before. Are they steering clear of challenge?” (04/27/16)

Charlotte, however, felt that by offering to read students memoirs for them, it, “took the monkey off their back” (Interview #2), resulting in more students writing their names on the ‘Share’ board.

I also often found myself questioning my role as teacher as I compared myself to Charlotte, who I deemed a well-practiced and effective educator: “I’m talking too fast, I’m not embracing silence, I’m not a good teacher” (Research Journal, 04/08/16). Only by hearing Charlotte say, “I think that went very well” would my feelings of self-doubt diminish. At times, Charlotte’s way of doing things was different from how I might have done things if it were my classroom. For instance, Charlotte wanted students to stay in at break to catch up on pieces missing in their Writer’s Notebooks. But I questioned, “How can I encourage students to want to write [rather than forcing them]? Are they not enjoying it?” (Research Journal, 04/25/16). It is important that teachers of memoir take risks and encourage students to do so, also. This can often be challenging when you are teaching in a classroom not altogether your own. These kinds of implications for practice and recommendations for teachers are discussed in Chapter Five of this paper.

Students need to see their teachers writing. The students in this study appeared to thrive from teacher examples and feedback. I watched as students listened intently as Charlotte shared, and then mimicked both her enthusiasm in reading as well as weaved effective elements from her memoirs into their own. Charlotte states, “Teachers have to

be on board with this and really get up there, pour their heart out too” (Interview #2). Through sharing, Charlotte helped students to improve their memoirs, but also fostered a community of writers. As illustrated above, students loved hearing both Charlotte and my memoirs, often asking “Aren’t you going to share today?” if they saw neither of our names on the board.

**A demanding curriculum.** Charlotte voiced her concerns in our first interview about the time it takes to cover the curriculum. Although she stressed how important it is to teach the curriculum, she struggled with the quantity of expectations: “I find there’s so much curriculum to do in grade seven” (Interview #1). Initially, it seemed Charlotte thought of memoir writing as being a separate process from creative writing. Graves (1983) problematizes this type of thinking, whereby the school day is consequently broken into small fragments, also known as the “cha-cha-cha” curriculum (as cited in Calkins, 1994, p. 186). Instead, it is important for teachers to see how creative and memoir writing can be merged together. Although memoir writing is based on personal experiences, it is written through a creative lens. Barrington (2007) explains that while memoir needs to be candid, the author can still make speculations about their memories. If memoir writing were imagined as being creative writing, one would see that these two genres of writing do not need to be taught independently from each other. As the unit progressed, Charlotte began to view memoir writing differently; she stated, “if you go down the curriculum documents, you could almost check off a lot of things [that the memoir-writing unit covered] ... being a good audience, listening, and reading aloud” (Interview #2). While maintaining her strong belief in the importance of covering the curriculum, Charlotte’s perspective shifted in that she was able to see how the memoir-

writing unit covered a wide variety of expectations in the Language curriculum. By having students read, write, and share their memoirs, Charlotte realized that the memoir-writing unit offered multiple possibilities for grading. From the one unit, a teacher could derive several grades from different strands in the Language curriculum.

**Where do I stand?** “I try not to put too much teacher stuff in there. I just want them to write and feel comfortable” (Interview #1). Charlotte’s philosophy aligns with mine in encouraging students to write while focusing on the *process* rather than the *product*. I often heard her urging students to, “just keep writing” throughout the unit. When it was Sacred Writing Time, she stressed the importance of students trying to write the entire time rather than pulling out a book when they thought they were ‘finished.’ She supported my emphasis on not worrying about conventions, telling Amara, for instance, to cross out the misspelled title and just keep going when Amara asked for an eraser. However, finding a balance in one’s role as teacher-writer is challenging. At the same time Charlotte loved to write and wanted her students to write important things, too, she still had her own hesitations about getting them to write.

Graves (2003) hints that it is not uncommon for teachers to struggle in encouraging their students to learn independence. Further, many teachers may find it challenging to give up some of their responsibilities to their students. Charlotte pointed out that she enjoyed her role as the authority figure in the classroom: “I still like where I’m up at the front of the room and I’m doing a direct lesson” (Interview #1). While she wanted her students to learn how to write without interruption, often reminding herself not to jump in to edit their work, at times, she would still input full sentences to help them make their story sound better. I think sometimes what happens is that teachers’

expectations of students are based on their adult teacher-writer feelings. It is even more challenging when students are learning a new genre of writing to not intervene right away. However, at the same time Charlotte may have intervened to help some of the weaker writers, she held high expectations for all of her students. Before beginning the unit, Charlotte enthusiastically commented how she believed all students would “rise to meet [her] expectations” (Interview #1). She recognized the diversity of writers in her class but believed that by providing plenty of examples, every single one of them would be able to participate, “if I’m excited about something, if you’re excited about something, if we show lots of examples, then they’ll get excited about it too” (Interview #1). Many times throughout the unit, she would tell me how proud she was of certain students, of students who were writing at home without being asked, who were sharing when they hadn’t participated all year, or just for handing in a finished product. Charlotte demonstrated the importance of not applying a deficit lens to the abilities of students: “I’m excited. I think they are going to rise to the occasion” (Interview #2). She believed in her students and held them accountable as writers; in turn, they put a great deal of effort into writing and sometimes shared their memoirs. Although balancing their roles as teacher-writers may be challenging for some teachers, I think Charlotte provides insight into how important it is to put forth the effort:

“I know as teachers we’re drawn in so many different directions and there were times when, you know, I got called on the phone or I had to do attendance, things like that, but I think them seeing my writing... me writing and hearing me read my writing, helped them a lot” (Interview #2).

I wrote my memoirs the night before each lesson so that I would be able to observe without distraction during Sacred Writing Time. I found myself questioning whether this was fair, as I could take as much time as I needed. Still, some nights I would sit for long periods of time thinking about what I wanted to write, the darkness creeping through the windows telling me it was getting late. Writing takes time and concentration. I discussed with the class how even I, not under the same time constraints as I was writing at home the night before, was finding generating an idea and writing memoirs to be challenging. Together, we brainstormed ideas to not get ‘bogged down.’ Just as Charlotte and I both practiced writing memoirs, I think it is also important for teachers to be honest and share their writing experiences with their students. By sharing how I was having difficulty pinpointing an idea to write about, the class was able to view me other than as just the memoir ‘expert,’ but also able to develop strategies to help them become ‘unstuck’ in the future. My experiences writing helped me to relate to the students:

“The act of writing myself is sure helping me to understand what I am asking these students to do. Even what reaction I might witness in the classroom. A baker doesn’t sell his/her pies without testing the recipes first. Why assign any task without first having done it yourself?” (Research Journal, 04/19/16).

The data brought to light the importance of teachers participating in the writing process as well as sharing their experiences writing, the successes and challenges, with the class.

**Understanding differences.** In our first interview, Charlotte pointed out how the students in her class may have smaller backpacks of experiences than students in other schools, stating, “These guys here have maybe never left [this town]” (Interview #1). She drew a comparison between her students’ backpacks and that of her son’s backpack. She

explained, “at my son’s school, just five minutes down the road, but the area where they live, where my son lives, is more affluent, they have more in their backpacks” (Interview #1). However, at the same time she was aware of this disparity, “we are in a low socio-economic area here and I think a lot of them have smaller backpacks than perhaps some kids their age” (Interview #1). She was confident that students, with help, would be able to discover significance in smaller moments, like, “the awesome pancakes your Dad made this weekend” (Interview #1). Charlotte felt that memoir writing would be a “common ground” for her and her students to meet on. She explained, “Everybody’s got some experiences and regardless of punctuation, spelling, all of that which bogs some of my kids down because some of them aren’t great at it. Hopefully they can drop that” (Interview #1). I commented in my research journal how Charlotte, “recognizes one student’s accomplishments might not match that of another” (04/14/16). A good example of this was with Ashad. Having been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Ashad often appeared distracted during lessons, playing with Pokemon and Digimon toys at the back counter or drawing pictures of them at his desk. However, by continually encouraging Ashad and praising him when he did write a memoir, Ashad began writing every day, and even began to regularly volunteer to share his writing with the class.

Later, Ashad wrote a memoir about how great of a teacher he thought Charlotte was:

*Will The True Teacher is The oNe aND only Mrs. Walker (Charlotte). She’s The best Teacher iN The World. aNd she is good aT DoiNg basTkebal ruNNis blowNg TeachiNg Math HisTory aND LoTs oF FuN stuff at School. ThaT is why i Like Mrs. Walker (Charlotte). She’s The best iN The world.*

Throughout the unit, Charlotte often provided her students with recommendations for writing, for instance, probing Tyler about his little brother and Lily about her dog. Only by knowing her students well was Charlotte able to help her students with their writing. Thomson-Bunn (2014) stresses that critical pedagogues must not foster an, “us vs. them” mindset whereby teachers strive to empower their students. Charlotte demonstrated a critical pedagogy by recognizing the diversity of identities in her classroom and discovering *with* each student how small moments in their lives could be viewed as momentous. She remained positive that the memoir-writing unit could be a ‘common ground’ where both she and her students could meet.

Data analysis was complex work. Through the process of qualitative data analysis, I was able to understand better how analysis is an art. Data analysis requires that a researcher explore data in-depth and report on the data in artful ways where the findings will hopefully speak to an audience. The process takes dedication and discipline and can therefore be exhausting. I recognize the importance of researchers documenting the analysis process as they move through the process in order to maintain transparency. Therefore, in the process of doing data analysis I have exposed my personal biases, recorded analytical decisions I made as well as documented questions that emerged during my time spent in the classroom as teacher-researcher.

## CHAPTER FIVE: LOOKING BACK AND MOVING FORWARD

“Each of us is a book waiting to be written, and that book, if written, results in a person explained.” – Thomas M. Cirignano

Adolescence is a crucial time for constructing a personal sense of one’s identity. In fact, Calkins (1994) explains that adolescence, “is a time for trying on selves, for reflection, self-awareness, and self-definition. The adolescent learns to say, ‘This is my story’ and ‘This is who I am’” (p. 158). It is therefore important to provide opportunities for students, especially adolescents, to explore their sense of self through their writing. This is one reason why it is worthwhile to teach memoir writing to adolescents: by writing their memoirs, students are given opportunity to see themselves and their lives in new ways.

In this study, I took a critically reflective approach with the aim of gaining insight into the students’ and the classroom teacher’s experiences with writing and teaching memoirs, as well as my own. To assist me with analyzing the impact the memoir-writing unit had, I collected data from interviews I conducted with the classroom teacher, responses from questionnaires student participants completed, and notes I recorded in my researcher journal. I analyzed memoirs written by the teacher, the students, and myself as well as examined teacher comments on students’ written work. I designed this study to explore the questions: What can memoir writing *do* for students? What are the characteristics of an effective memoir writing teacher? In line with my goal of motivating students to write, I planned to bring light to how memoir writing can successfully help to promote students’ mindfulness and growth in their writing.

## Discussion

When looking back at the memoir-writing unit in its entirety, Charlotte and I identified a few fundamental ideas about the genre that led to its successful implementation. First, we found that instituting routines and rituals increasingly helped students to see their lives as full of invitations to write. This meant setting aside classroom time to write every day and having a place for students to write down all of their memoirs. Second, the tone, values, and relationships in the classroom community influenced the quality of writing produced. We concluded that teachers of writing are often living ‘writerly’ lives, willing to share their writing and encouraging students to share their writing with others.

**Implementing rituals.** Calkins (2004) stresses the importance of students writing every day. In this unit, we started each morning with Sacred Writing Time. Deemed *sacred*, a committed time set aside for writing in the first twenty or so minutes of every class, students were invited to write about their lives. Although I regularly gave students three prompts as ideas for writing a new memoir each day, they were always encouraged to use the time to write about whatever they desired. At the end of the eight-week unit, students had written up to 25 memoirs. Each student’s Writer’s Notebook was unique, providing insight into their interests, passions, fears, worries, and desires. Fletcher (2013) asserts that writing notebooks provide a low-risk, high-comfort place for students to write. Further, only when students feel comfortable and safe do they feel motivated to write (Fletcher, 2013). By having their own journal to write their memoirs, students were supported in writing to, “probe into, puzzle over, muse about, imagine, [and] feel” (Calkins, 1994, p. 490). Writing memoirs encouraged students to reflect on their lives and

consider the possible meaning memories held for them. As their memoirs shed light on their identities, they also helped both Charlotte and I to better get to know the students and what made each person unique.

Many times throughout the study, I collected students' books to comment on their writing. While reading their memoirs helped me to discover meaningful things about each student, it also helped me to see where students may have been struggling with their writing. Charlotte felt the same, commenting how by reviewing student's Writer's Notebooks, it became, "so glaringly obvious" (Interview #2) to her what needed to be taught. It is imperative that teachers 'check in' with students in order to discern what skills and strategies need to be taught for students to become successful writers. Calkins (1994) identifies the purpose of a mini-lesson as to provide students with a repertoire of strategies they can draw from to help them with their writing. In using students' notebooks as a resource for the mini-lessons, I was able to suggest meaningful options for what students could do next to improve their writing. For example, the first time I took students' Writer's Notebooks home with me to provide feedback (i.e. through a 'Two Stars & A Wish' activity) on students' writing, I found myself repeatedly commenting, "How could you slow down more?" on their memoirs. This is when I recognized that students were either trying to write about too much or were skipping from one idea to the next hurriedly. From here, I was inspired to teach Nancy Atwell's lesson, "The Rule of Write about a Pebble," encouraging students to 'zoom in' rather than write about a general idea or topic. In conclusion, the students in this study benefited from having Writer's Notebooks that they could write in every day. This routine of adding to their

repertoire of memoirs during Sacred Writing Time supported students as they increasingly saw memoir writing as an opportunity to learn about their lives.

**Setting the tone together.** A common question that students often asked was: “Why? Why do we have to know this? Why are we doing this?” Atwell (1998) states that to answer the question “Why would anyone want to write?” teachers must demonstrate why they write and what use writing has in their lives. This study demonstrated the importance of teachers being writers, too. Teachers need to write with their students, just as Charlotte and I did throughout the memoir-writing unit. By writing and sharing our memoirs and our experiences writing, students were invited to see what strategies we utilized to make sense of an experience.

Graves (2003) states that the curriculum contradicts children’s natural curiosities to write. Rather than forcing students to write things we chose for them, Charlotte and I needed to be patient and support the students as they explored and took control of their writing. Teachers should craft their own pieces and look for ways to help students while demonstrating what worked for them. Graves (2003) states that, “many children don’t see the sense in putting words on paper because it hasn’t been useful to them to discover meaningful things about themselves” (p. 267). By demonstrating how meaningful memoirs were to me, the students in this study were able to see how they could use memoirs to discover meaningful things in their lives. Additionally, having teachers and students participating in the writing process alongside each other helped foster a community in the classroom, whereby students and teachers could together work to improve their writing and make meaning of their experiences.

William Zinsser states, “Memoir is a window into a life” (as cited in Calkins, 1994, p. 406). In this study, student memoirs served as a source of insight into students’ identities. Students were encouraged to use their memoirs to teach others about themselves, including their lives beyond that which teachers could gather in the classroom. Gibney (2012) states,

When you delve into a genre study such as that of memoir, not only do you have the opportunity to teach your students skills in a meaningful manner, but you also learn about who they are as people and as young authors. (p. 252)

Memoir writing offers new possibilities for mindfulness and sharing one’s experiences, which many other genres do not support. It encourages writers to ‘slow down’ and ‘zoom in’ when reflecting on their experiences. Goldberg (2007) explains that while many genres require a linear method of writing, memoir writing supports, “an examination of the zigzag nature of how our mind works” (p. xx). It requires writers to get close to their lives, which are often complex, and be mindful when reflecting on what meaning a memory holds. Implementing this unit in the classroom thus supported students in discovering their voice and brooding over the question ‘Who Am I?’ in their writing.

### **Implications for Practice**

I am reluctant to write a prescription for what educators should do or need to do to motivate students to write or to help them explore their voices and identities. I do not believe in a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution. Unless teachers are critically aware of how the curriculum may silence individual voices and limit students’ freedom in writing, their success implementing this unit would be limited.

Although I have attempted to describe the benefits of the memoir writing process by providing insight into the experiences both the teacher and students had while participating, there are limits to how transferrable the findings may be. Firstly, the experiences students wrote about were limited by how much trust and comfort the classroom environment provided, which, in turn, was impacted by my presence as a newcomer and a researcher. Although I felt my role shift from outsider to insider as the study progressed, and I invited students into my life by sharing my experiences with them, my placement in the classroom was always known to be temporary. The experiences students decided to write about were surely impacted by who they knew would be reading their writing, as well as their relationship with that person. To some extent, I can assume that their writing may have been different if their classroom teacher had implemented this unit, perhaps even writing about experiences more personally meaningful.

### **The Challenges of Doing Critical Research**

The intensive focus on writing and memoir, the novelty, the use of personal experience, as well as the collaboration of two educators resulted in growth and an engaged experience for all participants in this study. However, I explain below how given the limitations of time, space, and relationship, we did not get to the kind of critical work that I imagined.

There are complications that come with doing research in someone else's classroom, and further by doing research in an institution. To start, gaining access to an elementary classroom to do research is not always easy. It takes time to obtain consent – time that the researcher is not altogether in control of. Once you have gained access,

researchers may feel constrained by the power relations that exist between themselves and the classroom teacher. It was mostly after I had collected the data and was reflecting on my time spent teaching and researching in the classroom in its entirety, that I noticed my voice had been, at times, constrained. At the same time I felt welcomed into the classroom, I did, however, know that at any point in time I could be asked to leave. In this way, I had engaged in this research both aimed at exploring my research questions but also devoted to keeping those in authority happy. For example, aligning with her high expectations for her students, Charlotte was keen on implementing a reward system to boost student participation. I expressed my concerns in my research journal about doing so:

I worry: how will those students under pressure by the rest of their peers react? If they do participate is that participation authentic? Or forced? Is it necessary at some point to put this pressure on them to have them produce anything worthy of being assessed? (Research Journal, 05/10/16)

However, I did not verbalize these concerns, feeling that it was her right to describe the best methods for getting her students to participate.

Reflecting back on my time in the classroom, I can also remember feeling somewhat nervous that Charlotte might judge my teaching practice. Being a new and novice teacher magnified this nervousness. I looked up to Charlotte as the Principal had spoken highly of her and her teaching methods. Knowing that Charlotte was the type of teacher who tended to give clear instructions and held high expectations for her students, I felt I could not let students, “just write” as I had planned. I explained my hesitations in my research journal:

What if when I said, “just write,” students had nothing to write about? What if Charlotte saw such a reaction as unproductive, even worse, bad teaching practice? Memoir writing is meant to be messy and confusing but with Charlotte being the primary classroom teacher, I may have felt that that messiness wouldn't have been welcomed as I would have liked it to have. Did I abandon some of my preferred teaching styles in order to implement more mini-lessons and the direct style of teaching she speaks highly of in our first interview? Was I distracted in trying to impress her while I should have been focused on the other 21 participants in my study? (08/11/16)

This journal entry highlights how it can become difficult to enact a critical pedagogy when researching in another teacher's classroom. However, at the same time that there are challenges that come with doing research in another teacher's classroom, the benefits of having two teachers in one classroom are substantial. Charlotte and I were constantly able to share ideas and collaborate on feedback, generating rubrics, and grading.

Memoirs support students in adopting a ‘critical mindfulness’ in their writing. Such mindfulness asks young writers to engage with their emotions freely and to develop a sense of ownership and control over what they write and how they represent their experiences. Unfortunately, the dominant knowledge of the curriculum often interferes with memoir writing and students becoming mindful. Schools are institutions that sometimes resist new knowledge, instead stressing the importance of teachers teaching to a standardized curriculum.

Institutional structure, specifically time, is another challenge teachers may be faced with when attempting to bring new knowledge into the classroom. James (2012)

explains that crafting a memoir is hard work and takes time. However, time is often restricted by a teacher's need to follow a communal schedule in schools. I commented in my research journal:

I have slight feelings of sadness thinking that this unit and my time at the school are coming to a close. I worry; will this last week be enough time for students to finish publishing? Will the unit feel as if it has been successfully wrapped up?"

(05/16/16)

This journal entry only begins to hint at the time restrictions faced in schools that can interfere with opportunities for students to engage in writing freely. While I am grateful for the time I spent researching in the classroom, I also commented in my research journal how I could not help but wish that the unit had been slightly longer, thus, "allowing the students to become even more familiar with the genre and able to read and write even more memoirs" (05/16/16).

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Denton-Borhaug and Jasper (2014) explain how memoir is suited to three goals of critical pedagogy: encouraging students to recognize hegemonic forces in their lives, to deconstruct privilege and reconstruct alternative forms of democracy, and motivating students to do something about 'injustices.' Although we did not get to the kind of critical work I had wholly imagined, this study itself and the process of writing memoirs was critical. As was evident in this study, the memoir genre encouraged students to develop agency in their writing. Through the contemplative exercise of writing memoirs, students were supported in exploring the ambiguities and complexities of their lives. Some students used the time spent writing memoirs to ask critical questions about their lives and explore how they were connected

to the world at large. I believe that as students wrote about the challenges of their own lives, often from multiple perspectives, they developed a self-awareness that may not have been supported by other genres.

While I value all that I have experienced as a graduate student, I would be less than truthful if I said it has been at all times enjoyable and painless. In fact, completing this research was one of the hardest things I have ever done in my life. In the process of writing this document, I have felt, at times, angry and disappointed in myself and, at other times, overcome with feelings of pride and gratitude. This research has provoked more emotions in me than I could have ever imagined. It has also taken me longer to complete than I had expected. At the same time this research has been a huge part of my life, other aspects of my life have also interfered, such as my sister having a baby, my high school sweetheart proposing, and my inability to say ‘no’ to new jobs and old friends. However, I maintained a research journal to record my journey. Regardless of time lapses, I was able to keep the research moving forward in the right direction and be transparent in the process.

### **Future Research**

One day as I was observing the students in this study, I questioned in my research journal, “What if this were any other school? Class? Grade? Group of students? Classroom teacher? Time or day or month or year?” (04/27/16). After completing this study, I recognize that there is a need for more research to be conducted on memoir writing and education as many variables unique to a classroom can influence the findings. I agree with Calkins (1994) that we need more teachers to tell their teaching stories and, “add to a repertoire of images for successful writing workshops” (p. 162). We need more

research that captures the experiences of students as they reflect on the question, “Who am I?” in their writing, encouraging students to learn about themselves, their relationships, and the way they view the world. The more stories that are told, the more effectively equipped teachers will be to teach writing and lead students to deeper, more meaningful writing.

I have one specific recommendation for other researchers attempting to understand students’ experiences writing memoirs. At the same time I am content that I gathered meaningful data using different collection methods, I encourage other teachers to include children in the data analysis process. Charlotte explained how students often, “see a page with lots of questions and they are like ‘ahhhh’” (Interview #2). I, too, contend that students may have viewed the task of completing a questionnaire as a nuisance. I encourage teachers to consider alternative research methods when attempting to understand the lived experiences of students reflecting on and writing about their lives. For example, focus groups may encourage students to guide the conversation as they see fit. Punch (2002) recommends employing methods that tap into students’ interests and accommodate their (sometimes) limited attention spans; the use of drawings or photographs might be more fun for students and engage them in methods with which they are more familiar.

### **Final Thoughts**

“Live your daily life in a way that you never lose yourself. When you are carried away with your worries, fears, cravings, anger, and desire, you run away from yourself and you  
lose yourself.

The practice is always to go back to oneself.” – Thich Nhat Hanh

I like writing about me. Although others may frown upon this, I think the act of writing about oneself is invaluable. Writing about me helps me to capture my memories and hold on to them so that they do not drift away. Writing about me helps me to understand who I am and supports me as I try to make sense of all my emotions. I believe the act of writing about oneself nourishes personal growth and understanding. Graves (2003) dismantles the assumption that others may have that such self-centeredness is distasteful; rather, he points to the benefits of centeredness in helping individuals to enjoy the subject. In this study, students became increasingly motivated to write memoirs. They demonstrated growth as learners and appeared to enjoy practicing writing. Gibney (2012) states that memoir is, “the most democratic of all kinds of writing” (as cited in Bomer, 2005, p. 12) being that everyone has a story to tell. Not only did using “I” in their writing make writing enjoyable for the students in this study, but it also engaged even the most struggling of writers.

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