CASE STUDY OF A CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM AND THE INTERACTION
OF WHITE INSTRUCTORS’ AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS’
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

by

TAMMY CRAWFORD COOK

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction
in the Graduate School of
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2009
ABSTRACT

This case study investigated the implementation of a non-scripted, creative writing program designed by two English Education instructors from a large university in the southeastern region of the United States with collaboration from the Screen Actors Guild from Los Angeles, California, and the National Council of Teachers (NCTE) of English Research Foundation.

The main focus was to observe the implementation of the creative writing program, referred to as “We the Children: A Symphony of Lives,” and the interaction of participants’ social and cultural differences. Participants included ninth-grade African American students in an English Language Arts classroom directed by two white instructors and one white English teacher as they engaged in discussions, writing, and sharing of autobiographical writing. Data collection occurred during the spring semester of the 2007-2008 academic school year in a high school similar to many high schools across the United States struggling for higher achievement outcomes and dealing with a student population defined by factors such as segregation, high poverty, a high dropout rate, a low graduation rate, and low student achievement.

The study analyzes the manner in which the creative writing program worked to achieve its goals and the resources used which included visiting experts, the instructors’ expectations for students, and the incorporation of what was termed “culturally-central pedagogy” by the
instructors. The reality of more and more white English educators teaching students from social and cultural backgrounds much different from their own is a challenge for the English classroom of the 21st century. In order to fulfill a need for examples of best practices for English teachers entering the classrooms, the study explored not only the specifics of the writing program but also the interplay of instructors’ and students’ social and cultural differences.

Case study methodology guided the research, and a total of 14 weeks was spent in the field collecting data which included fieldnotes from observations, personal reflections, student artifacts, and interviews with students and the instructors. I used the constant-comparative method to generate frequent patterns and themes across the students, their teacher, and the instructors’ interactions. I identified literacy events in which socio-cultural differences among the instructors and students occurred. However, the differences in the participants’ backgrounds did not pose visible difficulties that could be linked to racial differences so much as the appearance of typical differences encountered by teachers and students from the same sociocultural backgrounds with regard to teacher expectations and student outcomes.

With regard to the concept of culturally-relevant pedagogy, many instances were recorded when the instructional practices and instructional talk reflected tailored curricular selections for the dominant African American class population, but more research needs to be conducted on the successes of using these type of literary interventions compared to the standard curriculum of most ninth-grade English classrooms.
DEDICATION

Pausing to reflect on my journey through the doctoral program, I know God has brought me here for reasons beyond my understanding. I stand at the end of what has been not only a life achievement but also a challenging endeavor in innumerable ways. If I were an astronaut, this would mean landing on the moon or on Mars; it has taken all of my strength. I know others have made it to this point, but it feels like I am the first. I thank God for everything, especially for my family and my friends.

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................. ii

DEDICATION ........................................................................................................ iv

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ...................................................................................... vi

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................. xiii

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY ............................................................... 1
   a. Introduction ................................................................................................. 1
   b. Statement of the Problem ........................................................................... 3
   c. Purpose of the Study .................................................................................. 4
   d. Research Questions .................................................................................... 4
   e. Significance of the Study ............................................................................ 5
      i. Limitations ............................................................................................... 8
      ii. Definition of Terms ................................................................................. 8
   f. Summary ...................................................................................................... 9

2. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE .............................................. 10
   a. Introduction ................................................................................................ 10
   b. Theoretical Framework ............................................................................. 10
   c. Sociocultural Theory ................................................................................. 11
d. Critical Race Theory .......................................................... 13
   i. Cultural Diversity .......................................................... 15
   ii. Life Spaces ............................................................... 18

e. Communities of Practice .................................................. 20
   i. Cultures of Power .......................................................... 24
   ii. Acknowledgement of Race ............................................. 25
   iii. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy ........................................ 27

f. Writing and Students’ Self-Identity ...................................... 28
   i. Identity Formation .......................................................... 32

g. Summary ........................................................................ 35

3. METHODS AND PROCEDURES ........................................ 36

a. Introduction ........................................................................ 36

b. Research Questions .......................................................... 39

c. Research Design ................................................................ 40
   i. Case Study .................................................................... 40

d. Participants and Setting ..................................................... 41
   i. Confidentiality and Informed Consent Procedures ............. 45

e. Synopsis of Fieldwork ....................................................... 45
   i. Observations ................................................................. 47
   ii. Interviews ..................................................................... 49

f. Collection of Data .............................................................. 50
   i. Role of the Researcher .................................................... 51

g. Data Analysis ................................................................... 54
i. Constant-Comparative Method ........................................ 55

ii. External Validity ............................................................ 55

iii. Reliability ...................................................................... 55

iv. Objectivity ...................................................................... 56

h. Data Protocol .................................................................... 57

i. Control for Bias ............................................................... 58

i. Subjectivity ...................................................................... 58

j. Summary ........................................................................... 60

4. DATA ANALYSES AND RESULTS ............................................. 61

a. Purpose of the Study ....................................................... 61

b. Research Question 1: Findings ........................................ 62

i. Instructional Strategies .................................................. 62

ii. Guided Imagery .............................................................. 64

iii. Strategies Related to Literary Genres ................................. 66

c. Research Question 2: Findings ........................................ 72

i. Students’ Personal Resources ........................................ 72

ii. Instructors’ Personal Stories ............................................ 74

iii. Students’ Writing Folders .............................................. 77

d. Research Question 3: Findings ........................................ 83

i. Connections to Writing Program ..................................... 83

ii. Classroom Management ................................................ 86

e. Research Question 4: Findings ........................................ 87
i. Relationships ................................................................. 87

ii. Individualism ............................................................... 90

iii. Participation ............................................................... 92

f. Summary ........................................................................... 95

5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS .................... 96

a. Introduction ................................................................... 96

b. The Empowerment of Writing ....................................... 98

c. Discussion of Research Question 1 ............................... 99

d. Discussion of Research Question 2 ............................... 102

e. Discussion of Research Question 3 ............................... 104

f. Discussion of Research Question 4 ............................... 105

g. Incorporating Culture into Classrooms ........................... 107

h. Implications for Practice ................................................. 109

i. Implications for Research ................................................. 110

REFERENCES ........................................................................ 114

APPENDICES .......................................................................... 126
LIST OF TABLES

Table

1. Data Collection Procedures for Research Questions ........................................... 5
2. Research Questions Paired with Data Collection Procedure.......................... 40
3. Fieldwork/Observations Schedule ................................................................. 46
4. Intensive On-Site Observation Schedule ....................................................... 52
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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................. ii

DEDICATION ........................................................................................................ iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................. vi

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................. xiii

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY .................................................................. 1
   a. Introduction .................................................................................................. 1
   b. Statement of the Problem ........................................................................... 3
   c. Purpose of the Study .................................................................................. 4
   d. Research Questions .................................................................................... 4
   e. Significance of the Study .......................................................................... 5
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      ii. Definition of Terms ................................................................................ 8
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  ii. Acknowledgement of Race .............................................. 25
  iii. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy ........................................ 27
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  i. Identity Formation .......................................................... 32
g. Summary .............................................................................. 35

3. METHODS AND PROCEDURES............................................ 36
a. Introduction .......................................................................... 36
b. Research Questions ............................................................ 39
c. Research Design .................................................................... 40
  i. Case Study ......................................................................... 40
d. Participants and Setting ........................................................ 41
  i. Confidentiality and Informed Consent Procedures............. 45
e. Synopsis of Fieldwork .......................................................... 45
  i. Observations .................................................................... 47
  ii. Interviews .......................................................................... 49
f. Collection of Data ................................................................. 50
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g. Data Analysis ........................................................................ 54
i. Constant-Comparative Method ............................................. 55

ii. External Validity ................................................................. 55

iii. Reliability ........................................................................ 55

iv. Objectivity ...................................................................... 56

h. Data Protocol ...................................................................... 57

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   ii. Guided Imagery .............................................................. 64

   iii. Strategies Related to Literary Genres ......................... 66

c. Research Question 2: Findings ......................................... 72

   i. Students’ Personal Resources ...................................... 72

   ii. Instructors’ Personal Stories .......................................... 74

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e. Research Question 4: Findings ......................................... 87
i. Relationships................................................................. 87

ii. Individualism.............................................................. 90

iii. Participation............................................................... 92

f. Summary ......................................................................... 95

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c. Discussion of Research Question 1 ................................. 99

d. Discussion of Research Question 2................................. 102

e. Discussion of Research Question 3................................. 104

f. Discussion of Research Question 4................................. 105

g. Incorporating Culture into Classrooms............................. 107

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i. Implications for Research ................................................. 110

REFERENCES........................................................................ 114

APPENDICES......................................................................... 126
LIST OF TABLES

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2. Research Questions Paired with Data Collection Procedure .............................. 40
3. Fieldwork/Observations Schedule ...................................................................... 46
4. Intensive On-Site Observation Schedule .............................................................. 52
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Our knowledge of other peoples is shaped by our own cultural experience. There is nothing simple about understanding another culture. (Moore, 1997, p. 274)

Socialization is a lifelong process during which members of a cultural group act to conform to and inform each other’s public behavior (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms in 21st-century America are comprised of cultural groups whose individual members have learned socialization in myriad ways. Of the various literacy activities students engage in, sharing stories about their personal life experiences is a common activity that serves to connect students across vastly different social and cultural backgrounds. Sharing stories in an academic setting, however, may be understood differently by students and teachers, and too often, students’ creative voices are squelched. In a study of writing, Sheridan, Street, and Bloome (2000) reported that language arts instruction (especially writing, spelling, and grammar instruction) may play a significant role in generating (and legitimizing) a hierarchical structure regarding who was and who could be a writer.

In a study of a creative writing program, Chandler (1999) found that providing adolescents with opportunities to tell their stories, in their own words, in secure, structured
surroundings with encouraging feedback can lead to higher self-efficacy and self-esteem. Furthermore, writing is a venture that actively engages the thinking process by allowing the writer to think extensively through something (Fulwiler, 1986). Writing without the fear of failure is important to students as they develop clear voices which speak from their hearts rather than voices mimicking a teacher’s rigid concept of what writing should look like. The plans for this study were based on the following suppositions: (a) creative writing programs provide opportunities for students to become a part of a community of writers; (b) students from social and cultural backgrounds much different from their teachers can gain confidence about their writing when they are provided opportunities to explore their identities through personal writing and then sharing their work with a teacher as well as their peers; and (c) creative writing will enhance teachers’ successes and communications with students who are from backgrounds much different than their own.

Too often, as Greene and Abt-Perkins (2003) explain, studies point out how teacher expectations influence student outcomes for children of color, but little is really known about “how researchers’ expectations have shaped the outcomes of literacy research” (p. 6). In fact, research (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003) indicates that understanding how literacy functions within particular cultures, especially historically underrepresented groups, causes discomfort for many white teachers who may lack “strategies and experiences with having conversations about race or racism across multiracial experiences” (p. 1). Research that adequately demonstrates what culturally relevant teaching practices look like is essential for teachers who want to be successful.
Statement of the Problem

To effectively help students bridge the gaps between their social and cultural backgrounds and academic expectations, English teachers not only have to be knowledgeable about their content area but also aware of effective pedagogical tools necessary to facilitate successful outcomes. Furthermore, teachers must be aware of the academic needs of culturally diverse students and have a comprehension of how to actively engage students whose social and cultural backgrounds are different from their own. To complement their instructional strategies of autobiographical writing, teachers must be aware of their own biases and prejudices, particularly in view of the current statistics which indicate that student diversity is increasing while the teaching population becomes increasingly white (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2004).

For productive change to begin to occur, boundaries between classrooms and communities must be dissolved, and the currents of cultural nuances must flow between them (Heath, 1983). Heath asserts that unless change occurs in the classroom, “schools will continue to legitimate and reproduce communities of townspeople who control and limit the potential progress of other communities and who themselves remain untouched by other values and ways of life” (1983, p. 369). Recognizing and being proactive, according to one study (Salter, 2001), to the countless “ways that schools—both the physical and psychological ones—inhibit (and sometimes enhance) our free development of human beings” is a big step towards teachers’ and educational researchers’ productive self-reflexivity. Bruffee (2003) explains the need for teachers to “perform as conservators and agents of change, as custodians of prevailing community values and as agents of social transition and re-acculturation” (p. 432). He also emphasizes, “To study and teach English is to study and teach the social origin, nature, reference, and function of symbolic structures” (p. 432). Increasing teachers’ awareness of the
sociocultural differences represented by students in the classroom is important to their successfully helping students learn.

Purpose of the Study

This study attempted to examine how an autobiographical writing program was implemented by instructors from a local university in a ninth-grade English classroom over the course of one semester. The study was designed to observe the instructional strategies—successful and unsuccessful—used by the instructors in the writing program to motivate culturally diverse students to write about their lives. The study also examined other ways participants’ cultural differences shaped what they were doing throughout the program. These examinations were guided by four research questions.

Research Questions

1. How was the writing program executed in the classroom?

2. What resources were in position to support the success of the program, and what, if any, barriers reduced the success of the program?

3. How were the days used for working with the creative writing program different from other days spent as a regular English class?

4. How did the students, the teacher, and outside experts interact with each other when they were participating in the program?

Illustrated in Table 1 are specific data collection procedures and instruments used to gather information for each research question. Because of the qualitative nature of the study, many of the same data collection measures overlap for more than one question. The core of the study was explored from the classroom observations and the student artifacts in the varied stages
of development and completion. With sufficient data, my study reflects phenomenon as it transpired in an explicit setting without diluting the overall effect of the writing program.

Table 1

Data Collection Procedures for Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Data collection procedure/instrument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How was the writing program executed in the English classroom?</td>
<td>• Classroom observations and field notes on the days (1-2 days each week) that the program was being implemented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2. What resources were in position to support the success of the program, and what barriers, if any, reduced the success of the program? | • Interviews with the instructors involved in the program  
  • Interview with the classroom teacher |
| 3. How did the days spent on the writing program differ from other days in the class? | • Classroom observations and field notes on days when the creative writing program was not in session. |
| 4. How did the students, the teacher, and outside experts interact with each other while participating in the program? | • Classroom observations and field notes  
  • Interviews with students, the regular classroom teacher, and instructors |

Significance of the Study

This study offers insight into literacy activities of an ordinary high school English class and is significant for secondary English/language arts teachers, administrators, and secondary teacher education preparation programs seeking ways to reach students from social and cultural backgrounds different from their own. Creative writing, particularly autobiographical writing like this study observes, helps all students, regardless of race, particularly “in terms of building self-esteem, self-efficacy, a strong voice, and a sense of one’s identity” (McDonough, 2002, p. 3). Another significant factor about the present study stems from a palpable disconnect between many English teachers aware of the influences of their own as well as their students’ social and
cultural backgrounds and the *actual number* of English teachers who are prepared to act upon these differences in terms of literacy resources, significantly in the area of writing.

The conception, design, and execution of the program encompasses the foresight of educators whose vision included providing culturally relevant literacy practices to a local school defined by segregation, high poverty levels, high dropout rates, low graduation rates, and low achievement levels. Their creative writing program was not a scripted, marketable program; rather, it was a research-based, theoretically sound program guided by the generative process of creative writing under the auspices of two experienced university instructors, Dr. Katherine Garner and Dr. Louisa Harvest (pseudonyms).

The instructors’ plans included capitalizing on resources offered by the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) Foundation, specifically, a program which began in 1999 when the Screen Actors Guild Foundation’s initial core volunteer literacy program, called BookPALS in Los Angeles, California, launched a writing program entitled “We the Children.” According to the SAG (2008) website:

> The program was created to make reading and writing a first-person experience by giving children an opportunity to write and illustrate their family histories. The objective of the program is to improve English literacy skills while encouraging a sense of pride in the student’s heritage… [The program] teaches children the value of books and the importance of their own lives by giving them the opportunity to write and illustrate their family history. Each story is compiled into a leather bound hard cover book. (p. 1)

The instructors applied for and received grant funding from the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) Research Foundation which offers funding for PreK-16 individuals and teams.
for grants to support research programs related to the teaching and learning of language and literacies.

The instructors’ vision embraced the idea of increasing literacy as a positive way to help students seek broader horizons for their futures through the realization that the stories of their lives had value and the world around them could and would mold them. The writing program served as a way to help students fashion new perspectives of their own potential for success. Initially, both instructors, along with a representative from SAG from Los Angeles, California, visited Mrs. Claret’s English classroom at CHS in mid-January and introduced themselves, the creative writing program, and examples of the published books they would be working with the students to complete.

Condor High School (CHS) (pseudonym) is a school struggling with high-stakes testing, a high dropout rate for students, and a high turnover rate for teachers and administrators. Researchers report that most urban schools struggle with the same issues, and some of these same studies have been dedicated to finding out why these issues exist (Anyon, 1997; Fine, Weiss, & Powell, 1997; Heath, 1989; 1993). In addition to the varying factors suggested by educational researchers, many agree the social, political, and economic gap between students and teachers plays an important role in the disparity between the ways in which teachers teach and learners learn (Anyon, 1997; Heath, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2001; 2006). Research has purported that classroom interactions are complicated because of issues of power and status (Alvermann, 1996; Ellsworth, 1989; Mahiri, 2001; Sperling, 2003), and in today’s classrooms, these types of issues are further complicated by estimates that 88% of public school teachers are white and 81% are 45 years and older (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Although this research recognized that power and status are problematic among classroom interactions and influence classroom
communications, more research is needed to highlight the ways in which teachers and students can successfully work through these issues.

Limitations

While the study’s findings can serve as a springboard for further research in a number of different settings, particular limitations constrained the usefulness of the study. First, the study was limited in scope to one English class at an inner-city high school located in a mid-sized city in a southeastern state in the United States. Second, the study was limited to one semester in a school which operated on a block schedule. Similarly, the study was limited only to ninth-grade students attending a school which operated on a block schedule and who were studying the ELA curriculum in the second semester of the school year which means they had received no ELA instruction since the second semester of their eighth-grade during the previous school year. The study was limited to one English teacher within a school system which employs several English teachers. Finally, the study was limited in scope to a white researcher, who has limited experience teaching African American students, investigating a creative writing program presented to chiefly African American students.

Definition of Terms

The following key terms are important for understanding the present study.

1. Critical race theory (in education): a framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural, cultural, and interpersonal aspects of education that maintain the marginal position and subordination of African American and Latino students.

2. Culturally relevant pedagogy: effective pedagogy as that which helps students “to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that
challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

3. Instructional scaffolding: helping students solve problems by providing clear objectives, guided assistance, and prompt encouragement.

4. Sociocultural theory: the belief that culture is transmitted from one generation to the next in the form of values, beliefs, customs, and skills of a social group.

5. Visiting Experts: people other than the university instructors and the regular English classroom teacher who spoke to or had interaction with students concerning writing.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate the constructs of the creative writing program and its effects on the participants whose social and cultural backgrounds differed. The research focused upon the creative writing program, the instructors, the ninth-grade ELA students, and the regular English teacher.

Chapter II offers a theoretical framework and incorporates relevant literature for further define the study’s direction and purpose.

In Chapter III, I address the methodology used for the study and offer explanation of the research techniques used through a discussion of a descriptive research paradigm. Demographic information about the participants in the context of the classroom is also presented in chapter III.

Chapter IV is a presentation of the data results obtained through observing and interviewing participants.

Chapter V presents a more thorough discussion of the findings relative to the theoretical framework and research literature. The implications of the findings for each of the four research questions and limitations of the study are offered.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength. -Maya Angelou

This chapter offers relevant literature about issues regarding interpretations of social and cultural differences in education, creative writing for adolescents, and construction of student identities. Some of the concepts surrounding the present study include the tension between theory and practice, the daily reality of students’ and instructors’ varying social and cultural backgrounds in the classroom, and the use of creative writing as a bridge to help students explore their identities.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is situated in sociocultural theory derived primarily from the work of Vygotsky (1978) who recognized the reciprocal relationship among language, culture, and thought. He declared, “It is an indisputable fact [that] thought development is determined by language...and the sociocultural experiences of the child” (p. 78). Thus, language and communication styles are systems of cultural notations and the means through which thoughts and ideas are expressively embodied. My analyses explained that
embedded within these different communication styles are cultural values and ways of knowing that strongly influence how students engage with learning tasks and demonstrate mastery of them.

Additionally, Critical Race Theory and Critical Pedagogy are an essential part of the framework for this study, particularly as these theories relate to Ladson-Billings’ (1995a) ideas of culturally relevant pedagogy. The emphasis on social factors in terms of what people learn and how they come to see themselves is a large part of what these theorists believe shapes each individual.

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural methods of learning and development, originally organized and applied by Lev Vygotsky (1978), focus on “the concept that human activities occur in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can be best understood when examined in their historical development” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 191). Vygotsky espoused the idea that cognitive development is basically a social process, and one of the major themes of his work is that individual mental functioning has sociocultural origins—development initially takes place on an external (social) level and is then internalized (on an individual level) (Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman, 1978). Arguing that language not only influenced intellect, but also the formation of the person (Wells, 2001), Vygotsky also viewed language as a tool introducing learners to various cultures in which they learned an assortment of word usages, which permitted them to become members of particular communities or cultures (Wells, 1999; 2001; Wertsch, 1991). The contributions of Vygotsky’s (1978) work, referred to as sociocultural theory, highlight the need for understanding how culture—values, beliefs, customs, and skills of a social group—is transmitted to the next generation; he conceptualized this development as the
“transformation of social-shared activities into internalized processes” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 191). Vygotsky maintained that social interaction is necessary for children to acquire the ways of thinking and behaving that make up a community’s culture (Berk, 2004).

Examining human activities as situated in historical development suggests cultural contexts as representations of historical materialism, a concept often defined as “an awareness and approach to society not only as it exists here and now, but as it existed in the past and as it is developing as the result of its internal contradictions” (Mbalia, p. 21). Historically, the U.S. educational system “has served as a means to assimilate People of Color into the dominant culture” (Carter, 2000, p. 866). The nation’s past and present affect what happens in education, and as Langer’s (2000) study revealed, “Teachers and students are part of a larger-than-classroom context” (p. 398). The participants in this study brought their own assumptions of each other to the classroom, and more often than not, those assumptions hinged on preconceived notions or stereotypes exacerbated by the media. Vygotsky emphasized that individual functioning is dynamic rather than static and is in a continuous state of change, being influenced by, responding to, and having influence upon its surroundings (which conveys with it a historical, cultural, and social context). The range of differences among cultures means that what may be considered appropriate in one culture may be viewed quite differently by another culture.

The language development aspect of sociocultural theory “shows how people’s individual minds are formed out of, and always continue to reflect, social interactions in which they engaged as they acquired their native language or later academic languages in school” (Gee, 2001, p. 114). With regard to this kind of language socialization, Gee references Bakhtin’s proposal that “how anything anyone thinks or says is, in reality, composed of bits and pieces of language that have been voiced elsewhere, in other conversations or texts, bits and pieces that
have circulated and recirculated inside the workings of various texts, social groups, and institutions” (p. 114). These connections to the language of the school classroom and the individual draw attention to the manner in which a teacher’s voice not only becomes part of an adolescent’s language, but it also suggests the range of influence a teacher has on a student’s perception of self as a successful or unsuccessful student.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has succeeded in helping more educators become aware of the unequal power struggles for minority students in school. According to McCarthy (2003), truly understanding personal ideas of racial identity is important because listening to students’ stories at “ground-zero level [is] where complex and contradictory feelings and white racial anxieties begin to come to the surface” (p. 130). Applying CRT in today’s classrooms means accepting students as individuals and encouraging them to explore and share their uniqueness.

One of the tenets characterizing CRT is that “it names and discusses the daily realities of racism and exposes how racism continues to privilege whites and to disadvantage people of color” (Edwards & Schmidt, 2006, p. 405). Using CRT as a lens through which educational practices and politics can be investigated has the potential to help educators in the classroom create safe places for adolescents to make their voices heard about social injustices and silent discrimination. CRT, also referred to as critical race pedagogy, is applicable as it pertains to my observing and analyzing the relationships of white teachers and African American students in relation to the extent that differences in social and cultural backgrounds enter into writing instruction. One connection of critical race theory to classroom instruction is explained through Ladson-Billings’ (1995b) ideas of effective pedagogy which helps students “to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools
(and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 469); she refers to this type of instruction as *culturally relevant pedagogy*. In the era of high-stakes testing and accountability in public schools, critical race theory provides a lens through which “greater ontological and epistemological understandings of how race and racism affect the education and lives of the racially disenfranchised” (Parker & Lynn, 2002, pp. 7-8), which is particularly beneficial for teachers and educational researchers.

Living in a more globalized 21st century means that schools are often responsible for helping students acquire social and cultural capital which goes beyond race and class. However, across a range of studies (e.g., Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003, Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Sperling, 2003), many researchers stress that in order for this kind of literacy to take place, race must be made visible—both in marks of difference and privilege. Significant ways of dealing with race in research studies means that researchers become more mindful of their own positions regarding race. Involved in the process of creating a course of action for research, McCarthy (2003) raises questions about “who has the power to define whom, and when, and how” (p. xvi). Even with the magnitude of challenges faced by researchers/educators, literacy learning in urban settings needs to be studied in order for those voices to be heard. Researchers should be cautious when assuming someone’s ethnicity and should also be aware of the tendency to neglect its powerful position in culture: “Race is a critical and defining feature of lived experience that young and old and people of all colors reflect upon, embody, challenge, and negotiate” (Fine, Weiss, & Powell, 1997, p. 251).

Living in a country that prides itself on the idea of freedom for all, it is disconcerting to consider what one researcher (Hyland, 2003) points out as a historical calamity continuing in
America’s communities even today: “institutionalized racism and the socially constructed
category of race.” Hyland explains some of the effects of institutionalized racism:

[T]hese conditions have shaped White people’s consciousness just as surely as they have
shaped people of color, but in a manner that has been largely undefined and unrecognized
by Whites, who, as members of the dominant group, often take their Whiteness and the
societal racial arrangement for granted. (pp. 18-19)

Exploring the binary realities of many teachers’ and students’ culturally diverse backgrounds,
Kincheloe (2004) explains a basic tenet of critical race theory as it pertains to education:

Every dimension of schooling and every form of educational practice are politically
contested spaces. Shaped by history and challenged by a wide range of interest groups,
educational practice is a fuzzy concept as it takes places in numerous settings, is shaped
by a plethora of often-invisible forces, and can operate even in the name of democracy
and justice to be totalitarian and oppressive. (p. 2)

As more educational research examines and highlights successful classroom practices, the
greater likelihood exists that new teachers will become better prepared to enter classrooms of
diversity.

**Cultural Diversity**

In addition to describing this particular writing program, my study sought to observe how
the instructors responded to cultural diversity in the classroom. The 20 African American
students with social and cultural backgrounds somewhat different from the instructors was an
environment in which I observed how the degree to which these differences affected the
instruction and learning. Increasing awareness of the importance of being prepared for cultural
diversity is essential if teachers, particularly white English teachers, are to become more adept at
supporting African American students achieve academic success, and it is a crucial step in the right direction.

Cultural diversity is an everyday reality for schools across the United States, perhaps more in the 21st century than any other time in the history of the nation. One study (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2004) indicates that minority students comprise one-third of the student population, and estimations propose that by 2020, one-half of the student population will be composed of minority students. In order to successfully teach the growing number of minority students, the growing number of mostly white English teachers whose social and cultural backgrounds are quite different from their students will need to find different strategies than those they use to teach their white students. One issue prevalent in these classrooms is the identification and application of best practices for teachers to follow.

To investigate conscientiously the interplay of social and cultural differences between teachers and students, it is important to consider what Van Manen (1990) maintained: “From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings” (p. 5). Ultimately, all educational researchers must consider cultural diversity in research as well as develop a mindset “which respects diverse views and cultures and is constantly attentive to race relations” (Hing, 1997, p. 4). Teachers must empower students with equal educational opportunities regardless of the quantity of identifiable diversity in a school. Unfortunately, the manner in which many teachers know about empowering students is vague; however, one certainty is succinctly stated by Tate (2003):
Many of us have become unaware of those “natural” tendencies that guide our beliefs and behaviors. We struggle to articulate how we really feel, and freeze at the thought of communicating about race, racism, and associated remedies. Remember that the fundamental meta-level question for the study of whiteness in classrooms, schools, district offices, state agencies, or the federal government is the same. Are you my neighbor? (p.126)

Giroux (1987) states that it is the teacher’s responsibility to broaden his or her own understanding of cultural histories; he further explains:

It is important that teachers learn to confirm students’ experiences so that students are legitimated and supported as people who matter, who can participate in their learning, and who, in doing so, can speak with a voice that is rooted in their sense of history and place. (p. 176)

It is imperative to remember that successfully supporting students’ learning “requires a tremendous amount of thoughtful planning and focused energy” (Sanacore, 2003, p. 746). Langer (2000) notes that “teachers never work in a vacuum,” and she points to the necessity of teachers’ ongoing professional development because “it is constant exposure to and filtering through both the broad and distant as well as closer-to-home professional contexts that teachers maintain the professional knowledge, skill, and technique they use to help their students learn and achieve in English” (p. 435).

Greene and Abt-Perkins (2003) indicate that understanding how literacy functions within particular cultures, especially among historically underrepresented groups, causes discomfort for many white teachers who often lack “strategies and experiences with having conversations about race or racism across multiracial experiences” (p. 1). McCarthy (2003) maintains that race
cannot be studied alone because it is impossible to understand the “social, cultural, or political behavior by looking at their putative racial location to the exclusion of a more complex examination of their social biographies and the complex and constantly changing social context of the modern world in which we live” (p. 132). Teaching in 21st-century classrooms requires having an anthropological inquisitiveness along with an informed sociocultural awareness to understand the depth of knowledge each student brings with him or her to school each day.

Life Spaces

Individuals’ life spaces that affect change represent communities which are often comprised of people who share a common culture and a historical heritage, and as Geertz (1973) suggests, “a society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believes in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members” (p. 11). Human beings are information processors, learners, thinkers, creators, and story tellers. Learning is a sharing of the culture, providing for its capacity to “refine and modify itself” which means that its members are taking active, participatory roles rather than passive spectator roles (Bigge & Shermis, 2004, p. 190). Engaging students in their own learning involves teachers who are cognizant of their students’ life spaces outside the schoolhouse doors, and as Dewey explained, “The critical element for explaining and predicting behavior is the intervening personal experience. In order to produce motivated behavior, one must produce the experience of arousal, commitment, and purpose” (cited in Bigge & Shermis, 2004, p. 191). Therefore, teachers must be willing to share some of their own life stories, to reveal their personal lives to a degree, and to actively engage in the same writing exercises they request from their students. It is this kind of personal sharing that my study discusses that helped students in the writing program to want to share their own stories with the instructors and with their peers.
In order to understand the basic tenets of the term *life spaces*, consideration must be given to the multiple representations of unique social and cultural experiences that fill classrooms every second of the school day. Efforts to observe a type of planned environment like a classroom involves awareness of multiple life spaces and conscious consideration of the cultural dynamics that exist beyond the surface level. Researchers must take into account the dynamics of the psychological environment which exists in education situations, and they must be sensitive to the techniques used to help students navigate such environments. According to Stake (1995), educational researchers need to recognize three dimensions of reality and practical avenues to building a “universal understanding of reality”: (a) reality as it is with or without the presence of the researcher, (b) personal beliefs about such a reality, and ultimately, (c) development of a more sophisticated concept of reality that “can withstand disciplined skepticism” about it (p. 102). Stake further elucidates that though there is some uniqueness to an individual’s seeking of reality, much is of a “collective making”; the goal becomes an interpretation of those realities that can bear up under “scrutiny and challenge” (p. 103).

Glimpses of life spaces from outside the confines of the classroom may often appear in what is expressed or in what is absent from expression. The narratives through which students steer the reflections of their past, present, and future selves may appear cryptic to the uncultured eye. Developing an understanding of students’ social and cultural backgrounds helps to aid teachers in acquiring new or changed insights and ultimately their gaining greater control of self and environment. Deliberately becoming aware of historically underrepresented communities requires that researchers/educators become thoughtful of the groups’ social and cultural experiences and seek an informed perspective surrounding issues of equity and discrimination in relation to learning. Van Manen (1988) explains that culture is “a loose, slippery concept, since it
is anything but unchanging… [C]ulture is not itself visible, but is made visible only through its representation” (p. 3).

Demonstrative thoughtfulness of others’ sociocultural experiences is captured in educational research (Rosiek, 2003; Schallert & Martin, 2003) which points to the necessity of teachers’ also gaining a practical knowledge of students’ emotions as connected to their lives outside the classroom walls. Being thoughtful of students’ sociocultural experiences and purposefully planning instructional practices to include those experiences involves the concept referred to as emotional scaffolding which Rosiek (2003) defined as “teachers’ pedagogical use of analogies, metaphors, and narratives to influence students’ emotional response to specific aspects of the subject matter in a way that promotes student learning” (p. 402). Rosiek (2003) further explains that teachers need to learn productive ways to help students reduce their anxieties and acknowledge the various ways that “interactions between curricular content, cultural discourses, community histories, students’ personal histories, and general attitudes about schooling” affect students’ emotional responses to schoolwork (p. 406). In efforts to “transform” students’ emotional responses to the subject matter, teachers draw upon their knowledge about “students’ cultures, individual histories, and attitudes about schooling.” Rosiek (2003) asserts that in addition to teaching subject matter, “teachers also deal with students as whole human beings and need to respond to them as emotional, moral, social, and cultural as well as cognitive beings” (p. 411).

Communities of Practice

The concept of communities of practice is closely linked to sociocultural theory; in their studies, Lave and Wenger (1991) explain that individuals are not only influenced by the people around them, but each individual also has an influence on other people and on practice itself. The
school classroom is one aspect of a community of practice: students gain knowledge in addition to (or often in place of) the curriculum. In order to successfully navigate the socially diverse classroom community, educators must recognize and accept students’ differences. Schallert and Martin (2003) explain that guiding students to become familiar with what counts as learning and knowledge in a specific setting is central to any educational endeavor; they assert that the manner in which present views of learning and the ways learners carry out knowledgeable practices gives teachers confidence to create supportive classroom environments. These communities “allow for peer interaction, authentic conversations among students and teachers, and opportunities for learners to connect across space and time (e.g., via Internet connections and other technological advances)” (2003, p. 41).

Ladson–Billings and Tate (1995) explain that the term urban, the root word of urbane, has come to mean Black; thus, “urban schools (located in the urbane, sophisticated cities) lack the status and reputation of suburban (white) schools and when urban students move to or are bused to suburban schools, these schools lose their reputation” (p. 79). The teacher’s presence in the school, in general, and the classroom, particularly, is significant, especially a teacher who practices critical pedagogy—a concept which Giroux and Simon (1989) explain as “a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among particular sets of social relations… [which] can be understood as a practice through which people are incited to acquire a particular ‘moral character’” (p. 239).

In teacher education programs specifically striving to create more awareness of classroom diversity, it is interesting to note Hyland’s (2003) views: “Sometimes racism is inserted into schools simply by doing what is normal in those schools that primarily serve students of color, or even doing what is seemingly wonderful for students” (p. 452). A need
exists for educators to be reminded they are not teaching content—they are teaching children, and their efforts reflect “the way students are thought about and treated by society and consequently by the schools they attend” (Nieto, 1990, p. 199).

Greene and Abt-Perkins (2003) discuss the importance of researchers understanding how racial differences shape literacy processes in the classroom. Learning the social backgrounds of students is essential to understanding how students’ identities and discourses are shaped, but it requires more than examining the observable actions of its members; an acknowledgement of the historical stigmas plaguing many people of color has to be made. In their discussion of critical race theory, Greene and Abt-Perkins (2003) purport:

The permanence of racism in our social reality means that we have a personal responsibility to understand racism and work against its effects. We are challenged to use race as a construct to examine the limitations of our interpretations, to wonder continually about the ways in which our racial identities are playing out in the work we do, and the extent to which our discursive practices maintain inequity and injustice.

(pp. 8-9)

For these reasons and more, Plaut (2006) stresses how important it is for teachers to be aware of their limited knowledge about each students’ development, and “They [teachers] must rely on observable data—students’ writing, silence, questions, and body language—to gauge student confusion; they can only infer meaning from (and perhaps misinterpret) students’ behavior” (p. 394). Being attuned to the fluidity of self-development and socially-learned discourses that adolescents experience is pertinent to designing ways of self-expression in the English language arts classroom.
Envisioning the opportunities supportive English classrooms provide students, as well as comprehending how quality classroom instruction should occur in the 21st century, involves taking into account not only the social diversity of students but also teachers’ personal knowledge of their own prejudices. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) cite data from the *Digest of Education of Statistics* which predicts that over the next few years, “the number of ethnic minority teachers will shrink to 5%, while the enrollment of ethnic minority children in American schools will grow to 41%” (p. 88). A number of studies (e.g., Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Scherff, 2005; Sperling, 2003) point to the reality that effective teachers must be proficient in creating pedagogical practices that have significance for students’ social and cultural practices. However, in order for all children be successfully educated, Delpit (1992) asserts that the blinders have to be removed—“blinders of stereotypes, monocultural instructional methodologies, ignorance, social distance, biased research, and racism” (p. 248).

Educational researchers and teachers, old and new, can benefit from ideologies like Lave’s (1991) concept of communities of practice which imagines gaining information from the “forms of apprenticeship in other cultures to consider learning in our own sociocultural, historically grounded world” (p. 63). In the learning about adolescents, it must be recognized that students’ shaping of self-identity does not occur in isolation; in fact, Lave explains, “[C]ommunities make possible certain kinds of transformations of understanding, identity, and knowledgeable skills, not simply changes of a quantitative sort” (p. 81). Observing students in learning communities and describing the processes which lead to successful productivity have to be made available for new teachers to learn to implement rather than emulate.
Ladson-Billings’ (1995b) emphasizes that “The dilemma for African American students becomes one of negotiating the academic demands of school while demonstrating cultural competence” (p. 476). Due to the reality that a greater number of white, middle-class teachers are in classrooms across the nation instructing students of color, the greater the likelihood that the traditional modes of teaching are being implemented. Research (Banks, 1995; Deplit, 1992; Duncan, 2005; Fine, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a, 1995b) has successfully proven that traditional methods of teaching are not successful with all students, particularly students whose social and cultural backgrounds are very different from the teacher’s.

*Cultures of Power*

Delpit’s (1995) explanations of the existence of a culture of power in schools points to the difficulties students of color often have in negotiating the power as well as the difficulties white faculty members have in acknowledging the power. Delpit’s (1995) ideas of power shed light on important issues in the attempt to put critical pedagogy into actual practice. Jennings and Lynn (2005) discuss the history of racism: “This conception of power in the classroom is largely grounded in an understanding of whiteness that makes explicit the privilege of being white in America” (p. 27). All of this points to the less than desirable social relations within the public institution of schooling. More research is needed to understand successful teachers’ practices for African American students as well the exploration of new paradigms that “include the voices of parents and communities in non-exploitive ways” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 163).

The position of the researcher/educator as a member of a specific community is affected by the inherent role of subjectivity as well as being part of the power structure described by CRT that is my whiteness. As Banks (1995) points out, “If we fail to recognize the ways in which social location production produces subjectivity and influences the construction of knowledge,
we are unlikely to interrogate established knowledge that contributes to the oppression of marginalized groups” (p. 15). As researchers/educators enter into a study of a culture of diversity, research (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Sperling, 2003) stresses the need to engage in self-reflection and seriously consider personal positions toward “difference”—race, class, gender, and culture—and the correlation to the goals of school, literacy learning, and definitions of literacy. However, for many educators, effective change will be difficult due to the circumstances Ladson-Billings (1994) observes about the quandary of “very little reliable literature on preparing teachers for diversity. And almost nothing exists on teacher preparation specifically for African-American students” (p. 7).

Acknowledgement of Race

The concept of racism is universal but has a particularly significant meaning in the history of the United States (Feagin, 2001). Derrick Bell (1992), a critical legal scholar who has contributed much to CRT believes that racism is a permanent fixture of American society, arguing that racism is not “an aberrant entity but is instead an integral part of the American socio-political landscape. Jennings and Lynn (2005) explain that being such an “integral part” of America has “allowed racism to shape and be shaped by the major institutions within American society,” specifically “the compulsory public education system” (p. 26). They further exhort that racism and education are part of a complex mosaic which is persistent and growing within and across various social contexts, and “it is an understanding of these complexities that is necessary precursor for the existence of critical race pedagogy”; however, it is “not meant to establish race as the only construct of importance when critiquing the oppressive nature of schooling in American society” (Jennings & Lynn, 2005, p. 27). In fact, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that “...race, unlike gender and class, remains untheorized” and suggest that “we [teachers]
do not possess a language that allows us to talk about race and racial inequities in ways that are useful” (p. 49) and ultimately liberating (Jennings & Lynn, 2005, p. 22).

Sperling (2003) admonishes researchers studying students, as well as teachers engaged in practice, “When we say that the writing-learning process is fostered by teaching that acknowledges students’ social and cultural experiences, we need to remember that we are studying issues of equity and discrimination as much as literacy when we study cross-racially or cross-culturally” (p. 146). Both cultural and racial backgrounds need to be positively acknowledged in productive manners so that students feel at ease. With regard to the range of language usage among cultures and race, Heath (1989) states that “judgments about language use extend to evaluations of character, intelligence, and ways of thinking; thus, negative assumptions of language abilities often underlie expressions of sweeping prejudicial characterizations of Black Americans” (p. 367). Teachers who are aware of these negative assumptions and take measures to prevent it are engaging in critical pedagogy. Howard (2001) emphasizes the significance of teachers’ developing positive perceptions:

Although having a connection to and awareness of the cultural context that students bring from home was important, what seemed to be equally important in the development of these teachers’ teaching practices was a belief that their students were capable of being academically successful. (p. 198)

Acknowledging race instead of ignoring it is paramount to establishing supportive learning environment. When individuals claim they are color-blind, they are inadvertently saying that color is not important; therefore students whose skin colors do not match the rest of the class wonder why they are not important to a teacher. In the need to create caring spaces for culturally-diverse students, Sanacore (2004) states that “These children are entangled in a mismatch
between the experiences that they have and what their schools expect for success” (p. 745). In addition, a number of studies (e.g., Levin, 1992; Sanacore, 1994; Sanacore & Wilsusen, 1995) discuss the irony of these students not having an “at-riskness” condition, but the situation of their being in an “at-risk” environment that does not accommodate their individual learning needs (Sanacore, 2004, p. 250).

Identifying an urban setting for research, Sperling (2003) explains how she sought to see how good teaching “plays out in settings where teaching and learning can be readily compromised by forces that are too often invisible both to the participants as well as to the researchers who study them” (p. 135). McCarthy (2003) explains that race cannot be studied alone because it is impossible to understand the “social, cultural, or political behavior by looking at their putative racial location to the exclusion of a more complex examination of their social biographies and the complex and constantly changing social context of the modern world in which we live” (p. 132).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings (1995b) asserts that culturally relevant pedagogy helps students “to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 157) and “requires that students maintain some cultural integrity as well as academic excellence” (p. 160). Adding to this, Lytle (2006) stresses that “reconceptualizing the literacies in adolescents’ lives entail, in part, learning from teachers of adolescents what it means to teach them” (p. 257).

In their study, Fecho, Davis, and Moore (2006) found that because language is first learned in the home and the neighborhood, its link to identity is strong: “When associations with mainstream power codes also are linked to a history of oppression, learners from marginalized
cultures may show reluctance to acquire language that too closely ties them to visions and conceptions of the oppressor” (p. 202). Davies and Harré (1990) note that language works to position people in relation to one another. Tenets of critical race theory suggest that students explore their identities through language, and personal writing is an important tool to be utilized in that endeavor.

Writing and Students’ Self-Identity

Research (McCarthy, 2003) explains that race cannot be studied alone because it is impossible to understand the “social, cultural, or political behavior by looking at their putative racial location to the exclusion of a more complex examination of their social biographies and the complex and constantly changing social context of the modern world in which we live” (p. 132). The technological advancements of the 21st century affect students at every socioeconomic level and are increasingly becoming accessed by teenagers. This reality, accompanied by the complex social lives of students, became problematic for the instructors’ plans for successful completion of the books.

While writing instruction is multidisciplinary, many times the English classroom is the place where personal writing occurs, and prepared teachers must have the appropriate tools to acknowledge positively students’ writing and to provide secure places for students to express and share their thoughts and ideas with one another. To help students better understand their own worlds as well as the worlds of those around them, establishing a successful writing community is one fundamental step.

Creative writing connects thought and feeling, allowing students to make significant associations by responding both cognitively and affectively to subject matter (Brown & Stephens, 1995). Such meaning making is personally transformative and growth producing.
Writing can present a natural way to unravel problems, explore feelings and inner experiences, experience power and freedom, and find one’s voice (Atwell, 1987).

The hope of learning something new and the desire to express oneself accompanies all students into the classroom whether they are consciously aware of it or not; moreover, as Greene (2001) explains, “Part of teaching is to come in contact with that sense of incompleteness… [T]he craft of teaching involves that capacity to make contact; it is another way of addressing our students’ freedom” (p. 86). Seeking self-identity and affirmation are part of adolescents’ striving for independence, and Bloome (2003) addresses how the initial fashioning of students’ worlds enters the classroom:

Children, based on what parents, teachers, and others do, and on the results of their own actions, construct models of how the world operates, and what is expected of them and others (which to some extent are shared models with peers and adults). Children are participants in constructing meaning and the outcomes of the educational events in which they participate. (p. 56)

Acknowledging agency, or “self-direction,” is also an important part of all students’ identity formation, discussed more in depth later in the chapter, because educators who trust adolescents to make important decisions about their identities and the kinds of people they presently are and have the potential to become empowers them to succeed (Moore & Cunningham, 2006). Educational researchers and teachers must be aware of the sociocultural nature of students’ identities; Tatum (2006) explains the concept of identity as “a complex one shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts” (p. 66).

Determinations of what students’ writing and self-expression should bear a resemblance
are important to helping students achieve success in the writing classrooms of the 21st century. Since the quest for self-identity is often a confusing time for adolescents, English instructors are in the position to help students access their full potential as a writer through demystifying the multiple modes of self-expression. Tatum (2006) maintains that “although identity construction is central to one’s literacy development, many teachers responsible for teaching adolescent students of color are unaware of their students’ multiple identities and how these identities can be used or should be built on during literacy instruction” (p. 67).

Research (see, for example, Applebee, 2003; Gee, 2001; Moore & Cunningham, 2006; Tatum, 2006) maintains that students’ perceptions of themselves and those in their social communities and cultures allow them to bring much more to the classroom than paper and pencil. Helping students understand the realities surrounding them daily, English language arts teachers are in a special position to equip students with methods that help to make sense of it all. Applebee (2003) says, “In writing, opportunities for ownership occur when topics call for students to explore their own experiences and opinions, to elaborate on a point of view, and to develop their own positioning within a social group” (p. 679).

Nurturing the writing of students in a diverse high school classroom setting must be more than presenting a formulaic process and expecting students to construct a nearly perfect piece of written composition. A need to be educated with “the broad strokes necessary to prepare them properly for the 21st century” (Deplit, 1992, p. 247) means preparing students to consider the world around them presently and for the future. Pointing to the idea that curriculum and instruction need to be better balanced, particularly with regard to the content to be learned and the active involvement of the learner through writing, Applebee (2003) insists that students who take a more active role in their own learning do so by “advancing their own interpretations and
opinions, defending them against alternatives raised by the teacher and peers, and checking them against their own experience and the logic and rigor of texts with which they deal” (p. 683). For many teachers, this self-interest in learning requires more focus, energy, and time on the teacher’s part as well as more effective ways of instruction.

Acknowledging that various groups of people write differently than other groups is not saying that one groups’ writing is less than what it needs to be to achieve cultural capital. Rose (2003) posits that “writing, as the whole span of rhetorical theory makes clear, is deeply embedded in the particulars of the human situation…a context-dependent activity that calls on many abilities” (p. 366). Obidah and Marsh (2006) declare that “by allowing students to express themselves without limiting their mode of expression,” teachers may “gain powerful insight into their lived realities while gaining critical insight into the multiple aspects and complexities of their identities” (p. 126). In regard to vital areas of future investigation, Schallert and Martin (2003) emphasize that more educators become aware of “the concept of adaptability,” and more teachers need to allow for “the individual’s desire to impose order and predictability on the world” (p. 34). At the same time, research (Kinnen & Bosma, 2000; Van der Maas & Molenaar, 1992; Van Gert, 1994) point to “the value in considering human functioning as a dynamic system, one in which opportunistic and chance juxtapositions influence the sense-making that individuals experience” (cited in Schallert & Martin, 2003, p. 34) thus allowing for more creativity in self-expression.

Another productive method for today’s youth is explained by Mahiri’s (2001) study of “ways to use African American youth culture as a bridge to writing development” (p. 67). Mahiri discusses his discovery of what he calls “street scripts” as stimulating writing that exposes “insightful, personal perspectives on crime and violence that counterpoise the way these youth
are portrayed in politics and in the media” (p. 67). Although the texts and scripts Mahiri (2001) discusses are actually pieces of “voluntary writing” created for the youths’ own purposes, “their perceptions and experiences reflect significant practices of literacy” (p. 68).

Identify Formation

Issues of identity for adolescents can be quite complicated. Ladson-Billings (1995a) cites Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) discussion of students “acting White,” which occurs when “African-American students fear being ostracized by their peers for demonstrating interest in and succeeding in academic and other school related tasks” (p. 161). Bacon (1981) explained that “among African American high school students identified as gifted in their elementary grades, only about half were continuing to do well at the high school level” (cited by Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 476). Ladson-Billings (1995b) stresses, “The dilemma for African-American students becomes one of negotiating the academic demands of school while demonstrating cultural competence” (p. 476).

Identity formation, according to Gee (2001), is intricately tied to discourse and “being certain kinds of people”; he goes on to explain that every individual experiences moment-by-moment “negotiations between oneself and others as to which Discourse will be operative for interpretation at any given time and place” (p. 110). Providing opportunities for students to exhibit themselves as they are identified by the various social groups of which they are a part means teachers need an active knowledge of the current trends in adolescents’ lives. Phinney, Cantu, and Kurtz (2004) note that “ethnic identity has been conceptualized as a complex construct including a commitment and sense of belonging to the group, positive evaluation of the group, interest in and knowledge about the group, and involvement in social activities of the group” (p. 168). The implications discussed in their study, however, suggest that if the ethnic
group is viewed negatively by society, members of the group may view themselves negatively. Autobiographical writing can be cathartic for adolescents struggling to identify with various social groups, particularly in their introductory status at the high school level.

Too often, teachers and researchers fail to recognize why some children fail to learn; Shallert and Martin (2003) suggest it is not “because of low intelligence or a deficiency in the ability to engage the basic comprehension processes, but because of missing an unactivated background knowledge presupposed by the new input” (p. 37). Identifying strategies that tap students’ life experiences and their familiarity with particular activities are especially important for writing with depth.

Research in the field of culturally-relevant pedagogy generally points to the idea that successful teachers of students of color recognize the public school system as racist and see themselves as part of a larger political struggle for social justice (Banks, 1995; Howard, 2001, 2003; Hyland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sperling, 2003). In their discussion of the need for re-conceptualization of a critical race pedagogy, Jennings and Lynn (2005) state, “The development of a critical consciousness can potentially encourage both teachers and students to be more reflexive of their experiences and therefore more open to understanding how the hegemony of the state has structured their life experiences” (p. 17). D’Amato (1992) discusses the positioning of adolescents of color which provides a type of socio-structural clarification of resistance often found in minority classrooms:

[I]n racially organized systems of social stratification, oppressed racial groups or “castelike minorities” develop attitudes of warranted cynicism regarding the social mobility functions of institutions like schools; practice a group-wide “oppositional culture” in dealing with representatives of such institutions; learn survival skills
appropriate to the nature of their structurally limited opportunities; and socialize their children in these manners. (p. 185)

The need for more awareness of the role cultural awareness plays in pedagogy is closely linked to ongoing professional development as Gay (2000) succinctly asserts: “If educators continue to be ignorant of, ignore, impugn, and silence the cultural orientations, values, and performance styles of ethnically different students, they will persist in imposing cultural hegemony, personal denigration, education inequity, and academic underachievement upon them” (Gay, 2000, p. 208).

The variance of social and cultural contexts in the United States, particularly for the present study, encompasses the historical and intergenerational inequalities of the larger population of African Americans which significantly affect what happens in the classroom environment. Gay (2000) emphasizes that too many times good teaching is equated with the assertion that “respecting the individual differences of students is really what counts in effective teaching, not race, ethnicity, culture, or gender” (p. 23). However, it is unconceivable that educators could identify and cultivate the individuality of their students when they plead ignorance of “Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans, Laotians, Vietnamese, and other immigrant groups” (p. 23).

This paradox is further manifested when educators fail to realize “Individuality of students is deeply entwined with their ethnic identity and cultural socialization,…[and] ignorance of people different from ourselves often breeds negative attitudes, anxiety, fears, and the seductive temptation to turn others into images of ourselves” (Gay, 2000, p. 23). Too many misunderstandings and negative labels, based on limited understandings of culture and its all-encompassing role in human development, have severely inhibited the efficacy of many
educational interventions aimed at improving achievement and life chances for these populations (Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003).

Summary

Chapter II revealed the theoretical framework that served as the foundation for this research. The literature was presented to emphasize the importance of knowing about students’ social and cultural backgrounds in relation to strengthening students’ learning outcomes. The research points out that teachers’ sincere efforts to know their students is a way to bridge students’ identities to more successful student outcomes in education. Any gaps in the research based on pedagogy and more effective teacher outcomes include challenges to researchers interested in evaluating the effects of culturally relevant pedagogy, particularly writing programs and African American students. The review of the literature demonstrates the importance of English teachers’ using writing to help students become cognizant of their own identities as well as the identities of others. The review of the literature also highlights the need for educators to productively seek ways to improve instructional methods and to utilize students’ differences for successful outcomes. Chapter III presents the methodology used for this study.
CHAPTER III

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Introduction

Case studies represent “theaters of language.” (Geertz, 1988)

My approach to the study is aligned with Van Manen’s (1990) observation about the human sciences, “One does not pursue research for the sake of research” (p. 1); the design of the present study included using descriptive, case study methodology which incorporated a variety of data collection techniques. Case studies are often characterized as narratives and are designed to engage those employing the methods to solve dilemmas, stimulate reflection, and disseminate character, emotion, setting, and dialogue (Merriam, 1998). Five important components distinguish case studies: (a) guiding research questions, (b) plans based on theory, (c) a unit of analysis defining the case, (d) logic linking the data to the propositions, and (e) the criteria used for interpretation of the findings (Yin, 2003). I used case study methodology to uncover both what was common and what was particular about the case (Stake, 1994) through the analysis of multiple data sources, such as interviews, observations, and document analysis (Patton, 1990; Stake, 1994; Yin, 1994).
Case studies present abundant ways for observers to generate descriptions of participants, particularly as participants are occupied in resolving daily problems and are reflecting on problems that can either improve or diminish effectiveness in the classroom. One of the most important factors in the selection of a case study methodology is that case studies explore in detail the *how* and *why* of specific situations (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991). A qualitative approach provides a method that allows others to feel the “pulse” of the culture via conversations, feedback, and artifacts with all participants becoming key players (Merriam, 1998).

An important advantage for using case study as a mode of research is the opportunity to select instances of particular teaching methods in a classroom setting which lead to rich data for close analysis of processes and problems associated with various approaches to literacy, translating into more useful results instead of being forced to make sweeping generalizations (Birnbaum, Emig, & Fisher, 2005; Green, Dixon, & Zaharlick, 2003). Birnbaum et al. (2005) assert that a case study is “an examination of a bounded system… [which] means that the case or cases being studied are fixed in time and place and have identifiable confines such as a program, an event, an activity, or an individual” (p. 192). In their study, Anderson and Irvine (1993) point to the risks of ethnography often being condemned for the same detachment and estranged object-subject relationships attributes of positivistic research; however, case study research is well suited to explore the broad use of language as well as the varying social uses of literacy, especially in light of unintentional inequalities in many classrooms.

Educational researchers studying a group’s literacy is akin to the anthropologist studying a culture and, in the process, implementing the type of research needed to capture a group’s cultural norms. Anderson and Irvine (1993) hail ethnography as a “method of discovery that
documents patterns in cultural behavior and knowledge [which] can further our understanding of the processes and effectiveness of critical pedagogies, because it represents the ‘insider’s’ point of view” (p. 82). The researcher’s own professional community, which seeks empirical evidence, considers the specifics surrounding a research study; for example, Ladson-Billings (1995b), who is an African American, points to her own identification “in a marginalized racial/cultural group” (p. 470) explaining that such perceptions could possibly make her research revelations problematic or appear biased or, at the least, skewed because of her vested interests in the community, especially if there was the presumption of her having a “native perspective as she studied effective practice for African American students” (p. 470).

On the other hand, many white researchers may not be prepared for entering classrooms of diversity without prior knowledge of an important component of critical race theory and critical pedagogy: the recognition of the importance of understanding the power dynamics inherit in schooling (Jennings & Lynn, 2005). With regard to my observation of a dominantly African American classroom, it was extremely enlightening to note what Delpit (1995) explains concerning the existence of a “culture of power” within schools and how “it often divides communities of color from well-meaning whites who wish to contribute to those whom they consider to be less fortunate” (p. 88). Delpit characterizes the culture of power by five broad characteristics: First, she explains that the matter of power enacted within a classroom occurs in many ways and involves the power of students, teacher, administrators, etc. whose degrees of power are continually defined, negotiated, and enacted within and outside the classroom (Jennings & Lynn, 2005). The second characteristic Delpit explains has to do with the “rules” regarding participation in the culture of power which includes things such as “communicative strategies, speech patterns, hygiene and dress, ways of writing, etc.,” (p. 26) and third, Delpit
says that the rules are created and put into practice based on the culture of those who hold power in the larger society and how the discourse of power is fashioned. Fourth, non-participants in the culture of power have a better chance of participating if they are explicitly aware of the rules that manage the culture of power; however, cultural group members often implicitly convey information to one another making it nearly impossible for non-group members to negotiate the culture of power. Finally, those groups with the power are more often the ones who are less aware of the power and are often least willing to give up that power. Jennings and Lynn (2005) maintain that “Acknowledging and understanding one’s privileged place in the culture of power can be difficult given the quest for egalitarianism professed by many professionals in the field of education” (pp. 26-27).

The study examined the usefulness of such a writing program, especially with regard to helping students explore their self identities through writing, especially as the students’ social and cultural backgrounds were somewhat different from the instructors’ backgrounds. This chapter, outlined in four sections, describes the methodology used in the study. The first section presents the research questions and the case study design. The second section describes the setting and the participants. The third section describes procedures for data collection and data analysis procedures, specifically the qualitative research method of the case study as well as external validity, reliability, and objectivity. The fourth section is an explicit account of the data protocol.

Research Questions

The unit of analysis (Yin, 2003) for this study was a creative writing program in a ninth-grade English classroom. As explained previously, the purpose of this study was to examine a
creative writing program and its effects on the participants. The following questions served as a framework for this study:

1. How was the writing program executed in the classroom?

2. What resources were in position to support the success of the program, and what, if any, barriers reduced the success of the program?

3. How did days spent on the writing program differ from other days in the class?

4. How did the students, the teacher, the university instructors, and outside experts interact with each other while participating in the program?

In order to establish how the research questions would be informed through the data collection, I used the structure (Table 2) I mentioned in chapter one to gather data.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions Paired with Data Collection Procedures</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. How was the writing program executed in the classroom?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How did the students, the teacher, and outside experts interact with each other while participating in the program?</td>
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</table>

Research Design

Case Study

Case study as a research strategy encompasses an all-inclusive method—covering the sense of design, data collection procedure, and precise tactics for data analysis (Yin, 2003).
Patton (2002) maintained that case study methodology is practical for understanding a “special people, particular problem, or unique situation in great depth” (p. 43). Researchers involved in case study observe the intricacies and the distinctiveness of the significant circumstances surrounding a case (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Bromley (1990) adds that the method of case study analysis functions as a “systemic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest” (p. 302). Bogdan and Biklen (2007), Carspecken (1996), Stake (1995), and Yin (2003) have used the case study method to develop rich and comprehensive insights about people.

Participants and Setting

We the Children: A Symphony of Lives is the title of the creative writing program directed by two English education instructors from a large, research university in collaboration with the Condor High School (CHS) (pseudonym) English department. The writing program was implemented in the spring semester of the 2007-2008 academic school year. The program site was a ninth-grade English Language Arts (ELA) class at CHS which hosts a student body of approximately 616 students. The school is located in Gothart (pseudonym), a college town in the Southeastern United States with a population of 83,135 which comprises 48% of the population in Gothart County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). The high school is predominantly African American (99%) with a student/teacher ratio of 12:1. Mrs. Claret’s (pseudonym) English class contained 20 African American students whose junior high school English teachers had recommended them for this particular Pre-Honors class. The 20 African American students included 11 girls and 9 boys who were between 14 and 16 years old. Of the seven student interviews completed, six of the interviewees were girls. All of the most talkative girls were interviewed as well as the most talkative male.
The school operates on a block schedule, which means that each class was 90 minutes long. The site of the study was a pre-Honors, traditional, ninth-grade English class, not a creative writing class, so the English teacher planned for Tuesdays of each week (January through April) to be solely used for the creative writing program to be implemented.

CHS is a fairly new, modern structure situated on the corner of a busy intersection located less than a mile from the largest public university in the state. The school’s building is less than four years old, and everything in and around it looks new. Inside the hallways and classrooms are uncluttered walls and floors which retain the gleam of quality paint and linoleum. The desks, auditorium seats, and cafeteria stools are intact and in mint working condition. In the computer labs, the computers, keyboards, and rolling chairs are in tip-top shape. The school’s facilities reflect an academic institution ready to meet the needs of students in the 21st century.

The ELA classroom is a small part of a larger social structure, and the town in which the high school is located is multi-dimensional. The fact that the town is home to a major university and one of the state’s most celebrated football teams creates a very unique atmosphere, an enigma for some of the students. The context of the classroom setting and the positioning of the students, their teacher, the instructors, and the researcher represent a range of social and cultural differences. While the research study focused on the implementation of the writing program, the context of the classroom and its participants are important to the analyses.

Traveling one mile in any direction from the school presents another picture. Some of the areas within a one-mile radius of the sparkling school building neither resemble the rest of Gothart nor appear to be connected in too many ways to the rest of the town of some 83,000 inhabitants. Although the school is built facing one of the town’s busiest streets with five lanes for traffic, the other three sides of the school border two-lane streets which lead to smaller,
cramped residential areas of the town. The buildings on these smaller streets are older structures with houses nested too closely to each other and not as well-maintained as some of the older, historic houses situated closer to the university in the downtown area. Run-down stores, restaurants, and gas stations pepper sides of the some of the streets along with boarded-up, vacant buildings falling down around the small businesses. On the south side of the school, the pinnacle of a billion-dollar football stadium towers above the contrived-traditional landscape of the university red-brick buildings with large white columns amidst live oaks and magnolia trees at least a hundred years old.

On the west side of this same town, CHS students live and spend 99.9% of their leisure time. Figuratively speaking, a large number of these students’ lives are miles away from the lives of the university’s inhabitants, so it is easy to forget that the high school is located just down the street and across the railroad tracks from the university. In so many other ways, these students’ lives are filled with the same type of everyday experiences as children who live in more affluent neighborhoods in and around the town. It is important to see both areas. In her study, Sperling (2003) found that urban classrooms are often sites where good teaching “plays out in settings where teaching and learning can be readily compromised by forces that are too often invisible both to the participants as well as to the researchers who study them” (p. 135). For reasons not directly discussed in this study, students’ personal notions regarding academic instruction are also shaped by social and cultural backgrounds. Students’ choosing not to engage in academic settings is not a race-specific problem but rather, part of the phenomenon of the narcissistic development stage of adolescence. Some students appeared to fit what Sanacore (2004) states, “These children are entangled in a mismatch between the experiences that they have and what their schools expect for success” (p. 745).
The instructors worked weekly with students—initially on Tuesdays and then biweekly on Tuesdays (in the classroom) and Fridays (in one of the school’s computer labs)—to guide students through various writing prompts using contemporary literature, e.g., song lyrics, excerpts from young adult literature, personal writing, etc. On Fridays, the instructors assisted students in the computer lab with the digitization of their stories. Because writing is a social and cultural activity, each writer (student) was considered a member of a writing community, sharing ideas and personal experiences with other writers in the classroom. The students shared the same ethnicity and culture but were taught by white instructors whose social and cultural backgrounds were similar to each other but quite different from the students. Under the instructors’ guidance, students became writers who exhibited traits of creative thinkers and designers of text within a classroom of social influences and cultural differences (Sharples, 1999).

From the very start of any writing program, it is important to bear in mind that writing instruction of any type involves helping students recognize that writing is not a linear activity which moves from step one to step two and so forth. Writing of any sort at every level of education involves understanding the horizontal nature and recursive cycle of writing. The multimodal, autobiographical writing program also included Visiting Experts, a term coined by the instructors to identify professionals who were invited to talk to students about ways various members participate in a creative writing program. These experts included a journalist/photographer and three university students studying to be documentary filmmakers. A number of class sessions were filmed by the documentary filmmakers in conjunction with their university course assignments; as a result, many of the classroom sessions are captured on video. Mrs. Claret, the regular English teacher, was also perceived as an expert who worked, in addition to her regular teaching load, to aid the instructors with the program, and she also took care of
classroom management as the instructors worked with the students. Interviews of Mrs. Claret and several of her students were also videotaped.

Confidentiality and Informed Consent Procedures

All possible precautions were taken to protect participants’ identities in the study. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the formally submitted study proposal (Appendix A) which included the protection of participants’ identities. Pseudonyms were used in all recorded data and any codes I used to link the participants with the pseudonyms will not be shared with any other person. Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study prior to my observation and interviews.

Synopsis of Fieldwork

The methods of data collection used for this case study generated a large amount of information. I observed the English classroom (as well as the computer lab) on 21 separate occasions with roughly one and one-half hours’ duration each; however, there were a few sessions for which I did not stay the entire class period. I typed fieldnotes of the on-site observations directly on my laptop computer, and I used a digital audio recorder for 16 of the 21 observations for reasons I will explain later in the paper. Table 3 represents a rough outline of the curriculum for the 14 weeks I observed students involved in the creative writing program, in the computer lab, and in three regular classroom visits.
### Table 3

**Fieldwork/Observations Schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Classroom activities</th>
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| 1    | Tues., 1/22| *Student Attitude Survey about Reading & Writing*  
Writing sessions & Author’s chair; literary elements: Imagery & voice |
| 2    | Tues., 1/29| Author’s chair & Writing sessions  
Literary elements: Tone & turning prose into poetry |
| 3    | Mon., 2/4  | Modeling: Constructing family trees & peer editing  
Visiting Expert: University Professor, Journalism Dept. |
| 4    | Tues., 2/5 | 1st regular English classroom visit  
Sentence writing (Valentine’s Day notes); students’ research birth dates |
| 5    | Tues., 2/19| Writing sessions & Author’s chair |
| 6    | Fri., 2/22 | 1st trip to computer lab |
| 7    | Tue., 2/26 | Literature discussions & Author’s chair |
| 8    | Fri., 2/28 | 2nd trip to computer lab |
| 9    | Tues., 3/4 | Writing, editing, & revising; discuss “tension” to titles of book chapters |
| 10   | Thurs., 3/6| 2nd regular English classroom visit  
Grammar: Pronoun/Antecedent Agreement & Literature: *Romeo & Juliet* |
| 11   | Tues., 3/11| 3rd trip to computer lab |
| 12   | Thurs., 3/13| 3rd regular English classroom visit: Open-note test *Romeo & Juliet* (1st 3 acts); teacher notes for tomorrow’s *Romeo & Juliet* test (Acts IV & V) |
| 13   | Fri., 3/14 | 4th trip to computer lab |
| None | 3/17-3/21 | Spring Break |
| 14   | Tues., 3/25| 5th trip to computer lab (UA instructors absent-attending conference)  
Recorded interview of Mrs. Claret-No audio recording of class |
| 15   | Wed., 3/26 | 6th trip to computer lab (UA instructors absent-attending conference)  
2 student interviews conducted-No audio recording of class |
| 16   | Thurs., 3/27| 7th trip to computer lab (UA instructors absent-attending conference)  
3 student interviews conducted-No audio recording of class |
| 17   | Fri., 3/28 | 8th trip to computer lab-Dr. Garner present; Dr. Harvest absent (conference)  
-No audio recording of class |
| 18   | Tue., 4/1  | 9th trip to computer lab |
| 19   | Wed., 4/2  | 10th trip to computer lab—No audio recording of class |
| 20   | Tues., 4/8 | Students to library to conference with instructors re: writing  
Students instructed to peer edit (did not happen) |
| 21   | Mon., 4/21 | Copies of students’ completed writing brought to class by instructors  
Students read their own writing and engaged in peer editing |

I transcribed all of my own audio recordings—16 total. The speech acts were transcribed verbatim—unless indecipherable, and the assortment of speech patterns uttered by the students are not linguistically precise in the transcriptions. However, transcriptions along with my on-site fieldnotes and interviews produced a type of thick record which provided rich details for my
analyses. Goals for my data collection included pursuing the kind of objectivity that Carspecken (1996) explained:

Thick description must be considered the “ideal case” for meeting validity requirements of objectivity… sections of thick record compiled in one’s primary record can be used to “ground” inferences made on less thickly compiled notes, for these often display the same patterns of behavior captured thickly. (p. 48)

As the writing program moved to one of the school’s computer labs in order for students to work on the templates of their books, fewer audio recordings were created for transcription due to the nature of the setting. Sessions in the computer lab proved to be less conducive for capturing specific communications; therefore, only fragmented bits of discussion were available for transcription and coding.

Observations

The schedule for the creative writing program (see Table 3) reflects the instructors’ visits on Tuesdays for the first two weeks and on Monday for the third scheduled week due to a conflict in schedule for the visiting expert from the university’s journalism department. My first observation of the “regular English class” occurred that same week—the day after the first visiting expert’s presentation. The fourth week both instructors were unable to conduct the writing program on their scheduled day at CHS due to a seasonal sickness also affecting a large part of the students and teachers at the school. The fifth week of the study, Tuesday, February 19, Drs. Harvest and Garner incorporated several SAG worksheets to guide students in the autobiographical writing; the worksheets were geared toward the theme “Explore Your Own Life” and included topics “All about Me,” “Family Members,” and “Friends” (See Appendix G). At this point, students were informed that beginning this same week, they were scheduled to use
one of the school’s computer labs on Fridays to type what they had written into computer word file templates for their books. After that initial computer lab visit, the instructors came twice a week for three weeks of the writing program, spending Tuesdays in the classroom to guide students’ with their writing and using Fridays for time in the computer lab to help students enter data for their books. The cumulative time both instructors were in the classroom helping students work on the recursive stages of creative writing totaled eight visits, and their assisting students in the computer lab totaled seven visits of which two visits only one professor was able to attend.

Following the students’ Spring Break week (March 17-21), the instructors attended a professional conference during which time they had scheduled a pause for the writing program visits. Mrs. Claret used the time to help students work in the computer lab to “catch up” data entry and work on their books. Additionally that week, my role as passive observer changed from passive observer to participant observer as I aided Mrs. Claret in helping students with computer issues. I was acutely aware of the need to keep my presence from affecting the validity of my study or producing the “Hawthorn effect”; however, my study was not really designed to measure any kind of “variables”; therefore, any alterations in the students’ behavior as a result of my presence did not modify the cultural milieu I was studying. My observations, in addition to the observations of the writing program, were occasions when I observed the same fourth-period English class on days not scheduled solely for the writing program. These observations are referred to as “regular class sessions” because the regular classroom teacher taught various elements from the state course of study standards for English language arts curriculum which included grammar, literature, drama, and poetry rather than just creative writing on those days. The idea for my observing on these separate occasions was to see if and how the creative writing program overlapped the English curriculum. The collected data presented very little connection
to the writing program because students were engaged in curriculum such as isolated grammar instruction and note taking/discussion of *Romeo and Juliet*. Although the writing program was certainly a positive addition to the students’ curriculum, the ongoing homework and tests had the potential to crowd out students’ efforts to work on their writing. It was understandable why it might be better to implement the creative writing program over the course of ten or more consecutive classroom days instead of spreading it over several weeks.

*Interviews*

In order to gain a sense of students’ attitudes about the creative writing program, I chose five students to interview: four girls and one boy. The criteria for my selection stemmed from my observations of all students during the first eight weeks and then solely on those who consented to being in the study; these five chosen students interacted well with their peers and with the adults in the classroom. I was also interested in their self-motivation as I witnessed the effort they applied to their writing endeavors in the classroom and in the computer lab. These particular students represented a unique perspective from a range of students from similar social and cultural backgrounds. In addition to the five students I interviewed, I also audio-taped two other student interviews conducted by the university documentary filmmaker students, which resulted in a total of seven student interview sessions for my data collection. Along with the student interviews, I audio taped the interview of the regular English classroom teacher conducted by one of the visiting experts as part of his film documentary about the program. The students’ interviews were rather short with a only few questions (Appendix E) about their personal history and their attitudes about the writing program and their regular English class. My interviews of the university instructors occurred after the writing program ended in order to gain a retrospective sense of their ideas and attitudes about the program’s successes and/or
shortcomings. I did not personally interview the regular English classroom teacher Mrs. Claret; however, I recorded the interview one of the university students conducted with Mrs. Claret in the faculty lounge.

Collection of Data

The writing program was one unit of analysis (Yin, 2003), and the study includes a number of observations intended to obtain a representative coverage of the relationships for this particular case. As Stake (1995) asserts, “The more qualitative approach usually means finding good moments to reveal the unique complexity of the case” (p. 62). Along with on-site observations and student artifacts, semi-structured and open-ended interviews also provided rich data for my study. However, it was important for my study to be mindful of what Bloome (2003) cautions educational researchers:

[The task is] not to ask what the culture of an English language arts classroom is, …but rather to ask how a particular classroom and the events in it defines/is part of/contributes to the evolving and contested cultural dynamics of education, of the community more broadly speaking, and of the particular classroom itself (as an important social setting in its own right) and what the consequences are of those dynamics both for all of those with a stake in what they do, how they do it, and what meaning and significance it has. (p. 56)

The data collected for this study were obtained in the following ways: (a) digital audio recordings and written fieldnotes from observations of each day (one to two per week) that students were involved in the creative writing program as well as observations from three other days that students were in the “regular” ELA classroom setting with Mrs. Claret; (b) audio-taped interviews with the Mrs. Claret, the university instructors, and the students; (c) transcriptions of
the digital audio recordings; and (d) artifacts from the students (i.e., drafts of papers, pictures, digital stories, etc.).

Role of the Researcher

Over the course of the spring semester of the 2007-2008 school year, I attended the English class at CHS one-to-two days during the week to observe students’ participation in, as well as the instructors’ instruction of, a creative writing program during a 14-week time period. My goal as a researcher was “to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization)” (Yin, 2003, p. 10). My research was an integrated system (Stake, 1995) comprised of a broad range of data collection methods as I wrote field notes, audio-taped classroom sessions, interviewed students, gathered artifacts from students, and collected as much information as needed for successful fieldwork. A detailed list of the dates of the data collection as well as the itinerary of each day is provided in Table 4.
During the study, I also asked students, the English teacher, the university instructors, and visiting experts opportunistic “one-shot” questions (Patton, 2002) relating to what I observed during class or in student work. I sought understanding of new cultural horizons (Carspecken, 1996) to gain a clear perspective for educational theory and practice.

To gather the data for this study, three methods were used: observations, interviews, and document analyses. Observations were documented in two ways: the thick record, or primary record, held intensive on-site observations which were supplemented by my digital audio-recordings of the class which I personally transcribed after each class session; all of this information was typed into my personal laptop and backed up with an external hard drive as well.
as a flash drive. The non-intensive observations were recorded in the field journal, which was a file folder on my laptop saved separately from my primary record. The documentation of intensive observations occurred at chosen times on a specific schedule. At the time of these observations, I provided detailed descriptions of what I saw and heard. Some of the information I recorded included speech acts, body movements, body posture, context information, and simple diagrams. Non-intensive observations were recorded in the field journal and included occurrences from the time I was in the field (that is, in the writing class or anywhere within the school building), and I recorded this type of data in the journal as soon as possible after an observation.

Specific dates and times were recorded frequently. Verbatim speech acts were enclosed in quotation marks, and context information was recorded, such as the time of arrival at the research site and descriptions of any particular circumstances in effect. Diagrams were placed in the notes to describe sites and positions of objects and people. All of these data were matched against the audio-taped class sessions which I personally transcribed from the audiotapes.

The transcriptions do not contain prosodic features but were written using conversational elements of dialogue with some degree of pauses and half-words included. According to Hamo, Blum-Kulka, and Hacohen (2004), transcriptions “as human-made products are by nature partial and selective”; they also state, “every transcription system involves a reduction of the social reality it seeks to capture often turning the continuous stream of the interaction into discrete units and transforming people from social actors with goals, identities, and motivations into ‘As’ and ‘Bs’” (p. 76).

Initial interviews were conducted with the teacher, the two university instructors, and five students; the interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 15 minutes apiece. Each
interview was digitally audio-taped with pre-formed questions (Appendices E and F) based upon data from previous observations and guided by the basic research questions of this study. I conducted formal interviews of students only once during the study. Selection of the students for the interviews unofficially started at the beginning of the program and spanned nine weeks of classroom observations during which time I identified students whom I perceived as exhibiting characteristics indicative of students who are consistently more engaged in classroom activities. The assumptions were based on my own experiences with students exhibiting the types of behavior and attitudes associated with candidness of conversation and contributions to the overall understanding of the entire classroom. All data from the interviews (as well as field notes) were transcribed, typed into the computer, and formatted into a self-made table for analyzing qualitative data.

The third type of data gathered involved the collection of relevant documents. These documents were referred to as artifacts and included such items as copies of voluntary participants’ writing in various stages of the writing process, teaching materials used in the writing class, and voluntary participants’ pieces of work submitted to the instructors. All of these artifacts were considered for analysis during the study.

Data Analyses

Constant-Comparative Method

Framed by grounded theory, the constant-comparative method of data analysis examines the social processes of people in order to better understand human behavior and experience (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The method requires researchers constantly comparing newly gathered data with previously collected data in order to refine categories. For this study, I used the constant-comparative method to generate frequent patterns and themes across the students’, their
teacher’s, and the instructors’ interactions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To begin analysis, I reviewed all audio and extended field notes corresponding with those recordings. Extended notes included information about nonverbal behavior, detailed dialogue, and personal, methodological, and theoretical notes. After notes were extended, I read and reread all of the data (field notes, transcribed interviews, my journal entries, and artifacts) and identified literacy events in which socio-cultural differences occurred among the instructors, the students, their English teacher, and visiting experts.

External Validity

In relation to testing the soundness of research, Messick (1995) stresses, “validity is the strength of the argument that a particular test outcome means what the test says that it means” (p. 742). The research design of this case study demonstrates the test of external validity. Case studies rely on analytical generalizations because the researcher is striving to generalize a particular set of results to some broader theory (Yin, 2003).

Reliability

Reliability addresses the data collection procedures and points to ways the study can be repeated with other groups with the same results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My goal for reliability was to minimize errors and biases in my study. In order to make the reliability of my study as operational as possible, my protocol for the investigation had as much detailed documentation as possible and a practical database was developed early in the study. Some of the ways I assessed the reliability of the study was the use of a code-recode strategy and triangulation. Truthfulness of intent and sincerity in action is crucial to authentically presenting the facts as Van Manen (1988) explains:
A culture is expressed (or constituted) only by the actions and words of its members and must be interpreted by, not given to, a fieldworker. To portray culture requires the fieldworker to hear, to see, and, most important for our purposes, to write of what was presumably witnessed and understood during a stay in the field. (p. 9)

Accurately interpreting the activities of a specific culture is important and should be written with “thick description” (Geertz, 1975), defined by Denzin (cited in Glesne & Peshkin, 1991) as “description that goes beyond the mere or bare reporting of an act (thin description), but describes and probes the intentions, motives, meanings, contexts, situations, and circumstances of action” (p. 19).

Objectivity

Efforts to remain objective in my fieldwork as well as throughout my analyses and interpretations of the data meant I had to continuously confront my own opinions and biases. However, the greater part of my discussion of the results reflects my inability to remain completely subjective. My own experiential views of students made it difficult not to infuse personal speculation into the discussion of participants’ attitudes, behavior, and interpersonal relationships with each other.

Multiple recording of fieldnotes helped me to strive for objectivity; using a digital audio recording device along with my typing on-site notes onto my laptop allowed me to simultaneously hear and see the actual and the supposed reality of occurrences in the field. The length of time I was able to situate myself in the classroom as a passive observer afforded me several occasions for purely observing and recording information instead of my being viewed as another instructor in the classroom to whom students sought for help.
Data Protocol

I used a four-stage research strategy which included (1) building a primary record, (2) conducting preliminary reconstructive analysis, (3) generating dialogical data, and (4) conducting systems analysis (Carspecken, 1996). The first stage of building a primary record meant collecting a thick description record which included the digital audio recordings I transcribed myself and on-site observations which I typed on my laptop computer and referred to as a field journal. This type of thick record also referred to as a primary record contains explanations of classroom activities as well as descriptions of the physical seating arrangements of students and classroom décor. I provided physical descriptors “showing” readers the “uniqueness and the ordinariness” of the physical surroundings in the field (Stake, 1995, p. 63). A checklist for studying the English classroom, referred to as Issue-Based Observation Form for Case Study, was used and is provided in Appendix B. The field journal was used to record personal responses and insights along with less formal descriptions of visual and auditory pieces of information gained at various times in the classrooms and in places outside the classroom. I tried to post my entries as soon as possible after my observations (often during the on-site observation time periods).

A list of interview questions for the students is included in Appendix E and for the instructors in Appendix F; these guided conversations (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) worked well with the students in order to understand how they structured topics of interest. I was present for the interview with the regular English classroom teacher which was conducted by one of the visiting experts, a university student documentary filmmaker. I later transcribed all of the recorded interviews. Listening to the social interaction among students as they worked independently on their writing also provided me with some clues to their interests in music, film, athletes,
performers, fashion—the information was valuable to understanding students’ sociocultural influences.

Control for Bias

Subjectivity

First days of school are usually a bit awkward for most people; however, in a sincere effort to be completely accurate, I have to admit that the first days of school at CHS were extremely awkward for me. Perhaps part of the reason for my discomfort had to do with my own life experiences from almost three decades ago. During grades five through twelve, I lived in North Alabama and attended a rural public school in which students of color were non-existent. In fact, not one person of color lived on the thousands of acres at the end of the Appalachian chain, commonly referred to as “the mountain.” The small community college I attended and the college from which I later completed my bachelor’s degree in teaching were also quite similar in demographics. My first experience with having an African American teacher occurred while I was working on my Master’s degree at the same university for which I am currently working toward a doctorate. So my initial inexperience of coming to a predominantly African American school in a classroom of all African American students was quite daunting. My state of mind for my first scheduled day of observations was one of absolute awe as I witnessed a blur of brown faces, voices, and movements. It was all quite overwhelming, to say the least; additionally, I am a Southern, middle-class, white female who talks slowly like a true Southerner and who listens almost at the same pace; so imagine my horror at not understanding much of the chattering young voices around me!

A fundamental principle, concisely stated by Bogdan and Biklen (1992), reflects what I struggled to accomplish throughout the study: “The researcher’s primary goal is to add to
knowledge, not to pass judgment” (p. 34). Often, qualitative researchers are criticized for allowing their prejudiced attitudes to bias the data. Bogdan and Biklen assert that qualitative methods actually assist in the process of surpassing the researcher’s biases; they state:

[Q]ualitative studies are not just impressionistic essays made after a quick visit to a setting or after some conversation with a few subjects. The researcher spends considerable time in the empirical world laboriously collecting and reviewing piles of data. The data must bear the weight of any interpretation, so the researcher must constantly confront his or her own opinions and prejudices with the data…The data that are collected provide a much more detailed rendering of events than even the most creatively prejudiced mind might have imagined prior to the study. (pp. 37-38)

Subjectivity was considered an important part of the research, particularly as I tried not to overlook certain data or meanings, not to overanalyze participants, and not to give unclear or vague descriptions of my findings (Drapeau, 2002). However, the compulsion to project personal ideas and viewpoints into the analyses was difficult for me. Although my goal was to become more reflexive and conscious of the ways that who I am shaped what I did (Yin, 2003), I was blind to some of the ways my personal interpretations could be construed by others. Drapeau (2002) stresses the importance of understanding and owning our subjectivity because “what we may find may be nothing more than what we were specifically looking for, sometimes without even knowing it” (p. 2). Without intentionally meaning to distort the results of my findings, I realize how wrong I was to think that I could be objective toward a culture of which I really knew so little and how wrong it was to assume that my conscious efforts could override negative sub-conscious feelings and attitudes.
Summary

Chapter III addressed the methodology implemented in the present study and offered a rationale for my design decisions. Advantages for each element of the methodological process were identified to show how the choice of each technique resulted from informed decisions. These methodological techniques selected for my study rely upon the descriptive research paradigm, which draws primarily on qualitative paradigms. Qualitative data analyses use the constant comparative method, including open coding, category generation, and theme development.

The traditional case study, a qualitative method of research, is an analysis intended to contain as much information as possible for a complete investigation. My study provides information concerning the population of the study, actions taken by researcher, data collection, and data analyses protocol using qualitative methodology, including triangulation. The significance of understanding social and cultural backgrounds of students and their teachers has been explained. The purpose for observing ninth-grade students in the second semester of the 2007-2008 academic school year was to investigate the dynamics of a creative writing program geared toward the process and completion of autobiographies by 20 African American students. Following the end of the creative writing program in April 2008, analyses of the data collected commenced. Chapter IV discusses the case study of the creative writing program and examples of the interplay among participants from the compilation of the qualitative data from the study.
CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSES AND RESULTS

In a social process, together they bend, spin, consolidate, and enrich their understandings. We come to know what has happened partly in terms of what they reveal as their experience. The case researcher emerges from one social experience, the observation, to choreograph another, the report. (Stake, 2003, p.145)

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was the investigation of a creative writing program supplemental to the standard curriculum in a ninth-grade English classroom and implemented by instructors whose social and cultural backgrounds were different from the students. Through observations, interviews, and participants artifacts, I attempted to describe the instructional approaches facilitating students’ autobiographical writing. In addition, this study sought to identify resources and barriers contributing to or detracting from the success of the writing program and to describe how the class functioned on days when the students were not engaging in the writing program.

The discussion of the analyses of the three primary sources of data—classroom observations, interviews, and participants’ artifacts—are presented in order of the research questions. Participants are identified by pseudonyms I assigned, and only participants who returned the required, formal assent and consent forms are included in the discussion. Table 5
provides information about the participants, such as pseudonym, race, gender, and age.

Table 5

Final Participants’ Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denisha</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queenie</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina Nolen</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laila</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrianna</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JáMeelah</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solange</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>F</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kobe</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Kameron</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxie</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Claret</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Louisa Harvest</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Katherine Garner</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 1: Findings

How was the writing program executed in the classroom?

Instructional Practices

Throughout the study, the instructors integrated several strategies for engaging students in the autobiographical writing. They used excerpts from adolescent literature to engage students in discussions about issues relevant to the adolescents’ ages and interest levels to generate writing. The instructors weaved the standard language of the English classroom curriculum with their own voices as part of their efforts to establish a community of writers and to guide students through various stages of autobiographical writing. Johnston (2004) explains that teachers can position themselves as givers of knowledge and students as receivers, and teachers’ choices “of words, phrases, metaphors, and interaction sequences invoke and assume these and other ways of
being a self and of being together in the classroom” (p. 9). Table 6 provides examples of the writing prompts and literary activities used during the writing program.

Table 6

**Examples of Instructional Strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Writing Prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1    | Tues., 1/22 | 8 (1-minute) “Quick-Writes”  
1) Write about how you celebrated Martin Luther King day.  
2) Write about your bedroom.  
3) Write about an old memory.  
4) Write about your old neighborhood.  
5) Write about your first crush.  
6) Write about your first job (“It doesn’t have to be a paid job; it can be paid or unpaid...just your first job.”).  
7) Write about grocery shopping (“It may not be real—it could be your *ideal* grocery shopping.”). |
| 2    | Tues., 1/29 | 3 Quick-Writes: 1 (1 ½ min) & 2 (2 min)  
1) Write about your favorite restaurant or meal.  
2) Write about your favorite music or artist and why they are your favorite.  
3) Write about some kind of prejudice or bullying that you’ve seen, experienced, or viewed on television. |

2 Expanded writing sessions  
1) After “guided imagery,” students are instructed to go back to your 1-minute writings and choose one to describe in greater detail.  
2) Using an excerpt from *The First Part Last* -Then & Now, instructors lead students in a discussion of the literary elements of “Imagery & Voice.” They instruct students to look back at one of the earlier “quick writes” and choose one to expand into the perspective of “Now.”

2 Expanded writing session  
1) After student listen to the song lyrics “You & Your Racist Friend” read and played on the CD and the excerpt from a book written in narrative poetry *Make Lemonade*, the instructors discuss the literary elements of tone and turning prose into poetry. Students are instructed to do one of two things with the pieces of writing from the earlier prompts: “turn the prose, meaning the lines across the page, into what looks like lines of poetry,” or write a “Fat draft” which means “double what you had written the first time.”

The literary activities, including teacher-led discussions, helped students tease apart some aspects of language from both home and school and realize the connections of context (Heath, 1983). In their study, Fecho, Davis, and Moore (2006) discuss how language is first learned in
the home and the neighborhood and how its link to identity is strong: “When associations with mainstream power codes also are linked to a history of oppression, learners from marginalized cultures may show reluctance to acquire language that too closely ties them to visions and conceptions of the oppressor” (p. 202). Incorporating the adolescent literature into the writing sessions helped students see and hear the casual way their own voices could be used to tell the stories of their lives.

*Guided Imagery*

Another means of enriching student writing was the instructors’ use of guided imagery. On the first day of the creative writing program and following several timed writing sessions, Katherine directed students in the guided imagery activity:

I’m going to talk about imagery first. I’m going to ask you to close your eyes and imagine something you’ve never experienced. Then I’m going to ask you about these writings that we did. You’ll then close your eyes again and write about these. Can you close your eyes? If you’re not willing to close your eyes, just look down toward the desk. Has anyone been to New Hampshire? Okay, I want you to imagine what New Hampshire as I describe some things.

Katherine then instructed students to imagine going up a mountain in a swing car that holds about 24 people with no guardrails to keep from falling. She described sensory images students might experience: huge pieces of granite jutting out from the mountain; a view of five miles across the valley with vivid colors of orange, burnt red, green, and yellow; a little stream running through the valley; a breeze, a zephyr, coming through and rustling the leaves by their feet; leaves falling off the granite slab, and falling down the mountain. Suddenly, one of the
students—Sunni—loudly interrupted the activity by saying she did not see any imagery except a gas station. In response, Katherine stated:

We can imagine things we haven’t seen, so think about what we can imagine about the things we HAVE seen. Go back to your one-minute writings and choose one to describe in greater detail. If you don’t like any of them, feel free to start something new to work with in rich imagery. Close your eyes and think about the one you picked in great detail. Here’s what we’re going to do. Take a deep breath, close your eyes or don’t. Put yourself in the situation; you’re dropping down, then you make a 360° turn around so that you are looking at everything like a camera. Take a big whiff...what do you smell? Are there groceries, chocolate? Okay, so you’ve looked, you’ve smelled. Now, I want you to think about who’s there. If it is just you, think about what you would say or think about. What noises are there? Is there silence? Let me know. Now come back to me for a moment. I want you to put your imagination to work. You have ten minutes to expand that writing.

By guiding students through step-by-step directions, Katherine provided occasions for students to think about the ordinary in extraordinary ways. Supplying concrete and abstract qualities of a visualized scene allowed students to hear and see elements in an imaginative way too often replaced with images from T.V., movies, videos, games, and various technologies located in homes of the 21st century. As students engaged in activities that activated multiple perspectives and viewpoints, they increased the repertoire of details from which to access for their autobiographical writing. Unfortunately, these activities failed to elicit creatively the tales and folklores and genres that are a part of all families and cultures; however, their own stories were fairly imaginative.
Strategies Related to Literary Genres

By presenting and discussing the various genres through which writing occurs, the instructors encouraged students to explore the multiple ways to express themselves in their books. Creating opportunities for students to write with greater flexibility in form was an important strategy for getting students to write. The instructors presented literary excerpts from adolescent literature, poems, song lyrics, and short essays. During one session, the instructors presented song lyrics (See Appendix H) entitled “You and Your Racist Friend”; Katherine explained to the students the purpose of reading as well as listening to the song lyrics:

We’re going look at these lyrics just like we did when we looked at the First Part Last last time, and we’re going read it for meaning and understanding. And then we’re going listen to the song, and then we’re going analyze the tone. Tone as we hear and as we read it compared to the tone that we get when we listen to it with music.

Students followed along with their printed copy as Louisa read lyrics to a song she had never heard. Katherine explained her familiarity with the song and her prior knowledge of the lyrics could possibly influence students’ interpretations: “Your tone can convey a lot about yourself.” A couple of students said they knew the song, but most of the class had never heard it. After listening to the lyrics read by Louisa and with music from the CD, the instructors asked students questions which prompted a discussion of how words can be misconstrued. Throughout the discussion about the song lyrics, Katherine modeled how readers become engaged with text; as she read words from the song lyrics, she orally questioned as to the kinds of meanings the authors were trying to make in their selection of words for certain stanzas. She juxtaposed the written lyrics with the manner of style used in the recorded version and noted how different the
words sounded as they were sung compared to the way Louisa read them. She explained to the students what this could mean in their own stories:

You can achieve this in your writing as well. It’s through the tone that you put in your writing that you can achieve this sort of effect: where you say one thing but you mean another. And so this is something that we’re going try and experiment with today a little bit. You know how you did those three Quick-writes?...we’re going to go back and you’re going fatten up one of those Quick-writes that you did; we’ll be experimenting with it, using a different tone and turning it into a lyric like this song or like the next piece that we have for you called Make Lemonade. It’s a great story by Virginia Euwer Wolff, who’s a young adult author.

Another example of their incorporating literary genres into the writing activities to help students consider personal attributes was an excerpt from Sandra Cisneros’ House on Mango Street (See Appendix I) entitled “My Name.” The narrator’s name is Esperanza, and her sister’s name is Magdalana, and the excerpt provided some history about the narrator’s name. Discussion surrounding the excerpt focused on unusual names and allowed students to share what they knew about their own name. For many students, it sparked curiosity as to the meaning of their names—a link to the identity formation discussed in chapter two—which suggests that learning about themselves helps empower students to succeed (Moore & Cunningham, 2006). Katherine’s instruction was as follows:

You are going to write about your names now, how you came to your name, who you’re named after, how you like your name, how you like your name in relation to your siblings’ names or friends’ names, what your name really means, what you would like to be called like at the end here.
Later, Denisha shared her name with the class during an Author’s Chair session: “My personal definition of [name] is Egyptian queen, someone who rules something and is dedicated and is always motivated to everything; that is a positive thing.” By creating opportunities to bring their cultural and social resources in the classroom, students were more likely to embrace the community of writers in the classroom space especially as the resources connected to their needs and interests—all of which lead to their writing and sharing more of an authentic learning experience.

Other literature selections the instructors shared with the class came from a collection of students’ stories published by Louisa titled *Thirteen Years of School* (See Appendix I). She explained to the students what the collection represented:

The whole book is kids’ writing to me about what they think about school, their memories of school, their favorite grades, their favorite activities, favorite teachers—even all the pictures in this book came from high school kids who took photographs like we’re doing and sent them to me. So these things that we’re going to have read to us came from real kids across the country, and they’re just to give you some ideas about what they had to say about school.

Findings suggest that helping students understand the realities surrounding them daily, English teachers are in a special position to equip students with methods that help to make sense of it all. By using this collection of stories, the instructors were providing good examples of other students exploring life experiences and inviting the students to develop their own perspectives about some of the topics.

Students also read an excerpt from *Tears of a Tiger* by Sharon M. Draper, titled “If I Could Change the World, What Would I Do?” (see Appendix I). The excerpt basically explains
how Gerald Nickelby (the student essay writer) could change his world by eliminating peanut butter, Band-Aids, and five-dollar bills. Following the excerpt and the discussion which ensued, students were instructed to write about their own ideas of what they would change about the world.

All of these literature selections helped students consider their own worlds by contemplating the perspectives of others’ experiences compared to their own. The readings also dealt with some of the everyday experiences similar to adolescents around the country and provided writing prompts for the students to work from. Kameron’s essay was read later the same day when shared in an Author’s Chair session:

If I could change the world, I would most definitely change gas prices and paying for water. Why today are we paying $3.15 for a gallon of gas? Some people need to go to some places but don’t have the money. Like people living in poverty, they have to ride the bus. That’s not cool; it’s only cool if you are going on a field trip with a school. Can somebody please tell me why are we paying for water? Water is not made by man-kind. Everyone uses water for something like for drinking, ingredients, feeding plants, or washing certain things. In a couple of years, we would be paying for air, or for waking up and using our own energy.

Much of the students’ logic and reasoning as it pertained to current issues about living and the state of the world in their estimations appeared to be somewhat derivative of opinions and conversations from the adults in their lives, illustrating the language development aspect of sociocultural theory, particularly Gee’s (1992) ideas that in reality a person’s language is composed of “bits and pieces of language that have been voiced elsewhere” (p. 116). Students’ autobiographical writing contained elements from their social and cultural experiences reflective
of their family talk. The reading selections and writing opportunities supplied by the writing program provided opportunities for these students to reflect on their self-knowledge and expand their line of reasoning through their explanations.

Findings also indicate that by prompting students to write about their lives outside the classroom, the instructors exhibited an understanding of students’ needs “to express themselves without limiting their mode of expression” (Obidah & Marsh, 2006, p. 126). In doing so, the instructors were able to expand their knowledge of the students’ experiences as they encounter the density of students’ identities. The students’ timed writings of one or two minutes created vivid snapshots of what they had experienced in their short lives. Students exhibited learned language similar to what Heath (1983) discussed in her ethnographic study about the ways children’s everyday “in family” talk sometimes causes a disparity between the language and learning practices the children encounter in school. Examples from students’ writing include the usage of the word “stays” instead of “lives”; in one young girl’s piece, she wrote, “We visit the other side of my family which stays in Marion, AL.” Another young girl wrote, “I don’t catch attitudes unless you catch one with me first.”

Findings also show that the instructors encouraged students to experiment with their writing, and Roman was one of the most adventurous in style and form. Because he was enthusiastic about sharing his stories, the instructors encouraged him and publicly affirmed his endeavors. Roman used the African American expressive verbal technique of “rapping” in some of his writing. According to Gay (2000), “Speech and performance precede writing narrative and reading texts since these are the cultural strengths and the ‘expressive anchors’ of African American culture” (p. 156). The following piece belongs to Roman and was performed in the
“Author’s Chair”; it illustrates his ease with the rhythmical discourse patterns in his revision of the earlier piece about school:

Man, I like this school. The students thank it’s cool. There’s a lot of rules. Some students are really rude. Some are stupid…like fools. I’m as fast and strong as mule. I thank they is fun. The students don’t use guns. The students love to run. Students kiss with their tongues. Kids act like bums. The floor has lots of crumbs. People are really nice. The warter [sic] is cool as ice. The walls are white hung. I am as small as ten mice. They always cook rice. Some need to go to Bryce. Some are cold just like ice. Some are very bad. I see a number of fags. Some teachers make me mad. Students run and play tag. Tracy is always sad. I love Major Rags [principal]. The teachers are mean. Teachers send students to Miz’ Green [school counselor]. The walls are white like cream. I have a lot of dreams. We have testy teams. And football players get rings. Our rah is great. Other schools hate. And Mario Pippen loves to shake. The work is a piece of cake. Some gives and takes. Some act fake.

This piece of writing is lyrical and exhibits the type of rhythm many people associate with African Americans referred to as “rapping”; it is likely the piece is indicative of feelings that all students have about school.

Several writing prompts used in the program resulted in students producing pieces of writing which show similarities of adolescents sitting in schools around the nation. However, it is the uniqueness of these particular students’ sociocultural experiences that make it distinct to them and this community of writers at this point in time. Heath’s (1983) ethnographic study looked at “ways of thinking about school and about learning, and of students talking their way in and through school were connected to their cultural roots, and, for some children, became the
contact zone in which they battled and often lost the struggle to acquire literacy” (p. 41). The writing program provided a contact zone for which students could engage in self-expression in ways they may have never attempted, and many students experienced success in their efforts.

Review of field notes, audio tapes of the classroom and computer lab, and student and teacher interviews led to the emergence of following themes as a result of the instructors assisting students in their autobiographical writing: (a) encouragement of multiple perspectives and viewpoints, (b) connection of the program’s literacy practices to the students’ autobiographical writing, (c) engagement in discussions linked to social and cultural differences, and (d) successes and obstacles in the development of a community of learners.

Research Question 2: Findings

What resources were in position to support the success of the program, and what, if any, barriers reduced the success of the program?

Students’ Personal Resources

Findings revealed how the instructors worked to make connections between the activities of the writing program and the everyday lives of the students. The students’ own social and cultural backgrounds provided valuable resources for which the instructors strived to help students use for their autobiographical writing. In addition to the writing sessions in the classroom, students were instructed to interview various people in their lives. By supplying students with disposable digital cameras, the instructors urged them to photograph people, places, and things that reflected what was going on in their lives. The interviews and photos were important resources from which students captured the essence of what was happening in their lives and reflected the varying identities they were exploring through their writing.
The instructors’ writing strategies included using handouts which presented questions about various parts of students’ lives to help them in their personal writing. The handouts (Appendix G) were grouped under the heading “Explore Your Own Life” and included the following: “All about Me,” “Family Members,” and “Friends.” The handouts became valuable resources for students as they focused on the influence of the people in their lives. The following two pieces were written by Kameron, a young man who was mild-mannered and appeared sincere in his efforts to create an autobiography that dealt with issues close to his heart. The following essay is about his mother, and he included the piece in his autobiography and titled it “Super Mom”:

My mom is a great mom. My dad left before I was born, so I never met him a day of my life. But my mom says that she’s my mom and my dad because she does everything for me and my sister. So I have to buy her something for Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. It really doesn’t matter if I don’t have a father figure. I’m alright without him. My mom sometimes goes out of her will to do things for me. So that’s why I love her so much. Even though I can’t talk to her about some things, it’s all right. With the way I’m going now without a father I’m good. So if he even does come back, I wouldn’t even care.

Interestingly, Kameron also wrote the following essay and inserted it in his final book in front of the essay about his mother; this essay is titled “Never Had a Father Figure” and illustrates the empowerment personal writing helped some students achieve:

I have never met my father a day in my life. My mom gave me a description of him and she said that he kind of looked like Will Smith (so I believe). She said that he was a little tall, had big ears, and light skin. I had a mentor but he was not like I wanted. He owned his own barber shop, so I worked with him for at least 2 years. It was boring but it was
easy money to me. I was getting tired of cleaning and sitting down just sitting there. So one day I worked from 7 to 4 and I had to leave and go see my uncle for his birthday and I told my mentor I needed to leave and he said, "after I give you your money (which was five dollars) you can’t come back today.” So I left and never came back. That was about 3 years ago. I’ve never talked to him since.

The instructors exhibited awareness of a precept which recognizes that individual functioning is dynamic rather than static and is in a continuous state of change, being influenced by, responding to, and having influence upon its surroundings (which conveys with it a historical, cultural, and social context) (Vygotsky, 1978).

Instructors’ Personal Stories

Findings show that throughout the writing program, the instructors regularly shared their personal histories and experiences in authentic ways that some students modeled in telling their own stories. The two examples of Kameron’s writing illustrate the conversational style of narration which emerged from the reflexive writing instruction of the program. Phinney, Cantu, and Kurtz (2004) discuss the catharsis that autobiographical writing can provide for adolescents dealing with identity issues.

From the examples shared by the instructors in their casual ease with language, students gained confidence about their own voices and the language they used to describe their lives. Students learned, by example, that code-switching is something everyone engages in regardless of their ethnicity. With regard to the range of language usage among cultures and race, Heath (1989) states, “judgments about language use extend to evaluations of character, intelligence, and ways of thinking; thus, negative assumptions of language abilities often underlie expressions of sweeping prejudicial characterizations of Black Americans” (p. 367). The instructors never
exhibited any kind of judgmental stance about the differences among the students and their own language usage. Students were encouraged to edit and revise their writing drafts, but the voice of the writer was never diluted.

By sharing some of their personal selves with the students, the instructors provided a model which students could replicate in their own unique ways. Modeling also extended the idea of peer review by allowing students to observe the concept in action and to gain insight as to what was expected from them in the peer review process. Using Katherine’s bullying narrative to demonstrate for students the art of peer review, Louisa asked several questions about the piece, and the instructors modeled the type of discussions that should take place between writers about the strengths and weaknesses of the narratives. The narrative read and discussed follows:

Katherine: Dawn was one of the tough girls. Mean. Blue mascara. Two slashes of blue eyes shadow above her eyes. On the first day of seventh grade, she came up to me on the morning bus. “My seat!” she spat at me with her mean eyes. I moved. Next day, different seat, same thing. “I’ll kick the crap out of you,” she threatened from behind her mean eyes. I began to understand. “I won’t move,” I said. “You won’t be able to after I’m through with you!” she screamed back from behind her mean eyes. I said looking up. I noticed the bus driver lowered her eyes from the rear view mirror. She wasn’t gonna get involved. “I won’t move!” I stood up now. It was small, but Dawn’s eyes looked more frightened than mean to me now. She walked down the aisle, all the while saying, “I will never walk again.”

Louisa: So, as I listened to her, I made a couple of notes because there are things that I wanted to know more about. The goal of peer response is to help the person
improve their writing, but you can’t just say, “Oh, that was good,” because that doesn’t really help Katherine to revise her writing. I want to ask questions. And you don’t want to get mean either. You don’t want to cut down the person’s writing, but you want to think of questions that they’ll answer in the writing, so I have a question: You talked about her mascara and her eye shadow; was she big and tall or was she tiny?

In their observing the dialogue between the instructors, students saw the importance of having someone listen to their writing and ask questions about the gaps which occur in everybody’s stories. By their engaging in knowledge-generating discourse, the instructors modeled the social processes of writing. Because language is a learned behavior, the discourse of their mock peer review served to underscore the importance of the editing process to writing instead of simply telling students what peer review should look like.

In their discussing the concept of creating family trees, the instructors shared personal information about their own families. These discussions about family were successful resources that provided students with an opportunity to consider their own family trees as well as the ways they could write about this type of personal information in their autobiographies. Sunni wrote the following essay about her family underneath a large photograph of her and Mrs. Claret:

This is me and Mommy, Mrs. Claret, in the morning, in the hallway before first period. I never knew I could tell someone some many personal things until I walked in Mrs. Claret’s 9th grade English Class. Mrs. C is a sweet and kind person but she can have her ways. The type of person, I remember as a person we will sit down and work it out. Mrs. C has two kids Emma Grace and Will Thomas, one boy and one girl. She might be white, but she is my mother also. She actually took me in her own hands. No, I don’t think sarcasm gets me. The last time I wrote a letter to her was talking about my mother and
some family problems. We communicate by talking it out face to face. Right now I’m teaching Mrs. Claret how to stay in her kids’ life and never give up on someone she loves, including me. We talked a lot at school. The reason I was talking about all of my problems was because Mrs. Claret is a trusting person that I can depend on at all times.

Yes, I will continue to talk to her about my personal problems.

By including the essay and picture in her published autobiography, Sunni expanded the notion that the relationship between writer and audience is often based on very personal connections. In contrast, Sunni’s final autobiography revealed few facts about her real family.

_Students’ Writing Folders_

Students were given personal writing folders in which they placed the writing from each day of the program. Findings show that the folders, supplied by the instructors, were valuable resources for students because the instructors wrote comments and suggestions directly on the students’ drafts served as a written conversation between teacher and student. By reading students’ writing and supplying conversational comments, the instructors positioned students’ stories and experiences as valuable and interesting. Students were encouraged to take the folders home if they wanted to work on them, but on the days the instructors planned to look over students’ writing, they asked students to leave the folders in the classroom. Students’ names and faces were learned fairly quickly, and the personal history students revealed through their initial drafts of writing helped the instructors better determine how to help students improve their writing.

Research Question 3: Findings

_How were the days used for working with the creative writing program different from other days spent as a regular English class?_
Connections to Writing Program

On the days when students were not scheduled for the writing program, they worked in their English class with Mrs. Claret using curriculum and textbooks which directly reflected items from the Alabama Course of Study (ALCOS) such as grammar (in isolation) and reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Romeo and Juliet*. The standards that teachers are expected to follow in their classrooms include a large amount grammar instruction. Accurately assessing what happens to often in English classes is said best by Rose (1989) in his discussions about his own experiences in the classroom as he points out that the English curricula, particularly English textbooks, are largely oriented toward grammatical analysis and little room for the “real stuff of literacy,” unless the inventive teacher created it (p. 109). He goes on to explain that the real stuff of literacy includes “creating narratives, shaping what we see and feel and believe into written language, listening to and reading stories, playing with the sounds of words” (p. 109). Although these literacy activities were a large part of what was occurring in the creative writing program, few instances of this type of learning was observed during the regular English classroom visits.

On the three visits to her class, I observed students taking notes from Mrs. Claret’s grammatical examples written on the board and their completing grammar exercises in their workbooks and going over the answers aloud. They also read aloud some of *Romeo and Juliet*, but they spent much time taking notes from Mrs. Claret in order to prepare for the quizzes and tests for the play. Some classroom discussions followed some of their reading the play, and Mrs. Claret challenged students’ on several occasions to explain their viewpoints about the characters’ actions.

Findings show that in her classroom instruction, Mrs. Claret rarely made connections to the self-exploration in which students were engaged with the writing program; more often, she
taught students directly from the textbooks. In her interview, it is interesting to note Mrs. Claret’s comments with regard to how she considered the ways that the writing program expanded the usual curriculum in her own classroom:

[With] programs like “We the Children,” we’re having our kids think; they have to think for themselves. We give them a little guidance and that’s it. Well, these kids have been told the whole time they’ve been in school, “Do questions 1, 2, and 3; turn it in.” Well, when you give a kid a broad question to answer, they say, “What am I supposed to do here? What’s my limit?” And they’re not thinking outside the box, not thinking in the broad spectrum; they’re just thinking about answering questions 1, 2, and 3.

Throughout my observations of Mrs. Claret’s classes, I discovered that she did not shy away from talking about issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality; instead, she created a space in which students could examine and explore how these issues played out in the literature they studied, particularly in their study of *Romeo and Juliet* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She effectively applied the issues to the immediate contexts of the students’ lives including the more globalized world from the media. Those discussions led students to explore and verbalize their own beliefs in relation to the cultural beliefs learned through socialization; however, many students did not necessarily want to share those explorations with the rest of the class when it related to sharing personal stories. This is an issue that merits further consideration: Does identity exploration have to be made public in order for students to take an authorial stance? Students in Mrs. Claret’s classroom would argue no.

Critical race theory stresses the need for teachers to learn the social backgrounds of students in order to understand how students’ identities and discourses are shaped, and Mrs. Claret appeared to be fairly informed about some of the students’ lives outside of school. My
findings show that while she may not have regularly adhered to principles of CRT in her discussions with the students, during her time with the instructors, she demonstrated a higher level of understanding about the issues some of the students were dealing with. Perhaps the creative writing program served as an effective way for students to explore their lives with written text, share their stories through their expressed reflexivity, and make their voices heard without physically standing before their teacher or their peers. Through their stories, the teacher and the instructors were able to connect the discernible actions of the students to their stories as well as acknowledge the historical stigmas that plague so many people of color.

The connections of the regular English classroom and the writing program to critical race theory was primarily demonstrated by the instructors’ and the teacher’s efforts to help students become aware of the similarities of all human beings regardless of color, and Greene and Abt-Perkins (2003) explain why this is so important:

The permanence of racism in our social reality means that we have a personal responsibility to understand racism and work against its effects. We are challenged to use race as a construct to examine the limitations of our interpretations, to wonder continually about the ways in which our racial identities are playing out in the work we do, and the extent to which our discursive practices maintain inequity and injustice.

(pp. 8-9)

Teachers who strive to attain the most productive learning environments possible have to reflect on the types of learning activities most likely to cultivate higher levels of thinking. Shallert and Martin (2003) suggest “Open tasks that [allow] choice and problem solving [are] more likely to foster motivation than closed tasks that required one answer and specified procedures” (p. 36). Unfortunately, Hyland (2003) explains, “Racism is inserted into schools simply by doing what is
normal in those schools that primarily serve students of color, or even doing what is seemingly wonderful for students” (p. 452). Education has to mean so much more than standardized tasks for standardized testing, and too often, as Newkirk (2003) points out, “repetitive attention to basic facts and skills and a corresponding lack of attention to intellectual development… [means that] coverage becomes the goal…or perhaps the rationale” (p. 396). Mrs. Claret’s earlier words about students not being able “to think outside the box” reflect the mindset of many teachers.

Classroom Management

Findings show that over the course of the semester, the 20 ninth-grade students who occupied the standard-issue desks inside this particular English classroom regularly engaged in laughing and chatting about the most important matters-at-hand: themselves and their friends. Several times during my transcribing the audio tapes I was not able to understand clearly what many of the students were saying to each other. Consequently, they all appeared to recognize the speech patterns of one another without question. It is interesting to contrast students’ writing and their increased talking throughout the course of the writing program: Many times students who were having problems writing appeared to increase their talking. Perhaps these particular students embodied what Burnett, Burlew, and Hudson (1997) explained as the quintessential cultural form through which people express group values and behavioral norms and the way they are able to best reveal themselves. It is interesting to consider Mrs. Claret’s interpretation of the students’ behavior and ceaseless talking. During her interview, she expressed the following views:

Interviewer: Do you feel like these students now, with the teachers from [the university], do you think that they’re [the students] giving them respect?

Mrs. Claret: I think that Louisa and Katherine are gaining their [the students’]
respect, but when they [the instructors] first came in, I don’t think that they [students] cared enough to respect them. But now I think they’re learning to respect them for who they are and what they’re trying to do.

Interviewer: What areas do you feel the instructors—what are they doing well?

Mrs. Claret: I think that they way they have everything organized is a very good job, and they’ve spent so much time doing this. They know what they need, but now, as far as what my students need, I think they’re having to learn as they go—how to approach my kids. You can’t tell my kids what to do. You have to persuade them and ask them to do it. And I don’t know if that’s the culture; you don’t tell a Black child to do anything. You just don’t. You persuade them; you coerce them; you sweet talk, and you bribe, and then they do…finally.

Interviewer: Even after you’ve gotten their respect.

Mrs. Claret: To a point. I still have to make sure I approach it just the right way or my day will be miserable.

Interestingly, Mrs. Claret’s statement “you don’t tell a Black child to do anything” is in contrast to the way one Black teacher perceives other Black teachers’ directives. In a personal statement, Dr. Hope Bloome (pseudonym), commented, “Black teachers tell Black students exactly what to do. They don’t try to persuade, to coerce, etc.” (personal communication, October 16, 2008). Dr. Bloome is an African American professor at a major university with many years’ experience teaching adolescents and future teachers.

Findings suggests that my interpretations of these socio-cultural differences as students’ exhibiting rude behavior came from my own experiences with traditional discourse conventions from the classrooms of which I had been a student as well as from my own classrooms when I
taught at the secondary level. Delpit (1995) would characterize this mindset as part of the
“culture of power” which exists in schools for which there are “rules” regarding participation
that relate to such things as communicative strategies, speech patterns, hygiene and dress, ways
of writing, etc.

As this scenario was replayed several times over the course of my fieldwork, I realized
not only how crucial it is for teachers to consider the intersections of the social and cultural
differences in the classroom but also the importance of teachers being cognizant of varying
components of critical race theory such as recognition of the importance of understanding the
power dynamics inherent in school (Jennings & Lynn, 2005). In her explanations of African
with which highly culturally affiliated African Americans invest their interactions or ‘verve’ is
troublesome to many teachers. They view this behavior as impulsive, overemotional, and out of
control” (p. 54). Consequently, too many teachers respond to this conduct in “a disciplinary and
controlling manner, directed toward getting them to ‘settle down’ and ‘spend more time on
task’” (p. 54).

The interview with Mrs. Claret, at the end of March, occurred roughly nine weeks into
the creative writing program and illustrates her positionality in the classroom with relation to the
instructors and her own students. When asked whether she felt she learned anything, as far as the
way she taught, from the program “We the Children” or from Katherine and Louisa, Mrs. Claret
replied:

I think that not only have my students learned a lot from this program, but I have learned
so much. I’ve learned that, first of all, instructors don’t know everything. I had Louisa as
a teacher…I did. And it’s one of those things to where, she came into my classroom and I
was the teacher—I was the one in charge. But you learn because I did give my classroom over to these people two days a week, and they made the lesson plans, and they decided what we would do. But I’ve also learned that my kids respect me because I’m the teacher; I’m like a Momma. They may have aunts who come in to visit, but I’m the Momma—I’m the one they go to if they have a problem.

The positioning of a teacher in loco parentis can be linked to the interpersonal caring aspect of culturally-responsive teaching that entails more than “merely exhibiting feelings of kindness, gentleness, and benevolence toward students” (Gay, 2000, p. 48). Actively caring for students involves teachers engaging in “concomitant competence-producing actions” and demanding “accountability for high-level performance” (p. 48). Noddings (1996) notes that the attitude driving this kind of caring “accepts, embraces, and leads upward. It questions, it responds, it sympathizes, it challenges, it delights” (p. 29). This type of relationship demands a level of advocacy for students, sincere and diligent in order for students to sustain cultural integrity and strive for academic merit.

As the semester went on, students’ personal revelations appeared to reflect what Gay (2000) explains as the desire for teachers to establish “caring, interpersonal relationships” characterized by “patience, persistence, facilitation, validation, and empowerment” for the student (p. 47). Students reaching out to adults who are from cultural backgrounds much different from their own indicate the need for the classroom to be a caring environment. Webb, Wilson, Corbett, and Mordecai (1993) declare that caring is a value and a moral imperative that moves “self-determination into social responsibility and uses knowledge and strategic thinking to decide how to act in the best interests of others,” and “caring binds individuals to their society, to their communities, and to each other” (pp. 33-34). Early on, the positive interactions of the
instructors with the students established a genuine level of care, patience, and interest in helping students explore their identities and expand personal horizons.

On the occasions when they expressed harshness toward Mrs. Claret, many of them spoke highly of her in their personal interviews. In fact, Sunni, one of the more talkative and harsher speaking girls of the classroom who was also physically larger than the rest of the girls, was acknowledged in her efforts to help save Mrs. Claret from a threatening “college girl” one day. On that particular day when students were working in the computer lab, the following conversation took place:

Queenie: Miss Claret got beat up this mornin’ ya’ll.

Mrs. Claret: I didn’t get beat up; I ‘bout got beat up! [then she turns to Sunni and says,] I’m glad you had my back.

Sunni: Well, I did.

Later, during the same class period, when Mrs. Claret had to call Sunni down for singing, talking, and basically, goofing off, Sunni asked, “What [sic] you all on me?” Several minutes later, Sunni remembered saving Mrs. Claret and loudly reminded her: “I’m gonna have that girl come beat you up! That college girl gonna beat you up for real! For real! Next time, she go’n straight for the face!” This kind of playful banter among the students and Mrs. Claret frequently occurred and appeared to be accepted by Mrs. Claret not addressing it in a harsh way; however, some instances of students’ trying to engage in this kind of behavior on a day when Mrs. Claret was not as receptive resulted in negative consequences.

Several of the girls expressed a familial type relationship with Mrs. Claret, referring to her as Momma. In chapter four, I included Sunni’s essay written for her autobiography to accompany a picture of the two. Toward the end of the writing program, students helped each
other choose pieces of their writing to include in an anthology external to the autobiographical book they each received. The favorite pieces were also shared at the celebration when the bound copies of the books arrived. The instructors had previously explained that students could read/perform their favorite story in front of their classmates, their peers, and the people they chose to invite. Denisha’s story illustrates the kind of ties some of the girls formed with their teacher.

This is about me and my mommy Miz Claret. I never knew I could say so many things, so many personal things until I walked in Miz Claret’s ninth-grade English class. Miz Claret is a sweet and kind person, but she can have her ways. She’s the type of person I remember as a person; we would sit down and work it out. Miz Claret has two kids—Emma Grace and Will Thomas—one boy and a girl. She might be White, but she is my mother, also. She actually took me in her own hands. The last time I wrote a letter to her, it was talking about my mother and some family problems. We communicate by talking it out. I’m trying to tell Miz Claret how to stay in her kids’ life. We talk a lot at school. The reason I was talking about all my problems with her is because Miz Claret is a trusting person that I can depend on all the time. I can talk to her about my personal problems. Denisha’s perceived sincerity of expression as she read the narrative made Mrs. Claret cry, but some students started laughing as soon as Denisha began reading. Denisha continued reading in the face of so many of the students’ inappropriate reactions. To successfully help students represent themselves in a manner that risks their positioning with peers, teachers must establish relationships that transcend cultural boundaries. The instructors’ instructional practices were successful because they understood and enacted what Ladson-Billings’ (1995b) explains, “Knowledge emerges in dialectical relationships; rather than the voice of one authority, meaning
is made as a product of dialogue between and among individuals” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 468). The success of the writing program involved their understanding of cultural synchronization (Irvine, 1990), and the many ways they helped students achieve an interpersonal context of writing and realize the links between themselves and their teacher maximized learning. The contextual layers of communication students were exposed to and engaged in during their classroom discussions and writing opportunities served to help students who were, perhaps, at higher maturity levels to acknowledge their transcendence of cultural boundaries.

Research Question 4: Findings

How did the students, the teacher, and outside experts interact with each other when they were participating in the program?

Relationships

During the writing program, findings show that the instructors treated students much like they expected to be treated. They were consistent with their outward behavior through their words of encouragement and support as students worked toward a common goal. Some of the students were respectful in their own unique ways, while others were not respectful to anyone, including themselves. Reciprocity of respectful relationships may have occurred from a different social and cultural perspective. Students did not appear to link their interruptions to rudeness, partly, in part, due to what Gay (2000) explains as the need for African Americans to “take positions of advocacy and express personal points of view in discussions” as a way of “recognizing the person as a valid data source” (p. 100). Positive attitudes toward the university instructors were highlighted during the student interviews. In their responses to the researcher’s question, “Do you think that the two university teachers, Katherine and Louisa, have been helpful?” the following statements demonstrate the attitudes of many students in the classroom:
Roxie: They’ve been very helpful, and I think they have positive attitudes because somehow some of these kids does them, they still keeps their cool, and they still do what they have to do. And they smile about everything. So, they got it. (personal communication, March 26, 2008)

Queenie: They really have, and they’ve been patient, too, ‘cuz I know some days we can talk too much and get on folks’ nerves. But they’ve been patient with us. (personal communication, March 26, 2008)

Roman: Oh, iz’ good I think…I like it a lot. It gives them students a way to express theyself on paper, and it gives them opportunity to let the whole world read it, if they’re interested in it and also their peers. (personal communication, March 27, 2008)

Students were fairly discerning in their explanations about the creative writing program. One student’s comments during her interview revealed the kind of self-reflection the autobiographical writing had forced her to engage in, reflecting on her own mortality.

Researcher: Has this caused you to be more reflective about what’s going on in your life?

Queenie: Yeah, becuz’ now I am forced to remember stuff that I wouldn’t usually remember.

Researcher: Well, do you find yourself kind of shying away from writing about the stuff that causes you problems to think about, or do you just go ahead and write it anyway?

Queenie: I just go ahead and write it out. The hardest story I had to write was about Jemison Franklin (pseudonym), and that wuz’ becuz’ he had just died like two or three
days before I wrote the story. (personal communication, March 26, 2008)

Researcher: What would you say is your biggest dislike about the writing program?
Queenie: Writing. I hate writing. I like pictures. I like to fill my whole book up with pictures and explain the pictures. But I don’t really like writing stories. (personal communication, March 26, 2008)

Even though Queenie expressed disdain for writing, she indicated her understanding of the importance of telling stories. Although she was one of the few students who stayed on track with her writing for the autobiographical book, it was the visual imagery she was drawn to in her desire to communicate her thoughts and opinions. Perhaps technology has had an effect on more adolescents with these types of attitudes toward storytelling. Her text for the book was full of colorful pictures and beautiful backgrounds to illustrate the stories of her life.

The quandary for many African American students who want to be successful in the classroom, according to Ladson-Billings (1995b) “becomes one of negotiating the academic demands of school while demonstrating cultural competence” (p. 476). In order for teachers to help students who are struggling, teachers must be aware of their limited knowledge about each student’s development, and Plaut (2006) explains, “They [teachers] must rely on observable data—students’ writing, silence, questions, and body language—to gauge student confusion; they can only infer meaning from (and perhaps misinterpret) students’ behavior” (p. 394). Being in sync with the variability of self-development and with the socially-learned communication adolescents experience are important to designing ways of self-expression in the English classroom. Applebee (2003) explains, “The issue for curriculum theory is one of providing an orderly, coherent set of experiences, each of which is flexible enough to provide the appropriate degrees of challenge and support to students whose knowledge and skills may differ widely from
each other” (p. 681). Lee (2003a) refers to an African American adage, “Every shut eye ain’t sleep,” which is a reminder that everyone in the educational field needs “to understand the diverse pathways to development through patterns of cultural socializations and their impact on learning…[as well as] use such understandings in the design of learning environments across settings” (p. 12).

*Individualism*

Findings suggest that some of the students were not convinced that they could trust their friends. One student, Solange, wrote the following in one of her rough drafts: “Friends come and go, so I don’t value them.” Etzioni (1996) uses a mosaic metaphor to explain how individualism can work for the common good. Individual bits of dissimilar shapes and color are held together by an ordinary frame and glue to make a mosaic. The separate, unique bits represent individualism, and the ordinary frame and glue is the community. Sergiovanni (1999) expressively explains how individual differences cannot usurp the value of community:

Individualism adds strength, stirs our creative juices, and provides us with an insurance policy against blind conformity. This policy can be liberating. At the same time, members of every society, and every school within society, need to be connected by a common framework and committed to some common good. Connections and commitment are the means by which students and adults alike find sense and meaning in their lives and find the resources needed to persist when times are tough, to look ahead to brighter days, to meet life’s challenges, and to be successful with life’s endeavors. Communities in our schools, families, churches, and other places work well for everyone when this common good is inclusive. When connections and inclusivity are worked out in a way that individualism does not suffer, a value fundamental to our democratic society comes alive.
This value, civic virtue, calls on us to willingly sacrifice our self-interest for the common good. (p. 12)

It is not possible to accurately identify the number of students who wrote with a high level of honesty in their personal responses to the writing prompts used in the writing program. However, it is possible to say some students described events from cultural backgrounds quite different than the white participants in the study.

Even in light of their increased vulnerability to other’s ideas about them and their lives, several students wrote about sensitive life experiences. In the students’ sharing time, referred to as the “Author’s Chair,” stories were shared and opinions formed which may very well have reflected what Delpit’s (1988) calls teacher terminology regarding “our children” and “other people’s children” due to the nature of the social and cultural differences among students and teachers. However, the students’ personal stories and snapshots of their lives away from the classroom illustrate children different from the teachers yet similar in many of their life experiences.

As with teenagers in English classrooms around the country, some students resisted the opportunity to become vulnerable during the sharing time provided by the Author’s Chair. Those who chose to read were usually vying with Roman to get a turn; Roman was most often the first student to volunteer and on a couple of occasions, bribing other students in order to read his writing. Often, the stories Roman shared had a comedic twist or were written in such a way as to elicit chuckles. The girls usually liked to share writing connected to their descriptions of themselves, their favorite musicians, or funny stories about things like eating butter with a friend.

Findings indicate that many of students who resisted sharing their stories were among those who talked more than they listened and who exhibited disruptive behaviors instead of
sharing their writing. One of the most troublesome behaviors was students’ having cell phones in class and trying to text while they were supposed to be listening. On numerous occasions, Mrs. Claret took up various students’ phones, but students continued to find new ways to conceal their cells. One young lady acknowledged the problem of some students displaying misconduct when she responded to the researcher’s interview inquiry of what she admired about the university instructors: “Even though some people in the classroom are being very disruptive or whatever, they [the instructors] still take time to deal with the people that really want to do it” (Nina Nolen, personal communication, March 27, 2008). Overall, most students typically acted like the young teenagers they were, but the cell phone usage was a real problem never truly eliminated.

Participation

The students’ words in classroom discussions and in writing reflected the similarities of all participants rather than the differences. For example, when asked about their thoughts toward the creative writing program, some of the students (all pseudonyms) responded in the following ways:

Roxie: It’s a good thing because I feel that it’s what all that’s been bottled up in someone, they can all write it down and get it out finally. And because that’s something that’s wrong with kids these days because they’s so much bottled up in them, they don’t when to express it. So then some kids have a lot of stories to tell because they done been through a lot as a young age like I have. So, as I write, I just want people—I can give examples and I can show—I can relate to young people how it is—to young females, how it is in the world—like people that is just coming in from my day—like now. (personal communication, March 26, 2008)
Queenie: I like it becuz’ I like to express my feelins’ or whatever. I like to—I don’t like to really write out, but I like to get it out. (personal communication, March 26, 2008)

Laila: I actually like it. It’s kinda exciting having your own book published and writing about your life. My mom is excited about it. I’ve been taking my folder home and been working on it, and my mom’s been helping work on it and been telling me, “You need to put this in there. You need to put this in there.” I didn’t think I could write that much, but I really…I like to write, but not this much! So it’s kinda fun to think that writing is pretty easy and after you read all your writing, it’s like “I can’t believe I did that!” (personal communication, March 27, 2008)

Each of these students’ responses reflects the positive learning trajectories that the English teacher and the instructors were excited about achieving.

Findings reveal that a large number of the students in the writing program worked diligently throughout the program on their writing, but fewer of these students volunteered to share their stories with the class. During the third session of the writing program, more students volunteered to read literature excerpts that the instructors brought. The key principles and strategies guiding the creative writing program combined various types of literature and the instructors’ own personal experiences with the instructional practices of writing. The instructors’ curriculum was positively accepted by the students, especially as students were included in the oral readings and discussions that ensued. Embedded in the instructional practices used by the instructors to help students get started writing about their lives were writing prompts connected to the students’ everyday lives. One of the instructional practices involved a type of guided imagery in which students were instructed to imagine looking down on a scene and to engage the
use of all their senses to describe what was around them. Laila explained later in her interview that this was her favorite writing event during the program:

My ideal place that I want to go to is Paris and Italy. When I was there in my imagination, I saw all the Italian people when I was Italy and smelled the fresh salad and the fresh Italian bread in the air. In Paris, I saw the Eiffel Tower from the outdoor restaurant I was eating at. I smelled the fresh scent of the flowers flowing through the air; when the wind blew, all the scents came together as a lovely fragrance that made you want to taste the air. I also heard the sound of people playing the Paris music on one of their boats in the water. I also heard, as I sat at the table where I was eating, a water fountain—that when all the water came down out of the air that the fountain was pushing out, it made you feel like you were on a paradise island.

The three forces in motion—students, teachers, and instructors—not only shaped but also were shaped by the energy and power undergirding the fundamental processes of engagement with the writing program. Three key groups of actors involved in the study are acknowledged by generalized titles which define to the world of academia their positioning within a classroom: students, teachers, and instructors. However, the contextual positioning of the actors involved in the specific place and time of this particular classroom offers a glimpse of the interplay of varying social and cultural realities as well as the experiences shared as a result of their writing community. This chapter has discussed how the creative writing program was executed in the classroom and how the influences of social and cultural differences shaped the instructional practices and the outcomes of the writing prompts.

In Langer’s (2001) study about students succeeding academically, she states, “Properly taught by persons understanding their strengths, varying backgrounds, potential for learning, and
who take into account historical, socioeconomic, psychological, and linguistic barriers, Blacks not only *can* but *do* learn like any other group” (p. 2). Successful English programs are comprised of teachers working in alliance “to plan, develop, and carry out a coherent plan,” because everyone is aware of what is being done across the grades and are able to make more connections for students across time (Langer, 2001, p. 39).

**Summary**

In Chapter III, I explained the approaches for conducting fieldwork across 21 weeks, using a timeline to depict some 31 hours of investigating the creative writing program which included observing and interviewing the two instructors, seven students, and the regular English teacher. Chapter V discusses the implications of the research.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Chapter I presented the foundation for this study by introducing the pedagogical significance of providing opportunities for students and teachers to learn about each other’s social and cultural backgrounds through creative writing in the English classroom. It outlined a statement of purpose, the study’s significance as well as limitations, and the definition of key terms. Additionally, this chapter presented research questions for the study.

Chapter II shaped the study’s theoretical framework and provided relevant literature regarding the importance of English teachers’ teaching writing as a way to help students become more aware of their own identities as well as the identities of others. The review of the literature further defined the study’s purpose and demonstrated the absence of research available to white English teachers on ways to improve instructional methods in order to help African American students achieve successful academic outcomes.

Chapter III addressed the methodology used in the study and presented an explanation for the researcher’s methodological decisions. This chapter depicted the objectivity and subjectivity issues involved in the study.
In the fourth chapter, I presented data gathered through observations, interviews, and artifacts of all participants in the study. The chapter began with an introduction to the participants, including the contexts of the study, such as demographics of the school, classroom teacher, and university instructors. Instructional strategies were examined and along with their integration in the classroom to learn the significance with regard to the four research questions guiding the study.

Chapter V presents a more thorough discussion of the findings relative to the theoretical framework and research literature of teachers helping students explore their social and cultural backgrounds to achieve successful writing outcomes. The implications of the findings for each of the four research questions and limitations of the study are offered. Recommendations for further study are made.

Still I Rise  
By Maya Angelou

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don't you take it awful hard  
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,

You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide.  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I rise  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.
The Empowerment of Writing

I began this section with a poem written by Maya Angelou that one of the students included in her final autobiographical book. The poem illustrates the complexities of self-identity as well as social and cultural differences which were significant to this study. As the title indicates, the poem is a tribute not only to Angelou’s ability to rise above the things that had happened to her but also to all people and their individual struggles. The poem begins with the problematic nature of others writing down history because all of it is “full of lies,” especially the silent discrimination surrounding the history of African Americans. Angelou’s questioning the reader demands self-examination of personal beliefs. The poem’s strong voice repetitively declares Angelou’s will to rise in order to fulfill the dreams of her ancestors and become successful in a free world. The poem forces readers to examine their own characters, strengthen their self-identities, and gain determination to be successful in their lives. Angelou’s story is one of agency, empowerment, and belief—essential elements for students’ academic success.

In a number of ways, the writing program worked to help students discover empowerment through the writing of their lives. Writing about themselves, their families, and their friends allowed students to appreciate the fluidity of their own self-development and to understand how the people in their lives helped shaped them and their perspectives of the world. Acknowledging their own social and cultural experiences and learning about others and the uniqueness of all, students were affirmed by positive feedback offered by the instructors through their conversational engagement with students’ rough drafts of writing as well as the instructors’ usage of verbal praise and encouragement.

Maya Angelou’s poem “Still I Rise” reverberates throughout this study because it illustrates how an individual’s identity *shapes* and *is shaped* by social, cultural, and historical
worlds. In particular, themes of personal reflection and community relate to the goals the instructors had for the students in the writing program. As Mrs. Claret stated in her interview, some of her students had problems from the past they did not want to confront, but writing about their lives helped to show them that much could be learned from the histories of their lives to empower them to think about their futures. The instructors worked to facilitate literacy practices that helped students to discover themselves.

Self-exploration in the writing program became a space in which students could work toward a goal of creating a concrete object that showed them, their families, and their friends that their lives mattered. I was honored to have the opportunity to observe a classroom with teachers who helped students discover the importance of the ordinary events of life and learn to navigate technology to accomplish their goals.

Discussion of Research Question 1

*How was the writing program executed in the classroom?*

In the creative writing program, the instructors worked toward the goal of creating a space in which teaching, learning, writing, and sharing could thrive. In their efforts to help students develop a sense of identity as writers and to help them work toward the completion of their own books—books written *by* them, *about* them, and *for* them—some measure of success was achieved. Instruction took place; learning occurred in various forms, writing was accomplished, and sharing regularly transpired.

In their efforts to help students connect their everyday lives with their schoolwork, the instructors took on challenging instructional practices that required their taking risks, learning about students’ backgrounds, and modifying lessons based on the needs and interests of the students. Through the writing activities, students who may have never been engaged *chose* to
become engaged and perhaps more motivated because school becomes relevant as students make sense out their lives as well as their social and home worlds. In inquiry-based programs about adolescents’ identities in their social worlds, Beach and Meyers (2001) found this to be true because students “perceived some connection between English and their everyday lives” (p. 4). My study found that students became engaged during moments of self reflection created by the writing prompts of the program and whole-class readings and discussions of the literary selections of the instructors.

Identity work in any classroom involves certain risks because issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality often become part of that work. Dr. Harvest and Dr. Garner’s initial objectives for the program as well as their observable actions encompassed the idea that no matter what the objectives of the writing program may have been, the goals are complicated by social, historical, and cultural issues that exist within any social setting. To respond to those issues, they consciously reflected on their instructional practices and transformed those practices based on the needs of the students. Although some students exhibited a nonchalant attitude toward the opportunities for writing as a way to explore their identities, many students showed me that, based on their “history-in-person,” they would resist, appropriate, or redefine those opportunities to fit their needs and intentions. However, no matter how students reacted, the instructors worked with them all in an effort to help them to explore their own lives and document part of the journey.

Central to the findings of this study was the effective ways that writing helped students explore their social and cultural backgrounds, specifically in a classroom with white teachers and African American students. Drawing on Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, and Cain’s (1998) concept of a “space of authoring,” I observed instances of identity work which opened spaces for students
to “author” themselves and the world around them through literacy practices. Through analysis, I investigated the various ways the instructors created and/or facilitated such spaces for students throughout the course of the program. In addition, I considered how students’ reflections of their life experiences *shaped* and *were shaped* by their literacy practices.

By providing opportunities for students to explore their multiple identities, the program opened spaces for students in which they contemplated the range of their life experiences and engaged in the process of “authoring” themselves and the worlds around them (Holland et al., 1998). In order to understand the extent of what the program helped students to achieve, it is necessary to understand how the writing program guided students to a space of authoring, and Lachicotte (2002) explains:

This space of authoring is formed, both within us and outside us, but the very multiplicity of persons who are identifiable positions in networks of social production, and of worlds of activity that are also scenes of consciousness. When we act, whether that act is instrumental or imaginative, we “move” through this space figuratively. None of us is occupied singularly; we are not possessed by one identity, one discourse, one subject-position. Each act is simultaneously a social dynamic, social work, a set of identifications, and negations, an orchestration or arrangement of voices. And our sense of self comes from the history of our arrangements, our “styles” of saying and doing through others. The freedom that Bakhtin calls authorship comes from the ways differing identifications can be juxtaposed, brought to work with and against one another, to create a position, our own voice, from which we respond to life’s tasks. (p. 61)
Discussion of Research Question 2

What resources were in position to support the success of the program, and what, if any, barriers reduced the success of the program?

Resources supporting the program included the investment of the instructors’ time, energies, and effort as well as their commitment to seeing the program through to the end. Under their direction, the writing program helped students learn to apply their own words to personal writing and to learn new ways of meaning. Findings show that the writing program presented opportunities for identity exploration and opened spaces of authoring which provided occasions for students to view themselves in different ways—not better ways, necessarily, but different ways. Some improvised and created new identities, while others, resisted and appropriated certain practices in order to share themselves publicly or remain private. Some of the students used their cultural resources in order to bridge the social and academic world at that moment. Oftentimes, federal and state mandates, along with standardized testing, drive instruction, but hooks (1994) reminds us that “the classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility” (p. 207). Moments of identity exploration, although complicated, open up those possibilities. The instructors did not require students to come to the Author’s Chair and speak in front of the whole class because many students preferred not to make their private lives public. Even though social and cultural differences were an ever-present backdrop of the writing program, it was the fashioning of the community of practice in that particular classroom and those moments in time that received the most attention. Vygotsky (1978) believed that people are able to imagine themselves in worlds and manage their behavior so that they can become a part of those imagined worlds. Through these opportunities for identity exploration, students engaged in self-directed agency. The students also gained knowledge about the technical aspects
of writing and hands-on experiences of utilizing technology to enhance their communication of self.

Any barriers reducing the program’s success were related to time factors. Many students exhibited trouble with the lack of time to complete everything needed for the final publication of their books. Some students procrastinated with outside assignments which meant leaving parts of their books incomplete. Some unexpected problems with technology also occurred which kept some students from working on their books for as long as they needed during their time in the computer labs. Some of the students’ absences interfered with their successfully completing assignments. The absences included students’ serving out-of-school suspension as a consequence of bad decision making like the two girls fighting, one boy’s excessive tardies, and another boy’s blatant disregard for following the rules. Ultimately, no matter how prepared a teacher is when he or she enters a high school classroom, factors beyond a teacher’s control affect the types of student attitudes toward learning and being present for learning. Obstacles affecting the success of the final autobiographical books were also tied to some students’ failing to take care of outside work.

Findings suggest that issues of power and status sometimes also interrupted identity work in the classroom. When the program moved to the computer lab for students to use technology toward completing their books, a few students exhibited resistance to following directions. These students were quite vocal and loud in their efforts to waste time and distract others; unfortunately, students who really wanted to stay on task were forced to hear the badgering that occurred among students seeking attention rather than being attentive to their work. Too often, Mrs. Claret issued reprimands that fell on deaf ears and were ignored and dismissed by students who were quick to make a scene. The instructors worked hard through their instructional
practices and talk to facilitate and control the space so that students were respectful of each other, but ultimately, the area of classroom control was left up to Mrs. Claret.

Discussion of Research Question 3

*How were the days used for working with the creative writing program different from other days spent as a regular English class?*

Initially, my plans for observing the students in both settings—the days they worked with the writing program and days they were with Mrs. Claret and the regular English curriculum—were more than what actually occurred. Due to time constraints, I was only able to observe regular classroom activities on three separate occasions, which is really not enough time to make viable comparisons. However, data collection for these visits revealed few connections being made between what the students were working on during their regular studies and the writing program. A large part of what students worked on in their English class was directed toward grammar exercises and studying literature from the Alabama Course of Study standards such as Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*, which was in their literature books, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In the discussions I audio-taped and the fieldnotes I gathered, it was evident that a large amount of classroom time involved the teacher’s classroom management of students’ talking—to each other as well as to her—about issues not directly connected to their studies. Many of the classroom discussions surrounded the students’ reading certain sections of the play and their questions as to the language being used. Mrs. Claret also summarized some sections of the play and required students to take notes from those teacher-led lectures. My analyses shows that a large number of students trying to take notes were writing verbatim what Mrs. Claret said which means that students needed more direction about note-taking. Data analyses also suggest that
several students were able to interpret more of the abstract meanings from the text than other students. Much of the classroom discussion about the play revolved around the students’ modern-day applications of the scenes surrounding love, courtship, and marriage which was quite interesting to follow.

As far as students’ behavior in both settings, I saw relatively no variances with regard to how they interacted with Mrs. Claret alone or in the presence of the university instructors. The behavior issues Mrs. Claret dealt with on a daily basis usually occurred when the instructors were there, but the instructors’ did not always have all of the specifics regarding some of the students’ ongoing interactions with one another and with Mrs. Claret.

Discussion of Research Question 4

_How did the students, the teacher, and outside experts interact with each other when they were participating in the program?_

Findings indicate that talking was a constant force in the program due to the nature of the instructional practices and the personal communications shared by students, the students’ teacher, the instructors, and the visiting experts. Certainly the girls were more talkative than boys and more demonstrative in their outward show of affection for each other, and at times, their behavior could become extreme if one of the girls was having a bad day, but it rarely escalated to the point of physical attack.

One visiting expert, a professor from the university’s journalism department, engaged students in ways to help them take better photographs and conduct more effective interviews which would add dimension to their books. Through students’ discourse with the adults in the classroom, they gained an understanding of how the inclusion of others in their lives was important to writing their own histories. Differences did not obstruct the establishment of a
caring environment in which the instructors encouraged students to share their differences through their writing and through their reading the stories of their own lives which are different because of each individual’s uniqueness. More often, the similarities of their life experiences with the instructors’ own personal stories helped students to understand the significance of the concept of community of which they were a part and of which they learned more about each other than would have otherwise occurred.

In my observations, I saw a fashioning of community whose similarities as writers were significant. Like Gay’s (2000) description of culturally responsive teaching, the instructors used these practices and talk to shape a figured world that “acknowledged the legitimacy of cultural heritages,” built “bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences,” used “a wide variety of instructional strategies,” and incorporated “multicultural information and resources” (p. 29).

The students’ gained confidence in learning to use language more effectively to communicate to others as they realized that writing can be a powerful tool. The strengthening of their technology expertise was demonstrated in the instances they helped each other with computer issues and the times they shared their discoveries of new ways to enhance the visual imagery of the book with textual features, background configurations, picture and page borders, and a number of other insightful computer skills learned. Roman, who was a confident and capable literacy student, positioned himself in the computer lab with Laila, Adrianna, and JáMeelah, some of the more serious students in the class. Perhaps, Roman recognized his potential to become distracted and seating himself away from the hub of distractions, he fashioned an identity that was flourished in his cooperative work with Laila and the other girls, but more directly with Laila. The camaraderie that emerged from their working so closely in the
computer lab also involved their discoveries and sharing of new ways to modify their books in ways that really did not appear to be competitive, rather it served to create a dialogue that praised, encouraged, and critiqued, when necessary. Roman was extroverted and used his cultural resources in order to bridge his social and academic world in ways that appeared to help Laila gain more confidence in her interactions with others.

The students’ writing about their personal experiences and sharing their stories with each other was significant to their becoming more cognizant of the ways that their social and cultural backgrounds shaped them. However, their writing narratives about personal issues and experiences in a free-writing type format rather than following a traditionally prescribed model, such as the five-paragraph essay, could be perceived by some as a stunted learning trajectory. The recursive nature of the writing process is often not presented to students as a way to strengthen drafts through peer editing and revision. Being taught to write as if the process were a linear activity could also be another drawback for students who participated in the writing program. By encouraging students to revisit their writing over and over again, the instructors helped students realize that all writing can be improved upon and strengthened. Another drawback for students could be their expectations that all writing teachers will provide productive feedback and will strive to make the classroom a safe place for students to share their writing. The writing program functioned in such a way as to help students build self-esteem, self-efficacy, a strong voice, and a sense of their own identities, and all writing classes do not approach writing with such important goals in mind.

Incorporating Culture into Classrooms

For many African American students, navigation of varying classroom environments in one school day is often accompanied by their intentional as well as unintentional exhibitions of
cultural proficiency (Ladson-Billings’, 1995b), and the students involved in this study were no exception. Due to the reality that greater numbers of white, middle-class teachers in classrooms across the nation are instructing students of color, the greater the likelihood the traditional modes of teaching are being implemented. Research (Banks, 1995; Deplit, 1992; Duncan, 2005; Fine, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a, 1995b) expose the dilemma that traditional methods of teaching are not successful with all students, specifically, students whose social and cultural backgrounds are very different from the teacher’s. It is crucial for teachers to become skillful at helping students reduce their anxieties and recognize the “interactions between curricular content, cultural discourses, community histories, students’ personal histories, and general attitudes about schooling” affect students’ emotional responses to schoolwork (Rosiek, 2003, p. 406). Additionally, teachers also must learn to work with students as whole individuals and respond to them “as emotional, moral, social, and cultural as well as cognitive beings” (p. 411).

Because this study took place with students of color, their white English teacher, and two white instructors, it attempted to tell the stories of marginalized students and illustrate how culture can be incorporated into the classroom (Gay, 2000; Greene and Abt-Perkins, 2003). Findings suggest that opportunities for writing as a way to explore identity is one way for students to consider issues related to markers of difference and to bridge their academic and cultural resources. Currently, theories of identity are growing in the field of education, and while several researchers have examined schools as figured worlds, few have investigated how a classroom as a figured world is created and negotiated between a teacher and students (Blackburn, 2002; Luttrell and Parker, 2001; Pennington, 2004; Vetter, 2007). This study proposes any type of writing program is a collaborative process, and in terms of negotiating issues of power and status within such a community of practice, the teacher plays a key part in
maintaining aspects of that community. Implementation of this kind of writing program, designed to guide students through identity exploration, means that students are provided more opportunities to take up positions of power since it becomes a figured world that values students’ backgrounds and discourses. Plans have to be in place for teachers to maintain a positive environment for all students to thrive and grow through self-reflection and creation.

Implications for Practice

Throughout this paper, I presented findings that reflect some of the ways the creative writing program helped students explore their identities within literacy practices. A fundamental task for the teaching of personal writing is to provide opportunities in which students can struggle to make sense out of themselves and the world around them through reading, writing, discussion, and research. As Fecho (2004) found in his study about race, language, and culture in a classroom, students were able to construct identities by making meaning of literature together in a community of practice fashioned within the English classroom. It is through these moments that students in this classroom taught me that they want and need to talk about issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality—a space to grapple with these issues. Critical literacy suggests that students can wrestle with these issues by interrogating texts, making differences visible, redefining literacy, and engaging in reflection and action (praxis) upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 2001; Giroux, 1993; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). Additionally, hooks (1994) explains that dialogue can serve as a method for students and teachers to cross boundaries and figure out social, cultural, and historical issues together. This study illustrated that students were able to look at themselves in new ways during literacy events that related to their everyday lives and provided opportunities to talk about their past experiences.
For so many reasons, students need to be able to express their life experiences through literacy practices in both public and private spaces of the classroom. The writing program provided those opportunities through various types of practices, such as writing, reading, and discussion. Pratt (1991) described the classroom as a “contact zone” in which “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (p. 126). However ideal the concept, students were not always comfortable sharing writing that was directly related to personal issues and experiences. As Ellsworth (1989) noted, no matter how hard teachers try to create safe spaces, issues of power still exist.

Findings of this study also reflect the associations between identity and literacy. As white educators of African American students, the instructors strived to provide opportunities for students to bridge and home and school lives. They demonstrated an interest in the students’ lives and were willing to share their own personal lives with them.

It is important that teachers realize the socio-cultural nature of the classroom and learning. To understand what that entails, this study shows that even though opportunities are created for students to explore their life histories and teachers learn about their students’ lives outside the classroom, social, cultural, and historical issues will always complicate how these opportunities occur (Vetter, p. 242). It is imperative that teachers continue to negotiate with their students to build spaces that benefit the various needs of individuals and to sustain dialogue with each other as they engage in instructional practices that promote self-reflection.

Implications for Research

The complexities of students’ identities include the fluidity and constant restructuring that takes place among adolescents across the world. One limitation of this study is that it examined only one creative writing program in one classroom with 20 African American...
students, their white English teacher, and two white instructors. More research needs to be done that involves the relationship between adolescents’ identities and writing within the contexts of various classrooms. Every classroom has a different impact on how students create, construct, and share their life experiences. More research needs to examine strategies teachers use to negotiate student identities in their classrooms. How can we help teachers realize that students are not fixed identities and that they are capable of positioning themselves in new ways? (Vetter, 2007).

Further investigation about writing that promotes self-reflexivity within a classroom needs to be done within various contexts. How do teachers across a variety of school contexts facilitate autobiographical writing? What range and types of opportunities provided by autobiographical writing shape students’ literacy practices? What measures can be taken to aid educators in their building communities of practice that enable students to explore their life experiences? How can students engage in literacy practices and discussions so that interruptions of power can occur and be productively negotiated in order for students to listen to each other’s true voices?

The increasing diversity of schools does not equal diversity of teachers. The greater teacher population continues to remain white, middle class, and female. Research needs to continue to examine what Ladson-Billings (1995a; 1995b) and Gay (2000) discuss as culturally relevant pedagogy which includes research on how teachers establish relationship with students from different social and cultural backgrounds. This study attempted to illustrate how two white instructors negotiated various discourses in a creative writing program, but more research needs to explore how educators, particularly English teachers, can be better prepared for the social,
cultural, and political issues that shape classrooms of the 21st century. Successfully dealing with these issues means that teachers and students take risks.

More ethnographic case study research needs to be conducted that deals with the relationship between students’ autobiographical writing and literacy. The task is not simple, and in no way did I intend to oversimplify the instructional practices of the instructors in their endeavors to help students create a personal record of their lives. The explanations of this writing program cannot be interpreted as a simplified view of pedagogy in action. This study is viable for teachers seeking ideas to help students, especially historically marginalized students, learn more about themselves through writing in order to bridge cultural differences, expand their horizons of success, and reach beyond the communities of which they are part in order to bring hope back to others.

From the very beginning of the study, most students exhibited an understanding and awareness of the expectations for participating in the program. While a number of students engaged more often in verbal communication which translated in the English classroom as less listening, a large part of the students worked diligently to complete the tasks at hand. The number of creative writing program sessions \((n = 4)\) prior to engaging in computer lab time was possibly one of the reasons why several students were unable to stay on task and on track with the various deadlines along the way. Much of the difficulties experienced by a few students could be traced back to their failing to work outside the classroom to complete various writing assignments, conduct assigned interviews, and make pictures on the disposable digital cameras furnished by the instructors.

Throughout the course of the program, students were exposed to a variety of content geared toward ethnic and cultural diversity as well as age appropriateness. The broader social
context of entirely African American students in an English classroom with entirely white adults presented some challenges at times, particularly in relation to expectations and outcomes. However, the ethic of caring and the tool of cultural communication were a large part of the praxis within this particular writing and sharing community. The interactions among students, the regular English teacher, and the university instructors were productive more often than not. The instructors were supportive and facilitative of students’ progress.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

IRB REQUEST
TITLE OF PROGRAM: We the Children: A Symphony of Lives

STARTING DATE: January 2008

ESTIMATED COMPLETION DATE: December 2009

RESEARCH PROGRAM:

Objectives of Program: The proposed study seeks to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of a writing program to be implemented at Central High School (CHS) in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, called “We the Children: A Symphony of Lives” on ninth grade students and their teacher. The program, which is funded through the National Council of Teachers (NCTE) of English Research Foundation has been approved by the CHS principal for implementation from January 2008-May 2008. Our research questions for the funded grant include:

1. How do students construct themselves through multimodal, autobiographical writing?
2. How do participants’ attitudes toward writing change?
3. What tensions, conflicts, and affordances are there in this "We the Children: Symphony of Lives" program as a pedagogy that aims to be culturally relevant and motivational?
4. What themes do students see in their own and their peers’ narratives?

Subjects: Data will be gathered from voluntary participants in the writing program: the students at Central High School (9th graders, n = 25-30) and their teacher.

Methods:

Gaining Consent

Student Participants. Consent forms for parents and assent forms for students will be distributed to potential participants in January 2008 when the new semester begins at the high school. At that time, participants will be notified that they can choose to not participate in the program’s evaluation component. As the evaluation aspect of the program is voluntary, non-participation in the study does not negatively affect participants.

Staff. A consent form will be given to the classroom teacher once the program is approved.

Visiting Experts. Consent forms will be distributed to visiting experts in January 2008 when the program begins.
Procedures

There will be several forms of data collected in this study: observations, interviews, artifacts, and assessments. For the purposes of this research and potential manuscript publication, we will only use material from those students who give consent. However, the attitude survey and writing assessments are tools that the teacher and/or principal might ordinarily use and can qualify for inclusion in our research (from participating students). In addition, as our study was funded to provide a creative writing program for the students, participants and non-participants will have access to the creative writing, visiting experts, digital stories, and the formal school and gallery showings.

Systematic Observation. Our fieldwork will include daily systematic observation of the school setting, the classroom setting, the unfolding multimodal autobiography program, instruction and interactions with students, and student interactions with instructors, one another, and the curriculum. Besides capturing the classroom activity in our individual field notes, both Co-PIs will reflect upon the daily observations and share the descriptive, analytical, and methodological notes with one another at least once a week. Our field notes will be augmented by audio taped classroom interactions (both large and small groups). In our transcriptions, we will bracket and highlight comments and utterances from those students who do not want to participate in the study; thus, when we write up the data, we will know not to use that material.

Interviews. The Co-PIs will conduct an audio taped, open-ended interview with the classroom teacher at the beginning of the unit, gathering her background/demographic data, her perceptions of her students, the school, her class, her teaching, and the new unit. We will also conduct audio taped, open-ended interviews with the teacher at the end of the unit and again after the gallery showing of the students’ work. Along the way, we will ask the teacher opportunistic “one-shot” questions relating to what we observe during class or through reading student work. We will conduct short, audio taped interviews with the Visiting Experts (SAG Trainer, Writer, Photographer, Journalist, and Digital Storyteller) to get background/demographic information, opinions about the program and how it is being conducted, and their reactions to student work. Since the scope of this study is limited to only one classroom and 30 students, we intend to conduct short, audio taped, open ended interviews with all participants who give consent to gather background/demographic data, their opinions regarding school in general, the subject of English, the program in general, and their own work on the program. Additionally, we will ask students one-shot questions relating to what they are doing, what we observed, or their work on the program.

Artifact Collection. We will collect and copy all consenting participants’ work, including written work, photographs, audio tapes, and other work relating to the program. We will collect the various drafts of the programs on an ongoing basis in order to analyze performance over the course of the program. Both PIs will also save final versions of participating students’ written and digital stories.

Assessments. Although this program will rely heavily upon the thick descriptions gained from our immersion in the classroom and analytic lenses throughout the length of the program, we will collect two different pre- and post-program assessments to help us gauge students’
attitudes toward writing and developing writing skills. We will use the Kear, Coffman, McKenna, and Ambrosio’s (2000) Writing Attitudes Survey, which has been normed for grades 1-12. We will also administer a timed writing assessment, similar to what participants will see on the Alabama Direct Assessment of Writing, to gauge changes in their writing ability over the course of the program.

Data Analysis

Data analysis will begin early in the data collection period as we pour over our own and one another’s field notes, transcribed audio tapes of classroom interactions, interview data, and student artifacts, looking for initial themes related to our research questions. Each PI will type up her field notes on a weekly basis and use NVIVO to conduct independent open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). When we find differences in our perceptions of what is happening in the classroom, we will go back to the field and ask clarifying questions and conduct member checks. Initial passes through the data will help guide our daily observations as we try to confirm or disconfirm emerging patterns. If different patterns emerge between the two PIs then we will prioritize what patterns best answer our original research questions or diverge from the questions, but illuminate some unexpected aspect of this program.

Once all data have been transcribed, read over, and preliminarily coded, the two PIs will come together to agree upon a coding scheme for the data based upon their initial passes through the data. Once we’ve agreed upon a coding scheme, we will each code a series of data samples independently, and then we will discuss disagreements, altering our coding scheme as necessary. We will triangulate the data across data sources and check with the teacher and students to make sure that the coding system makes sense to them.

If we only look at students’ finished programs, then we will miss what is often obscured in the process of narrating a life. We will have to play out the irreducible tension between letting participants’ stories speak for themselves and intruding our own authorial voices, never privileging our stories over theirs but letting readers see both. This is a key tension in any narrative inquiry. Czarniawska (2007) writes, there are “challenges posed by an ambition of writing about polyphonic and heteroglossic organizations in ways that don't diminish the weight of the original voices from the field yet give an author the opportunity to create some added meaning” (p. 397). We will also locate particular moments of pedagogy and write from the classroom experiences, choosing a small number of final programs (from participating students) and interpreting them using a narrative theory lens.

Risks and Benefits

Permission to complete the program and conduct research at CHS has been granted by the principal. In January, when the program begins, we will distribute consent and assent forms to the teacher, parents, students, and visiting experts. For students and their parents/guardians, we will make it clear that participation is the study is optional and will neither positively nor negatively affect their grade in the class or the level of support they will receive from the PIs, Teacher, and Visiting Experts. Visiting experts will be asked to provide their consent, since they will be in the classes when we create field notes and audio tape.

All students will complete the program for the class, but we will collect data only from those who choose to participate. We see no potential harm in participating in the study, but we
will warn students that their multimodal narratives will be on display at the school and gallery, and remind them that they can control the content. Participating in the school and art gallery showings is open to all students, whether they give consent to participate in the study or not. If we use data we collect at either showing, it will only be from those students who gave consent. The name of the school and the names of the students will be changed in our writing to protect their privacy, but we will warn students that if they allow us to use their work in our writing, then their faces may be recognized by others, especially if we utilize photographs they took as part of their program. Again, we will not include any representations of non-participating students. We will inform students that they may, at any time, choose not to participate in the study. All data will be kept in locked cabinets in the researchers’ offices for two years, at which time the data will be destroyed.

Nowhere are the ethical demands of educational research more apparent than in narrative inquiry in school settings, which is always highly relational. Writing about the ethical dilemmas she faced when representing her secondary English students in her scholarly writing, Appleman (2002) recounted a question one young man posed about his role in her research: “Are you makin’ me famous or makin’ me a fool?” This question will be central to how we choose to present the data, and we will make those choices transparent to our readers.
APPENDIX B

ISSUE-BASED OBSERVATION FORM FOR CASE STUDY
**ISSUE-BASED OBSERVATION FORM FOR CASE STUDY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observer:</th>
<th>School:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Time:</th>
<th>Time of write-up:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher: M F</td>
<td>Age: 25 35 50 65</td>
<td>Grade:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Experience: 0 - - - - M</td>
<td>Direct Instruction: L - - - - H</td>
<td># Students:</td>
<td>Subject:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Synopsis of lesson, activities: Comments on English education issues:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of room</th>
<th>Pedagogic orientation</th>
<th>Teacher aim</th>
<th>Reference made to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning place L - - H</td>
<td>Textbook L - - - H</td>
<td>Didactic L - - - H</td>
<td>Writing 0 - - - M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English place L - - H</td>
<td>Stdzd testing L - - - H</td>
<td>Heuristic L - - - H</td>
<td>Technology 0 - - - M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition L - - H</td>
<td>Prob solving L - - - H</td>
<td>Philetic L - - - H</td>
<td>Ethics, relig 0 - - - M</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

from Stake, R.E. (1995). *The art of case study research* (p. 50)
APPENDIX C

DATA GATHERING PLAN
DATA GATHERING PLAN

I. ANTICIPATION

• Review or discover what is expected at the outset in the way of a case study.
• Consider the questions, hypotheses, or issues already raised.
• Read some case study literature, both methodological and exemplary.
• Look for one or more studies possibly to use as a model.
• Identify the “case.” Was it prescribed, selected to represent, or merely convenient?
• Define the boundaries of the case (or cases) as they appear in advance.
• Anticipate key problems, events, attributes, spaces, persons, vital signs.
• Consider possible audiences for preliminary and final reportings.
• Form initial plan of action, including definition of role of observer on site.

II. FIRST VISIT

• Arrange preliminary access, negotiate plan of action, arrange regular access.
• Write a formal agreement indicating obligations for observer and for host.
• Refine access rules with people involved, including faculty, administrators, etc.
• Discuss real or potential costs to hosts, including opportunity costs.
• Discuss arrangements for maintaining confidentiality of data, sources, reports.
• Discuss need for persons to review drafts to validate observations, descriptions.
• Discuss publicity to be given during and following the study.
• Identify information and services, if any, to be offered hosts.
• Review plan of action, observer’s role, case boundaries, issues, as needed.

III. FURTHER PREPARATION FOR OBSERVATION

• Make preliminary observations of activities. Use other sites for tryouts?
• Allocate resources to alternative spaces, persons, methods, issues, phases, etc.
• Identify informants and sources of particular data.
• Select or develop instruments or standardized procedures, if any.
• Work out record-keeping system, files, tapes; coding system; protected storage.
• Rework priorities for attributes, problems, events, audiences, etc.

IV. FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

• Reconsider issues or other theoretical structure to guide the data gathering.
• Learn what audience members know, what they want to come to understand.
• Sketch plan for final report and dissemination of findings.
• Identify the possible “multiple realities,” how people see things differently.
• Allocate attention to different viewpoints, conceptualizations.
V. GATHER DATA, VALIDATE DATA

- Make observations, interview, debrief informants, gather logs, use surveys, etc.
- Keep records of inquiry arrangements and activities.
- Select vignettes, special testimonies, illustrations.
- Classify raw data; begin interpretations.
- Redefine issues, case boundaries, renegotiate arrangements with hosts, as needed.
- Gather additional data, replicating or triangulating, to validate key observations.

VI. ANALYSIS OF DATA

- Review raw data under various possible interpretations.
- Search for patterns of data (whether or not indicated by the issues).
- Seek linkages between program arrangements, activities, and outcomes.
- Draw tentative conclusions, organize according to issues, and organize final report.
- Review data, gather new data, deliberately seek disconfirmation of findings.

VII. PROVIDING AUDIENCE OPPORTUNITY FOR UNDERSTANDING

- Describe extensively the setting within which the activity occurred.
- Consider the report as a story; look for ways in which the story is incomplete.
- Draft reports and reproduce materials for audience use.
- Try them out on representative members of audience groups.
- Help reader discern typicality and relevance of situation as base for generalization.
- Revise and disseminate reports and materials. Talk to people.
APPENDIX D

CHECKLIST FOR RATING A CASE STUDY PROPOSAL
CHECKLIST FOR RATING A CASE STUDY PROPOSAL

I. Communication

   A. Clarity: Does the proposal read well?
   B. Integrity: Do its pieces fit together?
   C. Attractiveness: Does it pique the reader’s interest?

II. Content

   A. The Case: Is the case adequately defined?
   B. The Issues: Are major research questions identified?
   C. Data Resource: Are sufficient data sources identified?

III. Method

   A. Case Selection: Is the selection plan reasonable?
   B. Data Gathering: Are data-gathering activities outlined?
   C. Validation: Is the need and opportunity for triangulation indicated?

IV. Practicality

   A. Access: Are arrangements for start-up anticipated?
   B. Confidentiality: Is there sensitivity to protection of people?
   C. Cost: Are time and resource estimates reasonable?

from Stake, R.E. (1995). The art of case study research (pp. 52-54).
APPENDIX E

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) What is the name you were given at birth?

2) What do you prefer that people call you?

3) What did you decide upon for your pseudonym?

4) When is your birthday? Where were you born?

5) How old are you now?

6) How many siblings (brother and sisters) do you have?

7) What is your favorite subject in school?

8) How would describe your English class?

9) How is this year’s English class different from last year’s?

10) What do you think about the creative writing program?

11) What are you likes/dislikes about it?

12) What has been your favorite writing?

13) Are you excited about finishing the book?

14) Do you have a computer at home?

15) Has having/not having a computer at home made a difference in how much you’ve been able to get done at school?

16) Have the university teachers been helpful in your writing experience?

17) In what ways do you consider them the most helpful/least helpful?

18) Do you want to continue some kind of personal writing on your own (like in a diary or journal) after the creative writing program is over?
APPENDIX F

UNIVERSITY INSTRUCTORS’ INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
UNIVERSITY INSTRUCTORS’ INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) To what extent was the creative writing program what you expected it to be?
   a) How was it different from what you expected?
   b) To what extent did the things you were concerned about before the program come true?
      i) Which things came true?
      ii) Which things did not come true?

2) How did the program affect you personally?

3) In what ways do you think the program helped the students?

4) In what ways did the outcome of the program exceed your expectations?

5) What kinds of things about the program failed to meet what you had hoped for?

6) Do you have plans to pursue a second program similar to this one? If so, when? If not, why?
   a) What kind of changes will you make before you implement the program again?

7) What kind of unforeseen circumstances added to or detracted from the success of the program?

8) Did the element of students’ having/not having computer skills create problems? If so, what kind?

8) In what ways did students’ social/cultural backgrounds shape the program?

9) Specifically, the week you were both gone (last week of March) Mrs. Claret took the students to the computer lab that Tuesday through Friday. On April 20th, when you brought students copies of what they had written thus far, some were upset because what they had done the week you were gone was not printed out. What happened?
APPENDIX G

EXPLORE YOUR OWN LIFE WORKSHEETS
An autobiography is the story of a person written by that person. A memoir is a narrative composed from personal experiences. Both autobiography and memoir can be chronological, arranged according to the order of time, or topical, arranged by topics. Write at least a paragraph on the following topics:

1. **Physical description** (what color are your eyes, how tall are you, etc.)
2. **Personality** (describe traits, such as: patient, assertive, calm, aggressive, competitive, organized, responsible, picky, messy, etc.)
3. **Values** (What do you value in life? Family, friends, education, a good job? Why?)
4. **Likes and dislikes** and why?

Write description of your family members (mother, father, sister(s), brother(s), grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, whomever you want to include). If you have a small family, you can write about your neighbors, friends, or other important people in your life. Write about their personalities. What makes them happy and unhappy? How do they act? How are they like or unlike you? How do they describe you? Did they do something extra special for you? What is the most fun experience you had with them?

**MOTHER:**
**FATHER:**
**SISTER(S):**
**BROTHER(S):**
**GRANDPARENTS:**
**AUNTS:**
**UNCLES:**
**COUSINS:**
**CLOSE FAMILY FRIENDS:**
Friends

What is your definition of a friend?
Who are your friends?
Why are they your friends?
Think of people older than you are and younger than you are who are your friends.
Do you have friends who are relatives?
In the space below, write about a friend and the relationship you have with that friend.
Can you remember the first time you met this friend?
What does this friendship add to your life?
APPENDIX H

SONG LYRICS
SONG LYRICS

You and Your Racist Friend
By They Might Be Giants

This is where the party ends
I can’t stand here listening to you
And your racist friend
I know politics bore you
But I feel like a hypocrite talking to you
And your racist friend

It was the loveliest party that I’ve ever attended
If anything was broken I’m sure it could be mended
My head can’t tolerate this bobbing and pretending
Listen to some bullet-head and the madness that he’s saying

This is where the party ends
I’ll just sit here wondering how you
Can stand by your racist friend
I know politics bore you
But I feel like a hypocrite talking to you
You and your racist friend

Out from the kitchen to the bedroom to the hallway
Your friend apologizes, he could see it my way
He let the contents of the bottle do the thinking
Can’t shake the devils hand and say you’re only kidding

This is where the party ends
I’ll just sit here wondering how you
Can stand by your racist friend
I know politics bore you
But I feel like a hypocrite talking to you
You and your racist friend
LITERARY EXCERPTS

“My Name” ~Excerpt from The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.

It was my great-grandmother’s name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you’re born female—but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong.

My great-grandmother. I would’ve liked to have known her, a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn’t marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That’s the way he did it.

And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn’t be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window.

At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as sister’s name—Magdalena—which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza.

I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do.

~Excerpt from Thirteen Years of School, p. 126

I do not particularly enjoy school. This being my final year of high school has let me appreciate it more so than I had before. This final year has been my best, but does not make me nostalgic for past years. Of course, I am not the only one who would feel this way, not many children would be saddened if there were a few more snow days or if a meteor were to have it’s way with the school. In my younger years I was surely the most vocal in my apprehension against school.

In a piece very similar to this, I had written out the injustices of school. I had no personal vendettas against any teacher or student (although I was very cynical about the administration) but just a general dislike of the idea of school. Looking back, I can narrow my dislike to a more specific feeling—nothing made me feel good about myself. I do not see it as the school’s responsibility to make me feel good, but it would have helped. I have always made great grades, fantastic grades, but I found early on that grades were devoid of significance. What does it really say about me as a person when I ace a program? Have I progressed as a person? Have I progressed as a person? Have I accomplished anything outside the system itself? I would say ”No” to these rhetorical questions—I really don’t see how there is any major influence on my real life when I accomplish something in school.—James, Clover, SC
~Excerpt from *Thirteen Years of School*, p. 126

My favorite year of school was kindergarten. Those were the days when my biggest problem was a crayon breaking. My teacher was Mrs. ____ and she was the greatest. She was always patient. I think it was mainly because she loved children. I liked her the best because she showed she cared and did things like give me a hug whenever I needed one. This was also my best year of school because there were so many crafts that we could do. I remember one that I did around Thanksgiving. We made a baby out of paper and put it into a paper papoose that actually tied to my back. I wore that thing for weeks. I learned all the fundamentals that year and they are the basis for my entire career as a student.—Tansy, Merritt Island, FL.

~Excerpt from *Thirteen Years of School*, p. 139

For most people, the four years of high school are the most exciting, dramatic, eventful, and emotion filled years of their lives. For some, a daily soap opera revolving around them occurs daily and the only salvation comes from the feeding off of the sympathy of others. There are a select few who are able to see past the drama, not many. Friends and lovers come and go, for some more than others. Some kids are always at the wrong end of a practical joke while others always seem to be on top. In the end, high school doesn’t reflect the person you are or who you will become, that is, unless you let it dictate you. The playing field evens out in the future and whether you were seen as the creepy outcast or the homecoming queen bears no weight on your success. Life is what you make it, save the drama.—Ryan Amesbury, MA

~Excerpt from *Thirteen Years of School*, p. 139

I don’t want to graduate. I want to go back, start over, keep in touch with all of my friends. When I think of things that have happened over the 13 years that I have been in the school system, there are only a few things I would change. There are times in my life when I wish I would have thought more or put more effort in to it. But when I look at how it turned out, I don’t mind how it is now.

One thing that I wish I could change is the way I did my homework, or rather did not do my homework. School would have been so much easier if I had just done the homework. Instead it was always, “I’ll do later,” or “I don’t really feel like doing it.” Now I realize that life would be easier with better grades and I wouldn’t have had so much stress. I am definitely telling my kids to just do the homework so that they pass their classes.

The one thing that I definitely would not change would be my choice to take auto shop in high school. The reason that I wouldn’t change this is that has developed into my future. If I had not taken this class in high school, I probably would not have picked it for my career. I don’t really know where I would be without the class, my whole day revolves around it and it’s kind of what I am going to do with the rest of my life.—Tyler, Hartford, WI
If I could change the world I’d get rid of peanut butter, Band-Aids, and five-dollar bills. I know this sounds like a weird list, but I got my reasons.

First, I’d get rid of peanut butter. When I was little, peanut butter and jelly was my favorite kind of sandwich. Mama would fix it as a special treat and it always made my lunch box smell so good. But Mama left and the peanut butter stayed. We get it free, so there’s jars of it sitting around. Sometimes that’s all there is. It sticks to my teeth and it seems like it sticks my bones together—it always makes me feel clogged up.

I’d also get rid of Band-Aids—for two reasons. One, they’re beige. They say on the box, “skin tone” is the color of the bandages inside. Whose skin? Not mine! So I HATE wearing Band-Aids because they’re so noticeable and people always say, “How’d you get that cut, or that bruise, or those stitches?” And I always have to make up a reason about how I hurt myself. When Andy came back to school after the accident, he was wearing a bunch of Band-Aids. At least it took the attention away from me for a while. But I’d still eliminate Band-Aids—at least beige ones.

Finally, I’d get rid of five-dollar bills. With a five-dollar bill, somebody’s stepfather can buy a bottle of whiskey, a nickel bag of pot, or a rock of crack. He smokes it, or drinks it, and goes home and knocks his kids around, or his wife (before she got sick of it and left). He makes his kids wish they could leave. The next morning he doesn’t even remember what he did. With a five-dollar bill, Andy and the guys bought a six-pack of beer. They ended up buying five dollars worth of death. It seems like all a five spot can do is buy trouble, so I’d get rid of five-dollar bills.

So, to make MY world better, I’d get rid of peanut butter, Band-Aids, and five-dollar bills.
APPENDIX J

COMPUTER LAB DIRECTIONS
Agenda for the day:

FIRST, type up the twelve sections in Chapter 1: All About Me. If you want to write about something other than the topic given, you may easily REPLACE it with something you would like to write about. You need to end up with 12 sections in the first part.

- Family Story
- Father’s Story
- Mother’s Story
- Self Description
- My Brothers and Sisters
- Accidents and Scars
- Accomplishments
- Family Traditions
- The World of Work (What do your family members do for a living? What do you want to do for a living?)
- Heirlooms (important items passed down in your family—family Bible, favorite recipe, values)
- Friends
- Pets

SECOND, type the six sections in Chapter 2. If you want to write about something other than the topic given, you may easily REPLACE it with something you would like to write about.

- Family Gatherings and Reunions
- Vacations
- Weddings
- Religious Events
- School Events
- My Future and Legacy

THIRD, type the 4 sections in Chapter 3: In My Free Time. If you want to write about something other than the topic given, you may easily REPLACE it with something you would like to write about.

- Extra-Curricular Activities
- Most Memorable Moment
- My Room
- Music Reviews (or book reviews, video game reviews, movie reviews—you choose!)

FOURTH,

- Adding pictures to your text
- Adding poems from your poetry booklet (ask us how to insert a new section!)
- Drawing your family tree by hand or making one electronically
- Writing a title to your book
- Writing a brief introduction to your book
- Completing more music reviews or book reviews