UNSCHOOLING TEACHING PRACTICES AND COMMUNITY LITERACY

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Just because I'm black
Doesn't mean I'm dumb
Doesn't mean I'm ghetto
and Doesn't mean I wont
be successful
Ayana, age 14

Lets not judge by the
Color of our skin and focus
on the content of our character.
Allen, age 14

The city of Indianapolis, crossroads of America, cemented its status in December 2017 as a leading murder capitol in the United States: as National Public Radio put it, "It has been seven years since Indianapolis has had less homicides than the year before" (Daudelin n.p.). The Alliance for Educational Excellence issued a report in 2013 revealing that crime rates impact educational attainment nationally:

> [...I]ncreasing the male high school graduation rate by 5 percentage points [...] would decrease overall annual incidences of assault by nearly 60,000; larceny by more than 37,000; motor vehicle theft by more than 31,000; and burglaries by more than 17,000. It would also prevent nearly 1,300 murders, more than 3,800 occurrences of rape, and more than 1,500 robberies. (par.5)

In addition, Indiana holds one of the lowest educational rankings in the country—44th. Consequently, Indiana offers a growing voucher and charter school system, which has begun to take over the failing public schools (Faulk et al. 1).

In short, our students in the Indianapolis community are surrounded by violence, poverty, and low academic expectations, and summer programming and intervention have become critical steps in combatting achievement gaps and in helping to keep our young people "off the streets." In an effort to significantly reduce violent crime, for instance, the city of Indianapolis has allocated three million dollars for community engagement projects over multiple years. Such a stance helps to valorize programs like the Indiana Writers Center (IWC), a nonprofit community writing center in Indianapolis, and its summer Public Memoir Project for "at-risk" youth, where we both teach writing with an "unschooling" approach.[1]

"Unschooling," as we elaborate later, was originally conceived by John Holt and popularized by Mary Griffith as a resistance to institutionalization and standardization of students through education designed collaboratively by the learners rather than solely by the teachers. And we wish to be clear: "unschooling" is not equivalent to miseducation. As Geneva Smitherman explains in "Raciolinguistics, 'Mis-Education,' and Language Arts Teaching in the 21st Century," miseducation refers to remedial pedagogies that respond to difference, seeking to narrow disparities in "disadvantaged" or "culturally deprived" (in other words "at-risk") writers, the unfortunate result of which is a deficit model rooted in Black pathology focusing on "'good' grammar rather than good sense" (*Talkin and Testifyin*, 212). When educators focus on "cleaning up" superficial language "errors," they not only participate in sanitizing and whitewashing dialect but also underserve students by neglecting to teach powerful literacies of rhetorical knowledge and critical perspectives. Smitherman writes that "mis-educated children grow up to be mis-educated adults" (6). We agree, and we argue that, unlike miseducated writers, *unschooled* writers will learn to celebrate their identities and to apply critical interpretive perspectives to their world and to institutionalized education.

In the Public Memoir Project, we teach and model that it is key to like and respect students and to be a community writer with them as well as their advocate. Our goal is not only to teach young writers to write like writers, but also to make meaning and make sense of the memoirs they write, and of their lives. By writing and reading their words aloud, they learn how much they know and don't know about themselves and about each other.

In this article, we explore how unschooling teaching practices enrich community literacy programs. We first share about our Public Memoir Project and explain its framework design, next employ discourse analysis to interpret excerpts from our writers' memoirs, and finally arrive at implications regarding unschooling pedagogies for the teaching of writing.

A Situating Narrative

The day after the Zimmerman/Martin trial came down in 2013, Lyn was driving down Central Street to the summer day camp held at Indianapolis Public School #27, and there were protestors in the streets. The first she had ever witnessed in the community. And the protests continued in sync with the shootings and deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Philando Castle and, in the summer of 2020 in Indianapolis, Dreasjon Reed.

When Lyn walked into the workshop room after that first protest, the writers were quiet, sober, angry, looking at all of us with sudden distrust. Why wouldn't they? For the first time in years, Lyn just looked like another white face to them. Lyn knew that they had to write about this and asked them: "Tell me what it's like to be a young black boy or girl. Explain that to me in your writing." They sat there, and one young man spoke up, stood up, and said, "You have no idea how hard it is."

And Lyn acknowledged that, shaking her head. Lyn said, "You're right. I don't. I can write about how hard it is to grow up in poverty.

I can write about how hard it is to go to the worst school in the city. I can write about what it's like to have a son—who has a severe disability, who is mocked and bullied. I can write and tell you all about those hard things because I have stories to tell about them. But I don't know what it's like to be black and young and living in this city. I'll tell you my stories if you tell me yours." With that statement, they were back with Lyn. It remained so quiet. Even our very youngest writers had much to say.

When Michael walked into a workshop room filled with young black women and one young black man, he was uncomfortably aware, and not for the first time, of his white race, cismale sex and gender, and privileges associated with those identities. Another summer flirting with the fine line between pedagogy and imperialism, he thought, how should my voice "instruct" other voices to sound—even (and especially) with an "unschooling" objective?

As Christopher Worthman reminds us, "positional identities can develop unreflectively as one negotiates a self-in-practice" (49). He makes it a point to discuss his own whiteness and maleness as both position and privilege when working with Latinx and African American women writers. Considering our teacherly roles and their potential problematics, Worthman reminds us that, even if multiple perspectives can often enrich education, no teacher is free of learned and internalized oppressions as they (at the very least) physically, visually manifest and (re)present historical and systemic oppressions; Worthman advises us that—only when requested—we offer our perspectives as outsiders, the legitimacy of which our young writers (who are often women or young people of color, or both) can determine (50).

Similarly, Krista Radcliffe's acclaimed *Rhetorical Listening* offers a method of surmounting vexed contexts of gender and race with cross-cultural communication practices such as rhetorical listening, or a "conscious identification" of both privilege and oppression in networked writers. Privileged teachers of writing working with minoritized writers should "disidentify" or relinquish hold of purposeful or accidental preconceived stereotypes of both self and other. “Within this logic,” Radcliffe writes, “disidentifications are dependent upon previous identifications however faulty or stereotypical” (62). Such conscientiousness (and consequent interrogation) of privileged constructions and positions of race and gender are necessary.

Drawing from these insights on that day, Michael thought about how this doesn’t happen to him often enough—the exposure and (self-)surveillance of his whiteness—and certainly not nearly as often as it does to his fellow writers.

These sessions happened near the end of the summer camp in 2013, and we knew we needed to build upon this the next year. We shouldn’t require a hashtag to remind us that Black Lives Matter, but unfortunately that hashtag was well known, and we opted to build a memoir writing curriculum around it. Our writers would spend much of their summers in 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019 writing about how their black lives matter and stories of when someone or some institution tried to tell them their lives didn’t matter because they were black. We’ve excerpted these writers’ work from the past four summers to investigate our students’ burgeoning sense of agency through their written expression.

Conceptualization

The Indiana Writers Center addresses both the literary and literacy needs for community writers of all skill levels through storytelling practices, community outreach programs, and civic engagement. The Center believes that everyone has an important story to tell, and it’s the Center’s goal to help writers tell it. For example, each summer the Center extends its Public Memoir Project (a grant- and donor-funded outreach initiative that invites community members of all ages in Indiana to write and publish their stories) to students, ages 6-16, in summer learning programs. In this program for youth called Building a Rainbow, we use an “unschooling” approach to “teach” 200-300 “at-risk” students how to write their memoirs, ensuring they have a voice and an authentic platform for their voice in the publication of the collective city anthology, *I Remember: Indianapolis Youth Write About their Lives*.[2]

Since Mary Griffith published *The Unschooling Handbook* (1998), teachers have been using her “unschooling” approach in Their classrooms. They let their students learn what they want when they want for their own reasons: “choice and control reside with the learner” (4). Griffith draws from and popularizes an unschooling approach originally conceived by John Holt, who’s *How Children Fail* (1969) argues that

> Children do not need to be made to learn to be better, told what to do or shown how. If they are given access to enough of the world, they will see clearly enough what things are truly important to themselves and to others, and they will make for themselves a better path into that world than anyone else could make for them. (55)

Ultimately, whereas in schooling or homeschooling teachers and parents decide what’s best for the child’s education, an “unschooled” learner makes those decisions. The main argument is that children are natural learners and teachers; therefore, educators should resist institutionalizing and standardizing the student. As Griffith puts it, “Unschooling is basically a matter of attitude and approach. Simply put, unschooling puts the learner in charge” (3). In many ways, we must interrogate (and unlearn) the scripted narratives we inherit as inadequate, inaccurate, incomplete, or fictive: in short, sometimes we must learn to unlearn so that we can learn the truths.

As Elaine Richardson puts it in "Coming from the Heart: African American Students, Literacy Stories, and Rhetorical Education," (2004) we need these new stories because, while freedom through literacy has often functioned as a trope in our scholarly narratives of literacy acquisition for African American students, these stories are also bound up in complex “issues of dominance, suppression, economics, culture, racism, freedom, equality, and justice" (155). According to Richardson, we should always make visible vernacular discourses and rhetorical patterns and strategies in our students' texts, particularly for those students (like students of color) whose rhetorical traditions have so often been invisibilized. Part of this requires an exploration of Black students' acquisition of and reaction to school Discourses and literacies. "Language has always been a site of negotiation and resistance for African Americans in White middle-class society," writes Richardson (168). And so she calls us to make new stories.

We believe that certain strategies of “unschooling,” certain pedagogical possibilities across educational and non-educational settings, allow writing instructors to explore and implement unique, effective, and enduring lessons for writing students, particularly in contexts of community engagement and activism. As we learned from the keynote panel for the 2018 annual Indiana Teachers of Writing conference, rather than telling students which questions to answer and how to answer them, we should ask them to brainstorm topics they are passionate about, to locate problems and questions themselves, and then to discover creative solutions to them.

Our summer program’s curriculum promotes voluntary participatory work that involves our summer youth writers in our research process and allows us to collaborate with them as authors and engage with them as a community of writers (IWC, Building a Rainbow Curriculum, 2018). Students mostly elect to participate because our youth writers welcome the opportunity to embrace our unique design and delivery—our unschooled model of teaching writing—which allows students choice and agency over what they write about, how they write about it, and how they opt to deliver their writing. Freedom and agency to write about your own life promotes authenticity and voice in student writing. Students may elect to write to the three or four prompts we daily deliver, or they are welcome to invent their own or write to a former prompt presented at an earlier session. The prompts are simply a starting point, particularly for our young writers who need a place to start. And the prompts have been designed and modeled to showcase the open-ended possibilities for how those prompts may be interpreted on paper. They can write about their lives as poetry, in narrative, as song lyrics, and they can deliver those as pieces for the publication of the final anthology or perform them or both. Our writers decide what gets published and presented and how.

By incorporating home- and other place-based guided meditations during the writing process, by including elements of illustration and spoken word performance as multimodal pedagogies of linguistic expression, by gathering in the community to perform as activists and civic leaders, and by publishing an annual anthology together, we merge school and community literacy teaching practices and believe our "students" learn (and learn to love) to write like "real" writers rather than "school" writers. Our writers' experiences, performances, and publications have highlighted for us unique applications of unschooling practices to writing pedagogies that help battle achievement gaps in our community.

Theoretical Framework

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, achievement gaps occur when one group of students (such as students grouped by race/ethnicity, gender) outperforms another group (par. 1). We have a literacy achievement gap in this country, for instance, that clearly marks a disparity between black students and white students. The Center cites that black students overall, particularly black males, fall the most behind (par. 5).

Katherine Au and Raphael Taffy's research supports this statistic, explaining that students suffering from the literacy achievement gap in public schools are typically "students of diverse backgrounds who differ from the mainstream in ethnicity, primary language, and social class" (170). In the United States, those students "a.) are African American, Asian American, Latinx, or Native American in ethnicity; b.) speak home languages other than standard American

English, and c.) come from poor or working class families" (172-73). This gap in the United States is measured primarily with achievement rates on standardized tests, which do not acknowledge the multiple and rich literacies that students bring to the classroom—even though, as Au and Taffy write, "Literacy is not simply a collection of skills, but is instead a cultural practice" (173). The focus of literacy learning standards in schools does not encourage a connection or relevancy to students' everyday experiences and lives. This is one of many reasons why students are deemed "at-risk" and who have failed to close that gap. Other reasons for that gap are of course obvious such as socioeconomics, race, class, and lack of support. (National Center for School Engagement, n.p.). However, in terms of literacy, "the gap is less an indicator of students' literacy potential and more an indicator of schools' difficulty in providing students of diverse backgrounds with adequate opportunities" (174). Though predicated by Au and Taffy's observations about our national academic climate, the conceptual framework for this project hails from Paul Gorski, who has developed a proactive framework that he recommends using in unschooling writers called Equity Literacy.

Gorski defines Equity Literacy as the "cultivation of the skills and consciousness that enable us to recognize, respond to, and redress conditions that deny some students access to educational and other opportunities enjoyed by their peers" Defining Equity Literacy, (Definition par.1). Gorski constructed the Equity Literacy Framework "with an acknowledgement of both the strengths and limitations of existing frameworks for engaging the full diversity of youth in schools" in literacy acts (Definition par.1).

Gorski and his colleagues who write, publish, and present on Equity Literacy are committed to combatting many of the schools' mandatory (but rarely successfully executed) cultural competence programs that focus on culture *and not* equity. For example, Gorski and Swalwell explain, "when it comes to education, the trouble is not a lack of multicultural programs or diversity initiatives in schools," but that the initiatives in place "avoid or whitewash serious equity issues" (34-35).

In addition to a [l]iteracy achievement gap, there is also a gap between students' feelings of marginalization and what adults are "comfortable" implementing in the "name of multiculturalism" (35). As the authors point out, a discussion about Civil Rights might turn into a "sanitized" discussion of King's "I Have a Dream" speech. This "culture fetish," clarifies Gorski and Swalwell, doesn't provide space to offer more critical and "serious curricular (and institutional) attention to issues like racism and homophobia because they present the illusion of multicultural learning" (36). A sanitized discussion, according to Joseph Trimmer, is one which the professor follows a script of teaching what he knows about the work of literature and the students follow suit by learning what the professor knows. An unsanitized discussion means the professor or instructor "pitches the script and improvises our parts, and puts the book in play" (21). In this approach, the literary theory is allowed to be "tilted" and redefined and the script rewritten allowing for meaning making by each individual, including the instructor or professor. Trimmer further explains that an unsanitized discussion can be uneasy and create vulnerability, because students "stop analyzing the text and start arguing about the people in the books, the people in our lives, and the people in the class" (22).

In focus group interviews with African American students about the effectiveness of their school's multicultural program, one African American teen poignantly declared, "I'm [both] invisible" and "hypervisible" (Gorski and Swalwell 34). Gorski's equity literacy framework for teachers insists that educators be proficient not only with culture, but also "with the skills necessary for creating an equitable learning environment for all students and families" (Defining Equity Literacy par. 1). Equity Literacy abilities outlined by Gorski in his framework require that educators are able to:

- Recognize biases and inequities including subtle biases and inequities
- Respond to biases and inequities in the immediate term
- Redress biases and inequities in the long term; and

- Create and sustain a bias-free and equitable learning environment (par.1).

The associated skills and dispositions to meet those abilities include using the course content to advocate for just or unjust actions, rejecting deficit views, intervening when biases occur, engaging students in dialogue about equity and inequity, advocating against inequity practices in the school, responding with cultural celebrations, teaching about topics of inequity like homophobia and poverty, including families in the dialogue and content, and using critical and creative thinking pedagogical strategies that allow students to be authentic in their responses (par. 1-4).

Gorski recommends that after we have established the ability to recognize our own bias and responses that we then teach our students to question, reflect, and engage with the community and then to respond in writing or other multimodal communications with ideas for change.

We have increasingly informed our unschooling pedagogy with African American Language (AAL) scholarship. For example Bonnie Williams-Farrier admonishes us in "'Talkin' Bout Good & Bad' Pedagogies: Code-Switching vs. Comparative Rhetorical Approaches," noting it is *still* the case that code-switching in educational practice has not been taken seriously as a sophisticated rhetorical strategy to writing for African American Language speakers; however, if African American Verbal Tradition (AVT) is "presented as a skill in academic writing rather than a challenge necessary to overcome, students' rhetorical skills are enhanced and their language attitudes" are transformed (230).

Furthermore, in "'The Rose That Grew from Concrete': Postmodern Blackness and New English Education" (2008), David Kirkland argues that "traditional practices of English teaching require change" because even though cultural studies and rhetorical theory have undergone postmodern, deconstructive, and decolonizing shifts, our pedagogies have not always followed suit. For example, according to Kirkland, AAL and hip hop have made a vast impact on "our society, students' literacy development, and students' understanding of the world" in with and "[i]n this era," he predicts, "English education will be as much about how texts make meaning of individuals as it is about how individuals make meaning of texts" (73, 74). Finally, we believe, as Stacy Perryman-Clark argues in *Afrocentric Teacher-Research: Rethinking Appropriateness and Inclusion*, that not merely allowing, but also encouraging African American Language speakers to perform writing with Afrocentric Ebonics-focused expression will transform a pedagogy of rhetoric and composition by challenging and subsequently revising our interpretive approach to what counts (and doesn't) as linguistic "schooling"—"unschooling," ostensibly, as a result.

Program Design

This article analyzes the writing produced during the Indiana Writers Center’s Youth Public Memoir Program. The program uses “unschooling” and Gorski’s Equity Literacy model as its foundation, trains writing faculty to work with community sites, and assists individuals in composing their memoirs. Our program, by design, is an activist curriculum.

Critically, the Center’s work stretches beyond storytelling: we merge the best teaching practices of *both community and school* to encourage our youth writers to write like “real” writers instead of “school” writers. This eight-week creative narrative nonfiction writing program moves beyond merely improving students’ writing and literacy skills, because it encourages reflection on past experiences and past behavior and by promoting critical discussion and civic activism. In recalling significant moments, our skilled instructors and community writers also find cultural, political, and critical meaning in those moments; ultimately, they address their publics through community activism, performances, and the publication of their memoirs in an anthology series entitled *I Remember: Indianapolis Youth Write About Their Lives* through our independent small press, INwords Publications. The young writers also read and perform their writing at public literary and spoken word events.

The general tenets of our "unschooling" curriculum mirror the unschooling foundations that provide greater access to learning and allow students to make their own choices. We adapt and modify our curriculum to meet the diverse needs of our learners for each site we serve. Our curriculum includes the following:

- This isn't school. This isn't English class. In these workshops (not classes), we will learn and write like writers. Don't worry about spelling, mechanics, or grammar. That's what editors are for.
- Good writing comes from the gut, from the heart, and from the head.
- We believe you have a story to tell. You are the expert of your memoir, and your story matters.
- We will remember and create a picture in the reader's head so the reader can see and imagine what it's like to live and walk in our shoes.
- We are writing for an audience. This book will be published. Hundreds, even thousands, will hear our truths.
- We will share our writing using Author's Chair. There are three simple rules of Author's Chair: Read Loud and Proud, Listen Quietly, and No Judging.
- If you don't want to share or publish what we wrote, you don't have to. You are the author. You own your words. You decide which stories to write, tell, and publish.
- Writing is composed. It is not written, not crafted. And everyone has the capacity to create and to imagine. People who write new music for songs or for instruments are called composers. To create new sounds, composers order sounds and then dispose of sounds creating a melody, and then they place multiple sounds together simultaneously to create harmony. This process is composing. Music compositions are built until the sound is pleasing to the composer. You are not just physically writing words, nor are you only

> crafting or weaving; you are creating a cacophony of words, voice, rhythm, and details that delivers a message.

Notice the use of the pronoun "we." That's because "we," the instructors, university student interns, volunteers, and the students we serve write *together*. Writing is both a social and rhetorical practice that necessitates audience, and after students write for themselves, we encourage them also to revise for audiences by offering them authentic and agential experiences of sharing their work with their community—activist performance and community anthology publication.

The Indiana Writers Center is a community writing center, so we establish that we are a community from the beginning. The curriculum requires instructors and interns to teach and model daily memoir writing prompts, allowing students to hear a variety of interpretations. University student interns and volunteers sit with a small group of students and write with them for a sustained period. Then, the group returns to Author's Chair, offering praise and suggestions for revisions to our youth writers. After students hear more models and ideas for how to create visuals and dialogue, the students continue to both revise and compose.

The Indiana Writers Center trains its volunteers and student interns with an "unschooling" practicum on how to work with "at-risk" children, by first debunking the term "at-risk," because it's an example of a school term.[3] Remember our goal is to "unschool" the teaching of English. The National At-Risk Education Network (NAREN) defines the term "at-risk" in two ways:

- At-risk of dropping out of school.
- And/or at-risk of not succeeding in life due to unfavorable circumstances at home.

We clarify that school may or may not be or have been a positive part of the student's experience; students may be apprehensive or fearful of writing. Students may be alliterate (functionally able to read or write), illiterate (unable to read or write), or they may require modifications so they can write. We clarify with our faculty, university student interns, and volunteers ahead of time what assistance our writers require (Building a Rainbow Program Description 2) and remind them, *vis-à-vis* educational researcher and writer Howard Gardner (1996), that at-risk learners need the opposite of what is happening in their schools:

- A challenging curriculum that develops high-level thinking skills as well as basic skills
- Teachers and fellow students who care about their welfare
- Constructing meaning from content in a collaborative learning environment
- Community involvement in their education (Video Conference)

In literacy learning, we cannot hold on to the meritocracy that everyone can succeed or make a passing grade in class or on a standardized test if they work and study hard. Academic and literacy failure is a complex issue. In schools, students often learn that their language or language use is wrong; in our program, we build upon the rich home language and literacies they bring to the workshops. We train our faculty, university interns, and volunteers to reflect upon their own beliefs of equity and teach specific African American and Latinx literacies and practices in language and learning.

To provide an example of our work of how we employ "unschooling" and Equity Literacy, we draw upon examples from one of our successful "unschooling" writing practices with the largest youth group we serve, The Saint Florian Center (established in 1992 by Indianapolis Chief Firefighter Anthony Williamson). Saint Florian's mission is to "provide an opportunity to foster leadership skills, develop problem solving methods, and survival tactics" ("Our Mission" par. 1). At the Saint Florian summer leadership camp, students participate in learning modules that include leadership, art, law, and government including encouraging positive relationships with local police, business, science, math, creative narrative nonfiction writing, and even karate. The students are kept very busy at the camp, and all of the instruction and activities are immersive. Students are often transported into community businesses to learn and study or to community events to showcase their work. The summer classroom curriculum design has been easily adapted for classroom use and is available through the Center. We measure our success using the following activity-based objectives as outlined on our grant and program proposals:

- **Writing and Revising:** Students write about their lives from prompts and revise with the help of instructors, interns, and volunteers.
- **Author's Chair:** Students read their work aloud to the group and listen/respond to the work of others.
- **Listening and Responding:** Students listen and respond to lessons/writing prompts presented by instructors and to university interns' writing samples of the assignment.
- **Field Trips/Performance:** Students explore a variety of community sites and write about them on site. At the end, they read or perform their work out loud for a local community audience

Our objectives are met when:

- 90% of our students write at each session
- 90% of our students have a piece of writing included in the final published anthology
- 85% of our students share their work out loud with a peer or local audience

Based upon our success with other community partners, we were asked to join The Saint Florian Center's summer leadership camp to provide an additional creative outlet to help balance the academic and entrepreneurial work students were engaged in during their camp day. We spend an hour with each of the three age groups, helping the youth compose stories about their lives, their memoirs. We joined the camp in 2010, the same year the Saint Florian Center was recognized by *Time* magazine as a top five Summer Learning Program.

Examples of our Saint Florian Center Authors' Writing

Building upon both this description of the 8-week memoir program that uses Gorski's Equity Literacy framework and our unschooling teaching methods couched in Friere's literacy activism, we wish now to provide several examples of our students' writing from the Saint Florian Center.

One of the most highly anticipated experiences for summer writers at the Saint Florian Center is the publication of their work. Our writers know that their anthology will be instrumental in both literary and educational contexts, and toward the end of the Summer Memoir Project, they select the pieces that they feel represent them best and speak most powerfully to their community. Finally, they revise their work with their external audiences in mind.

Using discourse analysis (by studying naturally occurring language in social, discursive contexts, spoken or written) to examine these writing samples will more or less explicitly demonstrate our writers' sophisticated recognition of disparities between their primary home discourses and the secondary academic discourses they are asked to use in school; a felt sense of discomfort with such politics; and a perceptive analysis of the intersections of several visible and invisible identities, such as race, sex, gender, nationality, and economic class, among others.

This past summer, we offered our writers prompts that more directly engage with the politics of racial identity, invited students to employ the language they developed at home—not school— and emphasized the often oral and aural elements of creative narrative writing:

- #BlackLivesMatter: Have you heard this phrase before? What does it mean to you? Tell me a story about what happened when you didn't feel like your black life mattered. Tell me a story about what happened when someone made you feel like your black life did matter.
- Draw a map of your neighborhood, or your house or apartment, or your school. Put an "X" where something happened that you will never forget about. Then tell the story of what happened there.
- Complete this idea: "When I use my voice, I feel…"
- "Since you asked, I'll tell you why I'm angry…"
- "Just Because," adapted from Michael Fosberg:
    Just because I'm…
    Doesn't mean…
    Doesn't mean…
    And doesn't mean…
- #SorryNotSorry—Complete this idea: "I'm sorry but…" (Baumann and Jones, 2015, 248-50).

The following constellation of excerpts from our students' responses represents their anthology as a whole. We offer quick, connective analyses of each piece that reflect upon and interrogate the politics and powers of identity, activism, and unschooling.

#BlackLivesMatter

> *Brotherhood usually used by the black community (well from what I know) meaning unity, fellowship, and a common blessing. Mostly used when your race is being unjustified just because the hue of your skin is darker. There have been numerous accounts of these actions. I'm sick and tired of the same story. The Confederate Flag is another*

> *reason for me to hate my race. People act like it is a disease, but I guess that is just another side effect to God's most richest, beautiful skin color (Sterling, age 13).* (Baumann and Jones, 2015, 8)

Not only does Sterling acknowledge current events and political climate ("There have been numerous accounts" and referencing the most recent public conversations about the Confederate Flag), but he voices his frustrations and fatigue, and he does so on his own terms. Certainly we provide a selection of prompts, but as noted prior, students can write to those prompts, write to prompts presented during earlier sessions, or generate their own. But rather than informing Sterling how to feel about racial politics, he learns what he wants, when he wants, and for his own reasons (Griffith 4), and at the end of the piece, he takes a stance—and *vis-à-vis* the expectation that his audience will read and agree—engages in social activism through writing by expressing pride in "God's most richest, beautiful skin color."

I am a young African American male. A scholar, an athlete,
a perfectionist and most of all
a young African American male.
Yeah-Yeah we should all have Jordans
with black hoodies,
bald fades, all black clothes and
money to buy jewelry. But I
believe we can wear any clothes,
buy nice watches and have
mohawks like anyone else. Yeah
we are different but some of
us have character. We aren't afraid
to admit we are young men with a
passion to be great. So today as
a young 5'9"s 150 pound,
3.8 GPA-having basketball player.
I'm proud to say yes I'm African American male and

NO ONE can take my identity
[. . .]
Lets not judge by the
Color of our skin and focus
on the content of our character (Allen, age 14).
(Baumann and Jones, 2015, 18-19)

Allen's poem illuminates several of our arguments. First, this piece clearly resists the structures and strictures of academic prose with poetic line breaks and grammars—again, an "unschooled" liberatory space in which both "choice and control reside with the learner" (Griffith 4). Allen exercises his agency in using poetry instead of a typical narrative or essay form, and he also composes a message using a free form all his own to again create voice, rhythm, and most importantly—a message. In addition, Allen's piece demonstrates his awareness of the intersections of identity: sex, gender, race, nationality, scholastic and athletic status, economic class, weight and height, and cognitive and physical ability. While mapping these intersections of identity onto the discursive, political site of his own body, Allen performs the important work of critiquing stereotypes in society and in school through sophisticated rhetorical choices, such as incorporating irony through sarcasm ("Yeah-Yeah we should all…") and rhetorical reinvention of these harmful, homogenizing tropes ("But I believe we can…"). We believe that the model of "unschooling" requests that we reject the institutionalizing, conforming, and standardizing of students. And, like Sterling, Allen expresses pride ("I'm proud to say yes I'm African…") and social activism by addressing his audience with the third-person plural ("Lets," "our") in a call to action—to focus on character rather than on color.

Who Understands Me But Me

Everyone's life matters. No matter what race, age, gender, ethnicity, skin color, culture, etc. I for one am Asian, female, and tan-skinned. Life as an Asian is harder than you think. We are stereotyped and

> *made fun of everyday, whether it's at school, on social media, or at the mall. [. . .]*
>
> *We're only human, you may look different but you are as normal as everyone else. I am proud to be Asian. Be proud to be you (Sophie, age 14). (Baumann and Jones, 2017, 42)*

Much like Allen, Sophie here demonstrates a shrewd understanding of cultural pluralism and identity intersections. In addition to shucking some of the conventions of standard academic writing (complete sentences, contractions, third person), she rhetorically recasts constrictive identity categories with "tan-skinned" and "you may look different, but." Again, Sophie concludes with a strategic twinning of pride and audience-based imperative in which she, the learner, is "in charge" (Griffith 3).

> *Who Understands Me But Me*
>
> *My heart is almost as big as my hair.*
> *It's unruly, incredibly soft and thin*
> *but completely beautiful.*
> *My heart is a thousand sonnets on 300 pieces of paper*
> *carefully constructed together*
> *a source of energy like the sun.*
>
> *My heart is so big it gave birth to the rest of my body*
> *spit out my legs, caressed my very scalp*
> *for 7 months it built my ribcage and*
> *molded my spinal cord.*
>
> *Because of this I love too hard. Too strong*
> *powerfully.*
> *I'm sorry if that offends you.*
> *But then I am not, so I will take my sorry, shove it so far*
> *down my throat that my heart kisses it*
> *and then let it spill out my stomach*

because sorry not sorry.

They take away my Immortality so we live under the wounds of being mortal, of being great.
They build up ghettos and force me from cities, so I live without the interactions of the "superior."
They paint my windows black, tell me this is what I am. So I believe it.
They build me a ghetto and tell me it is my home, so I morph into the pollution. The neighborhood BBQ's. Discrimination.
Snatch away my sunlight and tell me I am a god.
Tear down my trees and expect me to live without the whispers of my ancestors. (Eunique, age 15). (Baumann and Jones, 2017, 50)

Eunique deliberately, defiantly misappropriates historically oppressive white and male conceptualizations of black, female bodies. By modifying rhetorical sites of discipline, such as her hair and sexuality and employing pejorative language ("big," "unruly") instead as assets and ultimately concluding that she is "completely beautiful," she interrogates critical rhetorics of identity intersections—sex, gender, race, economic class, social status, nationality. Of course, form matches content here, as well, through a resistance to standard academic English. Eunique's dare at the end functions persuasively to characterize her resilience.

BLACK

When I was brown someone think I was BLACK and someone think I was brown and then I was happy and then someone was mean, very, very mad and then when I went to go home my dad think I was brown. The end (Kyara, age 5). (Baumann and Jones, 2015, 78)

At age 5, Kyara engages a "right to her own language" (cf., CCCC, 1974) as Griffith's "learner in charge" when she writes in a distinctive variety of American English with its own consistent internal logic and grammatical complexities—African American

Vernacular or Black English, as Geneva Smitherman coins it (a concept we expand upon in the "Implications" section), in a primary discourse that hails from home rather than a secondary one from school ("someone think I was," "my dad think I was"). She writes in all caps, for instance, a choice "foreign" to academic standards for rhetorical emphasis. Kyara represents complex issues with racial essentialism (when in reality, there are important differences between black and brown skin color). She recognizes the realities and problems associated with racism ("someone was mean, very, very mad").

> *Just Because…*
>
> *Just because I'm black*
> *Doesn't mean I'm dumb*
> *Doesn't mean I'm ghetto*
> *and Doesn't mean I wont*
> *be successful*
>
> *Just because I'm a girl*
> *Doesn't mean I need a man to take*
> *care of me*
> *Doesn't mean my hair is nappy*
> *and doesn't mean I'll have a baby*
> *at 16*
>
> *Just because I'm young*
> *Doesn't mean I wanna smoke*
> *Doesn't mean I don't understand*
> *and doesn't mean you will discourage me (Ayana, age 14).*
> *(Baumann and Jones, 2015, 108)*

Ayana makes similar moves to the writers above: the rhetorical reinvention of harmful stereotypes, the breaking of standard academic writing conventions, and the intersectionality of identity.

The "unschooling" scaffolding and aims of this writing prompt asks students to critique these social and academic paradigms.

Finally, we offer a smattering of responses to "Since you asked, I'll tell you why I'm angry," the newest in our summer memoir "curriculum." We believe these stand and speak without need for a description of exigence or an offering of analysis; rather, and reflexively, they prompt *us* as teachers of writing to consider: In the time that remains in this Trump administration, what new prompts will we create for our students with which to uncover truth and testimonial?

> *Elyjah, Age 12: I am angry because in general people think that black people are all ghetto, bad, and rude and that's not true. Most black people are sophisticated, intelligent, smart, beautiful, inspiring, and unique. Don't stereotype. #BlackLivesMatter (Baumann and Jones, 2017, 30)*
>
> *Sidney, Age 13: I'm angry because people that aren't Black think its okay to say the "N" word. This word offends Black people. They always say, "It's just a word." Or they say, "It's not towards you, so I don't know why you're offended." You know what? It is very offensive. (Baumann and Jones, 2017, 37)*
>
> *Anon., Age 13: I'm angry because black people do not get treated fairly, although Malcom X and Martin Luther King and so many others fought for equality. I'm angry because they fought so hard for black people and today…, it seems like they fought for nothing. I'm angry because white cops keep killing blacks and barely get any jail time for it. For example, when Trevon Martin got shot and George Zimmerman, the suspects didn't get any time for it, and that is unacceptable. You wanted to know why I'm angry? That's why I'm angry. (Baumann and Jones, 2017, iii)*
>
> *Taylor, Age 14: I am angry at the world. The way it functions. How it functions. Choices. Decisions. People. I am angry because of how I*

> *can't say anything without being judged. I stay quiet, because I fear people's reactions. I overthink things because I can't live without knowing what will happen next. (Baumann and Jones, 2017, iv)*
>
> *Nia, Age 12: I'm angry because of the violence. There's blood on the streets from the people who will meet an untimely end. Come from another race, then you're a disgrace. (Baumann and Jones, 2017, 33)*

To draw again from Holt, when students "are given access to enough of [i.e., critical orientations to] the world, they will see clearly enough what things are truly important to themselves and to others, and they will make for themselves a better path into that world than anyone else could make for them" (55). And, as Victor Villanueva writes, "maybe we don't recognize the anger in our written voices," but nonetheless, "Students-of color as well as white—resist accepting the anger or the criticism. But they are exposed, and in their resistance, they begin the questioning. We are always trying to inculcate a critical consciousness" (160, 169).

Students also often engage in the rich, complex work of social activism through the public presentation of their work—through both performance and publication. Their audience-based calls to action often invoke us directly through the use of the second person imperative and/or interrogative at the ends of their writings. These students engage in real-world implication and implementation—socially and politically through the application of their work to existing social movements, as well as materially and economically through the physical reproduction and sale of their work. We believe that all of this is and can only be achieved through strategic unschooling practices.

We feel that too. Guiding our students to write in ways that critique their world "unschools" them for the purposes of community engagement and civic activism. Just examine the list above and consider recent events—race riots, white supremacists, additional unjust shooting deaths of young black men and women, racial profiling? Who will be the next Emmett Till? Is history repeating itself? Who will be our Malcolm X, our Martin Luther King?

Implications of Unschooling Pedagogy

Of course, one rather visible implication of our work involves our own racial identities as writing teachers. That is, as we observe above, once our nonwhite writers witness us reacting positively to their backgrounds, their beliefs, their use of language, we begin to see a shift in how they view writing and their own writing. It is important, perhaps, for us to acknowledge our own positionality as white workshop leaders and as white teachers. How does our white race motivate our nonwhite writers? How does our race, so very representative of most writing teachers they have had in school, aid our credibility? How does our race damage our credibility as a legitimate source of distrust and imperialism? Here we are summoning again Christopher Worthman, who counsels privileged writing instructors to share critiques, advice, and answers only when our writers ask for help: as outsiders, our perspectives can and should be subject to invitation by our young writers (50). Of course, this aligns well with both Griffith's and Holt's conceptions of "unschooling," of trusting in young learners to decide how, what, and when to learn.

Bearing our positionality in mind, our findings and analyses yield us additional implications concerning race and activism in the context of an unschooled environment. One is the politics of teaching literature discourse, and the other involves the politicization of the classroom.

Cultural Responsivity / Responsibility

We are culturally responsive and engage all our African American students using Paolo Friere’s philosophy that the first literate position we must understand is that “reading the world always precedes reading the word” (25). We want our students to understand that what they know and live is important knowledge to bring to the writing table in composing their stories—a belief which aligns quite seamlessly with an “unschooling” model.

Freire began his literacy activism by living in oppressed communities and with the people he was serving. During this time, he uncovered themes, words, phrases that were then used as ways to begin discussion in his literacy classes with those individuals. He used their language, words that he heard them use within their own literacies as a way to encourage not only literacy but literacy activism.

For example, instead of teaching them the word “hunger,” he would have them discuss why hunger was a problem, why people were dying from hunger, what the government needed to understand about their hunger, and what solutions could help those living in that community to overcome hunger. By reading the word “hunger,” the people he served were able to become not only school-style literate, but also “unschooled” literate activists. Like Freire, our students guided and directed their world of learning. Our students told us what they needed to write about, talk about. They told us what prompts were of value to helping them deliver their message while also getting to compose beautiful writing.

When we present a topic on Black Lives Matter or about being angry in a writing prompt, there is an authentic context in which students can respond because they are living in a community and in a society where they are being told and where they witness their black lives not mattering and where they are justifiably angry. By writing about it, sharing their stories, these young writers become not only more literate via the act and practice of writing narratively, but also literate activists because their words are published, read, heard.

Our writers at Saint Florian use their words to describe and tell about their world. Once students witness us reacting positively to their backgrounds, their beliefs, their use of language, we begin to see a shift in how they view writing. This year a 12-year old, in the beginning, bemoaned a summer camp that involved writing. The writer left with a broad smile, declaring, “This is my favorite part of camp!” As the Saint Florian students begin to own their literacy, the students, like Freire hoped when he first began working with the Brazilian working class, begin to see writing as a tool to communicate, maybe even rewrite or revise their stories—not just something they do for school.

Identity in Composition

Identity is meaningful in two ways: pedagogically (considering our students' voices) and rhetorically (considering postmodern and poststructural notions of how identities are socially and rhetorically made and maintained).

First, the college classroom has come to reflect transformations in our national population, with spikes in student diversity from various intersections of identity, including race, class, gender, age, ability, sex, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, military status, etc. Therefore, one of the most important exercises of the term *identity* has been a pedagogical one, because it is in our composition classrooms or other spaces where writing learning occurs (Young 88). And, as we've learned from Mary Louise Pratt, our classrooms are contact zones rife with politics, so identities become significant for us. As a result, we generate classroom research about the performative politics of ethos. It is also true that the college classroom has come to reflect K-12 classrooms not only in terms of demographic, but also in terms of academic achievement gaps, and the IWC's "unschooling" methods could (and should) be employed effectively in K-12 *and* post-secondary composition classrooms.

Attention to students' and teachers' identities also motivates us to consider a kaleidoscopic array of language practices that move in/to our classrooms—and not just multiple, global, and transnational Englishes, but also vernacular dialects and code-meshing/switching (Smitherman, 1973, 1986; Graff; Lu and Horner, 2009; Canagarajah, 2006, 2015); various positions, voices, and narrative logics hail from diverse positions. Most significant to our work are intersections of race and dialects that manifest from tensions between primary (home) and secondary (institutional) discourses (Smitherman, 1973, 1986; Gee; Delpit).

Indeed, evocative of David Bartholomae's celebrated "Inventing the University," Michelle Cox et al. urge us to "reconcile the identities students bring with the identities their instructors expect them to occupy—or at least perform—as they develop into academic and professional writers" (xvii). Recognizing such, and in conjunction with the Conference on College Composition and Communication's 1974 "Students' Right to Their Own Language," we've come to consider how our positionality affects our research agendas and to value culturally sustaining pedagogies.

Politicizing of the Classroom

Composition theorist Maxine Hairston places a caveat on the idea of agendized teaching steeped in turn with deconstruction, post-structuralism, and feminist theory. She argues, "Too often they [writing teachers] haven't been well trained in how to teach writing and are at a loss about what they should be doing with their students. How easy then to focus the course on their own interests, which are often highly political" (185). Hairston's lament applies not only to course content, but also to pedagogical methods: most writing instructors have been "schooled" themselves (in K-12 standards, or in undergraduate and graduate programs); despite the often critical-cultural inflection of most teacher training programs, educators themselves often do not experience "unschooling," a cycle that perpetuates itself.

Furthermore, Linda Christensen, celebrated English/language arts activist and author, has written curricular programs such as *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*, and *Teaching for Joy and Justice*. She reminds us that all "reading and writing are ultimately political acts" (vii). Every teacher who chooses what texts students will read to learn the content, and what kinds of prompts students write to or speak to, has created an agenda—and agendas are political. When teachers design curriculum and activities, they are accessing, sorting, and prioritizing what must be understood as true.

Though our goals in the politicizing of the classroom as a site of unschooling are to deconstruct and combat systemic racism and classism, it is still necessary to acknowledge our work as limited by its political agendae. Hairston reminds us that "[students] bring their subjects with them" (186), so politics are always and already part of the classroom contact zone. Hairston suggests that when teachers of first-year writing focus on "issues" instead of critical thought and rhetorical stratagem, "large numbers of their students end up feeling confused, angry—and cheated" (185).

The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse

The foundational scholarship of writing teachers and researchers Victor Villanueva, James Paul Gee, Geneva Smitherman, and Lisa Delpit remind us that we can navigate power, identity and writing pedagogy equitably and inclusively.

First, Villanueva notes, in reflecting on his seminal work *Bootstraps*, that while the "perceptions that academic discourse provides, for the resources the conventions of citation make available, for the ideocentric discourse that displays inductive or deductive lines of reasoning, a way to trace a writer's logical connections," the fact remains that "the cognitive alone is insufficient" and that "[m]emory simply cannot be adequately portrayed in the conventional discourse of the academy" (12). And in working with individuals of color, Villanueva clarifies that "the narrative of the person of color validates. It resonates. It awakens, particularly for those of us who are in institutions where our numbers are few" because "the personal done well is sensorial and intellectual, complete, knowledge known throughout mind and body, even if "vicariously" (14-15).

Villanueva also writes that it is ideal if we sidestep expectations for the voices of writers of color, or worse, the demand for a cultural assimilation into the whitewashed and classed discourse of ivory academia and instead embrace a multicultural rhetoric, a multicultural discourse, "thereby leaving the long colonial trail" (168). On that note, in his "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction," James Paul Gee theorizes about "Discourses" (with a capital "D") as

> ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes. [. . .] A Discourse is a sort of 'identity kit' which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize. (6-7)

Gee then distinguishes between primary Discourses ("original and home-based sense of identity") and secondary Discourses (when "each of us interacts with various non-home-based social institutions") (7-8). Gee further taxonomizes Discourses into those dominant and nondominant:

> Dominant Discourses are secondary Discourses the mastery of which, at a particular place and time, brings with it the (potential) acquisition of social 'goods' (money, prestige, status, etc.). Non-dominant Discourses are secondary Discourses the mastery of which often brings solidarity with a particular social network, but not wider status and social goods in the society at large. (8)

Here we see two main breeds of language emerging for students: the informal, nondominant, and "dirty" language of home that can be detected, corrected—that is cleaned up, sanitized, refined, professionalized, and otherwise white-washed—critiqued and written over by the dominant secondary Discourse of schools and corporations.

Lisa Delpit wrote "The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse" in reaction to Gee, who by the end of his article argues that 1) People born with dominant primary Discourses ultimately experience success in life; 2) People born with nondominant primary Discourses don't (can't); and 3) People born with nondominant primary Discourses often try to learn dominant secondary Discourses, but fail. Gee also notes that when people try to acquire a secondary Discourse with another set of values, they experience conflict with their primary Discourse. People must ransom their primary values in order to acquire dominant secondary Discourses.

To some degree, Delpit acknowledges the paralysis that many teachers feel in response to these seemingly insurmountable tasks. She writes,

> Although their job is to teach literate discourse styles to all of their students, they question whether that is a task they can actually accomplish for poor students and students of color. Furthermore, they question whether they are acting as agents of oppression by insisting that students who are not already a part of the 'mainstream' learn that discourse. Does it not smack of racism or classism to demand that these students put aside the language of their homes and communities and adopt a discourse that is not only alien, but that has often been instrumental in furthering their oppression? (152)

However, Delpit ultimately suggests that students can and will learn secondary Discourses of power, and that they don't have to forsake the language of their homes to do so. Writing teachers must facilitate such work by engaging in the Discourses of power in the classroom, while also undoing some of its authority—strategies that we recognize as unschooling. "What can teachers do? First, teachers must acknowledge and validate students' home language without using it to limit students' potential" (163). They must also recognize the conflicts students face as they move between primary and secondary discourses, and they must acknowledge these discoursal disparities, openly discussing them with students (163-64).

But what does this mean for the composition classroom—of all education levels? Much like Friere's two-pronged educational philosophy, we've learned that a marriage of an "unschooling" approach works best while considering these politics of teaching literate discourse: It is not enough only to acknowledge that dominant Discourses of power permeate standards of academic prose or only to resist them; it is our duty to equip students with dominant Discourses *and* to critique them as imbued with power. But how do we do so as "unschoolers," as teachers interested in placing the powers of discovery and curiosity in the hands of our sometimes "at-risk" learners while also adequately preparing them with literacies of success? As with all double-binds, we've found that a "both-and" approach is the answer: talk with students about their feelings of the state of their world; encourage them to consider genre, audience awareness, and context; and design writing prompts that engage in standard writing learning outcomes—and ones that, instead, ask students to disregard all of the rules if they want to. We do. And, as a result, our students write and publish stunning poems and nonfiction essays—engaging in a kind of storytelling that may be one of the most powerful and persuasive modes of discourse in our culture.

Conclusion

As we argue earlier, school may or may not be or have been a positive part of the student's experience; therefore, students may be apprehensive or fearful of writing. Students may be alliterate (functionally able to read or write), illiterate (unable to read or write), or require modifications so they can write. Even as we draft this article, recognizing the red and green squiggly lines informing us of misspellings and grammatical errors in our students' produced writing, we recognize how inextricably imbedded are the dominant, racist, and classist discourses of power in the competitive, pervasive, and multifarious interfaces of corporate, academic, and public spheres.

Regardless of whether our writers are or not illiterate/alliterate, some will be determined accordingly because the primary Discourse they learned and developed at home may not align with dominant Discourses of white race and upper class that are privileged and perpetuated in schools. This imperialistic educational paradigm constructs a mythology that suggest students who do not engage in the discourses of power cannot engage in the discourses of power. On this note, we again find Radcliffe's work invaluable: We might ask, for instance, what if instead of teaching writers we listen to and learn from them? (105). From Radcliffe's own pen, "rhetorical listening may foster understanding of intersecting gender and race identifications in ways that may promote cross-cultural communication" (35).

Finally, Joe Trimmer in "Reading and Writing Culture: A Group Memoir" shares a case study about a university African American literature course, where he, the white male professor and his eight white female students were reading and discussing memoirs as part of the course's curriculum. Because the texts were memoir and so personal, the discussions and the written responses also became personal—the talk and writing of each student and the professor began to take on the form of memoir narratives instead of critical analysis. And because the "stories were so personal," the discussion "lost its critical edge" (21).

What the class gained though was an understanding that by reading about these black lives, like in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, they each and collectively "shared his pain, his rage, his hunger for change" (22). But they couldn't reconcile that pain, rage, or hunger for change because they had not "participated in the brutalities of racism" and they came to the realization that they too were part of the "cultural conspiracy that controlled black lives" (22). The collective resolve was simple: "we were outsiders" (22).

Trimmer's response to the speculation and discussion was appropriate: "You think I can settle this? Nobody can settle this! Everybody's telling a different story. That's something!" (27).

Reflecting autoethnographically on our study and peering toward the future, we've mentioned that during the current executive, judicial, and legislative administrations will we pepper our pedagogies as we consider what is more equitable, sustainable, and inclusive for "unschooling" teaching praxis.

For example, we know what we are doing is working. We evaluate our student writers and typically have 95% complete those evaluations. And their answers are sophisticated and specific. Students note from year to year what their favorite prompts are and those prompts are on recent social and justice related topics. In 2016, it was the #blacklivesmatter prompt about why your black life matters or when someone did or said something to make you feel like it didn't. In 2017, it was "Since you asked, I'll tell you why I'm angry…" And our students note that they love having the attention of a student intern who sits with them consistently every week encouraging them, assisting them with writing strategies, and giving them sometimes one-on-one attention.

Students also talk about spaces. They like it when we can arrange for them to leave the camp site, a public school, and write somewhere else like an Art Park, a coffee shop, or a University Campus.

The only concerns we heard this year is that they also want to write fiction, to add characters like them living in different worlds or settings. Why not also dream and hope on paper, too? Again, we will be remedying this with our increased Freirean outreach approach. And students would like more time to read their work out loud. Like all writers, they want validation from not only the intern sitting with them or the instructor, but also from their peers. We are working towards creating a spoken word class for our high schoolers, and middle schoolers. We want to push them towards not only writing, but also speaking up and out and performing and sharing in audiences.

Therefore, for future summers, we will continue to work largely within the black community. While we recognize that there are, of course, many other marginalized populations of young students in the greater Indianapolis community, in terms of focusing our training and development of instructors and university student interns, creation of curriculum and prompts, and creating a clearer vision for our publication and spoken word events, focusing on the black community allows us to serve what is one of the largest underserved communities in the city.

There is no one center in the city serving African Americans, but many smaller community centers that serve the larger and spread out black community. Some focus on only social service and health issues and some focus on only education. But we are hopeful that by working with three to four of the larger all black Centers that also serve youth, we can help bring those organizations together and share resources. We have noticed, for example, that one site may not have enough supplies and another has too many. We have one site that has transportation and can take students on field trips and has room for other students to ride on their fleet of busses. We have one site that is struggling to write grants to gain resources and one site that does that well. Because we meet regularly with the directors at each site, we can help coordinate and bring those groups together to share resources, write and swap stories, and ultimately help build a better black community that is dedicated to serving and lifting up its youth. And like Freire, we believe that being able to communicate and write and tell your story using your voice, your words, is a critical access point to launch activism.

A final improvement for next year is to add new prompts that are more specific to local events and news within the black community. Like Freire, we too need to live and know more than perhaps what we might see on the news or read in the newspaper. We have just moved our Center to the heart of the City where we will be living alongside the community we serve allowing us to better immerse ourselves in local community events that our students and their families attend.

This is the power of both reading and writing memoir. We may not be able to solve or fix or change everything (or anything), but we can bring a new story to life's table.

Our young black writers aren't writing to the local police forum, school teachers, or their non-black peers necessarily. They don't have to establish before they write the traditional school writing process requiring them to identify an academic purpose and tone. All they have to do is tell their story, tell what they know about their black lives. Our hope is that our students' memoirs will speak to readers much like Richard Wright spoke to this university classroom. In the words of one of our writers Chase (age 6): *"I like writing. I like that it describes my story. Everyone has a story."*

Notes

[1] Cherish Smith and Vani Kannen argue that the term "at-risk" carries racial connotations for students who don't fully understand why they are considered "at-risk," when actually it is their surrounding institutions that are underserving them (52). Who is truly at-risk are not the students, but the larger structure that cannot support young students who need and deserve equitable education and services to be able to succeed in this larger society where access to literacy education is the gateway to more opportunities. Smith and Kannen describe how they not only refute the label, but engage young writers in redefining themselves and rewriting that term. We also refute that label in our own training sessions and pedagogies, and while we do not subscribe to it, while we never use it with students, while we absolutely do not present ourselves as "white saviors," we find ourselves unfortunately still subject to the term "at-risk" because it remains deeply entrenched within the foundation of grantors, nonprofits' mission statements, and appeals to funders.

[2] Learn more about the summer Public Memoir Project at <https://www.indianawriters.org/pages/youth-summer-programs>.

[3] Arguably no one has influenced literacy activism more than Paulo Freire. His words, theories, and actions have impacted the field of education. Freire believed that every educator, every bureaucratic system, has an agenda and that the learners, the workers, must not remain passive, but instead resist by actively linking their knowledge to the knowledge being presented or fed to them. The authors recognize and discuss that there has to be a grassroots movement in order to get organizations, such as the ones that the Writers Center must answer to, on board in using new language across the board (71). They suggest, like Freire, that organizations come together and "read" their content within a new space and context and through a new lens and re-envision their vision statements (72). Their model is certainly something we could employ as we do periodically collaborate with organizations who receive this large grant fund, and we should consider even bringing the term "at-risk" to a writing prompt in our continued efforts to not only write, but also to build, community.

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