

# Gifted Children's Relationships With Writing

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## Abstract

This collective case study represents 10 gifted children's relationships with writing. The construct "relationship with writing" includes children's influences, goals, values, identity, and emotions connected to writing. Overall, these students' relationships with writing can be described as creative, responsible, and mimetic. Students benefit from intensive home enrichment. They have identities as "good students," and these identities are compatible with efficient work habits, intrinsic motivation, and mastery goals. Practical implications include the need for diverse and complex writing models that will help young writers begin the transition from mini-c creativity to more advanced writing, as well as the need to provide more challenging revision tasks.

## Keywords

writing, domains of talent, passion, phenomenology, creativity, gifted

Peter Elbow, the distinguished writing teacher and theorist, once noted that reading is often privileged over writing in elementary schools. Yet writing both enriches reading skills and provides a primary motivation for learning to read. "Reading asks, 'What did *they* have to say?' whereas writing asks, 'What do *you* have to say?'" Reading is consumption; writing is production" (Elbow, 2004, p. 10). When teachers consider that writing proficiency is not primarily judged by spelling, punctuation, or even legibility, but by creativity and productivity, they understand that writing talent can be seen in young children. Elbow (1998), Calkins (1983), Graves (1983), and others have worked to bring writing instruction to the forefront as a tool for learning. However, in recent years, the study of children's writing has declined, perhaps because of the increased interest in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) areas or because writing skills are difficult to assess using computer-graded

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or multiple-choice assessment. Furthermore, the focused study of writing *talent* in children is still emerging. Writing is a domain-specific talent that is a product of the interaction between the individual and the field of study; if teachers are to be better able to identify and foster writing talent, it is helpful for them to understand this interaction.

## Theoretical Framework: Talent as Domain Specific

Feldman's (1997) theory of nonuniversal development is an attempt to resolve the tension between conceptions of giftedness as generalized and as specific by placing abilities on a continuum from universal (which all healthy people will develop naturally) to discipline specific (which require the support and structure of a field of study to develop). Writing is discipline specific, and writing talent is a function of the relationship between the individual and the domain. Personality factors associated with writing talent include depression, mania, resilience (Kohányi, 2005), risk taking, stubbornness, persistence (Piirto, 1992), and childhood solitude (Gallo, 1994). Contextual factors include precocious and voracious reading (Piirto, 2002) and uninspiring writing instruction experiences in childhood (Freeman, 1979; Goertzel, Goertzel, & Goertzel, 1978). Questions about the interaction between individual personality traits or aptitudes and educational contexts include issues of values, goals, and emotions in relation to writing. The construct of *relationship* provides an overarching structure for this study in an attempt to draw attention to the "why" of writing talent development, because it is the answer to "Why write?" that fuels the development of how to write. Further explication of writing talent as a relationship between the individual and the domain can be found in my study of adolescent writing talent (Olthouse, 2012). The current study extends my earlier framework to an examination of younger writers.

## Literature Review: Writing Talent in Children

Feldman presented a case study of a precocious writer in his 1986 study of child prodigies; however, he noted that prodigious writing is rare because "the field itself has few organized supports of strategies for instruction in the craft" and that "children normally lack the kind of experience, insight, and understanding that writers are expected to convey in their works" (p. 44). Piirto (1998, 1992, 2002) presented evidence of precocious writing in the biographies of eminent authors and in her own work with children and young adults. She contended that the phenomenon of children with writing talent equal to that of skilled adults was not as uncommon as previously thought, and that talented children's writing displayed a unique set of characteristics, ranging from the use of paradox to sense of humor. These characteristics were evident in the writings of Geoffrey, who was the subject of a longitudinal case study led by Edmunds (A. L. Edmunds & Edmunds, 2004; Edmunds & Noel, 2003; Noel & Edmunds, 2006). Geoffrey's childhood writings often mixed advanced vocabulary, acute sensitivity, invented language, and reinterpretations of abstractions (such as physics and

philosophy). Studies of talented adolescent writers indicated that these writers were intrinsically motivated and experienced tension in their adolescent years between their penchant for creativity and the high school emphasis on standardized academic writing (Garrett & Moltzen, 2011; Olthouse, 2012).

Contextual factors that positively influenced children's writing achievement included maternal education level (Hooper, Roberts, Nelson, Zeisel, & Kasambira Fannin, 2010) and statistically significant writing interventions such as self-regulated strategy development, peer collaboration, and teacher feedback (Graham, McKeown, Kiuhare, & Harris, 2012). Students in schools where writing achievement was high received a balance of holistic and skills-based instruction (Pressley, Mohan, Raphael, & Fingeret, 2007). Although this literature on children's writing achievement gives some clues as to factors that result in writing talent, these researchers often examined composite student groups rather than depicting unique qualities of gifted children's writing or talented child writers. Noel and Edmunds (2006) contended that the main reason for the lack of research in youth writing talent is that writing is typically perceived by educators and researchers as the vehicle by which gifted children demonstrate their other talents; writing is not considered the *talent*. Plucker and Barab (2005) stated that "researchers of precocious talent development face a significant problem because they lack a major theory that explains how specific instructional contexts interact with students' precocious abilities and dispositions to produce domain-specific learning outcomes (p. 212)." The current study is one attempt to build this knowledge base.

## Method

This collective case study (Stake, 1995) of writing talent in children is one of three in a cross-sectional phenomenological investigation of writing talent (in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood). In each collective case study, my intent is to describe the phenomenon "relationship with writing" from the writer's perspectives. In reviewing case studies in gifted education, Mendaglio (2003) described features of exemplary case studies; they address the reasoning process and interplay between various aspects of study design, taking on another's perspective, and awareness of one's own perspective. They also avoid generalizing to a population or making causal statements apart from context (Coleman, Guo, & Dabbs, 2007).

### *Selection of Participants*

I selected 10 rising third- through sixth-grade children for participation in the study. All of the children met the following criteria: a 3.5 average grade point average (GPA) for the school year in language arts, a writing sample that I determined to represent achievement in the top 10% of age peers (based on my experience in teaching gifted and elementary school writers), and a strong motivation to write as evidenced by the desire to spend summer vacation in a writing workshop. In addition, 9 of the 10 children were enrolled in a public school gifted program (denoted by an IQ in the range of

125-130 and high academic achievement in the 95th percentile in at least one subject area). The one student who was not in the gifted program had not yet been assessed. These children were not highly precocious writers when compared with Edmund's longitudinal single-subject case study, but they were gifted children who evidenced potential specifically in language arts. I was not the students' teacher at the writing camp, but I assisted the teachers and conducted observations for this study.

### *Description of Context*

The writing workshops were classes of 10 to 15 students housed in the computer lab at a large rural state's public university education building. Many of the participating children had parents whose professional lives were connected in some way with the university; socioeconomic diversity was less common at this camp than ethnic diversity. The creative writing workshop ran for 3 hrs each morning for five mornings. Some of the children were also enrolled in the afternoon journalism workshop that ran for 3 hrs each afternoon for five afternoons. The teachers were local gifted education teachers who had completed courses in gifted education at the master's level. The teachers were given the direction to build their own curriculum characterized by accelerated learning goals, critical thinking, and creativity. Workshops were writing intensive, followed a process approach, and utilized technologies such as Microsoft Word, Microsoft Publisher, Kidblog, and Storybird.com.

### *Data Collection*

Although the other two collective case studies in this investigation focused mainly on three-part, semistructured phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2006), I found it necessary to modify and diversify data collection in this study to accommodate for the age and attention span of young children. First, I simplified the interview questions and shortened interviews from 2.5 hr to 40 min. In accord with recommendations about conducting interview research with children, my research assistant and I allowed a period of free discussion before the interview, discussed the purpose of the interview and confidentiality paperwork in kid-friendly terms (Cameron, 2005; Larsson & Lamb, 2009), and we also reminded students that they could pass on questions they did not want to answer. Considering children may have difficulty answering more abstract questions (Doverborg & Pramling, 1993), we phrased our questions as concretely as possible, and when asking the more challenging question, "What is a metaphor depicting your relationship with writing?" we gave example metaphors and rephrased the question as an open-ended simile "Writing and I are like \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_."

Because the interview time was shortened, I also included observational data. My research assistant engaged in participant observation, and while we interacted with children in the course of teaching, we took inconspicuous notes using an iPad. Notes consisted of behavioral observations, interpretative statements, student initials, and approximate time. During the morning session, while my assistant was teaching the class, I interacted with students and took observational notes for all 15 hr. During the

journalism class, a different teacher was teaching the class and both my assistant and I observed and independently took notes.

Data included the writing samples students submitted with their workshop applications as well as the products students created in camp. Students in the creative writing workshops wrote a story (ranging in length from 300 to 3,800 words) that was a reinterpretation of a classic tale from the villain's perspective. Students in the afternoon workshops wrote one individually authored and one collaboratively authored newspaper article. Students also drew pictures of the role they believed writing would play in their lives as adults.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began with basic organizational coding. I grouped the observational notes according to student observed and grouped interview data according to questions asked. I coded interviews according to more abstract themes that emerged in a previous study of writing talent; these themes included goals, values, emotions, and identity. Next, my analysis followed a modified form of that described by Moustakas (1994). I looked at each child's individual collection of data to profile that student in an "individual textual description"; this is a description of the individual's relationship with writing. I repeated this process with each student in turn, completing one in-case analysis before going on to the next.

As I wrote the eight in-case analyses, I kept a journal of possible cross-case themes. I used analytic induction to develop cross-case themes (Glaser, 1969) and modified the cross-case themes as I finished each additional case. These cross-case themes were all subthemes under the categories of goals, values, emotions, and identity. I did not arrive at a final list of cross-case themes until I had completed all 10 of the in-case analyses. Finally, I wrote a cross-case analysis that described how these talented young writers related to their craft. I completed the in-case analyses before cross-case analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1994) to avoid the situation in which cross-case analyses become generalizations that relate to no case.

### **In-Case Analyses**

#### **Susie**

Susie was entering the third grade, having missed the window for talented and gifted program (TAG) nomination and assessment, although her school achievement and writing samples demonstrated high verbal ability. She bubbled with enthusiasm, often exclaimed in surprise or delight as she wrote both independently and collaboratively, and confidently volunteered to share her work or her opinions whenever the teacher called for participants. Susie's camp writing showed progress from her original writing sample. She demonstrated productivity by writing a 300-word story. Although her story proceeded as a straightforward retelling of plot events, Susie used multiple paragraphs to denote shifts in setting from the beginning to the end of the story. One of the

challenges of the assignment was to make the villain in the story more sympathetic, and Susie did attempt this by adding a scene to the traditional Disney version of *Cinderella*: “Come on lets go now said the step sisters. Hold your horses said the step-mother. ‘But’ said the step sisters. No buts we are shopping for Cinderella remember her birthday is next week said the stepmother.” In this scene, Susie showed the ability to create humorous and realistic dialogue. Susie’s writing followed some predictable “girly” themes such as romance and fancy clothes, but in her interview she insisted that she was “done with love stories” (Susie, individual interview, June 27, 2012). Overall, Susie’s relationship with writing was quite adventurous as she was excited to take on challenges and persist through difficulties and viewed writing as an enormously fun activity.

### Rebecca

Rebecca was a rising third-grade student who especially liked combining silly or fantastic ideas such as a blue monkey or animals wearing clothes. She wrote series books at home in her spare time and received lots of encouragement and feedback at school. In observations, Rebecca was seen to be very careful and somewhat hesitant. She was a slow typist and often stopped to ask for reassurance or guidance from the teacher. In her retelling of *The Incredibles* movie from Syndrome’s view, she wrote a four-paragraph story. In each paragraph, she described a scene of the movie but added a convincing reinterpretation of the scene so that the villain, Syndrome, would seem sympathetic:

Then I thought it would be a good idea to make a robot that helps parents but it functioned wrong it started acting like a robot monster And since I left they got away I told them it was dangerous out here. They tried to ruin my robot! It’s a good thing I had the remote but just as I was about to get it under control when Frozen came sliding across ice and was freezing my robot.

Even though Rebecca was one of the youngest students, she was one of the most successful at creating a convincing rationale for her villain’s bad behavior. Rebecca’s relationship with writing could be described as both careful and creative.

### Leah

Leah was a rising fourth-grade student with a quiet demeanor who seemed uncertain of the “correct” answers to give in the interview. Her writing sample was well organized and to the point, with little risk taking. Leah enjoyed writing from the villain’s perspective because it was a bit more challenging and creative than some of her school assignments. Leah’s story from workshop showed that she was learning to add visual description, and although she did not seem to add this detail selectively, she did demonstrate creativity in her ability to shift into the first-person narrative, the use of metaphor, and poetic rhythm. For example, she described the woods where Snow White fled as “In the deepest part of the woods where the raccoons and dragons hid and no

good thoughts came to your head.” Leah’s wicked queen from *Snow White* remained deliciously evil until a surprise ending that makes the villain a bit more sympathetic: “I finally married someone and had 3 little girls because after that lesson I learned a LOT” (Leah, camp story, June 22, 2012). Leah’s relationship with writing was full of potential and influenced by the challenge level of the assignments presented to her.

### Abram

Abram was a rising fourth-grade student in TAG who submitted a story about a NASA spacecraft that was ambushed in flight. His writing included suspense created through visual details and the use of adverbs and adjectives: “The control tower shouted the countdown excitedly: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Ignition! Blazing, red, hot fire shot out of the huge white engines.” His final story included some sensory description, and explanation for why the villain of the story, Voldemort, should be given sympathy. Most of the story was rather rushed action, as he tried to fit the entire *Harry Potter* saga into one page. Abram did extensive writing in school, and at home he was working on a book about the Civil War. Abram wanted to be an author when he grew up, and worked best with large tasks broken up into specific shorter goals. Abram brought creativity and a sense of responsibility to his relationship with writing.

### David

David was a rising fifth-grade student with a good-natured sense of humor that often came into play in his writing and his interactions with other students. He described his relationship with writing as a “frenemy” (David, group interview, June 20, 2012) and in his drawing, he depicted himself happy because as an adult he would not have to write any more. Despite displaying mixed feelings about writing, David could focus for long time spans on a writing activity. He was social and liked to read and discuss others’ articles and participate in online commenting features. David had a talent for understanding the assignment and writing in a similar format. He was able to include dialogue, recognize alternate perspectives, and include a moral in his stories. He was able to write factual articles as well as fictional descriptions. When writing a sports article, he was able to adopt a conversational tone with intermittent sports jargon, such as “trade rumors” and “power rankings.” David’s relationship with writing was somewhat dependent on whether he found the topic interesting, as he did when he wrote about sports.

### Ethan

Ethan was a rising fifth-grade student whose initial writing sample was an invented interstellar ship captain’s log. His writing included scientific vocabulary and detailed description:

The ship also has plasma cannons for defense. Inside it has 3 radar devices, 10 computers, 1 supercomputer (5,000 computers), and a control room where they fly the ship. It was built for five people, two pilots, one navigator, and two other people.

Ethan's story for camp was a retelling of Obertr Skye's (2006) *Leven Thumps* series of books from the viewpoint of one of the main villains, Dearth. Ethan was very goal oriented and school focused, and his main reason for writing was to do well in school so he could become a scientist. Ethan's relationship with writing was positive and career oriented, but at times he said that he did not like writing when this seemed to be the socially acceptable thing to say.

## George

George was a rising fifth-grade student who submitted a two and a half page report on medieval knights with his camp admissions paperwork. Beyond showing great organizational skills and accurate details, George's paper showed the effort of his mother's grammar tutelage, with a correct use of "whomever" as well as compound and complex sentences. At camp, George wrote a 14-paragraph retelling of the first *Harry Potter* book from the perspective of Voldemort. In this excerpt, George created a narrator who was not necessarily a sympathetic villain, but a funny liar:

I got out just in time. Then, I looked down and there were one-thousand steps down. Unfortunately, the Imperious curse was wearing off of him. So I quickly put it back on him. After that, I felt like a thirty minute stair ride. When I finally got down, I almost had the Stone, and I could be immortal. But, right as I was about to get it, Mr. Scar head came to the rescue, and everyone thinks I hurt his head. "Oh, pour[sic] little Harry Potter, I hurt his head, uh, I mean, he hurt his head."

George's relationship with writing involved a fun, creative, responsible approach to writing.

## Abby

Abby was a rising fifth-grade student who wrote short stories complete with problems, solutions, dialogue, and first-person perspective. Abby's initial writing sample was written from the perspective of a golden retriever lamenting the want of opposable thumbs. In her story for camp, Abby provided a complex backstory for a cruel nanny to rationalize the development of her cruelty:

Miss Barmy's childhood memories are filled with unhappy thoughts. Her parents were rarely home but when they were they would be scolding or spanking someone. Miss Barmy is the oldest of her 18 siblings. Her parents always expected her to take care of every crabby child, give them food, keep them entertained, and while doing all that it was expected that she keep the house clean. Their ugly (Miss Barmy's parents had interesting tastes) house might be thought of as large to you because it was a 7 bedroom, 3 bathroom, kitchen, 2 dining rooms (1 cruddy one for the kids and 1 fancy dining room for the adults), and 1 living room house but it really wasn't for 18 kids (ages ranging from 12½ months to 18½) and 2 adults. Miss Barmy's parents didn't show it but they desperately wanted Miss Barmy to stay so she could take care of all their kids. Miss Barmy's parents

already forced her to take a year in between high school and college but now they didn't even want her going to college. Miss Barmy wanted to be a lawyer for child and family law but her parents were trying to convince to be a nanny so she could spend time with children every day. Miss Barmy knew they were just going to hire her and make her take care of her other siblings. Miss Barmy's had a plan her plan was that she would refuse to take care of her siblings more and more and she kept putting off leaving home until most of her siblings were grown when they were all grown she left home and her parents couldn't force her to take care of her siblings because they were too old. Miss Barmy succeeded in that part of her plan but she didn't have enough money to go to college so she ended up having to be a nanny just not for her siblings.

In her interview, Abby depicted writing as a free-spirited muse who visited with inspiration, sometimes disappeared (resulting in consternation), but was always sure to return. Abby's writing process focused on production, and one of her most pleasant writing experiences was working on an eight-page story for two years. She was able to make conceptual revisions based on feedback from her teacher and peers, but was a little confused about the difference between revision and editing. Abby's relationship with writing could be described as free spirited and creative.

## Janelle

Janelle was a rising sixth-grade student who demonstrated quiet, confident leadership skills. Janelle was very good at managing her time and finished her assignments early. She often used her extra time to transcribe or edit for younger students. She used humor in her stories and modeled her story after *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (Scieszka, Giamatti, & King, 1989). Most of her revisions consisted of adding detail and description. As the newspaper editor, Janelle was particular about meeting assigned requirements, such as length, formatting, editing, and citations. Janelle was very good on picking up on teacher expectation; she presented a very organized logical style of writing, but could use perhaps some more time to tackle creative risks, make mistakes, and address challenges (such as moral subtleties and abstract themes for stories). Janelle did not do a lot of writing on her own, and did not often do revision in school, but she enjoyed writing stories. She gave one of the most novel approaches to the metaphor exercise: "[Writing and I are like] water and food coloring, because at first I'm really bored, and then I get into it and stuff [like food coloring spreading gradually through water]" (Janelle, group interview, June 20, 2012). Janelle's relationship with writing was responsible, skilled, and efficient.

## Scarlet

Scarlet was entering the sixth grade, and as one of the older and more accomplished writers, she was a little advanced for the writing workshop. Unlike some of the writers, whose stories were tumbling over with plot events, Scarlet included many sensory details as well as inner thoughts and emotions in her writing, perhaps, at times being overly descriptive. Scarlet's interpretation of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) began,

### The Hunger Games: Caesar's Point of View

7:12 a.m.—I am on my treadmill and already sweating in my color-changing sweat suit. (It goes from purple to blue!) Today was the reaping . . . yay! I am Caesar Flickerman, the interviewer of the tributes, announcer of many things, and a trend-setter. The reaping is still going on, with the time difference and all. But at 8:00 Capitol Time (CT), they will be airing the whole thing. Who will the tributes be? Volunteers? Surely in 1, 2, and 4. Maybe in another district? But those are SO rare . . . it would be epic! I think to myself. I have a lot of thoughts, from body makeup to The Hunger Games.

Scarlet's 3,400-word story paints Caesar as funny and self-absorbed, going about his day excitedly preparing for a spectacle. Yet at the end of her story, she adds a scene that shows Caesar's change of heart:

I scream out loud, hoping for President Snow to hear, "DON'T KILL KATNISS EVERDEEN OR PEETA MELLARK! THEY ARE AWESOME PEOPLE AND DON'T DESERVE TO DIE!" I start pounding the floor and Rauey comes up to put me in bed. Dash climbs up next to me and I fall asleep with him tucked under me. I didn't do anything. I didn't mean for Katniss to be hurt!

Although she said she could have written more, Scarlet occasionally voluntarily took time from her writing to help younger students with typing or spelling. Scarlet's relationship with writing reminded me very much of some of the high school students I had spoken with in an earlier study. She was very invested in open, complex assignments that allowed for self-expression and she gave accurate criticism of her own writing. Scarlet's relationship with writing was highly intrinsic and creative.

## Findings

These 10 students' relationships with writing varied, and yet shared some common themes. These themes parallel an earlier study of adolescent writers, but the subthemes are unique to this study.

## Influences

Students experienced school influences on their writing skill development, and students shared an enjoyment of reading series adventure books. Although these two influences are common to many children, one unique influence that likely accelerated these students' talent development was intensive home enrichment.

Students received varying levels of writing practice and feedback in school, but they generally shared the experience of writing fiction to open-ended prompts. Older students practiced for computer-scored, state-mandated writing tests. Although children's school experiences varied, their teachers were not overly prescriptive. Leah described one way her teacher made writing fun in the elementary classroom:

And sometimes she also does art crafts after, like, to make pictures with our stories. As I was saying earlier, one time we wrote about a SCUBA-diving jellyfish, and I ended up writing about that. And I put that she had an uncle shark and an aunt pearl, and she had to go to a SCUBA-diving race. And then, with the picture, I put my hand for the jellyfish, and then we got to decorate it with all different things. (Leah, individual interview, June 25, 2012)

This open approach to writing combined with a variety of feedback (including both conceptual revisions and technical edits) may contribute to these students' positive relationships with writing.

Students were all readers, and many spoke of enjoying both nonfiction and fiction. Most prominent were series adventure-fantasy novels such as *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1999) and *Percy Jackson* (Riordan, 2011). Susie, a younger reader read the *Boxcar Children* (Warner, 1989), an older series with advanced vocabulary but themes appropriate for young readers; Scarlet read *The Hunger Games* series, which carries darker tones and more philosophical themes. Students' interests in popular series suggests that marketing and social influence weigh heavily in these students' choice of texts. Series books also encourage reading as a lifelong habit; students anticipate each new volume and learn to comprehend complex plot structures.

Finally, these students' parents viewed their children's educational enrichment as their responsibility. I use the word "intensive" to describe the home enrichment because the activities went beyond providing children with writing notebooks or library cards. George's mother offered advanced grammar lessons, Ethan's mother assigned extra homework, Abram's and Abby's parents encouraged their children to submit stories for publication, and of course, all parents paid US\$90 to enroll their children in each writing camp. Multiple students described traveling with parents to the Smithsonian museums in Washington, D.C. Even students who did not report this sort of intensive home enrichment usually did some form of reading and writing at home in addition to their in-school assignments. Although this extra practice no doubt contributed to students' advanced abilities, it is possible that this enrichment was provided in response to students' interests and abilities. By no means should these parents be characterized as pushing their children to learn things they were not ready to learn, a stereotype that is common to parents of gifted children (Alsop, 1997).

## Goals

To assess students' goals, I asked, "What are three reasons why you write?" I also asked students what problems they faced in their writing, and how they dealt with these problems. Similar to both adolescent and adult writers, these child writers expressed their goals in primarily intrinsic terms; goals included mastery and fun.

A mastery goal means that students were focused on improving their own performance. Students set goals for themselves in the area of productivity. For example, Abby commented, "I'd like to be able to make it longer" (Abby, individual interview, June 25, 2012). Most students were learning to add sensory detail to their plot-focused

stories, so this was a primary goal for students. Susie said that a good writer “shows the characters’ emotions and feelings, like if they’re sad, happy, mad, glad” and “to get better at writing, I will have to use more similes” (Susie, individual interview, June 27, 2012). Students also discussed technical skills such as eliminating errors in spelling and punctuation.

Although mastery goals are focused on improving one’s abilities, another intrinsic goal is to write because it is fun; students who described writing as fun connected this construct with freedom, eliminating boredom, and self-expression. For example, when Leah listed her three reasons for writing, she wrote, “because I like writing, because it calms me down, and it is fun” (Leah, individual interview, June 25, 2012).

Although students occasionally mentioned extrinsic goals such as pleasing teachers and parents or preparing for career success, intrinsic goals featured prominently in students’ interviews and in their behavior. Students set their own goals, and they requested more time to write rather than asking for a minimum word count or writing time. The classroom was often quiet for long stretches of time as children worked independently: “Room eerily quiet. Lots of typing and writing” (observational notes, June 18, 11:00 a.m.). Intrinsic motivation is important because it allows students to focus on personal goals, and some studies have linked it with creativity to be more creative (Amabile, 1983; Prabhu, Sutton, & Sauser, 2008).

## **Values**

Values are abstract nouns with positive connotations that help set priorities and direct actions. The first of two main values evidenced in the data was creativity. Creativity was reflected in students’ ability to adapt model stories and articles, add sensory description, write from the villain’s perspective, and in the use of humor (both in writing and in informal actions around the writing task). When writing collaboratively, students elaborated each other’s ideas to make them silly or extreme. For example, when students were collaboratively writing a courtroom defense scenario for a villain, a group of boys began with a defense of gangster Al Capone and were soon creating an elaborate alibi for him including a forged receipt from Five Guys restaurant, which students created with a scrap of notebook paper, laughing all the while (observational notes, June 20, 10:44 a.m.). In their interviews, students stressed the importance of creativity. Abram described writers as having “fresh ideas, ideas that no one else has” (Abram, individual interview, July 9, 2012). Rebecca used the word “crazy” to describe having unique ideas, and explained her choice of crazy by saying, “because I’m thinking of a bunch of weird things like purple goo and screaming dogs” (Rebecca, individual interview, July 9, 2012).

Students also valued responsibility. This was evident primarily in their behavior throughout the course of the workshop. We had very low incidence of even minor behavior problems such as boredom or distractibility during the weeklong camp, even from students who were writing for 6 hr a day. We also saw evidence of responsibility in the qualities of the students’ writing. Each student wrote a finished story with a beginning, middle, and end. Each student made revisions based on teacher and peer

feedback. In interviews, students emphasized responsibility through qualities such as persistence, practice, and efficiency. For example, Rebecca's advice to students who wanted to become writers was to

take a simple amount of time every day, like half an hour or an hour or something, and write for that amount time every day. And just keep doing that until you finish what you're trying to accomplish. Don't give up if something is just hard. Don't say, "I'm not doing this, it's too hard. I give up." Just keep at it. And maybe ask someone for help. (Rebecca, individual interview, July 9, 2012)

## Emotions

Students discussed times when they enjoyed writing and times when they did not enjoy writing. In the interviews and the observational data, students had very positive emotions toward writing. For example, George answered the question "How do you feel about the writing you do on your own?" with the response "I feel good. I feel like I keep learning stuff, and when I learn stuff, I like to write it down and express what I feel with it" (George, individual interview, July 2, 2012). Any negative feelings in regard to writing generally had to do with the conditions of the writing task, such as being required to write silently, to write in cursive, or to share writing of which they were not proud. However, students liked generating creative narratives, and in many cases, writing nonfiction as well. Students' feelings toward writing were generally uncomplicated and positive rather than conflicting and self-aware.

## Identity

According to Erikson's (1950) theory of psychosocial development, these children were in the developmental stage where competence is the goal. They needed to feel successful performing tasks and pursuing interests. Adult praise, direction, and modeling were the key to these students' development of competence. In addition, moral reasoning and gender identity influenced these gifted children's writings.

Modeling is a very effective form of writing instruction for gifted students, especially when compared with formula writing. However, modeling can be less effective when only one model is used, or when the model chosen is not complex enough. For example, children had vastly different products resulting from modeling a story after a Disney movie, *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*, or *The Hunger Games* trilogy. Many of the students at camp were modeling their stories after chapter books, but trying to fit the book into a few pages. This resulted at times in a litany of plot rather than emotion and description.

In addition, some of their original samples submitted seemed to be what I term *school genres*. School genre stories are modeled after simplified versions of more complex adult genres. They are the beginnings for learning genre: description, persuasion, and narrative. These stories generally do not diverge drastically from teacher expectations. Examples of school genres are a descriptive piece about growing a

school vegetable garden, and a folktale describing why the peacock has pretty feathers. These stories do not bear much connection to the current published young adult literature or nonfiction. Students who are invested in their identity as “good students” or “responsible students” may be hesitant to diverge from the teacher’s models or expectations, even when this results in a more creative, more complex story.

We found that rewriting a story from the villain’s perspective was appropriately difficult for these children, given the challenge of taking the perspective of an unpopular character. The younger students characterized people in stories as good guys and bad guys. They had difficulty understanding situations in which someone is misjudged or is acting out of positive values that conflict with another character’s positive values. At this age, gender identity was also a factor that influenced students’ choice of topics and writing style to some degree. We saw this in some cases with the tendency of some of the boys to be adept at sports jargon whereas some of the girls liked to write about animals or princesses. It seems like there exists some opportunities in children’s writing instruction to encourage a more nuanced view of moral reasoning and gender identity, specifically by using model stories in which characters evince unconventional gender roles or work through conflicts with dialogue rather than with magic or violence.

## Discussion

These writers fit the research profile of successful child writers in many respects; they were intrinsically motivated, avid readers, and their writing included some of the characteristics listed by Piirto (1992) such as humor, visual imagery, and sophisticated syntax. In addition, rationalization and perspective taking were important elements of the creative writing project. In school, many of the students benefited from a combination of holistic and skills-based feedback. They were able to conceive of revision in positive, conceptual terms rather than merely the correction of surface-level errors. These children did not show evidence of mental illness or solitude, nor did they show evidence of tension with school assignments. It may be that elementary schools are nurturing places for young writers, or that gifted children who write are not the same individuals who grow up to be eminent authors.

These students’ relationships with writing can be described as creative, responsible, and mimetic. The apparent conflict between the terms *mimetic* and *creative* may be reconciled by the distinction some have made between big-C and little-c creativity (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007). Children delight in coming up with ideas that are new to them, and they like the freedom involved in making choices with what direction to take in a creative story. However, at this age, they may not have a good enough grasp of genre or theme to write pieces that would be considered creative from an adult perspective. Because these children were invested in their identity as responsible students, they were bound by the models and assignments they were given. This does not mean that children do not have the potential to write works adults would judge as creative. Certainly the longitudinal case study of Geoffrey includes writings that demonstrate considerable creativity. Such creativity was aided by Geoffrey’s advanced

skill levels and his broad range of reading interests. Most of the writers in this study followed a traditional genre structure and then made one or two creative changes to that structure, whereas Geoffrey's creativity was demonstrated in his ability to intermingle kid themes and interests with advanced formats and vocabulary throughout—in essence creating a new genre.

At this stage in writing development, the diversity and complexity of reading models and writing prompts are key in helping young writers reach their potential, in a similar way that above-level testing is key in diagnosing talented children's mathematics potential. Smith (2008) has proposed an effective technique for using models with children. Children read multiple stories from the same genre. Teachers choose models that are challenging for the children's developmental level; for example, Shakespeare is chosen for middle school students. The teacher and students discuss the characteristics of the genre. Then, when the children write their own stories, they address a variety of these characteristics. The writing process becomes a matter of solving a list of complex problems rather than just a stream of consciousness linking of ideas. Students also have "choice elements" to put in their stories, which allows for creativity.

The children in this study demonstrated an understanding that revision is about more than just correcting surface-level errors. Teachers can build on this advanced understanding of revision by asking students to rewrite the same piece, but with one significant change. For example, in writing fiction, students might rewrite the story from another point of view (as they did here), in another historical setting, in a different genre, or using a different dialect. Students can rework nonfiction pieces by arguing the opposing side after writing a persuasive piece, or by examining different facets of a complex issue (e.g., scientific, technological, and societal aspects of saving endangered animals). These exercises teach students the importance of revision, technical aspects of narrative and genre, as well as how to be more flexible in their writing.

## Conclusion

This study is one in a three-part cross-sectional phenomenological investigation of talented writers' relationships with writing. I have completed collective case studies with talented writers in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. In the future, I hope to contextualize the findings from these three studies with other scholars' examinations of creative writing expertise to develop a domain-specific theory of creative writing that answers the question, "How does the expression of creative writing talent change at each stage of development?" Such a theory would highlight the attributes to success that are not specifically cognitive—such as values, goals, emotions, and identity; the emphasis is just as much on the *why* of talent development as the *how*. Such cross-sectional phenomenological approaches could also be used to study many other domains.

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