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HOW ENGAGING WITH THEMES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE  
IMPACTS STUDENT WRITING

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Education  
Moravian College  
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania  
2013

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative action research study examined how reading and engaging with themes of social justice affected the writing and thinking of secondary English composition students. There were 19 English composition students in this study from a suburban high school located in the northeastern part of Pennsylvania consisting of 727 predominantly white students. Methods of data collection included: participant observation journals, non-participant observation journals, student surveys, student interviews, student work, and individual student reflections. Incorporation of the social justice themes took place before, during, and after the writing process and included reading poems by multicultural authors and novel excerpts as guided by the research of Linda Christensen, reading and responding to e-mails from English language learners, and class discussions focused on ideas such as personal identity and perceptions versus realities. The purpose of incorporating social justice themes into the composition curriculum was to motivate student writing while helping students to expand their worldviews in order to be more accepting of those different from them. The research findings suggest that students are more willing to discuss and write about sensitive social justice themes if supported by age-appropriate materials and a classroom environment that respects their opinions. Findings also suggest that examining social justice themes may lead to students revising their own thinking.

## **Acknowledgements**

There are many people I would like to thank as I reflect on the success of this action research study. First of all, I am so grateful for the opportunity I had to work with a class of such interesting, enthusiastic, and honest composition students. My students revealed more to me about teaching than I ever could have imagined at the outset of my study; the ways in which they adapted to my ideas and gave me even more ways to make them better is something I will always be grateful for. In addition to my composition students, I am grateful for the serendipitous turn of events that allowed me to be paired with such a genuine and committed first-year co-teacher. Thank you so much for your encouragement and critical feedback throughout this process; you have shown in your first year of teaching how much you will be able to give our students over the coming years!

I would also like to thank the faculty members at Moravian College that taught me over the last four years and helped me to grow an appreciation for action research. Specifically, I owe much thanks to my thesis committee chair, Dr. Gilson. Dr. Gilson, without your conscientious and careful feedback during the heart of the writing process I would not have felt nearly as confident in my own abilities to succeed. Thank you for giving generous feedback with my best interests as a student in mind. Thank you for helping me to become a better writer and researcher!

I would also like to thank Dr. Shosh for the ways in which he challenged me to become a better student and educator. During my first experience as a student of yours, I remember telling my classmates that you have a captivating way of tricking us into doing really difficult work! This trick is the mark of an expert educator. I will always be grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from you, Dr. Shosh, and I hope that I can continue to learn from you in the years to come. Thank you for always having the extra time after class to answer my questions, the additional time outside of class to respond to my many e-mails, and above all, the contagious enthusiasm and positive attitude within class to make me excited to learn. I owe so much of my growth as an educator to the guidance I received from you!

I would like to offer a sincere thanks to Ms. Varela for sitting on my committee and providing me with feedback to better my future teaching and students. Also, thank you to my graduate classmates for the many times when you've all provided a laugh, a piece of chocolate, or a cup of coffee to quell my stressed mind. It has been a pleasure getting to know so many dedicated and talented educators.

An extra special thanks goes to my graduate colleague and friend, Meredith Cohen, for her encouragement and integral part of the success of this study. Thank you for taking the time to read and offer feedback about my work. Also, thank you for helping me to generate excellent ideas for how to better my study as

a whole. Without our “dynamic” brainstorming sessions, this study might not have had the spark that it does now. Finally, thank you for the countless hours you sat by my side, with your own graduate work, so that I would not have to feel alone in this daunting process. I am certain you will be adding a tremendous thesis of your own to Moravian’s archives one short year from this publication date; I hope we can share many more peppermint mochas and Post-It notes along the way to help you get there!

Lastly, I could not have flourished during this rigorous process if it weren’t for the care and love from my family. Whether it was an e-mail of encouragement, a text to check in on me, or simply patience with me when I was preoccupied by the demands of graduate work, all of these things helped me to feel as though I could get through this. Mom, thank you so much for your unceasing belief in me. I cannot fully express how much it means to me to have you as my constant cheerleader and sounding board. You help me to see the light of the larger picture when I am clouded by the darkness of a stressful moment. Steve, I am truly blessed to be your wife. I could not have accomplished this much without your love and support; thank you for being dedicated to our family in a way that enables me to reach my goals. Thank you for understanding my need for study days and library sessions even when it meant not seeing each other as much as we would have liked. Thank you for your sense of humor that helped me to keep things in perspective! Finally, I am blessed to be raising our daughter

with you. Phoebe Lynn, your hugs, kisses, and snuggles were my saving grace through this whole process. I hope someday you are able to pursue your own passions supported by the love of those around you, led first by your mom and dad!

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## **Researcher Stance**

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to capture the voices, both vocal and written, of a composition teacher and her students as we explored issues related to social justice.

### **Knowing the Field, Knowing Myself: My Entry into Education**

I first entered the field of education because I saw it as an exceptional opportunity to inspire significant societal changes. I came to understand the depth and complexity of this opportunity when I student taught, eight years ago, in a charter school with a predominantly African-American student population. As a Caucasian female, I was the minority of this classroom population. Surrounded by the harsh realities of racism, sexism, poverty, and defiance, it took all of my strength just to get up every morning to re-enter those four classroom walls. By the end of my student teaching term, my strength was gone and I was left trying to forget the building that held me captive for the required two months. I longed to return to my own college classroom, where I did not have to lead, but could simply learn. I longed for comfort and stability.

Fortunately, I had one semester left to resume my role as a student, but it was not exactly as comfortable as I expected. As part of my final graduation

requirements, I was placed in Diversity in Education- an interesting course being that I had just come from one of the most diverse educational experiences of my life. I entered the course longing to be passive and sheltered- everything that I had not been over the last few months- yet I left this course feeling vulnerable and exposed. I came to know my whiteness. By unpacking McIntosh's (1988) "invisible knapsack" containing some of the biased privileges white people carry with them that come from living in a society that tends to favor the white majority and oppress the non-white minorities, I began to see a part of me that would forever affect my role as an educator (McIntosh, 1988, as cited in Andersen & Collins, 2007). I began to reconsider the lives of the students for whom I felt unprepared to lead. I examined the effects of my gender and my sexual orientation. Most importantly, I left this course yearning for another opportunity to enter the walls I had come to fear and to engage in the experience of teaching again.

### **Social Justice in Action: Beginning My Career**

Fortunately, I secured a job three months after graduation and I began my career as an English teacher at a reputable public school district in western New York. A wonderfully diverse community, this school attracted families who had moved to the district specifically because of its schools' reputation for including students of many racial, religious, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds. The students' respect for one another's differences and their commitment to a

common goal of learning matched my vision for education, one characterized by social justice that values the individual voices of a diverse group of people and “culturally responsive” teaching (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 446). After two years of teaching in New York, life changes brought me to my current district in eastern Pennsylvania where I am in my seventh year of teaching and fifth year at this district. At this current placement, I have continued to develop a philosophy of education based on the idea of social justice. I expect all students to be able to learn, and I believe in the high standards that I set for myself as their teacher.

By juxtaposing my years of teaching at the district in New York with the years teaching in my current district, I notice the contrast between coming from a district rich in diversity and acceptance and moving to one that is lacking in diversity and, consequently at times, the acceptance of differences. This contrast inspires me to teach within a framework that helps my students to know and accept themselves in order to know and accept others. One of the specific ways that I teach within this framework is defined by the study I have conducted for my Master’s thesis.

### **Teaching Toward Justice By Teaching Writing**

This is the fifth year that I am teaching a composition course in my English department. Due to the fact that I have had numerous experiences with teaching many students how to write, I have seen that students often lack the

intrinsic motivation to write something meaningful. In other words, students often get stuck writing what the teacher wants, instead of writing as a means for improving their thought processes and personal understandings. The fact that I am teaching writing to ninth and tenth grade students pushes me even more to want to give them opportunities for personal growth, since they are at a stage in their adolescent lives when so many important values and attitudes are being accepted, rejected, and recreated. Since the composition course where my study takes place involves a flexible reading supplement instead of a set literature requirement, I believe that reading about others' experiences through secondary sources, reading about meaningful ideas presented through a variety of genres, and reading primary accounts from an electronic pen pal could have a positive impact on students' writing and lives. Therefore, my research question is:

*What are the observed and reported experiences when secondary English composition students read and engage in activities about themes of social justice as catalysts for writing?*

By including supplementary reading materials focused on ideas of identity, perceptions, stereotypes, personal realities, and tolerance, as well as pairing my students with students from diverse backgrounds and varying language learning experiences, I am eager to study the effect on my students' writing and essay choices. Over the course of my study, I will be teaching writing units that were led by these ideas instead of only teaching writing units that are led by the

composition modes that the students should work with in this course. By shifting the focus of the course from the mode of writing to the way to best express ideas about personal views, as sparked by various readings about purposeful topics and real world written conversations, my expectation is that students will begin to write more meaningful works. By writing essays, letters, and e-mails that express personally meaningful ideas, I am also hopeful that my students will inadvertently learn how to become better writers due to the presence of a more intrinsic motivation: the ability to express themselves about ideas that matter to them. Finally, I am hopeful that these educational experiences may transfer to personal experiences, by creating wider lenses for viewing the world and more accepting attitudes toward people of differences.

### **Understanding My Students**

With that being said, I realize that I have outlined units and ideas that I believe will be relevant to the average ninth and tenth grade student, yet I cannot know for sure how individuals in this age group will respond to these reading supplements and activities. It is possible that students may not be as affected by the readings that I include for them or that they may not want to delve into writing that is so personally charged. Even though I would hope for the outcome of a more open attitude of acceptance, as a responsible educator I will help my students to become better writers even if they do not respond as I had imagined. I will respect their views, just as I am trying to teach them how to respect others'

ideas. Instead of letting moments of confusion or frustration from their responses negatively influence my teaching, I will write about these concerns privately in my field log so they do not affect my quality of teaching and the students' rights to be taught. Along this same line, I am committed to observing and reporting student experiences whether or not they match my hopeful outcomes; Hendricks' (2009) idea of including negative case studies is one that I will address in more detail in my Trustworthiness Statement.

Although these composition experiences may not have the same effect on my students as my educational experiences incorporating social justice did with me, I am hopeful that my students will leave this course even slightly more invested in the value of their own truths and possibilities. In other words, I cannot guarantee that I will provide them with life-changing experiences. However, I do hope that I might help my students to understand at least one piece of themselves a little bit better through the discussion and writing experiences that I provide them with in my English Composition course. I want them to know that their individual ways of seeing the world matter and that they have the ability to change these views continuously through personal learning and reflection.

### **A Review of the Literature**

Being able to write well is an integral part of many life situations and human interactions. More specifically, writing deepens students' learning of content knowledge, is a required skill for employment in the modern workforce, and is present in many aspects of daily civic life (Kiuahara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009). Recently, schools have realized the need for writing across the curriculum, or WAC, where students write in a variety of modes across all subject areas. This shift of writing instruction as a shared responsibility shows the power effective writing practice can have on student learning (Williams, 2003). This suggests that writing is only as meaningful as the thinking it helps students to discover. In the context of my English composition classroom, where the content of the course is more flexible than a biology, history, or British literature class, the question becomes: what is the content I am expecting students to master? Is it only for my students to be able to define different rhetorical modes or is it for them to apply these modes to enrich their thinking about bigger ideas?

Raywid and Oshiyama (2000) point out this need to consider bigger ideas that go beyond a basic acquisition of skills; they suggest, "Over the years, schools have tended to focus on making youngsters more informed, more rigorously trained, more skilled. Perhaps we had better begin focusing on also making them more humane" (p. 448). Connecting themes of social justice to students' writing

help students analyze the injustices they experience in their everyday lives, from being called names in the hallways to witnessing their family members being denied housing, and enables them to learn how to form opinions and to think about these issues in a positive, more humane, way (Christensen, 2009). The necessary connection between teaching students how to write by illuminating themes of social justice, thus challenging the status quo, is articulated well by Brannon, et al. (2008), “Writing, we argue, should not be yet another way to train students to be obedient citizens, but rather provide them with opportunities to develop their thinking as individuals, making meaning through the act of composing” (p. 18). Christensen (2009) highlights this act of “meaning making through the act of composing” by encouraging students to “examine why things are unfair, to analyze the systemic roots of that injustice, and to use their writing to talk back” (p. 4). In other words, writing has the ability to make students more humane by giving them a safe space to articulate injustices that they see in the world around them, which may ultimately help them to change these injustices in the future.

By having students engage in a variety of writing forms apart from mere formulaic writing, they can create meaning. By allowing students to write to other students whom they have not met before, they can produce authentic writing samples to better prepare them for writing outside of the classroom. Ultimately, by engaging in a social justice curriculum, students can expand their thinking and

develop empathy, while learning how to communicate effectively through writing. Therefore, it is important for my English composition class to serve as an introduction to writing by way of critical thinking activities; by having students read and write about people and experiences they may be less familiar with, they can experiment with various writing techniques in a purposeful and humane way.

### **Defining Social Justice and a Social Justice Curriculum**

The most basic understanding of social justice relates the idea to providing equity among a diverse group of people. In education, it is difficult to make this definition more concrete, although many educators claim to support the basis of social justice. Hytten and Bettez (2011) note “almost everyone in education seems to share at least a rhetorical commitment to social justice, especially as we routinely express the belief that schools should help to provide equality of opportunity” (p. 9). However, every educator puts this idea to use in a different way depending on his or her comfort level and personal background (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). This suggests that it is hard to define social justice completely, since it includes many personal nuances when it is being applied to curriculum and instruction.

In order to make more sense of these variances in the definitions for social justice, Hytten and Bettez (2011) characterize the literature about social justice in education as falling under five main categories: “philosophical/conceptual, practical, ethnographic/narrative, theoretically specific, and democratically

grounded” (p. 10). According to Ayers, Quinn, and Stovall (2009), social justice education is defined by “equity,” “activism,” and “social literacy,” while embracing relevance, rigor, and revolutionary practice (xiv). Bieler (2006) describes the concept of “teaching purposefully,” which is similar to “Freire’s notion of praxis, which he defines as, ‘reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it’ (p. 51)” (Freire, 1970/2000, as cited in Bieler, 2006). In other words, the common ground between the many definitions of social justice and social justice curricula, or SJC, is the fact that the ideas encouraged and goals pursued are those of changing the status quo in order to build a more democratic society. Although some may question the necessity for an SJC in a mostly homogeneous district, such as the one in which my study takes place, it is worth stating that social justice and SJC are not concepts to be applied only to districts with student populations of great diversity. Even if there is a lack of diversity within the school’s population, particularly within a suburban, mostly privileged community, it is still useful to teach about the underprivileged because the privileged have more access to power in the future that they could use to create positive change (Nurenborg, 2011). In my classroom, social justice, in the context of social justice themes, can be defined as the overarching goal of seeking to understand those who are different from us by analyzing others’, as well as our own, thoughts, actions, and words.

### **Teaching With and For Increased Empathy**

At the heart of a social justice curriculum lies the imperative benefit of creating more empathetic students. Teaching empathy is more than simply teaching tolerance. Raywid and Oshiyama (2000) note that tolerance tends toward a neutrality of other groups, whereas purposeful instruction of appreciation and respect will better help students to become empathetic toward one another (p. 446). Bieler (2006) notes that “the performance of both skills and dispositions that involve wrestling with issues of difference, foster a critical, compassionate way of being in the world”- in other words, an empathetic and socially just way of conducting oneself inside and outside of the classroom. By giving my students issues of difference and social justice themes to grapple with in their writing, I am hoping to create this sort of compassion and empathy. With the practice of empathy comes the practice of critical thinking instead of the following of a mindless status quo.

In order to help students become more empathetic, teachers need to develop empathy within themselves as well. Therefore, teachers need to “reflect closely upon their own attitudes and impressions of their students,” especially minority students, in order to recognize that their students’ backgrounds are different from their own (Carlson, 2007, p. 5). In other words, I cannot expect my students to grow in this way if I am not also willing to do the same.

**Establishing a community of learners.** Students need to be taught how to work well with each other and how to form a community (Christensen, 2000). Christensen (2000) goes on to say that at the same time, teachers need to know and understand the members of these learning communities in order to support them well enough. Teaching within a social justice curriculum creates a community of learners because it allows teachers to include student voices across all groups in order to work together in a more cooperative way, which leads to a more democratic society (Brookfield, 2000 & Johnson-Bailey, 2002 as cited in Carlson, 2007, p. 5). Working together and being increasingly democratic give students a chance at becoming more empathetic in their interactions with others, which is a skill that will outlast and extend beyond the four walls of a classroom.

### **Teaching Writing**

**Moving away from the five-paragraph essay.** Some educators may cite positive experiences with this format for teaching writing. Smith (2006) emphasizes the benefits of giving students a solid structure to build off of by employing the format of the five-paragraph essay, thus enabling all students to have a common, approachable starting ground. However, the limitations that this structure inevitably provides must also be understood. Brannon, et al. (2008) examines the limitations of this structure through the lens of a deficit model of education, suggesting, “When students are considered lacking- lacking organization, lacking ideas to write about, lacking understanding- writing in an

arbitrary formula [such as the five-paragraph theme] merely sustains the deficit perception” (p. 18). This model goes against everything that the SJC stands for, being that it “labels the language of low socioeconomic students as a problem, often marking them as ignorant” (Brannon, et al., 2008, p. 18). In other words, teaching the five-paragraph theme reinforces the status quo and “dissuades students from practicing the rhetorical analysis necessary for them to become critical thinkers” (Wesley, 2000, p. 58).

Some of the ways in which I attempt to move away from the five-paragraph essay in this study are by giving students the opportunities to write essays not based on three-prong thesis statements, writing essays that allow personal pronouns, writing letters, and writing e-mails. Whitney, Ridgeman, & Masquelier (2011) suggest that alternatives to the five-paragraph essay be used so that students will:

...understand that writing well, inside or outside of school, is not simply a matter of writing without errors, as many students understand writing, or even following closely the instructions provided by teachers. Instead, it is a matter of learning about the writing situation one finds oneself in- its participants, its history, and its politics- and responding appropriately using the patterns that our predecessors in those situations have developed over time (p. 532).

In other words, alternatives to the five-paragraph essay lie in the students' abilities to analyze and decipher the context of a particular piece of writing and the best way to go about responding to it- not just merely plugging information into a predetermined pattern.

### **Student Writing**

**Student motivation.** Calkins (1994) notes, "When we help our students find and pursue their own projects and goals, we make it more likely that they will turn toward becoming productive and committed rather than disillusioned and bitter" (p. 172). One way to do this is by encouraging students to write about relevant issues in their own lives. Calkins (1994) goes on to state that "I believe that adolescents very much need to write about the poignant, turbulent events of their lives" so as to help make meaning of their lives through writing (p. 174). Students become more invested in their writing when it is about their own lives and will often be more motivated to work to make their writing better (Christensen, 2009). In other words, Christensen (2009) suggests, "Students will rise to the 'challenge' of a rigorous curriculum about important issues if that rigor reflects the real challenges in their own lives" (p. 6). In my opinion, it is the role of a responsible educator to work to provide these challenging issues for students to grapple with and this can be done through the infusion of social justice themes in a writing curriculum.

**Student engagement.** Teachers need to provide students with opportunities to enjoy writing, while expressing themselves with clarity and power (Elbow, as cited in Daisey, 2009, p. 157). Referring to the irritation of privileged students to engaging in learning about politics, particularly in regards to the underprivileged, Nurenborg (2011) observes, “A teacher cannot ignore this irritation; students will not learn unless the teacher finds a way to engage their willing consent” (p. 55). Teachers need to meet students with compromise, but also diligently urge them to persist beyond their current understandings; this can be done by helping students to learn how and to want to express themselves through writing. Williams (2003) links the importance of meaning making to student engagement, stating:

When teachers make writing meaningful, the majority of students still may not be able to see themselves as historians, musicians, accountants, or whatever, but they at least may stop seeing themselves merely as students and start seeing themselves as *writers* who can get things done with written discourse (p. 121).

In an effective composition classroom, students will be motivated and engaged by writing about their own lives.

**Writing as emancipation.** Freire (1970) reminds us, “Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information” (p. 79). Writing, especially beyond the constraints of the five-paragraph essay format,

gives students the opportunity to commit to these emancipating cognitive moments. Writing offers empowerment and gives students a chance to understand the effect their words can have on others (Daisey, 2009). Christensen (2000) sums up the urgent need for reading and writing skills to be developed in young people by stating, “People who lack reading and writing skills have difficulty expressing who they are. Their words are strangled and they learn to be silent. Their lack of literacy becomes internalized self-hatred” (p. VI). Bieler (2006) observes that adolescents too often feel suffocated by school instead of freed by it; therefore, it is the role of educators to help students experience opportunities for emancipation and growth.

### **Summary**

Writing is clearly linked to increased student learning (Kiuvara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009; Williams, 2003). By connecting themes of social justice to students’ writing assignments, educators may be able to help students learn about injustices in the world around them. As students learn more about the worlds around them, they may be able to challenge the status quo. As students learn more about others who are different from them, they may develop more empathetic attitudes, which may also have a positive impact on changing the status quo. In challenging the status quo, responsible educators of composition should give students opportunities to write in a variety of forms instead of simply adhering to one basic predetermined pattern, such as the five-paragraph essay. It

is the committed and reflective educator's job to incorporate a social justice curriculum into student writing assignments; one way to do so is by having students write about social justice topics that are relevant to their own lives. This link of relevance may increase both student motivation and engagement, thus leading to increased learning through writing. Finally, increased learning may lead to increased freedom from the injustices that bind students and other people in our modern society.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

Teaching students how to write well is an important goal of education, particularly at the secondary level where the focus is on preparation for college and career readiness (Kiuahara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009). Students write willingly and produce better work when they are interested in and/or can see relevance to the topics at hand (Christensen, 2009). Therefore, it is important for writing teachers to reflect on how to create more meaningful assignments by connecting the work assigned to the lived experiences of the students. One possible way to develop this connect is by looking at the impact writing about relevant social justice themes will have on students' motivation and writing performance.

### **Setting and Participants**

My study was conducted at a suburban high school in eastern Pennsylvania with 727 students enrolled in grades 9 through 12; 389 of the

students were males and 338 of the students were females. Of these 727 students in grades 9 through 12, the high school was composed of 677 students classified as “White,” 23 students classified as “Hispanic,” 20 students classified as “Black,” and 7 students classified as “Asian/Pacific Islander” (High School Principal, personal communication, March 3, 2013). The diversity in this district was mostly represented through a range of socioeconomic statuses instead of a variety of racial backgrounds. The high school used block scheduling for its English classes, including the English Composition course where my study took place.

The class which I chose for my study was a regular education composition class made up of 18 students in grade 9 and 1 student in grade 11. The students in my study ranged from ages 14 to 17 and 8 of the participants were female, while the other 11 were male. Out of the total 19 study participants, in a self-identification of race: 14 students identified themselves as white, 1 student identified as African American, 1 student identified as Puerto Rican, 1 student identified as Japanese American, 1 student identified as Greek, and 1 student identified as Irish. Two of the participants in my study had IEPs and 1 student had a 504 plan. There was not recruitment from the entire high school for the study; subjects were made up of the secondary students who were normally placed in my English composition class. However, there was an element of recruitment for the study within my class, since I told students they had the

opportunity to participate in it, but they did not have to. Although students were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study after they entered it, none of my 19 participants chose to withdraw. This process is described further in my following Trustworthiness Statement.

### **Data Gathering**

In order to capture the voices, both vocal and written, of a composition teacher and her students as they explored issues related to social justice for my study, I used a variety of collection methods to collect my data. Hendricks (2009) says, “Data to be collected should lead to meaningful, accurate and appropriate conclusions regarding research questions” (p. 79). Therefore, I used the following variety of data sources in order to produce the most thorough and fairly representative results: a private field log composed of my classroom observations and personal reactions throughout the study- especially when introducing a new unit, student writing samples in the forms of graphic organizers, poetry, and essays, student surveys pertaining to student opinions about the social justice themes and units, writing assignments and self-assessments of writing, self-assessments of interaction with the social justice themes, and student interviews.

**Participant observation journals.** Hendricks (2009) states that observational data is the “most important source of information in an action research study” (p. 90). Therefore, of primary importance throughout the study

were my participant observation journals, also known as field log journals. These are the entries I typed up after a class discussion or class lesson from my viewpoint as the teacher immersed in the classroom among my students and/or participants. In order to increase the credibility of these journal entries, I was sure to write as many direct quotes as possible from the participants when they were saying them in the form of class notes for all of the students to see. In other words, most of my field log entries are based on class notes that I took during class discussions as students were talking about various topics. As Hendricks (2009) suggests, these notes became a formal field log entry for my own keeping and analyzing when I typed them up in a timely manner, as close to the original event itself as possible, usually later that day or a couple of days after at most.

**Student interviews and surveys.** Another collection method that I utilized was conducting informal student interviews on a whole group basis and on an individual basis throughout the study. By talking with students and recording their reactions to specific questions and giving them time to share their ideas about specific concerns related to my study, I was able to cross-reference my position as researcher with their viewpoints as participants. Similar to student interviews was my use of personally created student surveys. I checked for the fairness of these surveys by having a professor and expert in my field of study look over them before I gave them to my students. Each participant in my study

completed an electronic multiple-choice and short answer survey at the end of every unit (Appendix A). Additionally, the participants completed an electronic autobiographical survey at the beginning of the e-pal project (Appendix B) and an electronic final reflection survey at the end of the study (Appendix C).

**Student work.** In addition to participant observation logs from the standpoint of the teacher and student interviews and surveys eliciting the responses of the student, I also collected student work samples throughout the study. As students completed various writing assignments that were tied to the major units within my course, I inserted pseudonyms and then made copies of these assignments to add to my field log for further reflection and analysis. In total, I gathered: a benchmark writing assignment from the beginning of the semester, a brainstorming assignment from the first unit, a creative poetry assignment from the first unit, final essays from the first unit, final essays from the second unit, student e-mails from the semester, and student reflections from the end-of-semester portfolio assignment. Please refer to Table 1 for an additional timeline of data collection and analysis.

Table 1

*Timeline of Data Collection and Analysis*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Key Event</b>
<b>9/24/12</b>	HSIRB approval received
<b>9/24-10/1/12</b>	Study permission slips distributed and collected: First by principal then parents/guardians and colleague(s)
<b>9/25/12</b>	Participant Observation Journal: Student Interactions
<b>9/26/12</b>	Began Personal Identity Unit: Collected written responses to brainstorming task
<b>10/1/12</b>	Non-Participant Observation Journal: Student analysis of personal identity poems
<b>10/2/12</b>	Collected individual personal identity “I Am Poems”
<b>10/4/12</b>	Principal approval granted for e-pal project at an individual meeting
<b>10/5/12</b>	Participant Observation Journal: Our first real social justice discussion
<b>10/5/12</b>	Informal Class Check-In: “What did you learn from the poetry discussions?”
<b>10/9/12</b>	Introduction to the idea of the e-pal project to the students

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<b>10/10/12</b>	Participant Observation Journals: Deconstructing the word “ghetto” and Who is the audience for this paper?
<b>10/23- 10/25/12</b>	Participant Observation Journal: Thesis statement conferences
<b>10/24/12</b>	Participant Observation Journal: Why not the five-paragraph essay?
<b>10/24/12</b>	Whole Class Survey: Experiences with the five-paragraph essay
<b>11/11/12</b>	Parent permissions distributed for beginning the e-pal project
<b>11/12/12</b>	Collected Personal Identity Essays
<b>11/13/12</b>	Participant Observation Journal: Class discussion about respect
<b>11/13/12</b>	Administered individual electronic Post-Personal Identity Unit Survey
<b>11/14/12</b>	Participant Observation Journal: Assigning of the e-pal pairs
<b>11/15/12</b>	Began Perceptions vs. Realities Comparison Unit
<b>11/16/12</b>	Participant Observation Journal: Racial categorization activity through PBS.org
<b>11/19/12</b>	Students sent first e-pal e-mails including copies of Personal Identity Essays
<b>11/19/12</b>	Participant Observation Journal: Discussion of <i>Brothers and Sisters</i>

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<b>11/21/12</b>	Participant Observation Journal: Class discussion about language assimilation
<b>11/21/12</b>	Individual Survey: Negative Case Analysis of Sawyer
<b>11/29/12</b>	Individual Survey: Negative Case Analysis of Eko
<b>12/2/12</b>	Participant Observation Journal: Individual teacher reflection on teaching writing
<b>12/4/12</b>	Collected Perceptions vs. Realities Comparison Letters
<b>12/5/12</b>	Administered individual electronic Post-Perceptions vs. Realities Comparison Unit Survey
<b>12/5/12</b>	Analysis of Post-Comparison Unit Survey Results and Negative Case Analysis
<b>12/6/12</b>	Students shared reactions to the first e-pal e-mail responses
<b>12/13/12</b>	Students sent second e-pal e-mails
<b>12/18/12</b>	Students received second e-mail responses from e-pals
<b>1/4/13</b>	Students sent third e-pal e-mail including copies of Perceptions vs. Realities Comparison Letters
<b>1/11/13</b>	Miss Harper visited Mrs. Hauser's classroom to meet the students Participant Observation Journal: Meeting Miss Harper

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<b>1/14/13</b>	Students received final e-mail responses from e-pals
<b>1/15/13</b>	Administered individual electronic Final Reflection Survey

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**Trustworthiness Statement**

**An ethical study.** In order to protect the people who made this study possible, my first and foremost obligation was to the confidentiality of my students' identities. Therefore, pseudonyms were used to replace student names in this study and throughout my data collection process. All of these research materials were stored in a locked filing cabinet throughout the study and were destroyed at the end of the study. Also, the students were aware of their participation in this study from the outset of it; their parents and/or guardians signed letters of consent and the students were given letters for withdrawal that they were able to use at any time throughout the study, without penalty (Appendix D). My principal also signed a letter of consent before I implemented the study (Appendix E) and colleagues involved with the study also signed a form of consent (Appendix F). As another way to confirm the ethical intent of this study, the Human Subjects Internal Review Board at Moravian College approved my overall study before it began (Appendix G). The data sources I included and the variety of ways that I gathered information as described in the previous section is another way that I conducted an ethical study.

**Triangulation, member checks, and negative case studies.** Hendricks (2009) refers to this important point about triangulation, "The more sources of data you have, the more likely it is that your findings will be credible" (p. 81). This explains why I studied a variety of data sources in order to reach conclusions

in my study. I took participant observations, but I also acquired non-participant observations. I asked students about my observations in the form of member checks in order to cross-reference my field log journals, while also referring to student artifacts throughout the study. Additionally, I conducted student interviews and gave out multiple-choice and open-ended survey questions aimed at “exploring” not “probing” in order to continue to triangulate my perspective of the data being collected (Seidman, 1998, p. 68). In other words, I took care not to try to elicit specific responses through my questioning. Instead, I let the students dictate the direction of the interview so that I could understand their true thoughts. Finally, I included not only data from participants that confirmed my study, but also students who did not perform as I had hoped in the study and/or were outliers to my other data, also known as negative case studies (Hendricks, 2009). By including these cases as well as positive cases, I accounted for my data and the story of my study as accurately and thoroughly as possible.

**Review of the literature and experience in the field.** Another way that I ensured my trustworthiness as a researcher was by presenting the findings in my literature review. By researching academic literature related to my study, I showed the background knowledge I acquired about the topics related to my study. In doing this research prior to implementing my study and at times when my study took new turns, I honored the voices of other experts in the field in order to make my own study more credible.

In addition to the presence of the literature review, the fact that I was in my seventh year of teaching secondary English also added to my credibility as a researcher; although I am constantly learning from my profession, I was not brand new to it at the time of this study. Also, by conducting this study in my own classroom, I was fully immersed in the content being studied and completely involved with the participants of the study for five months, five days a week.

**Researcher bias.** Even though I am preserving confidentiality, honoring consent, providing multiple data sources, displaying credibility, and writing as a researcher immersed in the field on a daily basis, I realize that there are personal biases that I carry with me in this study. For one, I believe that students will benefit from writing about issues related to social justice. However, it is possible that some of these themes may cause students to become more discouraged with their writing, depending on their personal experiences with the topics.

Also, I am biased in the ways that I understand the experiences of ninth and tenth grade students. In the words of Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul (1997), “The written document reflects the complex, partial, and multi-perspectives that refract meaning for and from the reader” (p. 35). In other words, the social justice themes I am choosing are themes that I feel ninth and tenth grade students can relate to; I am interpreting their ability to relate to them by the ways in which my personal perspectives cross-reference with their words, work, and my participant observations, just as readers of my study will also interpret it differently.

Therefore, I understand it is possible that some students may not find these themes of social justice or the assignments I have created to be relevant to their lives. However, as acknowledged, this has not deterred me from including these experiences in my study; the inclusion of negative case studies has also allowed me to avoid bias and portray this account as truthfully as possible

### **My Story**

#### **First Impressions: More than Meets the Eye**

When I think back to the beginning of my semester with my English Composition students who were to become my study participants, I recall one specific interaction. Jared and Meredith were seated by each other according to my pre-made and somewhat arbitrarily appointed seating chart. I noticed they would chat here and there, but never realized the full extent of their working dynamic. After a couple of weeks into the class, Meredith approached me privately and requested a seating change due to the fact that “she’d worked together with Jared for many years and they just don’t get along because he is mean.” Since one of my most important goals in the beginning of a semester is to establish a safe and comfortable learning environment, I immediately tended to her request by making a few rearrangements to the seating chart for the following day.

However, as luck would have it, when the students counted off for a group activity a few days later, Jared and Meredith were both twos. I cringed inwardly,

but decided to let the randomization be and allow them to have a chance at figuring out how to work together. I placed their group by my desk and kept a careful eye on their interactions. I noticed that Jared kept telling his group that there was too much information on the poster, but added little to their group poster himself. At one point, Meredith got very frustrated with him and said that he should have been helping earlier instead of talking to the group next to them about Fantasy Football.

Since I could tell that frustrations were mounting quickly, I decided to intervene by explaining to the group what I was hearing. I told them that Jared did have a point- that it is important to consider the amount of information on a poster so as to present it effectively. However, I then explained that Meredith had a right to want his help instead of only criticism. Therefore, I explained that maybe Jared could re-read what had been written on the draft and suggest ways to make the information more concise or identify what words could be left out. During my suggestions, Jared looked away from me at first, but then just gave me a blank stare. I was concerned that he was tuning me out, but when I asked him what I had said, he was able to repeat the plan. Therefore, I returned to my desk.

Later in the period, Jared was turning toward another group and talking to them again instead of working with his group. My co-teacher, Miss Kay, spoke to him and this group. When Jared finally returned to his originally assigned group, Meredith expressed her frustrations with him again, saying, “You’re not supposed

to just tell us what to do, you're supposed to work with us." This time, I did not intervene. Instead I thought, thank you, Meredith- you have articulated one of my most important classroom goals- for students to learn how to work well with others even though there will be differences and disagreements along the way.

The following students are some of my key participants that helped to show this array of differences in the classroom where my study took place. Although they are not the only students I include data from, they do represent some of the variety that created many of our most meaningful moments throughout the study.

**Jared.** It seemed to me not only from the reactions of other students in the class, but also by the side comments he often made, that Jared had the potential to come across negatively in a class. Whether it was Meredith requesting a seat change and then Miranda requesting one away from him three weeks later, his incessant commentary about Fantasy Football statistics, or addressing himself as "clearly getting a 100% on that assignment because I know everything," Jared's personality originally struck me as a freshman boy with a sarcastic personality and an attitude toward class that was sometimes more interested in the social aspects than the academic aspects. I knew that he would be a challenge at times, but I also knew that with these challenges would come excellent opportunities for growth on my part as his teacher and hopefully on his part as my student.

**Meredith.** Her ability to speak up for herself by requesting a seat change and for her group by confronting Jared showed me from the very beginning of the semester that Meredith was a strong girl. She was not afraid to voice her opinion, which lends itself to her self-proclaimed label of being a “sassy pants.” Meredith’s sassiness was something to be admired; she was concerned with doing what was right and being fair to those around her. She was committed to learning, which was displayed on a daily basis by the body language she used during class- eyes were forward, her body was tilted at attention to the person speaking, and she rarely ever interrupted anyone because she was always raising her hand. I found out quickly that her classmates recognized the admirable qualities in her, too, since five or six other students would often huddle around her desk during the customary “stretch break” in the middle of our ninety minute class. I had a feeling from the very beginning that Meredith was not only going to learn a lot from my class, but that she had a lot to teach our class, too.

**Desmond.** Many of the students in my English Composition class were friends before entering my class and I quickly learned this from the way they made their side conversations and knowing gestures with one another throughout a class period. Desmond’s gestures and comments indicated that he was a friend of both Meredith and Jared. Desmond did not speak out nearly as much as Jared did in the beginning of the semester, but when he was impassioned by something- whether it was a Fantasy Football reference or a classroom topic- he had a lot to

say. He often brought energy to the class, even from the very beginning, by sharing his passionate rants.

**Eko.** Due to his close friendship with Jared, I was a little worried that Eko was going to get swept away by negativity with the sometimes too-sarcastic remarks of Jared. However, the most that these two created was taunting each other about their Fantasy Football statistics. Eko enjoyed being social, but I could tell from the beginning that he was also a respectful student who wanted to do the right thing. For instance, when I would remind him to return to his seat after wandering around, he did so easily and without a defense. Although I had to speak to him about inappropriate language early in the semester, he was remorseful and showed improvement from that point forward. Eko liked to make his classmates laugh, which became apparent in some of the small group presentations and individual opportunities to share that he was a part of- he joked that he was a “sexy Greek dance MONSTER” when referencing his personality. Laughter fueled many of his antics, but so did his overall respect for us- myself and Miss Kay, as his teachers. I found a soft spot forming in my heart early on in the semester for the fun-loving, yet respectful personality of this student.

**Miranda.** Oh, Miranda! I taught Miranda before in a different writing class two years ago and due to this, she was the only junior in my English Composition class of mostly freshmen. Miranda was a female student with an expressive personality that was displayed by the hot pink streak in her long,

brown hair, unique outfits of black and neon colors, and the witty phrases and blunt remarks that often come out of her mouth. Although Miranda has said that she feels judged by other teachers because of her bold personality and rocky past disciplinary record, Miranda and I never had a problem building a rapport with one another. Therefore, I was looking forward to having her in my class again, although I did wonder what it would be like for her to be in another writing class with students a bit younger than her. Since I remembered her struggling with finishing her work on time when I had her last, I wondered and worried if this younger environment would negatively impact her ability to focus.

It was my initial observation that she had matured quite a bit since I'd last taught her, so I hoped my instinct was right. When she burst out at Jared in the middle of class that she "was going to kill him if he didn't shut up," it actually confirmed my instinct about her growth over the past two years. In the past, she might have created a physical altercation or gone off on a much more unbridled rampage, but this time she was giving her classmate a warning and trying to express how she felt. She and I spoke about this outburst after class and she confided in me some of the harsh things he had been saying under his breath at her to make her react this way. We came up with a peaceful plan of a seat change to quell this problem. I knew Miranda had to truly focus in order to control her impulses directed at Jared. Although I normally do not condone threats to another student, I was able to recognize this comment for what it was- progress and self-

restraint- because of the relationship I had with her. I encouraged her to talk to me when things got out of hand instead of bursting out, but commended her for her ability to restrain from reacting in a physical way. I knew from early on that Miranda's honest personality was going to be an asset to our class.

**Charlie.** Charlie was a freshman who had just transferred to our school district from a neighboring school district. I was concerned that it would be difficult for him to adapt to the new environment, but the other students took to him and his easygoing personality very easily. He joked about his old district, often sharing his allegiance to it, while other students teased back at the fact that he was now a member of our district instead. The more comfortable Charlie got in the beginning of the semester, the more he had to say! He often liked to interrupt the class with a witty comment and he found friends in Eko, Desmond, and Jared. He was also part of the crew that liked to huddle around Meredith's desk during breaks. Unfortunately, I also started to notice from early on that Charlie did not always come prepared for class and that he would need some redirecting in order to stay on track with what needed to be done.

**Sawyer.** My first impression of Sawyer was that he was an interesting character since his outer appearance was not indicative of an average freshman boy. He had facial hair and long hair that made him look older than he was, but his sometimes silly and nonchalant comments about things like "not wanting to get up because it would be too far to walk to get a pencil" made his real age more

apparent. He spoke up selectively, but when he did speak out, students tended to take notice. His comments and unique ways of wording things complete with “dudes,” calling his female teachers “man,” and confessing his “addiction to waffles and Taco Bell” elicited many chuckles from his classmates from the very beginning of the semester.

**Becky.** From the beginning of the semester, I found myself perplexed by Becky’s personality. Early on, she presented herself as a fairly shy student who did not talk much. When called upon, she would speak rather softly at times. I often wondered if she was mad at me or upset by something I was doing in the class because I found her actions hard to decipher. However, on other days, she would be very talkative and enjoy sharing ideas and stories with the people around her. I was delighted when one day after class, a few weeks into the semester, she approached me with some poetry she had written and gotten published from a student writing contest. It was then that I felt we were building a rapport with one another, so I made sure to read her poems and offer her feedback so as to make my interest in her- and all of my individual students- transparent. I could not have predicted in the beginning of the semester just how much Becky would flourish in the coming months of my class.

### **Introducing My Study to the Class**

Following Whyte’s (2011) research that summarizes the work of many researchers in the field of teaching writing who say it is important for teachers of

writing to be writers themselves, I decided to take the opportunity to introduce my study to my class by sharing the writing that I was doing. At the time in September 2012 when the class was ready to learn about the possibility of participating in this study, I began by projecting a writing sample of my own, a page from my current review of the literature, on the document camera for the class to read. I then asked them to read the three paragraphs on the screen. I told them I did not expect them to understand these paragraphs line for line, but that I wanted to share with them something I was writing and have them answer some questions for me to the best of their abilities.

After about five minutes of quiet reading time, I asked the students what ideas they noticed I was writing about. They came up with answers like: teaching, students, how to teach students how to write, and students receiving criticism. I then used this as my segue into explaining to the students what I have been researching over the course of my graduate study years. I told them, "I'm very excited because now is the time when all I've been researching, studying, and writing about will be implemented in here- with you!" I then explained to them that they would have a choice if they wanted to participate in my study or not and that their decisions were completely personal and would not impact the grades they received or the lessons they were included in. In other words, I let them know that all of the data I would be collecting would not affect the lessons the class took part in. I also assured them that if they were participants, then their

names would not be included, but instead pseudonyms or “code names” would be used. I explained to them that all of this information and more was available in a letter to their parents and/or guardians and they would need to have it signed in order to be part of or not be part of the study.

At this point, excitement started to spread in the classroom. Eko shouted out, “Yes! I definitely want to be in it!” and other students gave glances in agreement. It was an exciting moment for both the students and myself because I realized that this dream of my study was becoming a reality. As I placed it in the context of real students with real needs and emotions, I found myself feeling even more eager to get started and to do it right. This study was no longer just something I was doing for a graduate class outside of my classroom; it was something I was doing to improve the learning experiences of the young people in front of me.

As the weeks went on of waiting for signed permission slips and formalizing the study, more questions and reactions to the reality of my study came up. A popular question was whether or not the students would be able to meet my graduate professors. However, a particularly meaningful question and observation that speaks to the authenticity of my study, is when Eko asked if there would be video cameras in the classroom because “there shouldn’t be since we might talk about Fantasy Football too much.” I took this comment as a time to clarify the design of my study to the students. I told them that this was a good

point, but that my study is not about “you acting a certain way, but instead about me observing everything that happens.” I told them that I know we will have good days and bad days, but this study was “for me to examine why something wasn’t as I’d hoped or you’d hoped and to consider what I could have done better or what you could have done better.” My explanations and enthusiasm, coupled with other students’ enthusiasm, must have paid off because 19 out of my 20 total students chose to participate in the study.

### **Our First “Real” Social Justice Class Discussion**

I admit- sometimes the process of conducting a thesis study is scary, especially when it involves so many unknowns that embody themselves in adolescent students. The students were on the third day of an activity where they had read, discussed, and answered questions (Appendix H) about poems that I had pre-selected for their various representations of personal identity (Appendix I) in small groups of three to four students, when my own fears and worries started to set in. I began to worry that I was letting the students spend too much time on the poetry genre and not enough time on curriculum geared at specifically preparing for the statewide Keystone Exam. I was fearful that if another department member walked into my room, then he or she might feel that my departure from simply teaching the students about the expository modes was superfluous. These statewide testing demands and departmental pressures were making me doubt my efforts toward a well-rounded and well-researched writing curriculum.

However, the very next day after these doubtful moments, my students and I had a discussion that reignited my belief in this study and convinced me that it was worthwhile. Up until this point, I had been going through each of the 5 poems and reviewing their small group analysis of it in a whole group discussion facilitated by projecting each poem on the document camera. However, the tapering class discussion and increased need for my prompting suggested to me that the students were getting tired of talking about the poems that they had read. I had a feeling that we needed to pick up the pace. Also, I wanted to help them to see what they had learned from discussing the first 3 poems together as a class. Therefore, I decided to condense our discussion with a few review questions and a final discussion of one of the remaining poems instead of both of the remaining poems.

Before moving on, I asked the students to reflect on the first 3 poems we had analyzed by writing down one thing they had learned from these first 3 discussions. The responses I got were encouraging, since I realized the students truly were learning some valuable things from our English classroom. For instance, David mentioned, "Originally, I thought that the speaker was the same person as the writer." Normally, this is an idea that students struggle with, yet David was able to articulate it clearly and easily for the class. Eko shared, "You need to look deeper into poems to find answers." I realized that Eko was beginning to appreciate the close analysis of words, both written and spoken, that

would be the backbone of our time in English Composition class. Jared honestly revealed, “In the poem called ‘Black,’ I didn’t think of her as an African American woman. In re-reading it as this, it made me think of her as such and it made me think of the government.” I was proud of Jared in this moment because he was recognizing other people’s opinions, in the form of the persona of the poem, and allowing for his own thought process to change. Finally, Tyler announced one of the key truths to any written work by stating, “Showing details sound a lot better than telling details.” These conclusions were enough to assure me that the work we were doing was worthwhile. With my renewed sense of purpose, I was excited to get into a discussion about the final poem. Due to the varied responses that arose from their individual reflections and my encouragement toward those who shared these ideas with the class, it seemed as though the students were recharged in their purposes, too.

I opened up the discussion of “What Are You?” by projecting a copy of it on the document camera and asking the students to refer to the responses they had written in analysis of it in their small groups. Due to the fact that this poem explicitly includes lines about diversity, race, and ethnic histories, I was hoping it would kick start a discussion about personal identity that included such ideas, since the other poem discussions had not illuminated these ideas as directly. This opportunity presented itself when a few students highlighted the idea of “diversity” as one of the main ideas in the poem. Since my past experiences have

shown me that students sometimes use this word without really thinking about what it means, I decided to ask my students to delve deeper into this idea by giving these directions to the class: “What is diversity? Write down a definition in your notes.” The students wrote individually for a couple of minutes and then I wrote down answers from student volunteers on a paper projected on the document camera.

Jared started our conversation in a way that surprised me. He noted, “Diversity is not all being the same in a group. Like here at school, we’re not all the same skin tone, we’re diverse.” At this point, a few students in the classroom rolled their eyes and others even coughed under their breaths. This suggested to me that they did not agree with Jared’s statements, but instead of interjecting, I let Jared continue, “Although, we’re not as diverse as other schools like those that neighbor us in the nearby city.” I was surprised by the way that Jared was able to immediately revise his thinking to account for an alternative viewpoint on the diversity of our school, which is a place that most would deem as a fairly homogenous group. It is possible that Jared picked up on his classmates’ disagreement and simply wanted to save face, but I also think he was making an attempt at thinking critically by monitoring his comments.

From there, our conversation spiraled into a plethora of viewpoints. I asked the students to define other examples of diversity between people, beyond the example of skin tone that Jared referenced. The way in which students shot

up their hands and wanted to share opinions about this idea kept my pen moving quickly. Their varied viewpoints, from both students who normally spoke aloud and those who did not as frequently, included these ideas in their own words. The italicized words indicate my words as I helped them to clarify their thinking and relate it to more commonly understood terms:

- Religious – *Religion*
- Sex diversity- male and female, and who we like, like some people who are lesbians – *Sexual orientation*
- Nationality
- Diverse in personal preferences
- Money – *Socioeconomic status or SES*
- Political views and personalities
- Physical or mental disabilities – *Exceptionalities*
- Prejudices

With the mention of prejudices, Miranda took a moment to share her bold and sincere personality with the class:

People who have tattoos and piercings get judged. Like if a person has a bunch of tattoos other people automatically think that person is bad, but the tattoos could be a memorial, like dead family members or for breast cancer. I still get judged because I have pink in my hair, like when I'm

out with my mom people stare at me and her, but she doesn't care because she's used to the fact that I'm weird.

She then laughed and smiled jokingly, which told the class and me that she was comfortable with sharing these opinions. I admired her candor; her honest story about the effects of being judged prompted me to ask the students this next question, "Why do we think these things, or prejudices, happen?" Again, the students chimed in by raising their hands and waiting for me to call on them. Students I had not even heard from yet had something to offer, while others still remained quiet, taking it all in. Their responses to this question about prejudices included these answers:

Desmond shared that "no one wants to be mainstream." He followed up with the example of "Apple products, everyone has them, so that's mainstream. People are prejudiced of not mainstream."

Jasper, who had been quiet up until this point, noted, "Sometimes people do stupid things and then they associate the entire group with them even if it's not."

Juliet added, "Generations pass formal opinions to new generations, and judge because maybe other people aren't following how they were raised."

Charlie expanded on this by stating, "Older look at young in a weird way, different colored hair- whole different person, because it wasn't that way years ago."

Samantha gave us her interpretation of this by adding, “Everybody has own way of acting and dressing, for example dying hair, some say yes and others say no, but start to judge based on these opinions.”

Jared pointed out that “how you’re brought up- your parents” can influence your opinions.

In her emphatic way of revealing an important point without even realizing she was doing so, Miranda concluded this discussion about judgments by firmly stating, “People are too judgmental. If you don’t act and don’t look like them, then they don’t like you. For example a skater versus a football player.”

Although time constraints kept us from analyzing every detail within this discussion, I came away from this class period with a sense of accomplishment. Through something I had exposed the students to, a simple poem with a persona who takes on the identities of many different people, a class discussion was spun out of student voices and opinions. The way students fed off of each other, allowed a variety of people to talk, and kept my pen of record moving, marked the ability of our group to talk maturely about abstract and sometimes sensitive topics. Jared proved himself to have an opinion on most things, just as I had figured he might from early on, but he surprised me in the way that he monitored these opinions openly. Miranda used her bold personality to bring our conversation to a personal level and the quiet that spread throughout the classroom as she spoke suggested that other students were as impressed as I was

to hear her personal reflections. On the surface, we discussed a poem, but in the lens of a social justice educator, students and teacher alike came together to share opinions, learn from each other, and debate topics that affect how we view one another. This first “real” social justice discussion left me eager for the students to voice these opinions in the upcoming writing assignments throughout the rest of the semester.

### **Individual Growth: Not a Linear Process**

My seven years of teaching adolescents has shown me that nothing is permanent and that learning is a process- it is not a neat, step-by-step progression, but a playful tug back and forth of students’ willingness to learn and the teacher’s desire to teach, along with students’ understanding in one area juxtaposed with their difficulty in transferring this to other areas of their lives. Therefore, I should not have been surprised when some of my key participants, who had shared moments of socially just sensitivity and mindful discussion, followed these up with comments of violence and ignorance just days later.

In a class conversation, the state of New Jersey came up. Eko interjected, “I hate New Jersey, I wish it didn’t exist! I think we should blow it up!”

Well, this was a bit too violent for me to ignore, plus I had a feeling there were plenty of people in the class who may not only disagree, but also be offended by this sort of comment due to the fact that people in our area of Pennsylvania often have ties to New Jersey. Therefore, I responded with, “Just

because you hate it, can you see how others might like it? How it is some people's homes and where they're from?"

Eko modified his previously violent statement for a less violent, yet still seemingly harsh conclusion, "Well, we can take all the people out of there, then get rid of it."

"Well, at least that is more humane, but can you still imagine why others may disagree with you?"

Eko concluded with this profound statement: "Yeah, but it's just so annoying."

Was calling an entire state filled with individual lives "annoying" what I was hoping for in my quest for creating socially aware and justice-seeking students? Not exactly. Did Eko contribute positively and meaningfully to our class discussion about diversity just a few days ago? Absolutely.

These types of violent and judgmental comments were not isolated to only Eko. On another occasion, while discussing a female character, another male student shouted out, "She should come here so I can teach her a lesson!" while punching one hand into his other hand. Some of his classmates started laughing, so I immediately held him accountable. I told him, and the class, that this comment was extremely inappropriate. He then made a few excuses, trying to tell me that the gesture meant something else. Instead of simply arguing with him, I told him that no matter what he meant by it, that gesture could be seen as

offensive since it is often associated with violence. At this point, some students were still laughing, so I needed to hold them accountable for their actions, too. I told them that this was not a laughing matter, to which they responded with silence.

In these less than ideal moments, I learned that this growth process is not simple. However, I also realized that a few unjust comments should not erase other comments of justice or increased understanding. Just as I do not take away points from past assignments when students make mistakes on current assignments, I could not hold these moments against Eko or his classmates. In reflection, I am grateful that they showed me early on that the work I was doing needed to be a daily, moment-by-moment commitment.

### **Student Voices Regarding the Five-Paragraph Essay**

From all of this discussion about personal identity, the plan was to have the students write an informative essay about their own personal identities (Appendix J). However, before I could forge ahead with this plan, we needed to establish a common ground of past writing experiences and expectations first. I had already given my students an opportunity to share with me how they felt about writing in general, but now I wanted to hear about using the infamous five-paragraph essay structure. Based on my previous experiences of teaching this grade level, I anticipated that most of the students were taught this form at some point in the years leading up to ninth grade. As a matter of fact, I had even taught

Miranda about this form just two years ago when she was in ninth grade!

However, this time I wanted to let the students' voices dictate how the teaching should go. I wanted them to know that it was okay to admit they liked this form or that they have struggled with this format.

Therefore, before starting our first major essay assignment, I asked the class in an informal type of survey, the following question: "How many people, by show of hands, have used the five-paragraph essay structure before?" Out of my total of 18 present participants, 16 students raised their hands to show they had used this structure before. I then followed up with this question, "How many of you that raised your hands have felt limited by this structure? In other words, you didn't think your ideas fit perfectly into this structure or you had to leave out some of your thoughts because of it?" Thirteen students raised their hands in agreement with these questions. I took this as an opportunity to explain to the students why we would not be simply adhering to the five-paragraph essay structure for every writing assignment in this class. I told them:

This is why I am going to try to get you to see beyond the five-paragraph essay. Because I don't want any of your thoughts to be left out if you think they are important- I'd rather work with these ideas than simply work with a set structure that makes you leave some of your ideas behind.

I could see some expressions of surprise, with raised eyebrows and quick glances to classmates, but I also saw some faces that I could not figure out. I took this as a sign to tell them:

I know some of you may be anxious, while others might feel excited by this. The point is, we are going to work together and I am going to help you learn how to think about writing. This will hopefully give you the tools to approach any assignment in the best way possible!

This is the first time I ever took such an explicit, yet somewhat ambiguous approach to teaching the students how to go about writing. In the past, I was used to having students construct three-prong thesis statements, then using those to fill out a specific graphic organizer based on three body paragraphs, and then trying to teach them how to create an interesting and meaningful introduction and conclusion, while simply saying the same thing over and over again. By surveying the class in this moment and seeing their opinions match up with the research I was newly becoming familiar with, I was refreshed and excited. I had a creeping suspicion that this process would be somewhat ambiguous, since it would not be spelled out graphic organizer by graphic organizer in the same manner for every student like I was used to in the past, but I also knew that by being honest with them about my intentions and by honoring their honest opinions, then we would hopefully end up in a better place than where we started.

### **Sometimes Theories Are Easier Than Practice**

Honestly, I know this from my seven years of teaching and many years of being an education student, yet I am still caught off guard when something seems to go so well in an abstract idea or theory, but then does not turn out as smoothly when the plan is put into practice. This is what happened after my refreshing in-class survey about the five-paragraph essay; we moved forward feeling energized by this freedom of breaking away from a past writing habit. Yet, as we moved through the writing process, we were met by some unexpected challenges.

In an effort to give students more guided feedback during the drafting process, being that students would likely be approaching their essays in a variety of ways, I decided to hold small-group thesis conferences of 10 students each. This worked well due to the fact that Miss Kay, my co-teacher, was able to work with the other half of the class while I held the conferences. I chose to meet with a small group of students instead of meeting with each student individually because I wanted the students to learn from each other's questions and comments. I also thought it would be beneficial for students to hear other students' thesis statements before I spoke with them individually, so that they could see how to revise or consider what their statements mean to a larger audience.

We started the session by having each student read his or her statement out loud to the rest of the group. I made notes as students read so that I could remember each of their individual statements for more refined feedback later on.

After they were all done reading, I asked them to share their observations about everyone's statements. They noticed similarities in format, areas that were too general, and other ways to be more specific. I also shared with them my own observations that many of the statements were extremely general; I then told each of them to underline or highlight the part of the statement he or she thought could be revised to be more specific or more detailed. This revision became their homework for tomorrow's class.

In addition to pointing out these revisions, I also asked the students to reflect on the conference session and tell me how this did or did not help with the writing process. Miranda concluded, "I have a better idea of how to write my thesis, to be more detailed." Desmond said, "It gives me an example of what to do." Jared shared, "I can see where I am as a writer within the class." Overall, I was encouraged by this first session and the students' responses to it. It took a bit of time, but everything I'd been reading about teaching writing said that I needed to let it be a social process for the students, so I was glad that I implemented this small group support before moving on to individual conferences.

Once I did start talking to students individually about their revised thesis statements over the next couple of days, I started to realize my dilemma. In telling them to make their statements more specific, I was inadvertently guiding them toward, not away from, three-prong thesis statements! Students who had started with a general assertion were now coming in with a thesis that detailed

three specific aspects about their identity, the topic of this essay. For instance, students shared statements like, “My personal identity is funny, creative, and thoughtful” or “My personal identity is defined by sports, television, and family.” I was appalled- not with my students, but with the way in which I had led them down the path I was previously telling them that we would be avoiding! In theory, my goals were noble. In practice, my goals were difficult to achieve for both my students and me, at least for this first trial.

Although this reminder discouraged me at first, as I reflected on my dilemma further, I found it was a useful realization because it allowed me to empathize with my students. If it was hard for me, the “expert,” to come away from this format of writing, then I realized it might take just as much, if not more, time and practice for the students to come away from it. Therefore, I decided that I would continue to offer advice for revisions that challenged the students to go beyond the three-prong and five-paragraph essay format, but if there were some three-prongs that still stabbed their way into this first essay assignment, then I would let them be for this assignment.

### **What is Personal Identity? No, Really, I Still Don’t Get It**

At the outset of my study, I envisioned the students’ first major writing assignment about personal identity to produce many revelations for the students in their writing and their development as teenagers. When I collected and read their essays at the end of this unit, I realized that our most eye-opening moments came

from the process of this unit instead of the actual essays themselves. The conferences I made a point to engage in, the learning I took from the first time trying to break away from the five-paragraph essay structure, and the fact that even after almost two months of discussion on the idea of “personal identity” some students were still left wondering what this was, showed me more than any one student’s essay.

The fact that some students were still not able to identify with the idea of personal identity despite having written a whole essay on the topic prompted me to do some further investigation. For instance, Sawyer wrote an essay based around this statement, “My personal identity is defined by my friendships and hobbies I have made as a person,” yet when asked about his understanding of personal identity, he could not clearly decipher it. Figure 1 shows a copy of Sawyer’s essay.

Figure 1. Sawyer's Personal Identity Essay



### Sawyer's Personal Identity Essay

What makes me who I have become what makes to become who I did. What make me be the person that you have become? My hobbies make me who I have become. The influences my friends have on my life make me become who I am. My friends keep me on track or off track. My hobbies also make me unique because the hobbies are where I spend my time doing what I want to do.

Being with my friends have change my life, if it was not for my friends I do not know what I would do. My friends teach me subjects school does not teach me. My friends are always there for me and my friends do not fight often but we fight all good friends do. My friends have changed my choices and what hobby I choose to get involved in. My morals and beliefs are the same as my friends. I do most of my hobbies with my friends.

My hobbies also make me who I am because my hobbies are what I do when I have free time. My favorite hobby is hanging out with my friends. I hang out with my friends a lot we do whatever comes to mind. Skateboarding is also a hobby of mine, I do not get to do it as much as I want to. Skateboarding really made me who I am since I was seven I was skateboarding. Skating made me because I was a little seven year old with a lot of energy that had nowhere to use my energy. I was dying for something to put my energy and it also introduced me to all my friends

My personal identity is defined by my friendships and hobbies I have made as a person. My friends make who I have become and they make because there teach things I cannot lean on my own. my hobbies make me because I also learned things I would I would not of learned otherwise. Think my friends and my hobbies have made me who I have become.

Figure 1. Copy of Sawyer's final essay in the Personal Identity Unit.

I remember my co-teacher and me working with Sawyer to help him create the statement he included in the last paragraph, “My personal identity is defined by my friendships and hobbies I have made as a person.” This statement is essentially his thesis statement; yet, the placement of it only at the end of the essay, along with the way he responded to the post-unit survey and my subsequent interview with him suggested Sawyer still had some areas of confusion with the components of the unit and his personal identity. In other words, he might not have come away from the unit with as in-depth of an understanding of personal identity as I had hoped. See Figure 2 for a copy of Sawyer’s electronic survey results.

## Figure 2. Sawyer's Post-Personal Identity Unit Survey Results

**2. Essay mode studied in this unit:**


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 info

**3. The personal identity readings (personal identity poems, my own poetry, etc.) helped me to gather ideas to write about in this unit.**

---

 Agree

**4. The readings challenged me to think more deeply about the topics we discussed and wrote about in this unit.**

---

 Disagree

**5. The topics we read, discussed, and wrote about within this unit kept my interest.**

---

 Agree

**6. The topics we read, discussed, and wrote about within this unit were relevant to my own life.**

---

 Strongly Disagree

**7. Please explain why you chose the answer you did for question six.**

---

 it had nuthing to do with what i do

**8. Please use this space to expand on any of your other answers from the survey. Thank you! You rock like a sedimentary superstar!! : )**

---

**No Response**

*Figure 2:* Replication of the post-personal identity unit survey and results from Sawyer. The responses portrayed are in the student's own words based on his electronic responses.

It is interesting that Sawyer agreed that the readings for the unit helped him think about ideas to write about, but then strongly disagreed that the readings were relevant to his own life. In other words, I was struck by how inconsistent Sawyer's responses were. I wanted to know more so I decided to do an informal interview with him after class. This is how our conversation went:

**Me:** You mentioned you didn't really relate to the readings in this unit, and I would like to know more about why because as your teacher, it's really important for me to understand how things could have gone better.

**Sawyer:** *All of the readings were poems, and it ends up being I don't like poems, so I don't care, and then I don't listen as well.*

**Me:** How about the essay topic of personal identity? Did that capture your interest or help you to think deeper?

**Sawyer:** *I don't know who I am, especially as a freshman I have no idea, maybe if I was right before college then I'd kind of have an idea, but this was hard because I don't know who I am.*

**Me:** Is there anything I could have done to help you to make a better connection between what personal identity means and what it means for you?

**Sawyer:** *Not make it about personal identity! Make it about what you do in your free time because that's what I mostly focused on.*

Interestingly enough, I remember conferencing with Sawyer and saying how he could make this essay of personal identity about how identity is formed by the way you spend your free time. However, something was obviously missing for him to see the connection between this idea, what he ended up writing about, and

the idea of personal identity. I really appreciated Sawyer's honesty; he had a great attitude and was very open to my suggestions and my questions.

Similar to Sawyer's responses to this personal identity essay assignment were some comments that I overheard Eko making at the end of the unit. I took the opportunity to ask him about it a little more specifically, too, and this is how our conversation went:

**Me:** What did you think of having to read the poems in the personal identity unit?

**Eko:** *Reading what poems?*

**Me:** (I reminded him.) The poems you read in the poetry stations and discussed as a class.

**Eko:** *Oh, I hate poems, it's hard to understand, there are all different meanings, so it gets confusing.*

**Me:** Did this influence your understanding of the personal identity essay?

**Eko:** *It didn't change the personal identity essay. It didn't help me to understand personal identity. I still don't understand personal identity!*

**Me:** What could we have done to help you understand it better?

**Eko:** *I don't know, I think it's what I do in my free time, but I don't think that's personal identity.*

Even though Eko's thesis statement was, "Personal identity is what a person likes to do in his/her free time," he still had trouble connecting his own understanding of personal identity as what he does in his free time to what it "should be." It is as

if Sawyer and Eko were both looking for a set definition of this concept instead of the personal interpretation I had hoped they would come away with.

### **Introducing the E-Pal Project and Deconstructing the Word “Ghetto”**

Although the Personal Identity Unit was originally designed to elicit personal self-discovery in order to expand each student’s worldview, as my semester went on I came up with another way to make this writing assignment, and my overall class, more meaningful. A fellow graduate colleague of mine and educator, now referred to as Miss Harper, taught English as a Second Language, hereafter ESL, students in grades 6 through 8. The reality that her students consistently needed writing instruction since they were learning English, combined with the fact that her students were from a variety of diverse countries and/or had families with a variety of diverse backgrounds, made having our students collaborate with each other a promising task. Williams (2003) notes:

Corresponding with a peer hundreds or even thousands of miles away is a rich educational experience for most young people. They learn something about different schools, towns, and countries; they learn something about the commonalities and differences among people; and they also learn something about writing (p. 122).

The students with whom my English Composition students were to correspond with lived only about fifty miles away, but their stories and unique histories spanned thousands of miles. With the goal of expanding one’s worldview in

order to be more accepting of others in mind, Miss Harper and I set to creating an e-mail relationship with our two classes. Although my participants would have written the Personal Identity Essay regardless of this e-mail relationship with other students, Miss Harper and I decided to turn this first major writing assignment into the first opportunity for students to share their writing with one another. Therefore, Miss Harper had her students complete a similar assignment where her students wrote personal narratives in exchange for the informative essays my students were writing about their personal identities. Before embarking on any of these written exchanges, my students' parents and/or guardians were notified of this development in the study and given an option to take their student out of the e-pal project (Appendix K). However, no parent/guardian chose to keep his or her student out of this part of our class.

I could not have predicted the discussion that would result from introducing this e-pal project to my students. Not only did it help by giving their writing a real and purposeful audience, it also invited the class into a discussion where we were able to deconstruct some of the myths surrounding immigrants and/or the language we use about those who are different from us. Since each participant was paired with a student from Miss Harper's class, it was important for us to talk about and learn a little bit about what it meant to be an ESL student.

My students wanted to know exactly where these other students went to school, yet I did not tell them for sake of confidentiality. All I told them was that

it was a suburb outside of a neighboring large city. Jared sparked a detailed and passionate discussion where the class began to deconstruct potentially pejorative language when he asked, “Is ‘ghetto’ an inappropriate word to describe the school district we’ll be writing to? In other words, if this district uses certain slang, like ‘dawg’ and ‘homie’ can we use those words, too?” Well, once my students got past giggling and shouting out their own reactions to these questions, I was able to facilitate a mature conversation about this language. First off, I commended Jared for thinking about his word usage, but asked him to think again about what he really meant in saying this. I then asked the entire class what the problem or flaw might be in using the word “ghetto” in this context. Desmond started by giving Jared this clarification, “The district is not ALL ghetto. The general area may be, but students are not.”

I responded to Desmond’s insight by saying, “Good point, Desmond. I like how you suggest that ghetto can refer to an area being low in socioeconomic status, or run down, but that doesn’t mean the students have to be.”

Desmond nodded his head in seeming agreement and said, “Yeah.”

Samantha continued our analysis of the use of ghetto by stating, “It’s like saying one person in a group talks a lot, but not the whole group. The whole group doesn’t necessarily do the same.”

I reiterated Samantha’s profound point by summarizing, “Okay, nice- so one person can’t represent an entire group. That’s a good point.”

John then added, “Ghetto could mean different things. For instance, it could mean, ‘cool’ or it could mean ‘being impoverished’ or ‘in a gang.’ People could misinterpret the word, making it an overgeneralization, which could be prejudiced.”

Miranda connected with this point personally and shared with us this story, “Talking about ‘ghetto’ - I come from vo-tech and kids you’d think were ‘ghetto’ are whiter than white.”

At this point, many more laughs and outbursts occurred in the class, so I intervened and asked Miranda, “Does ‘ghetto’ mean not-white?”

She clarified her statement by saying, “No- skin color doesn’t matter! Kids you’d think might be a certain way aren’t and others are.”

Eko, a friend of Jared’s as I’ve mentioned before, concluded, “I think Jared was being judgmental about the city near where the students live. Just because the district is in that city, it doesn’t mean all of the students should be considered ‘ghetto.’ Maybe some parts are, like the south part--” At this point, Eko was interrupted by other students accusing him of being prejudiced. He then modified his own statement by saying, “Okay, well, not all of it can be considered ghetto.”

Unfortunately, the end of our class period was approaching quickly, so the conversation had to be cut short. However, I did make sure to explain that we were not all trying to pick on Jared by bringing up this topic of conversation, but

rather we were trying to understand why and how to use the word “ghetto.” Jared then went on to say, “Yeah, cuz if you did, I’d come at you with my gang!”

I then paused and asked him, “Should we joke about parts of life that aren’t part of our own identities?”

He withdrew, looked a little bit bashful, and said, “No.” This calmed the impending reactions from the class, too, and the students left shortly after at the sound of the bell.

Before even starting to communicate with these new students of the e-pal project, my students were already analyzing others and the way they talk about others from diverse backgrounds, in a more accountable way. They were doing so in the safe environment of my classroom where their thoughts may not be perfect, but were acceptable due to our commitment to learn from them.

Although I was discouraged by the quip Jared used to end our conversation, the entire discussion started by his ability to question his word choice so as to invite an “appropriate” or acceptable way to talk about other people. This was one of the goals that I hoped to reach throughout this study and I came away from this class period feeling astounded by the relevance of these important discussions. In the past, I often felt like I was straying too far from the curriculum if I went off into a discussion like this; the context of my study and the introduction of the e-pal project now made this discussion relevant on top of being worthwhile.

Conversations like these kept me believing in my study: even if the students were

not having life-changing moments in my class, at least they were learning to examine their thoughts and consider how their words operate as part of a larger context and, thus, can impact other people.

### **Applying an Understanding of Audience to Writing**

As students continued to adjust to the idea of writing for more than just their teachers, we revisited the details of their e-pals and what it meant to be an immigrant a few times. Our discussions not only aided in their understanding of what it means to be an immigrant, but it also helped them to see a writing audience in an authentic way. A few key insights pertaining to their understanding of audience are from one of our discussions during the students' process of writing their personal identity essays.

I asked the class how knowing about their fellow student audience might affect their writing. Becky shared, after deliberating for a few moments with what seemed like words on the tip of her tongue, "Not all of them speak English, so do we have to not use big words?" I helped the class to understand the nature of an ESL student better by telling them that they did not need to limit their language use completely, since the ESL students' teacher, Miss Harper, would be there to support the e-pals in reading and understanding the essays sent to them. I encouraged the class to still embrace their own voices when writing their essays and writing directly to their e-pals.

Meredith mentioned, “We should watch our tone to be respectful since they may not have all of the things that we have.” I commended Meredith for her ability to incorporate one of our key writing ideas, the concept of tone, into her analysis of audience. I also shared information provided by Miss Harper as clarification to a common misconception about immigrants that many of them actually come from quite wealthy families, due to the fact that it costs a great deal in order to go through with the process of moving out of one’s country.

Atticus pointed out that the e-pal audience is made up of “a diverse group of students from different countries.”

Jasper clarified this point. “A lot of them are from other countries, but let’s not forget that some of them are from America.” I thanked him for this important and accurate reminder.

Tyler added, “They are in middle school, so we’re setting an example with good vocabulary, etc.”

Jared picked up on this conclusion immediately, by questioning, “If we’re writing to them as models, then why are they writing to us?”

Although I had an urge to share my many opinions of why this was going to be such a wonderful experience, I really wanted the students to think this one through on their own. I asked the class, “What do you all think?”

Charlie started by saying, “So we can learn about where they came from, different countries, how they are.”

Eko echoed, “We can get an understanding of how immigrants use our language.”

Becky added, “So we can reflect on what we wrote like when we were younger” and in a similar vein, Jared pointed out that this could help our class get better at editing. I concluded this by telling the class that each of these responses was correct and that other unexpected benefits might come from the process, too. Just the fact that the students were already analyzing audience in writing in a purposeful way provided them with a powerful benefit.

### **Discussing the First E-Pal Exchange: Content and Tone**

After the students sent and received their first e-pal responses, we had a class discussion where I encouraged the students to reflect on the project thus far. Students first noted that when reading their e-pals’ writing, they often critiqued conventions instead of content. Pleased with their use of some of our key writing concepts, I told them I would like them to talk specifically about the content they read first. Some of the students’ observations were as follows in their own words:

- My e-pal had to get used to the change of time zones when he came here; when he was awake it was nighttime in his home country.
  - Many students could relate to this comment; Samantha, Desmond, Eko, Miranda, Corinna, and Sawyer shared stories of their own about adjusting to different time zones.

- I think it's pretty crazy that she picked up her stuff and moved here from another country. She had to go on a plane all by herself. She didn't know English. Just to move randomly would be weird.
  - Becky and John related to this comment by sharing experiences of having to move because of divorced parents.
  - Miranda also shared a story about moving from a different state.
- “Her story is very sad because she had a hard transition because kids weren't very accepting of her because she didn't know the language or understand her classes. It was the American kids who made fun of her.”
- “They were all making fun of her and she was trying in all of her classes and when she would answer questions in class people would laugh at her because of her English. She wanted to drop out. It doesn't say if it got better, but I guess it did because she has learned more.”
  - A quick survey of the class showed by raised hands that many other students also noticed something in their e-pals' writings about a difficult transition or lack of acceptance upon arrival.

After sharing these observations about general content of the ESL students' writing, I then asked the class to reflect on the tone of the written e-mails they received from their e-pals. At this point, Charlie's hand was raised extremely high and he was nearly jumping out of his seat with what I perceived as eagerness to answer this question. Due to the fact that I had overheard him reading his e-pal

e-mail to a few of his friends when he first received it, I had a feeling he had some strong opinions about this response. I called on him first and he began to share. “She sounded mean kinda. I didn’t talk about video games, but maybe she thought I was. She told me to concentrate on my studies than on the stuff I was talking about. I talked about ATV, lacrosse, and Airsoft. She said if you have guns or toy guns you could be arrested or beaten to death in her home country. She thought Airsoft was either a video game or real. Tone comes off this way.”

Jared interjected, “She sounds like my mom!”

Eko added, “She wrote Desmond such a nice e-mail and Charlie such a mean one!”

Samantha gave her classmates another viewpoint to think about, which I was grateful for because I did not want to be the only one considering the other ways to interpret this exchange. Part of giving my students this opportunity to write to other students was so that they could learn from them and consider different opinions. Samantha explained, “I think she was trying to say to take advantage of what he has and not just video games.” Desmond also added that in Charlie’s e-pal’s home country, education is more important than anything else and that without it, it is much harder to get a job.

In order to validate Charlie’s reactions, but also help him to know how to deal with them, I asked the class, “What should Charlie’s tone be in writing back to his e-pal?”

Jared responded, “He’s gotta get it straight- who’s the top dog? I can see Charlie e-mailing her back and taking total control.” Once again, I found myself frustrated by Jared’s strong and outspoken opinions. However, I did not want to tell him how to think nor did I want to be the only one prompting him to reconsider his thoughts and statements.

Thankfully, Meredith offered this graceful response, “I think he’s making an incorrect perception of her and she didn’t really mean to be mean. I think that’s just how you’re judging her based on your first impression of her writing; I don’t think you should be mean back.” Just as I had suspected from the beginning of the semester, Meredith imparted wisdom and a fierce sense of fairness upon the class in her kind, yet firm, way. She also called upon our concurrent analysis of perceptions of others to aid in her understanding of this dilemma about tone that Charlie was facing. All of these factors made me so proud of her ability to frequently share her opinions with the class.

When it came time to construct his response, Charlie did indeed take an open-minded and patient tone with his e-pal. I believe that this conversation in class helped him take an initial response of viewing his e-pal’s response as one of criticism to considering it in a different light that was not as negative. See Figure 3 for Charlie’s e-mail response to his e-pal:

Figure 3. Charlie's E-Mail Response to E-Pal

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thanks for the response! Well I read that you didn't know what Lacrosse was well Lacrosse has 10 people on each side 1 goalie, 3 defensemen, 3 mid-field, and 3 attack. We use sticks that are either 36 inch stick or 72 inch 36 for goalie, attack, and mid-field and 72 for the defense. There is one ball and both team try to score your allowed to hit the people anywhere, but the head, you're also allowed to hit the person with your body. A ATV is a vehicle to go off roading in the woods it stands for All Terrain Vehicle it is kind of like a moto in Africa. It is also used in places with rough roads or places not reachable by cars. In your essay I saw that it was a hard transition to America and I totally agree with you. This is actually my first year in this school although it was not as big of a move as yours it was still hard to get use to the new rules of this school district. I know America is way different from \_\_\_\_\_ in every way and I see you are trying to get the hang of it. I see that you have 4 siblings in America that's crazy! I have a older sister in college, but that's it. You're also the oldest which probably means they try to be just like you so they probably follow you around, try to act like you, and want to learn from you. Well keep on going and don't get too much of a headache from your siblings.

Sincerely,  
Charlie

---

*Figure 3:* Charlie's e-mail response to his e-pal. Information has been omitted to protect the identity of the e-pal, but the rest of the e-mail is in Charlie's own words.

The opening sentence of his e-mail set the tone for his response; Charlie showed that he was pleased to have read the e-mail from his e-pal. Based off of the class discussion he engaged in, Charlie chose to clarify the topics his e-pal might have been confused about instead of assuming that his e-pal was being

critical of him. Impressively, Charlie recognizes his e-pal's different life experiences by stating, "I know America is way different from \_\_\_\_\_ in every way and I see you are trying to get the hang of it!" This sentence was another signal of Charlie's change in heart due to our class discussion. I especially like his closing, where he relates his own life with siblings to that of his e-pal, and finishes with a bit of advice: "...don't get too much of a headache from your siblings." This e-mail exchange allowed Charlie to practice his ability to see life from another person's perspectives.

### **Introducing the Ideas of Perceptions and Realities**

The second major unit within my study was based on understanding the idea of perceptions and juxtaposing it with the truth of personal realities. Due to the fact that prejudices and stereotypes can stem from mistaken perceptions, I saw this as a useful topic for discussion and writing for my study participants (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012). Therefore, I opened up a unit on perceptions and realities by having the students read excerpts from two different novels, which presented characters that were either on the receiving end or the giving end of mistaken perceptions. The following three poems: "Different Jobs, Similar Qualifications," "Perceptions of LaKeesha," and "a line to cross?" are written by me and represent a collection of student words that arose from the rich discussion of differing opinions that the students provided while analyzing the excerpt from *Brothers and Sisters* by Bebe Moore Campbell (Appendix L).

**Different Jobs, Similar Qualifications**

Some say hiring a single mother is trouble  
If she has to take off a lot, the job could view her negatively.

*This is not fair because that's not related to her job  
She needs the job  
It could help her  
Take care of her baby, to feed the baby, to not have to take off a lot*

*She is a single mother- she could be a really hard worker.*

Being a mom and being a banker are very different jobs.  
You can't say she'll be good at banking if she's a hard working mom.

*I think the point is*

*That some of the qualities are the same  
even though the particulars might not be.*

### Perceptions of LaKeesha

Jared claims,  
From a business standpoint,  
making money,  
Versus the Personal Story of someone,  
Well, we don't know  
How  
She got pregnant.

If it was her choice,  
I wouldn't like her at all.

She's got a GED,  
A kid,  
The way she was dressed,  
Didn't seem professional,  
The way she talked.

*well  
I think  
I Completely Disagree With Jared.*

*LaKeesha is smart to go back and take classes  
because another dropout might not-  
offers Becky.*

*Meredith continues  
Although it doesn't appear that she wants the job by her  
appearance  
she REALLY prepared for it, she took classes,  
she sticks up for herself  
and is fighting for herself.*

Desmond says  
It doesn't matter  
I wouldn't care  
about the background of the person.

*If she's a good worker-  
Then she's a good worker!*

*It doesn't matter what she looks like.*

Jack observes  
Esther doesn't know the person  
She doesn't really know her background  
LaKeesha is being stereotyped.

**a line to cross?**

Jared declares: she's interviewing to be a bank teller  
 I'd really be against her  
 Because the way she's talking isn't right.

*What do you mean by this?  
 Say it again.  
 Take these words and give them a second glance.  
 LaKeesha has a very  
 Intricate  
 Way of speaking.  
 Are you saying she needs to switch from her culturally accurate way of speaking  
 to a white way of speaking?*

*Eko cries  
 No!  
 This isn't fair at all!  
 It's trying to change  
 people into robots!  
 I mean  
 Appearance means a little,  
 but there is a line to cross.  
 If she's really hard working  
 It doesn't matter how she talks.*

*She shouldn't have to change her ways if she's qualified.*

When Sawyer speaks, they listen:  
 It's pretty fair  
 Because people see you on how you talk  
 And how you act  
 So you just gotta do what you gotta do.

*Half is fair  
 Half is not  
 It is fair to change how she dresses  
 Because at the bank you can't wear that stuff.  
 The bank is formal.  
 But she shouldn't  
 She can't change how she talks  
 That's pretty stupid.*

If she talks non-formal  
 The clients might not trust the bank.  
 It's a business, so she should have to change.

*There's different etiquette in the workplace  
 Than there is at home.  
 Is there one right answer?*

The analysis of the characters in *Brothers and Sisters* that my students engaged in took our class far beyond simply discussing fictional characters for the sake of completing a class assignment. The students taught themselves about perceptions, stereotypes, judgments, cultural norms, societal norms, and language assimilation. I facilitated the discussion, but it was the students who drove it forward and grappled with these concepts. Once again, social justice themes were made relevant to my curriculum in such a way that I did not have to doubt the importance of their presence. By discussing these, the perceptions my students experienced upon reading this as well as those the characters were experiencing in this excerpt, the students were better equipped to analyze some of their own perceptions and realities in the next major writing assignment. Even more than that, they were ready to use writing to continue to think about these big ideas, instead of only being ready to use writing for the sake of practicing writing.

### **Time: Every Teacher's Master- Knowing When to Bow Down**

I had originally planned for students to complete a literature circle activity using children's books that also center on themes of mistaken perceptions and hidden realities, but at this point in the semester I knew we were running out of time. The presence of an unexpected hurricane resulting in a week of lost school days combined with the students taking longer to complete some assignments than I had anticipated made me realize that I needed to bow down to time and let

a few plans go. Therefore, I used the novel excerpts, but let go of the children's books. I also decided to present the next writing assignment as a letter instead of a full essay, but in the end, students ended up producing work that was very similar to an informative comparison essay. Therefore, this decision might not have cut down on time, but the decision to let go of the literature circle activity definitely did.

### **Students' Personal Understandings of Perceptions and Realities**

For every way that the Personal Identity essays made me doubt as to whether or not students were growing from them or not, the comparison letter assignment that the students completed to analyze the perceptions people have of them as compared to their own personal realities made up for this (Appendix M). Students grew in the way that they organized their thoughts into coherent essays and they created comparison letters that clearly reflected their understanding of what others' think of them, while giving them the chance to set the record straight by telling their own truths. Please refer to Figures 4, 5, and 6 for three examples of students' final perceptions versus realities comparison letters.

In Figure 4, Jenna stated in her comparison letter, she was a shy and soft-spoken student in school. I often wondered how much Jenna was getting out of the class being that she rarely spoke up outside of chatting during breaks with a few of her close friends and responding only when called on. However, this writing piece encouraged me to believe that Jenna was growing from our writing

assignments. Jenna was able to let her voice shine by explaining that she is not quiet all of the time and her perceived shyness does not define the type of person she is. I also appreciated the way Jenna chose to highlight her part-Japanese race by explaining her grandma's history. I am hopeful that Jenna felt comfortable to share some of these details about her grandma's immigration and her race being that we were discussing ideas like this consistently with the e-pal project.

Figure 4. Jenna's Perceptions and Realities Comparison Letter

December 4th, 2012

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Often, people have perceptions of others that are based on how they act and what they look like. In reality, those perceptions might be incorrect.

The first impression people make is about my shyness. Most people think I am really shy since I do not talk a lot, and they think that I am quiet all the time. In reality, I am loud and obnoxious when I am with my friends and family. Most of my friends will say that I can get annoying because I talk so much. When I am in school or class I do not talk at all, but after school I talk nonstop.

Another impression people make about me is my race. When most people see me they automatically think that I am caucasian.

When in reality, I am a quarter Japanese. When some people find out that I am Japanese they automatically assume that I am smart because I am Asian. It irritates me because they just assume things that might not be true. My grandma is an immigrant from a small city in Japan, she moved here right after World War II with my grandpa and uncle. My mom was born shortly after they found a house, then my family started to form.

The next impression about me is my happiness. Most people see me laugh and smile when I'm with my friends and family.

They expect that I am a happy person, and they are right. I am happy and content with my life right now. I have great friends that care about me and are there when I need them. I am so happy I have a guy bestfriend because it gives me another perspective about what I might say or do. We have gotten really close in the past year and I think that is great to have another friend that cares about me more than anything. My other friends are girls, they are always right there when I need help. My friends are mostly the reason that I am happy. My family understands me more than anyone, and I appreciate that they spend time with me. My family and friends make me laugh and smile everyday. I am so glad that I have inspiring friends and a loving family.

Figure 4. Page 1 of Jenna's perceptions and realities comparison letter. Name of e-pal omitted for confidentiality.

Figure 4. Jenna's Perceptions and Realities Comparison Letter

Another impression of me is my intelligence. Most people see that I do my homework, so they assume that I do well in school and get good grades. This does not really make me frustrated because they are thinking that I am smart. I am smart and I do get good grades. When I can not understand something I will ask the teacher or study the notes we have until I understand it well enough.

In conclusion, people make perceptions of others based on what they look like, act like, and sound like. Their first impressions might not always be true, most of the time they will not be true.

People judge you on your first impression and it might not always be what you want them to think.

Sincerely,  
Jenna

Figure 4. Page 2 of Jenna's perceptions and realities comparison letter.

On top of being a well-organized letter with effective transitions and a strong controlling idea, Claire's letter as shown in Figure 5 stood out to me for its honesty. Claire spoke up in class occasionally, but moreso on a one-on-one basis. The fact that she chose to share such personal details about her own realities, such as her weight and her dyslexia, suggested that Claire felt liberated in her writing. In other words, there is a tone of honesty instead of an overtone of fear in Claire's writing that stood out in contrast to the sometimes hesitant contributions she made verbally in class.

## Figure 5. Claire's Perceptions and Realities Comparison Letter

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Many people these days judge a person without even knowing who they are. Often, others think they know someone well, but they typically are not correct with their judgments. Other people hate it when someone else makes false accusations about them, so why make them about different people as well?

Others think that since I wear all black so I must be emo. Which means emotional, but most people think it means that you cut yourself as a form of self pity. At school, I just wear black mostly because that is just what a lot of my non-pajama clothes are. I am actually gothic/scene, which means that I wear a lot of black and bright colors. Being gothic/scene just sets me out to be a person who is complex or different.

Often, people see me as quiet, so they think I want to be left alone. I do not really talk because I am not really friends with all the other people that judge me as quiet. In reality, I actually like being around people that are respectful. I am very talkative with people I can relate to in life.

Also, people in general say that I am fat so they think I eat a lot. Yet when I was younger I had to take water pills, which made me gain weight and that made me feel hungrier when I was not hungry at all. Nowadays, I do not eat a lot at all, I mostly just drink water or other liquids. I am a very picky eater and I like almost all drinks.

Some people think that I have friends that are not academically advanced, then I must also be poor with respect to academics. A lot of my friends just act like they do not know anything. I actually do well in school, especially in mathematics. Sometimes learning comes very quickly to me. I am dyslexic, but when things are properly spaced out the words and work come easy to me.

*Figure 5.* Page 1 of Claire's perceptions and realities comparison letter. Name of e-pal omitted for confidentiality.

Figure 5. Claire's Perceptions and Realities Comparison Letter

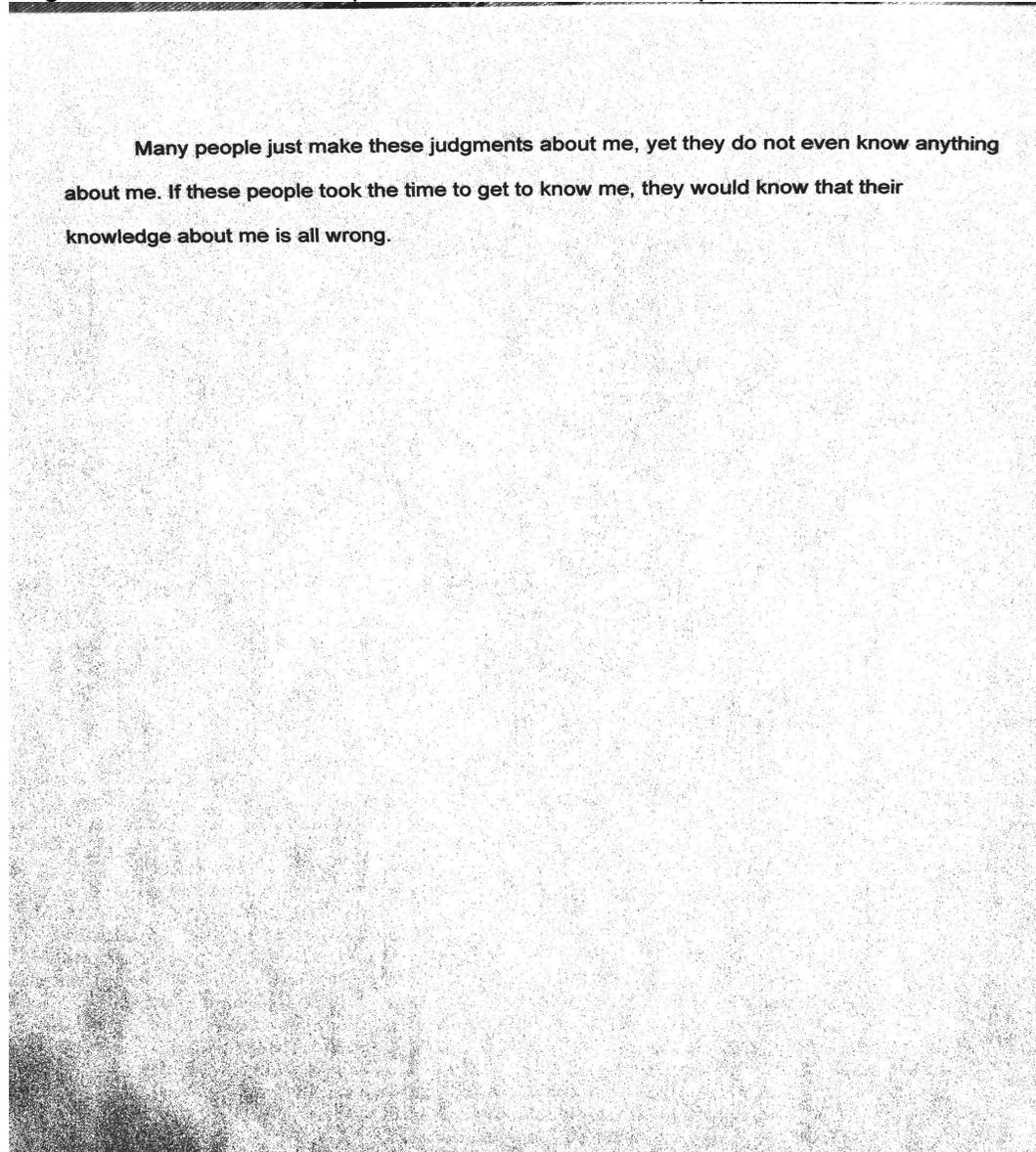


Figure 5. Page 2 of Claire's perceptions and realities comparison letter.

Desmond's letter as illustrated by Figure 6 stood out to me for his mature ability to grapple with the stereotypes that often accompany his race. I was so proud of the way he was able to respectfully account for some of the reasons as to why people might misjudge him; for instance, "I guess it's because the name other's of my race have created for me." Desmond's word choice also contributed to his respectful tone. He used words like people's perceptions being "strange" and "not all true," which showed an appropriate level of disagreement with those who might misunderstand him. Finally, Desmond's conclusion really spoke to his patient and deliberate ability to consider other people's perspectives when he explained that he "cannot blame the people that make these assumptions" because of the way stereotypes around his race might have influenced them. I am hopeful that the thinking he developed in his writing will be transferred to his thinking outside of my classroom.

## Figure 6. Desmond's Perceptions and Realities Comparison Letter

4 December 2012

Bonjour (Hello) \_\_\_\_\_,

People's perceptions of other's are usually misguided due to false assumptions. These are a few of the many perceptions people have of me.

Generally people's assumptions of me are not true.

I am big and black, so when people look at me they are generally scared of me or figure that I'm mean. I guess it's because the name other's of my race have created for me. I am also very outgoing and have many friends, so many people figure I'm obnoxious when looking at me. I don't find that conclusion fair though because they don't even know me.

A lot of people figure I'm older because I'm really tall. Also good transition use a lot of people look at me and figure I'm chill if they know of me. As in that I don't like to be too active, and just like to hang around with people. So usually people's first perceptions of me are very strange.

Even though people's perceptions of me is that I am big, black and mean, in reality I'm actually very friendly. It is only because others of my skin tone have shown that mean side, but generally for most it isn't true. I really do value friends and I try not to hurt people's feelings. Also, the perception of people thinking I am obnoxious isn't very true either. I don't think I am obnoxious. If I am a little overly obnoxious, I realize that people don't appreciate it so I usually stop.

When people figure that I'm older because I'm tall, the reality is that I am only 14. Most people in my grade are 14 or 15. Also, it is a very false assumption to think I'm so laid back because I'm actually very energetic in reality.

*Figure 6.* Page 1 of Desmond's perceptions and realities comparison letter. Name of e-pal omitted for confidentiality.

## Figure 6. Desmond's Perceptions and Realities Comparison Letter

These perceptions I feel are very untrue, but I cannot blame the people that make the assumptions. There are many stereotypes for my race, which is black, that could have influenced these assumptions. So I don't find it too alien that they would make these assumptions. I do appreciate these perceptions though because it just gives me the chance to prove they are not all true. I would like to learn about people's perceptions about you.

Sincerely,

Desmond

*Figure 6.* Page 2 of Desmond's perceptions and realities comparison letter.

**The Woman Behind the E-Pals: Meeting Miss Harper**

Throughout the semester, the e-pals exchanged their personal identity essays and personal narratives, shared e-mails reacting to these writing samples, and my students then shared their comparison letters of perceptions and personal realities with their e-pals. The ESL e-pals once again shared reactions about my students' writing assignments, so over the course of the few months when these students were collaborating, they exchanged at least three e-mails, but sometimes more if a student had more to share and sometimes less if a student was absent. As one might imagine with curious teenagers who are writing to other equally as curious pre-teens, the participants in my study had many more questions about their e-pals as time went on. Therefore, Miss Harper and I thought it would be interesting and appropriate for her to come into one of our classes to meet with my students and share some more information about her students, their e-pals. Miss Harper was simultaneously creating a movie montage of her students to introduce her district to their ESL population, so she agreed to bring in a condensed version of this movie to share with my students. In doing this, my students could feel like they were almost meeting their e-pals by seeing them in the movie and hearing their voices, thus also hopefully expanding on their understanding of a diverse population.

My students were eager to meet Miss Harper and when I told them about this possibility in the first place, they interrupted one another to share with me

that she should definitely come to visit! Although they truly wanted to be able to meet their e-pals live and in person, this was the second best thing. Miss Harper and I were finally able to make our schedules work together during the last week of class with my study participants. Although many of the students were overwhelmed by studying for final exams, which was evinced by their forgetfulness for bringing in snacks to share with Miss Harper, their attention to Miss Harper when she spoke and shared the movie of her students showed that they really liked having her there- not to mention that they flocked to this affable teacher for a photo opportunity during the last few minutes of class.

Most insightful was the way in which students shared some of their honest reactions to writing to Miss Harper's students. Jared said, "I was worried I was going to start a war with some of the comments I made." This reminded me of a particular e-mail that Jared sent his female e-pal where he could not understand how she could play football as a girl. In this e-mail, he opens with acknowledgement of his own writing error and then asks some questions that could create quite opinionated responses. See Figure 7 for a copy of Jared's e-pal e-mail.

Figure 7. Jared's E-Mail Response to E-Pal

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

**I am sorry for spelling your name wrong. And why do you think girls are just as good at football than boys? Why do you think Obama is the best president ever? Do you like democrats? How was your movie premiere? Was it entertaining? This is my comparison letter comparing reality and perspectives.**

**Sincerely Jared**

*Figure 7.* Jared's e-mail response to his e-pal. E-pal name omitted to protect the identity of the e-pal, but the rest of the e-mail is in Jared's own words.

The fact that Jared wanted his e-pal to explain views related to gender and politics did not surprise me since I knew him well, but I could understand why he might have viewed this as "starting a war" since not everyone is as open or eager to discuss these controversial topics. It was interesting that he was aware of the fact that others might not be as eager to discuss these topics by making his comment to Miss Harper.

Eko admitted to Miss Harper and our class, "My writing stinks, so I was nervous, because my partner writes better than me and she's just learning English, and she still writes better than me." Miss Harper responded to his honest comment with confidence as she explained how comforting this might be to her ESL students in knowing that even native English speakers do not write perfectly. Eko nodded his head in a way that suggested he had not thought of this perspective before.

Miranda shared, “I was okay with writing to my e-pal because if she didn’t like it, can’t change her mind about me. I’m a pretty straightforward person.” Miss Harper appreciated her candor and it showed the class, yet again, how self-assured Miranda is with her own identity.

When Miss Harper showed the students the actual movie of her ESL students, my participants were exceptionally respectful and attentive. They did not talk during the movie and watched the screen for the entire presentation. However, one exception is that I did notice Jared seeming to get uncomfortable when his e-pal was on the screen. He averted his eyes from the screen and fidgeted in his seat whenever this student was on the screen. As I usually find myself thinking with him, I was perplexed by his inconsistencies of engagement, but at this point I had come to realize that I could not let his inconsistencies diminish the times when he was truly engaged and fully present with an assignment or his own thought process.

As Miss Harper concluded her time with our class, she told the students how much it had meant to her students to develop this relationship and she invited anyone from my class who felt like it to continue sending e-mails to her students. She emphasized that this was not a requirement, being that she knew our semester in English Composition class was ending next week, but we both reiterated that if anyone wanted to he or she could continue the conversation. Just as we did with every previous e-mail exchange to preserve confidentiality, my students could e-

mail me their e-mails and I would forward them to Miss Harper to give to her students. By having Miss Harper and myself as the messengers, last names and personal e-mail addresses were omitted from these exchanges.

Before Miss Harper left, Becky told her that she really enjoyed writing to her e-pal and asked her if she could actually keep up this conversation. Miss Harper and I were delighted by Becky's interest and encouraged her wholeheartedly to do so. Becky smiled, asked to have her picture taken with Miss Harper, and seemed pleased to have been a part of this opportunity. Due to the fact that she has written her e-pal two additional e-mails since the formal end of her class, I can tell that Becky was positively impacted by this e-pal writing opportunity.

### **End of Semester Survey and Written Student Reflections**

During that last week of class with my students and study participants, I shared many kind words with them about the pleasure it was to get to know them and to work with them in their development as writers. Miss Kay expressed similar sentiments during our final goodbye on the last day of class; we both agreed and said frequently throughout the semester that this was a "special bunch of students." The fact that this study took place in their semester made the class unique, but it was their complex personalities and willingness to learn that made the class the most enjoyable. Please refer to Figure 8 for end-of-the-semester survey results to see some of the students' own reactions to my preliminary

conclusions from the semester. The end of the semester survey results shown in Figure 8 were important because of the way many of the students agreed with my conclusions, which suggested that my analysis of the data was a fair representation of the participants. Figure 8 was also significant for the varied responses that were given to the last question, “What was the best part of the curriculum of this class for you and why?” A number of students expressed their enjoyment of the e-pal project, which gave me affirmation for including this component of the course in ways that I could not have originally predicted. For instance, David wrote that “When we were talking to the e-pals. I liked that because I got to show my writing” and John responded, “The best part was writing to our e-pals because it instilled in us the example of how bad everyone wants to fit in and be accepted, not just the ‘unpopular’ kids.”

Figure 8. Student Responses to End of Semester Survey

Username	Do you agree with this statement: Students are willing to talk about a variety of sensitive social justice themes if supported by age-appropriate materials and a safe learning environment where individual student voices are respected & honored.	Do you agree with this statement: Having discussions and writing about social justice themes may result in students' revising their own thinking and/or previously held conclusions about those different from themselves.	Do you agree with this statement: Student engagement increases when their voices are heard and they find the classroom materials to be interesting and relevant to their own lives.	Do you agree with this statement: Practice and reflection by both the students and teacher are required in order to change the habit of writing 3-prong thesis statements and 5-paragraph essays in a composition classroom.	Do you agree with this statement: Not having to write a five-paragraph essay and/or use a three-prong thesis helped me to write better in this class.	What was the best part of the curriculum of this class for you and why?
Becky	Yes	Yes	Yes	Somewhat	Somewhat	I really liked how we got to talk to other people. I learned a lot from my e-pal.
Charlie	Somewhat	No	Yes	Yes	Somewhat	The best part was probably talking to our e-pals.
Jared	Somewhat	No	Yes	Somewhat	Somewhat	Vocab
Samantha	Yes	Yes	Somewhat	Yes	Yes	Free writing and vocabulary were the best part of the class.
Jack	Yes	No	Yes	Somewhat	Yes	CLASS
Sawyer	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	getting heard
John	Yes	Yes	Yes	Somewhat	No	The best part was writing to our e-pals because it instilled in us the example of how bad everyone wants to fit in and be accepted, not just the "unpopular" kids
Jenna	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Somewhat	The best part of this class was writing the essays because I really like to write now because of this class. I also liked to write to my E-Pal because it gave me someone to write to other than the teachers.
Desmond	Yes	Somewhat	Yes	No	Yes	The best part were all the parties we had, and getting to meet Miss Harper and watch the movie of our e-pals.
David	Somewhat	Yes	Yes	Somewhat	Somewhat	When we were talking to the e-pals. I liked that because I got to show my writing.

Figure 8. Student responses to electronic end of semester survey. Responses are students' own words.

Figure 8. Student Responses to End of Semester Survey

Username	Do you agree with this statement: Students are willing to talk about a variety of sensitive social justice themes if supported by appropriate materials and a safe learning environment where individual student voices are respected & honored.	Do you agree with this statement: Having discussions and writing about social justice themes may result in students' revising their own thinking and/or previously held conclusions about those different from themselves.	Do you agree with this statement: Student engagement increases when their voices are heard and they find the classroom materials to be interesting and relevant to their own lives.	Do you agree with this statement: Practice and reflection by both the students and teacher are required in order to change the habit of writing 3-prong thesis statements and 5-paragraph essays in a composition classroom.	Do you agree with this statement: Not having to write a five-paragraph essay and/or use a three-prong thesis helped me to write better in this class.	What was the best part of the curriculum of this class for you and why?
Juliet	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	The best part was writing the personal identity essay and the perceptions v realities essay. I like writing about myself.
Corinna	Yes	Somewhat	Yes	Yes	Yes	The best part of the curriculum was our opportunity to write about ourselves. We did not have to endless amounts of research on a certain topic, and if we did it was a topic we chose. There was freedom with how much we wanted write or what we wanted to write on.
Atticus	Yes	Yes	Somewhat	Yes	Yes	The best part for me was revising the way I write. After our first essay I learned that I don't always have to use the standard format and that using that format could hurt me because I could have an extra part that weakens my essay.
Miranda	Yes	Yes	Yes	Somewhat	OMG it was soooo much better!	being able to express our personal preferences in different topics. just being able to say whatever you were thinking about on a certain topic was awesome. Like in the conversation about stereo types we all got to say different thinks we have witnessed.
Meredith	Somewhat	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	The best part of the curriculum of this class for me was writing to my e-pal and all the things we did before that to prepare for dealing with the e-pals. Such as learning about immigrants and talking about different races.
Eko	Yes	Yes	Yes	Somewhat	Yes	The best part besides fantasy was the class over all ( students in class and teachers)
Claire	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Somewhat	Learning about how others see each other and react to their race or social background.
Tyler	Yes	Yes	Somewhat	No	No	The best part was when we got to do the vocabulary activities like the drawing or acting in front of the class.

Figure 8. Student responses to electronic end of semester survey. Responses are students' own words.

Figures 9, 10, and 11 are some of the students' final written reflections from the semester that were contained in their final portfolios. Figure 9, Becky's final reflection, was worth noting for the ways she described her growth as a writer from our class. The ways that she compared her previous writing process with her new and improved writing process as a result of English Composition class showed me success as marked by individual student growth.

Figure 9. Becky's Final Reflection

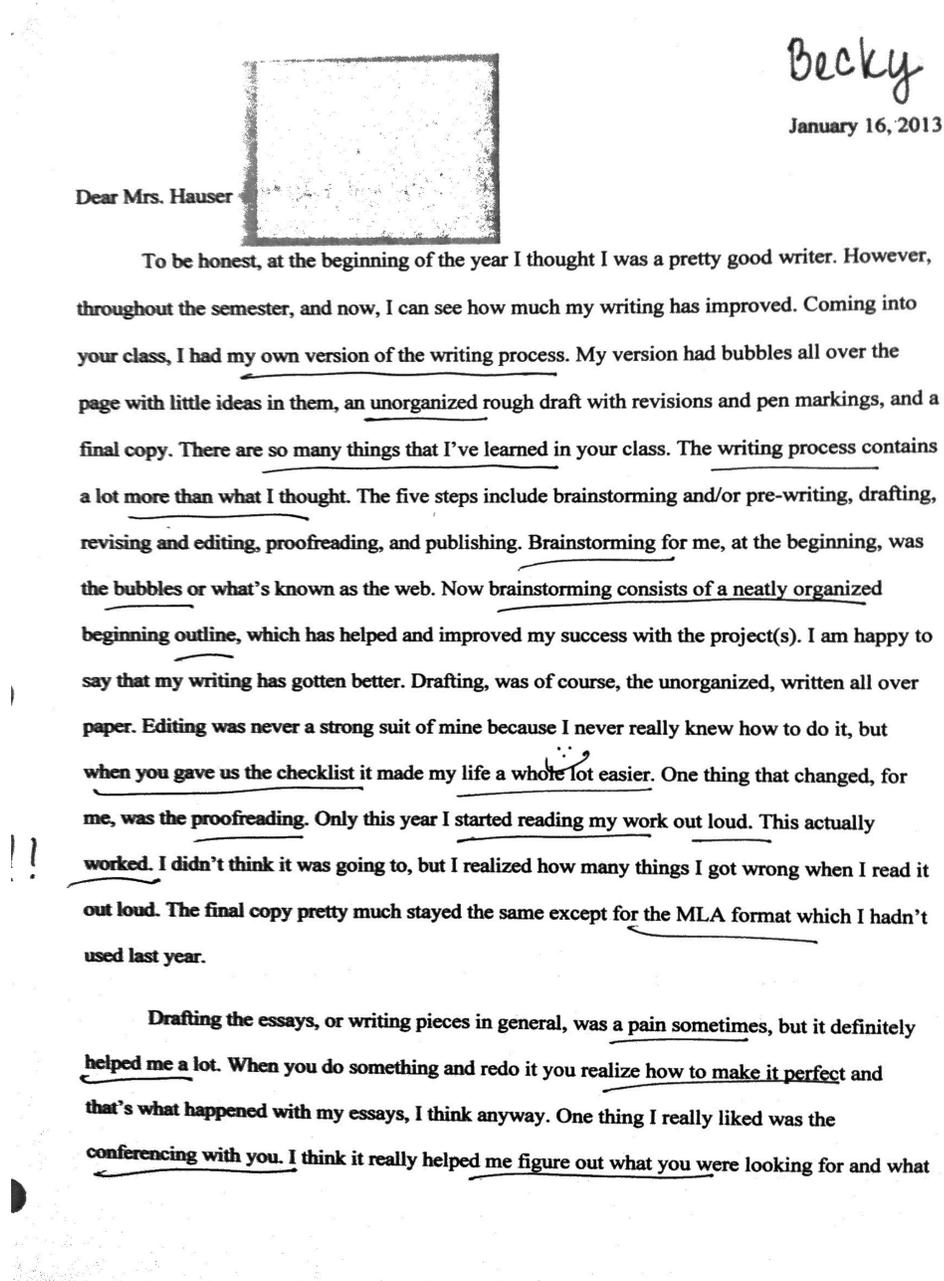


Figure 9. Page 1 of Becky's final reflection taken from her final portfolio for the class.

Figure 9. Becky's Final Reflection

Becky

I needed to do to fix my mistakes. I always try to hand something in when it's perfect, but that doesn't always happen, so for me, it had a huge impact. Another thing that helped was getting feedback from my peers. Some teachers don't allow us time to ask questions with our classmates, but you let us. Of course we would get off topic, but in that short amount of time I could get every question answered. Self-assessing was a challenge for me because of how I want everything perfect the first time. On the other hand it did make me have to think and review what I was doing wrong and what I was doing right, so it was alright.

In the upcoming semester, I will be taking Honors US History II. From what I hear, there is an essay on almost every test and there are many research papers. I know, for a fact, I will take what I've learned in English Composition and apply it to this class. Another class I have, upcoming, is Honors Physics First, which, from what I'm hearing, has many assignments where I will have to explain in great detail what I've learned.

A man, Steven Brust, said something I will forever remember, "Don't explain why it works; explain how you use it." I really like this quote because of how broad it is. It can really be used for anything, but in this case it's for writing. It's not explaining why I placed this sentence here, or that comma there; it's explaining why that works. Why does this sentence wrap up the entire essay, or writing piece? This is a quote that speaks to me as a writer.

One last thing I would like to address is how much I want to thank you for teaching me how to be a better writer.

You are so welcome,

Figure 9. Page 2 of Becky's final reflection taken from her final portfolio for the class.

Eko's final reflection, as shown in Figure 10, was not grammatically perfect, but it showed personal reflection that was a sign of personal growth. Eko mentioned the ways in which he changed his writing process, as well as his increased confidence with writing. I found these gains to be more significant than a grammatically correct document being that the development of the writing process and increased confidence are the big ideas that will help Eko to master the finer details of his writing later on. In other words, Eko needed to have confidence in his own voice before he could care enough about correcting every conventional error. Otherwise, his writing might have looked perfect, but been lacking in true substance and meaning.

Figure 10. Eko's Final Reflection

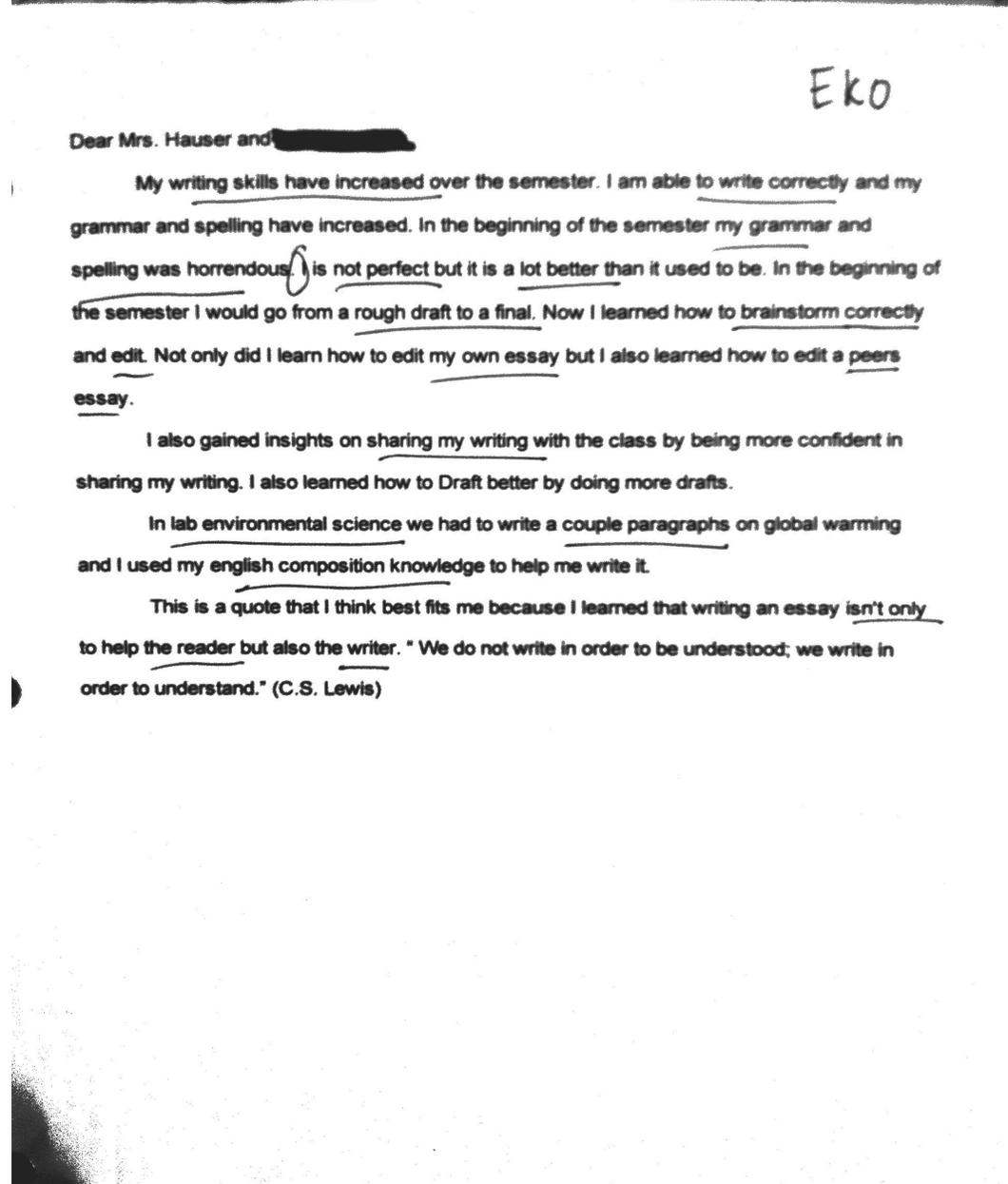


Figure 10. Eko's final reflection taken from his final portfolio for the class.

In Figure 11, Tyler's final reflection, he made some honest points about what did not work for him in this class and what he found to be ineffective, such as the peer editing process. I appreciated these points because they gave me ideas of what I can work on with my students in the future. However, I was invigorated by the point Tyler grasped in the conclusion of his reflection, when he explained the "rules" for writing- that there are none, or specifically, the five-paragraph essay is not the only format for writing an essay. If nothing else, I was glad that Tyler grasped this main idea.

Figure 11. Tyler's Final Reflection

Tyler

**Reflection Letter**

One thing this class had done to me was increase my vocabulary. By doing all of the activities in the vocabulary book I learned a lot of new, practical words that I could use in my future essays. Doing some of these activities I learned a couple new homonyms, like 'horde' and 'hoard.'

Editing in this class felt different than the editing I did during previous grades. Usually I spend very little work making the rough draft nice and spend the editing portion improving it, but in this class I think we spent a lot less time editing. I also thought the peer editing was ineffective; a lot of people gave the other person's essay a two second look and said "good," then gave it back.

To be honest, this class hasn't affected my writing in other classes all that much. I only had one class that had stingy writing requirements, which was Media Studies. I did have to write once or twice in lab environmental science, but the teacher didn't really care about the format. In media studies I had to write an essay about a movie we watched, which had to be in MLA. We didn't learn that yet so I started panicking, thinking 'oh my god, what's MLA?' The essay was worth about forty points, and the teacher said that if we didn't do it in MLA a lot of points would be taken off. Without this class teaching me what MLA was I would've gotten a really bad grade.

"There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are." W. Somerset Maugham. This quote speaks to me as a writer because of what I learned during this class. We don't have specific guidelines that we absolutely must follow because if we did, all literature would be the same. We don't need three body paragraphs or three main details in our thesis if we have more or less ideas than three.

Great point!  
A

Figure 11. Tyler's final reflection taken from his final portfolio for the class.

## **Explanation of Data Analysis**

### **Organizing Codes and Bins**

The first step I took in analyzing my data was re-reading my field log numerous times a week and on separate occasions. At times I would re-read the data after adding an additional entry and at other times I would re-read the field log separately without having added anything to it. Due to the fact that each page in my field log was numbered and separated into specific sections for the type of data it was, it made it easier for me to begin to organize my work (Appendix N). After multiple re-readings of my data, about midway through my study I began to code my data. In coding my data, I was annotating directly on my field log entries, surveys, questionnaires, and student artifacts in order to articulate the main ideas that were appearing from the data. In order to keep my analysis open for multiple interpretations, I often shared my coding with critical peers and/or had critical peers code some of my data as well (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997). This helped me to minimize bias and to consider other ways of looking at my data.

After coding all of my main data sources as contained in the field log, I then created a coding index in order to keep track of the different places in the log where each code came up. This also helped me to see what codes were of primary importance and relevance to my research question and which codes were extraneous additions (Hendricks, 2009). At this point, I also combined a few

coding names that meant the same thing, or as Hendricks (2009) states, I “collapsed some codes” in order to use the same wording and be consistent on the coding index (p. 147). Finally, I included a section for “Related Codes” along with every code in order to see where my data might intersect.

Once I coded my field log and created the coding index to organize my codes by frequency and related codes, I created bins for my codes. In other words, I sought out commonalities between my codes and created categories for my various individual codes to be placed into; see Figure 12 for a copy of my codes and bins. In doing this, I was able to visualize the patterns and groupings that my coding, and thus data, had in common. Often times a code fit into more than one bin, which allowed me to analyze my data in a few different ways so as to allow for the fairest results.

### **Writing My Theme Statements**

Only after organizing my codes and bins was I able to extrapolate the big ideas, or theme statements, from my data analysis. Although this process of coding, binning, and drafting themes was ambiguous at times, it was very important that I followed through with and trusted in the process in its exact order. Hendricks (2009) explains, “As you build the categories and codes, themes and patterns will develop in the data” (p. 147). In other words, I did not gather theme statements and then try to code my data to fit the big ideas I hoped to learn from my study, but instead I went through my data, analyzed the reoccurring

ideas, and then made my conclusions about my data. By writing up these results in the form of a few concise statements, it allowed me to look at my data in a much more refined way. This process allowed me to take a hundred or so pages in a field log and boil it down systematically into its most significant findings regardless of whether or not they supported or did not support my original research question; see Figure 13 for my research question and theme statements.

Figure 12. Bins and Codes

**TEACHING WRITING**

- 3-prong thesis/non 3-prong
- 5-paragraph essay theme
- Connotations
- Figurative language
- Feedback in writing process
- Genre issues
- Lack of details/examples
- Language analysis
- Student practice for improvement in writing
- Student using personal examples
- Student voice
- Teacher intervention/clarification
- Test preparation
- Departmental pressures
- Use of details/examples
- Writing process
- Writing as a social process
- Use of self in writing

**DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT VOICE**

- Student voice
- Use of self in writing
- Student using personal examples
- Student practice for improvement in writing
- Writing as a social process

**STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

- Honesty
- Student connections
- Student disagreeing
- Student excitement
- Student reflection
- Student revising thinking
- Student use of key terms
- Student use of textual evidence
- Student using personal examples
- Use of self in writing

**TEACHER STRESSORS/ STRUGGLES**

- Unexpected teacher reactions
- Departmental pressure /Test prep
- Teacher doubt/Teacher anxiety

**STUDENT DISENGAGEMENT/ STRUGGLES**

- Genre issues
- Lack of relevance for student
- Student confusion
- Student frustration
- Unexpected student reactions

**KEY SOCIAL JUSTICE THEMES**

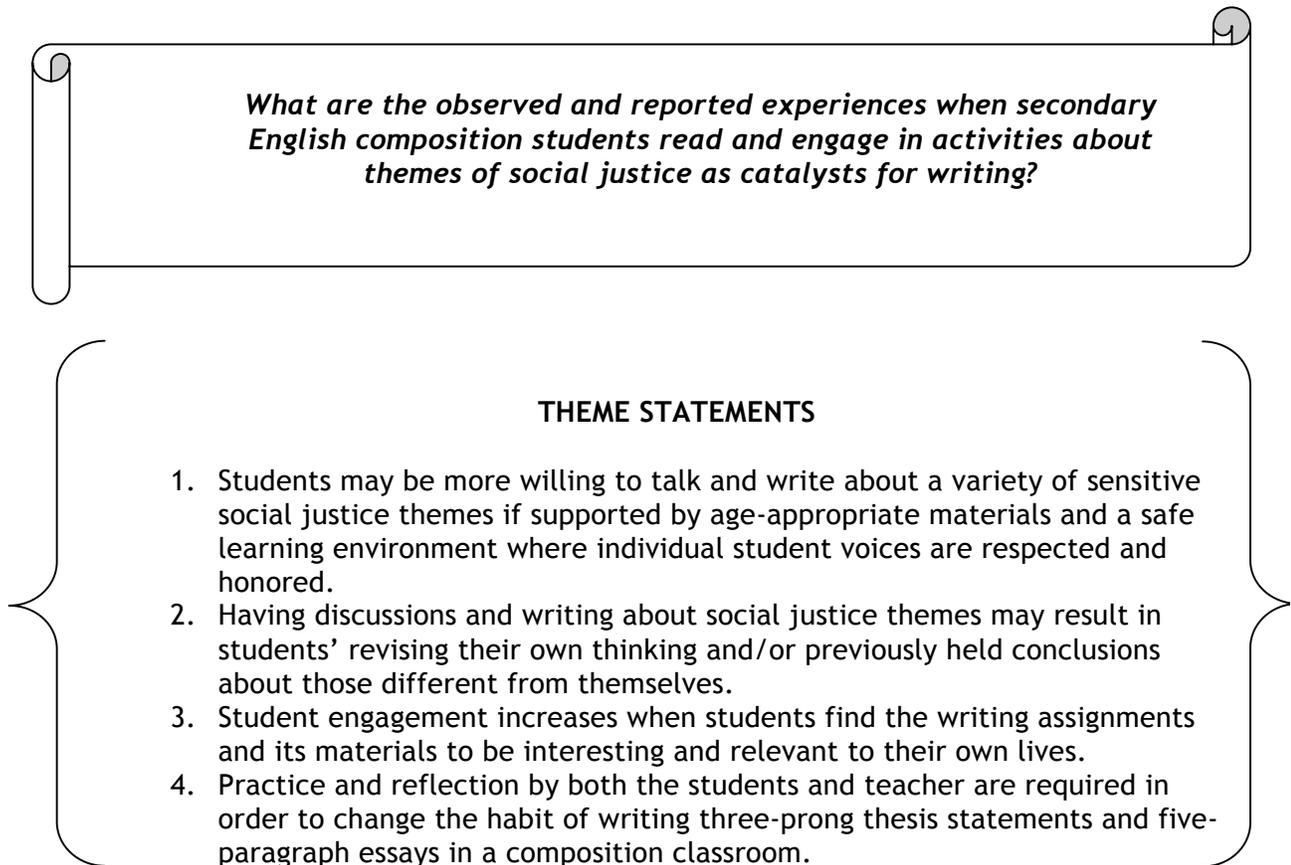
- Differences
- Diversity
- Empathy
- Equity
- Generational beliefs
- Group associations
- Heritage
- Immigrants
- Inner person as more valued than outer appearance
- Judgment
- Mainstream
- Outer appearance as more valued than inner person
- Prejudice
- Race
- Racism
- Religion
- Respect
- Sexual orientation
- Societal norms
- Socioeconomic status
- Violence

**STUDENT APPLICATION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE**

- Empathy
- Inner person as more valued than outer appearance
- Student connections
- Student observation of injustice/inequality
- Student reflection
- Student use of key terms
- Student revising thinking

Figure 12. Bins and codes garnered from analysis of the field log.

Figure 13. Research Question and Theme Statements



*Figure 13.* Research question followed by key theme statements. Theme statements represent suggested findings from data analysis.

### **Research Findings**

The purpose of my study was to address this research question, “What are the observed and reported experiences when secondary English composition students read and engage in activities about themes of social justice as catalysts for writing?” I was especially interested in studying how students’ writing and thinking would be impacted when writing about thematic ideas of social justice and when writing to an authentic audience. I was also eager to observe how students’ engagement and motivation was impacted when writing units in this class were focused on thematic ideas of social justice instead of simply focused on a particular essay type. The following theme statements represent the key findings that I took away from this study; they identify what my data suggests.

#### **Supporting Students To Foster Analysis of Social Justice Ideas**

*Students may be more willing to talk and write about a variety of sensitive social justice themes if supported by age-appropriate materials and a safe learning environment where individual student voices are respected and honored.*

From the outset of my study, I knew that I needed to incorporate thematic ideas of social justice in such a way as to make these ideas age-appropriate for my students. Therefore, I thought carefully about the types of ideas that would be relevant to their own lives and opted to highlight ideas such as “personal identity” and “perceptions vs. realities,” instead of directly tackling more mature topics. According to Calkins (1994), “During adolescence, youngsters construct a sense

of personal identity. It is a time for trying on selves, for reflection, self-awareness, and self-definition” (p. 158). I designed units and incorporated themes of social justice with the developing adolescent in mind. In addition to this decision, it was of utmost importance that I, as the teacher, continuously set an example for my students of how to talk and listen to one another. Whether it was listening to a Meredith and Miranda’s concerns about seating arrangements, being patient with Jared even when he was not being patient with other students, or reading the poetry Becky shared with me, I made a concerted effort to let the students know their English Composition classroom was a safe place of respect—every voice mattered.

The students surprised me in the excited way that they would dissect a reading, such as their discussion of LaKeesha from the Perceptions vs. Realities Unit, or debate the connotations for a word like “ghetto.” Many students participated in these discussions. This suggests that the materials they were reading and the ideas they were discussing were appropriate for them to understand and grapple with. The fact that students felt comfortable sharing their opinions about issues related to social justice suggests that they felt respected in the classroom. It is possible that many of the students in this study were just opinionated students who liked to talk. However, the fact that a variety of students contributed throughout these conversations and were not afraid to add to the discussions if asked to do so could indicate that there was a support in the

classroom which helped them to be willing to share, present in both the materials provided and the atmosphere created by the teacher and students.

### **Students Revising Their Own Thinking: A Beautiful Development**

*Having discussions and writing about social justice themes may result in students' revising their own thinking and/or previously held conclusions about those different from themselves.*

Some of my proudest moments as my students' teacher in this study came from the times when students revised their own thinking. This took place in a couple of key ways. First, there were those times when students were about to say something, or did say something, but then revised and restated their original thoughts. One example of this was when Jared was describing our school district as diverse, but then changed his understanding of diverse based on student reactions of doubt around him and offered that our district may not seem as diverse as other neighboring districts. The fact that he was able to think about his own conclusions and consider other people's conclusions then use them to modify his own shows a thought process that I hope might stay with him and all of my students outside of my classroom.

Secondly, students revised their thinking by showing evidence of previously held beliefs that changed as the study went on. The e-pal writing assignment offered many of these types of insights as students reflected back on their first impressions of their immigrant e-pals and compared them to what they

came to know through communicating with these students. The following examples are taken from the students' own written reflections that were submitted within their final portfolios for the course. Claire revealed her awe toward her e-pal's writing abilities, "One thing I learned about her was that she really knows how to write. She has not been here long and she really knows how to write well. It was surprising to me that she was only here for two different years and she writes like she has been here way longer." This suggests that Claire would not have imagined that immigrants could adapt to a new language so quickly.

Along a different train of thought, Tyler admitted this about his e-pal's favorite sport, "It surprised me that he played ice hockey because I didn't think any official games or teams were in this area. I just dismissed hockey games to areas where it's cold year-round." Although this was less about his e-pal's immigrant identity and more about his personal preferences, the fact that Tyler changed a previously held notion as the result of writing to his e-pal suggests that this experience helped him to revise his own thinking. Sawyer noted, "As I wrote emails to my e-pal, I found that english is a hard language to learn to write." This suggests that Sawyer might not have considered this idea or articulated it clearly before engaging in the experience of writing to his e-pal. Finally, Becky shared this about her e-pal experience, "Although I loved hearing her story; it surprised me. I didn't realize some people actually had to deal with the emotional part of leaving home at such a young age." Again, Becky's comment suggests that

students were able to reflect on and revise their thinking throughout this study. Since the data shows much of this revision came within the context of discussing and writing about social justice themes, it can be suggested that a curriculum embedded with social justice ideas may help students to revise their own thinking.

### **Using Topics of Interest and Relevance to Engage Students**

*Student engagement increases when students find the writing assignments and its materials to be interesting and relevant to their own lives.*

Based on the results from the survey I administered electronically at the end of the Personal Identity Unit, 17 of the 19 study participants agreed with the statement that, “The personal identity readings (personal identity poems, my own poetry, etc.) helped me to gather ideas to write about in this unit.” Similarly, 15 of the 19 participants agreed with this idea: “The topics we read, discussed, and wrote about within this unit kept my interest.” Also, 13 of the 19 participants agreed with the idea, “The topics we read, discussed, and wrote about within this unit were relevant to my own life.”

Based on the results from the survey I administered electronically at the end of the Perceptions vs. Realities Comparison Unit, 14 of the 18 participants who took the survey agreed with the statement that, “The materials about perceptions and realities (including: "Free Hugs- Express Yourself!" video, Racial Categorization website activity, novel excerpts from *19 Minutes* and *Brothers and Sisters*) helped me to gather ideas to write about in this unit.” Twelve out of the

18 participants agreed with this statement, “The topics we viewed, read, discussed, and wrote about within this unit kept my interest.” An overwhelming 17 out of the 18 participants agreed with this statement, “The topics we read, discussed, and wrote about within this unit were relevant to my own life.”

These survey results show a link between students having ideas to write about and being interested in, or engaged with, the social justice topics that were selected based on probable relevance to their lives. Corinna touched upon this point in her end of the semester survey by responding to a question about the best part of the curriculum in English Composition: “The best part of the curriculum was our opportunity to write about ourselves. We did not have to endless amounts of research on a certain topic, and if we did it was a topic we chose. There was freedom with how much we wanted write or what we wanted to write on.”

The survey results also show that these themes did not interest every student all the time. As was mentioned in My Story with the negative cases of Sawyer and Eko, the variety of supplementary materials provided might need to be increased in order to engage more students. It is also possible that some students simply do not have an interest in or desire to write about themselves, which is something that all of the major writing units required them to do.

**The Quest Toward Freedom From the Five-Paragraph Essay**

*Practice and reflection by both the students and teacher are required in order to change the habit of writing three-prong thesis statements and five-paragraph essays in a composition classroom.*

Brannon, et al. (2008) argue that “Students who do not conform to the five-paragraph essay indoctrination, whose thoughts do not easily lend themselves to the five-paragraph-theme format, learn quickly that they and those ideas do not belong in the classroom” (p. 20). When I asked my students to share with me their experiences with the five-paragraph essay format in an informal survey of the class, 13 out of the 18 present participants showed by raised hands that they had felt limited by this structure in the past and that they could not always fit their ideas into it, which often resulted in having to leave some ideas out. With the research confirmed in my classroom among the majority of the students, we worked together throughout the semester to not see the five-paragraph essay as the only option for writing essays.

One way that I tried to move beyond this format with the students was by conferencing with the students and trying to help them to improve their thesis statements beyond three-prong thesis statements. It took a few rounds of conferencing to get past this habit and a few three-prong thesis statements did surface within the Personal Identity Unit. However, the recognition of the fact that the five-paragraph essay and three-prong thesis statement was not the only

way to write seemed to help many students overall. In the end of the semester survey, 10 of the 19 participants responded, “Yes,” to “Not having to write a five-paragraph essay and/or use a three-prong thesis helped me to write better in this class,” and 6 of the 19 students responded to this as “Somewhat.” Atticus, who responded with a “yes” to the statement, shared this follow-up comment about the best part of the curriculum in English Composition class:

The best part for me was revising the way I write. After our first essay I learned that I don't always have to use the standard format and that using that format could hurt me because I could have an extra part that weakens my essay.

The first essay that Atticus is referring to was the Personal Identity Essay where I began to help students move away from the five-paragraph structure or “standard format” that he refers to. Only two students responded with a “No” to the statement about not using the five-paragraph and three-prong structures. This data suggests that students felt their writing improved when they were not held to the structure of the five-paragraph essay at all times.

### **Where Do I Go From Here?**

#### **The Heart of Social Justice: Patience**

I am not the same educator that I was at the beginning of this action research process; I will never be the same educator I was before completing this study. In this process, I learned so much about a key aspect to my educator

identity, my commitment to social justice: I learned what other experts in the field of education have to say about this topic, I learned about what this curriculum can look like in the context of a secondary English composition classroom, and I learned what it means to truly embrace teaching about social justice. Something I am still struggling with that I put a lot of thought into for this study was whether or not to include the demographics of each of my individual students. In other words, I struggled with whether or not I should mention key identifying factors, such as race, for key participants in my study and as part of my analysis. Ultimately, I decided not to include these details myself; instead I only included them if they were a part of a student's own words or work. Since they, with their parents and/or guardians, had signed permission to have any work or words of their own included within the protection of pseudonyms, I let these examples serve the purpose of providing individual demographic details only when it was appropriately based on a students' own creation.

Most of all, though, I learned that teaching and learning about social justice is a process. Social justice is not a level of enlightenment that one achieves and thus becomes "socially just" for the rest of his or her life. My students have taught me that sometimes we are able to step back and think before we speak or consider alternative personal realities. Yet, other times, our imperfect minds may jump to conclusions or handle a situation in a way that does not add to the pursuit of social justice.

However, the times when we may not handle a situation as well as we had hoped do not diminish or negate the times in which we are aware of our social commitment to those around us. In fact, if nothing else, these flawed moments allow us to deepen our understanding of ourselves. As mentioned in my Researcher Stance, the more we know ourselves the more we are able to know how to best interact with others. This ebb and flow of moments of socially just actions and moments of less just actions leading to deepened personal understanding are not isolated to our students alone; this changing tide is experienced by teachers and students alike. Therefore, in committing oneself to teaching within a social justice curriculum, patience is an imperative quality of every educator: patience with oneself and patience with one's students. Seeking a socially just world and way of interacting with the world is a path to be forged with patience, not a destination to arrive at with superiority.

#### **A Commitment to Action Research: Following Through with Change**

As illustrated in My Story and Research Findings, this study did not produce perfect results and my students taught me about many things that I can change in order to improve the units included in this study. This would not be an action research study if I did not follow through with these changes when given the opportunity to do so. While writing up my study, I have entered a new semester of English Composition with new students. Therefore, I have the chance

to make changes to some of the units that my study participants identified to me as needing improvement.

For instance, when I got to teaching the Personal Identity Unit a couple of weeks ago, I thought carefully about the insights revealed to me by Sawyer and Eko. I realized that I could not just photocopy my plans and replicate the exact unit I used during my study; I remembered them telling me that they struggled with understanding personal identity only through the genre of poetry. This caused me to include a new component in the brainstorming stage of this essay process; instead of simply completing the poetry stations to prepare for writing the essay, I asked students to bring in an object or picture of a person or object that represents part of their personal identity.

The responses from my students were promising, due to the fact that the majority of my students brought in something to share and every student had something personal to talk about. However, I cannot know yet if this will impact their personal identity essays as positively, but the fact that I have made this modification in the first place suggests that I have taken the value of an action research study seriously. It is one thing to research areas where changes are necessary, but it is the act of a true action researcher to follow through with these changes.

### **A Writing Teacher Awakens to the Writing Life**

Lastly, this process has made me a student of the subject I teach; I am an English composition teacher who was given an exceptional educational opportunity to engage in writing for academic purposes again. Just as I have hoped my students would write to express themselves, to expand their thinking, and to improve their lives, I realize at the close of this process that I have engaged in all of these pursuits. Not only does this make me a stronger educator, being that I can speak firsthand to the types of tasks I ask my students to engage in, but it also makes me a stronger student. I know that my learning is not complete- I would not be in the field of education if it were. However, through this action research process, now I know that I not only enjoy writing, but that I must write. In the words of Calkins (1994):

Writing allows us to hold our life in our hands and make something of it. We grow a piece of writing not only by jotting notes and writing rough drafts, but also by noticing, wondering, remembering, questioning, yearning. 'I must write,' Anne Morrow Lindbergh says. 'I must write at all costs, for writing is more than living. It is being conscious of living' (p. 4).

This action research study has heightened my awareness and ability to wonder, remember, question, and yearn about the students and issues in education around

me. It has shown me that our individual stories matter and must be told in order to create change.

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## Appendix A—Post-Unit(s) Survey

*Please note: This survey was given to the students electronically by using a teacher created account at SurveyMonkey.com.*

Directions: Respond to each of the following questions by reflecting on the writing unit we have just completed.

1. Your name:

2. Essay mode studied:

3. The readings helped me to gather ideas to write about in this unit.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

4. The readings challenged me to think more deeply about the topics we discussed and wrote about in this unit.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

5. The topics we read, discussed, and wrote about within this unit were relevant to my own life.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

6. The topics we read, discussed, and wrote about within this unit kept my interest.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

7. Please explain why you chose the answer you did for question six.

8. Please use this space to expand on any of your other answers from the survey.

Appendix B—Autobiographical Survey for E-Pal Project

*Please note: This survey was given to the students electronically by using teacher and student Google accounts.*

1. Where were you born?
2. Where did you grow up?
3. Have you ever had a pen pal before? If yes, describe briefly.
4. Have you ever travelled outside of Pennsylvania? The United States? If yes, write the places you've been.
5. Do you speak any other languages fluently? Does your family speak any other languages? If so, state the languages.

## Appendix C—End of Semester Reflection Survey

*Please note: This survey was given to the students electronically by using teacher and student Google accounts.*

1. Do you agree with this statement: Students are willing to talk about a variety of sensitive social justice themes (race, personal identity, perceptions/stereotypes, etc.) if supported by age-appropriate materials and a safe learning environment where individual student voices are respected and honored.

Yes            No            Somewhat            Other:

2. Do you agree with this statement: Having discussions and writing about social justice themes may result in students' revising their own thinking and/or previously held conclusions about those different from themselves.

Yes            No            Somewhat            Other:

3. Do you agree with this statement: Student engagement increases when their voices are heard and they find the classroom materials to be interesting and relevant to their own lives.

Yes            No            Somewhat            Other:

4. Do you agree with this statement: Practice and reflection by both the students and teacher are required in order to change the habit of writing 3-prong thesis statements and 5-paragraph essays in a composition classroom. (In other words, it takes time to break the habit of the five-paragraph essay and three-prong thesis!)

Yes            No            Somewhat            Other:

5. Do you agree with this statement: Not having to write a five-paragraph essay and/or use a three-prong thesis helped me to write better in this class. (Or it at least made me feel better about my writing!)

Yes            No            Somewhat            Other:

6. What was the best part of the curriculum of this class for you and why?

## Appendix D—Parent/Guardian Letter of Informed Consent

September 25, 2012

Dear Parents and Guardians,

I am presently completing my Master's thesis study as part of the pursuit of my Master of Education degree at Moravian College. The Moravian program is a teacher action research degree that encourages us to reflect on our own teaching practices; I also spend time reading current research on teaching and learning. The Moravian College program helps me to stay aware of the most effective teaching strategies so that I can provide the best learning experiences for my students.

The work required for my thesis study involves conducting a systematic study of my own teaching, which will take place during the middle of September through the beginning of December. The focus of my research this semester is the effect that readings related to themes of social justice have on student writing within my English Composition course. Students will be reading, discussing, and reflecting on central ideas such as, but not limited to: personal identity, family identity, community identity, perceived outlooks and stereotyping as compared to individual realities, and common myths about adolescents in society. I hope to increase student motivation, to strengthen students' writing abilities, and to create a classroom of student-led questioning as a result of the reading and writing assignments students complete throughout this study.

I will be gathering information to support my study through observations, student interviews, surveys, and analysis of student work samples. Within my study, I will only use information collected from students whom have permission to participate in the study. All of the students' names will be kept confidential, as will the names of teachers and other staff; the school name will also remain anonymous. Any information that may reveal a student's identity will be altered to protect anonymity. No names will be included on work samples or in any reports of my study.

Any student may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty; please see the attached student letter of withdrawal and feel free to refer to it at any time throughout the study. If a student does withdraw, I will not use any information pertaining to her or him in my study. However, every student will be engaged in this experience of best practices as part of the curriculum of my English Composition class.

My faculty sponsor at Moravian College is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be contacted at Moravian at 610-861-1482 or by e-mail at [jshosh@moravian.edu](mailto:jshosh@moravian.edu). If you have any questions or concerns about my in-class project, please feel free to contact me at

school or to contact our principal who has already read over and approved my research plans. If not, please sign and return the second page of this letter. Thank you for your support!

Respectfully,

Megan L. Hauser

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I attest that I am the student’s legal guardian and that I have received a copy, read, and understand this consent form. Please initial the appropriate box below.

\_\_\_\_ **Yes**, I am willing to have my student participate in Mrs. Hauser’s action research thesis study.

\_\_\_\_ **No**, I am not willing to have my student participate in Mrs. Hauser’s action research thesis study.

**Parent / Guardian’s Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Student’s Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

English Composition

Mrs. Hauser

**HOW TO WITHDRAW FROM MRS. HAUSER'S STUDY**

***Students: You can change your mind about participating in my study at any time throughout the semester. I respect your opinions and wishes, so please know that there is no penalty for withdrawal. If you would like to withdraw from the study, simply fill in the blanks and submit the following letter of withdrawal. When I receive this letter, I will exclude you and all of your information from my study.***

***Thank you!***

---

Dear Mrs. Hauser,

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have decided that I want to  
(Print your full name)

withdraw as a participant from your thesis study. Therefore, please do not use any of my information in your study.

Thank you,

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Sign your full name)

## Appendix E—Principal Letter of Informed Consent

September 24, 2012

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am currently enrolled in the final set of courses toward completing my Master's degree at Moravian College. The Moravian Master of Education degree is a teacher action research program that encourages us to reflect on our own teaching practices; I also spend time reading current research on teaching and learning. The Moravian College program helps me to stay aware of the most effective teaching strategies so that I can provide the best learning experiences for my students.

The work required for my thesis study involves conducting a systematic study of my own teaching. The focus of my research this semester is the effect that readings related to themes of social justice have on student writing within my English Composition course. Students will be reading, discussing, and reflecting on themes such as, but not limited to: personal identity, family identity, community identity, perceived outlooks and stereotyping as compared to individual realities, and common myths about adolescents in society. I hope to increase student motivation, to strengthen students' writing abilities, and to create a classroom of student-led questioning as a result of the reading and writing assignments students complete throughout this study.

I will be gathering information to support my study through observations, student interviews, surveys, and work samples. I will only use information collected from students whom have permission to participate in the study. All of the students' names will be kept confidential, as will the names of teachers and other staff; our school name will also remain anonymous. Any information that may reveal a student's identity will be altered to protect anonymity. No names will be included on work samples or in any reports of my study. Any student may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If a student does withdraw, I will not use any information pertaining to her or him in my study. However, every student will be engaged in this experience of best practices as part of the curriculum of my English Composition class.

My faculty sponsor at Moravian College is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be contacted at Moravian at 610-861-1482 or by e-mail at [jshosh@moravian.edu](mailto:jshosh@moravian.edu). If you have any questions or concerns about my thesis study, please feel free to contact me at school. If not, please sign and return the bottom portion of this letter. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Megan L. Hauser

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\_\_\_\_ Yes, I do authorize Megan Hauser to conduct this research study as part of her English Composition class at High School.

\_\_\_\_ No, I do not authorize Megan Hauser to conduct this research study as part of her English Composition class at High School.

Principal's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix F- Colleague Letter of Informed Consent

Dear Colleague,

I am presently completing my Master's thesis study as part of the pursuit of my Master of Education degree at Moravian College. The Moravian program is a teacher action research degree that encourages us to reflect on our own teaching practices; I also spend time reading current research on teaching and learning. The Moravian College program helps me to stay aware of the most effective teaching strategies so that I can provide the best learning experiences for my students.

The work required for my thesis study involves conducting a systematic study of my own teaching, which will take place during the middle of September through the beginning of December. The focus of my research this semester is the effect that readings related to themes of social justice have on student writing within my English Composition course. Students will be reading, discussing, and reflecting on central ideas such as, but not limited to: personal identity, family identity, community identity, perceived outlooks and stereotyping as compared to individual realities, and common myths about adolescents in society. I hope to increase student motivation, to strengthen students' writing abilities, and to create a classroom of student-led questioning as a result of the reading and writing assignments students complete throughout this study.

I will be gathering information to support my study through observations, student interviews, surveys, and analysis of student work samples. Within my study, I will only use information collected from students whom have permission to participate in the study. All of the students' names will be kept confidential, as will the names of teachers and other staff; the school name will also remain anonymous. Any information that may reveal a student's identity will be altered to protect anonymity. No names will be included on work samples or in any reports of my study.

As one of the key colleagues within my study, I was wondering if you would be willing to allow me to use our conversations and exchanges as data for this study. As mentioned above, you will remain anonymous within the study and may withdrawal from the publication of this data at any time.

My faculty sponsor at Moravian College is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be contacted at Moravian at 610-861-1482 or by e-mail at [jshosh@moravian.edu](mailto:jshosh@moravian.edu). If you have any questions or concerns about my in-class project, please feel free to contact me at school or to contact my principal who has already read over and approved my research plans. If not, please sign and return the second page of this letter. Thank you for your support!

Respectfully,

Megan L. Hauser

---

I attest that I am a colleague of Megan Hauser's and that I have received a copy, read, and understand this consent form. Please initial the appropriate box below.

\_\_\_\_ **Yes**, I am willing to participate in Mrs. Hauser's action research thesis study.

\_\_\_\_ **No**, I am not willing to participate in Mrs. Hauser's action research thesis study.

**Colleague Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix G—Human Subjects Internal Review Board Approval

Dear Megan,

The Moravian College HSIRB has approved your proposal, "How reading about themes of social justice impacts student writing." A copy of your complete proposal will remain with the HSIRB Co-Chair, Dr. Adams O'Connell, for the duration of the time of your study and for up to one year from the approval date indicated by the date of this email.

Please note that if you intend on venturing into topics other than the ones indicated in your proposal, you must inform the HSIRB about what those topics will be. Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this email notification, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation, awaiting HSIRB approval of the changes.

We do still need to collect your electronic signature, so please respond to this email with your name and project title in the subject line. Your reply will serve as your signature. Your faculty adviser, Dr. Shosh, also needs to provide an electronic signature. He can reply to this email with his name in the subject line. These responses will serve as your electronic signatures.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Virginia Adams O'Connell  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board  
Moravian College

## Appendix H—Poetry Station Questions

Name:

English Composition

**Key Questions for Poetry Stations**

Answer the following questions for each poem you read on your own sheet of paper. Use as many specific details from the poems as you can!

1. What key characteristics are used to describe the persona's identity?
2. What is the focus of the poem?
3. How does the writer convey his or her information to the audience?
4. List some of the specific words that stood out to you in the poem and explain why.

Appendix I—Personal Identity Poems from Linda Christensen's *Teaching for Joy and Justice and Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*

STUDENT HANDOUT: Verbs and Language Play

## Bottom of the Ninth

by Scott Steele

Fingernails glide smoothly  
across seams,  
rosin absorbing  
sweat from palms,  
dirt skyrocketing  
from the intrusion  
of deats,  
signals encoded  
in fingers,  
an imperceptible nod,  
the slow and deliberate  
bringing together of the hands.

A pause.

A furtive glance.  
The knee ascends  
then swings,  
the arm plummets  
then arcs upward,  
the leg kicks,  
the elbow  
leads the wrist  
expelling the ball  
between the  
middle and the forefingers.  
The ball in  
violent revolution  
crosses the plate.  
Strike out.

## I Got the Blues

by Aaron Wheeler-Kay

Blue eyes.  
Yes, ma'am.  
Blue.  
Like the ocean—  
No, blue like new jeans,  
Stiff and comfy—  
No, blue like hard times.  
Yeah.  
Blue like cold steel and oil.  
Blue like the caress of jazz at a funeral.  
The azure ice cubes in my head  
Melt hearts.  
Yes, blue like lightning in a desert storm.  
Blue like my baby.  
Like my baby blues.  
Blue like cold lips in winter,  
Indigo stains  
in an optical vein.  
I got the blues  
And they got a tale to tell.

## HANDOUT: List Poems

**Black**

by Anaiah Rhodes

Black is beautiful  
 Black is bold  
 Like the peppa in the salt shaker  
 Black words on white paper

Black is harmony  
 Like the notes in a symphony  
 The hymns my mama hums to me

Black is love  
 Courage in hard times  
 To tell it like it is

Black on the ledger  
 Makes the money flow  
 Black is success

Black magic  
 Elegant and classy  
 The feeling before the curtain pulls back  
 Black entourage

Black is the heartbeat  
 Of the soul  
 Like still waters  
 Riches untold  
 Black is beautiful

**Just Thick**

by Bree Levine-DeSpain

Just thick  
 Thick like North Carolina sweet grained  
 Sun-kissed cornbread thick,  
 Melt in your mouth, smothered  
 With butter and honey thick.

Thick  
 Thick like homemade pancake batter  
 Smooth to the touch  
 Yet creamy and delectable  
 To the tongue.

Thick  
 Thick like caramel sauce  
 Mouthwatering, sweet, and sticky  
 To the touch.

Thick  
 Thick thighs  
 Thick hips  
 Just thick.

Good ol' Southern style, eat what tastes good  
 "You wanna go to Popeye's?"  
 "Naw, I'll have a milkshake!"  
 Cornbread, pancakes, caramel sauce.  
 I'm thick.

WHAT ARE YOU?  
By Robert Smith

What are you if you're not Black and you're not white?  
I am both, so how could I choose just one?  
No, I am not an "other."  
I am not a small box to be filled  
with the dark markings of your pen.

I am not a blank space between Black and white.

There is no other like me.  
No one holds what I know.

"Then what are you?" you ask.

I am a Black man who has never  
touched the sands of Africa.  
I am a European looking for riches.  
I am a slave stripped away from his home.  
I am a lost woman in Egypt, Niger, Cameroon, or Zambia.  
I am a merchant who sells fish from his brother's boat.  
I am the men and women who died at Plymouth Rock.  
I am the Aztec Indian whose blood was spilled for a little  
gold.  
I am the pregnant women who sits in the icy cold.  
I am the red faces who walked the Trail of Tears.  
I am my mother's father whose face is covered by a cold  
hood.  
I am the German soldier who spills my Jewish blood.  
I am the South African Republic that beat  
my Black grandmother.  
I am a being, called human, from the word "humane."  
I breathe as a product of marriage.  
I am a child of life.  
I can't be put into a box and filled up  
with cruel ink.  
I can't be spoken of as an other or decide  
the simple choice of Black or white.

I am a soul, flesh and blood and so much more.  
I am history  
I am diversity.



## Appendix J—Personal Identity Essay Assignment

Name:

English Composition

**Defining Your Personal Identity: An Informative Essay*****What you've done already...***

Over the last couple of weeks, you have spent time reflecting on your understanding of personal identity, reading and analyzing poems about other teenagers' personal identities, and exploring some of the aspects of your own identity in a creative way by writing poetry.

***What you're ready to do next...***

Over the next week, you will combine what you've learned about personal identity to write an informative essay defining your own personal identity.

***The PURPOSE of this essay is...***

You will define your personal identity so that the reader of your essay comes away with a picture of the characteristics that define who you are as a person.

***More specifically, your AUDIENCE will be...***

Getting to know general information about your identity based on your essay.

**Your AUDIENCE will be other students in another school district!  
(You'll be learning more about them in the coming days...)**

**How we will proceed:**

1. Whole Class and Individual Brainstorming about Personal Identity
2. Individual Planning of the Essay Based on a Set of Pre-Writing Questions
3. Research about Writing Thesis Statements
4. Drafting the Thesis Statement
5. Writing the Rough Draft
6. Giving and Getting Feedback: Teacher and Peer
7. Final Revisions and Proofreading
8. Publishing the Essay: Sending it to E-Pal Students

## Appendix K—Parent/Guardian E-Mail for E-Pal Project

Good evening,

I am writing to inform you of a project your student will be participating in this week. For the past few weeks, the students have been writing personal identity informative essays. Over the next few days, students will be sharing their essays with middle school students who are English as a Second Language (ESL) students at a district outside of \_\_\_\_\_. A colleague of mine from graduate school is their teacher and both of our principals are supportive of this project.

We have arranged for this opportunity for a few reasons:

1. Your student will be serving as a model of writing for the middle school student he or she shares work with.
2. Best practices for teaching writing suggest that it is imperative for students to have opportunities to write for authentic audiences; although I will still read and grade your student's essay, the student is not simply writing for my review.
3. Your student will have the opportunity to learn about other cultures by reading writing from the partnering middle school student.

If you have any questions about this project or would not like your student to be involved, please let me know. The students have been working very hard on their essays and I look forward to the conversations that will follow!

Thank you for your time,  
Mrs. Hauser

Appendix L—Excerpt from *Brothers and Sisters* by BeBe Moore Campbell and featured in Christensen's *Teaching for Joy and Justice*

## Excerpt from *Brothers and Sisters*

by Bebe Moore Campbell

Esther stared at the scrolling figures on her computer screen. It was hard to comprehend that people could be so careless about their finances that they forgot they had money in the bank, but as she reviewed the dormant accounts, a task she undertook every few months, the evidence was indisputable. In the downtown branch alone, there was nearly three million dollars in accounts that hadn't been active in months, sometimes years. Two million, nine hundred thousand and seventy-eight dollars, to be exact. She logged in the amount. Of course some of the holders of the accounts were deceased, but in those cases, she would have thought that relatives would come and claim the cash. All that money going to waste. She shook her head.

Esther heard a soft knock at the door. She looked at her watch: nine-thirty. She had completely forgotten about her appointment. Well, the interview wouldn't take long. She'd already decided that she was going to hire David Weaver. "Come in," she called.

The door opened slowly, and a young, dark-brown-skinned woman stood in front of Esther's desk. Their eyes met, and Esther could read in them the girl's uncensored surprise. Esther realized immediately the reason for the startled look in the young woman's eyes: she hadn't expected another black person to be interviewing her.

Two months earlier, Angel City had formed a partnership with the city's social service agency. The bank was obligated to interview a certain number of welfare recipients who were involved in a job training program, although they weren't obligated to hire them. Today's interviewee was Esther's first from the program. Office scuttlebutt said the candidates were pretty poorly qualified.

Esther found the girl's astonishment amusing. Why, the child couldn't even speak. "Were you expecting someone else?" Esther said.

"Oh, no. Well, I—" The girl stopped, and they both laughed. "I'm glad it's you," she said, and they chuckled again. "No, I mean, like, it makes me feel good to know that one of us is the boss. You know what I mean?"

"Yes, I know what you mean," Esther said. The girl seemed a little awkward. This was probably her first job interview. Esther felt a twinge of guilt, knowing that her mind was already made up. Thinking, she probably needs a job worse than old Alex Keaton, Esther extended her hand. When the girl shook it, Esther could feel her fingers trembling like a frightened kitten; then she felt something hard and sharp cutting into her palm. She looked down. Good God! Long. Curved. Bright Red with a capital R. And rhinestones were embedded in the pinkie nails. Genuine Hootchy Mama fingernails. "I'm Esther Jackson. Thank you for coming. Sit down, La... La..."

HANDOUT: *Brothers and Sisters*

"LaKeesha. LaKeesha Jones." She talks so proper, LaKeesha thought. Just like a white woman.

LaKeesha sat down in the chair near the desk. Esther gave her a quick once-over. The dress was too tight and too short, but not awful. The girl's face was pleasant, even though she wore too much makeup. The braids, well, they weren't the proper hairstyle for a black woman who wanted to get ahead in business. "Tell me a little about yourself, LaKeesha," Esther said. "Have you had any teller experience?"

LaKeesha took a breath, trying not to be nervous in spite of the way Esther was looking at her. Her eyes were like fingers lifting her collar to check for dirt. LaKeesha attempted to concentrate. She'd been through a number of practice interviews. She paused, remembering what Mrs. Clark had told her: Look the person straight in her eyes; smile a lot; speak clearly; sell yourself; don't be nervous. But Esther's language, each word so precisely enunciated, was erecting a brick wall between them. There was nothing to be nervous about, LaKeesha told herself. She smiled at Esther. "I just, like, finished the South-Central Alternative Education Center's bank teller program. I was, like, you know, number one in my class...."

An around-the-way girl if ever I saw one, Esther said to herself as she listened to LaKeesha describe her course work and a month-long internship at one of the city's banks. "The manager wanted to hire me, but they didn't have no openings at the time."

Esther flinched at the double negative. "Well," she said, getting a word in, "it certainly appears that you've been well trained. Tell me about the school you attended."

"See, I dropped out of high school after I had my baby. Then I met this lady named Mrs. Clark; her and her husband run the school, and so she talked me into going there to get my GED. She has a contract with the city to train people, so after I got my GED, I decided that I wanted to take the bank teller course, because, well, I'm on the county and I want to get off." LaKeesha sat back in her chair. She hadn't meant to talk so much, to get so personal. Mrs. Clark told her to be professional. Maybe she shouldn't have mentioned being on the county. She looked at Esther's black suit, the shiny low heels, and all that gold jewelry she wore, not the kind that screamed at you but a nice quiet gold. And words came out her mouth so sharp they could draw blood. She probably thought she was white, sitting up in her own office, being everybody's boss. She shouldn't have said anything about being on the county.

A baby. Esther thought. She could just hear the phone calls, the excuses: the baby is sick; the baby-sitter can't make it. Hiring a single mother with a baby—because

of course she wasn't married—was asking for trouble. She looked at LaKeesha, who was staring at her uneasily. "Do you know TIPS?"

LaKeesha grinned. "That's what we was trained in."

Esther scratched the back of her neck. The child wasn't ready for prime time, and the bad thing about it was that she probably had no idea just how deficient she was. Esther thought fleetingly of what that asshole Fred Gaskins would say if he were listening to her conversation with LaKeesha. He'd say that LaKeesha was another product of a substandard high school in South-Central. She could just see the operations manager, his fat little lightbulb head bobbing back and forth, his bantam chest heaving in and out. Fred Gaskins can go to hell, she thought to herself. She glanced at her watch; ten o'clock. "Come with me, LaKeesha. I'd like to see what you can do."

Leading the young woman out the door to the operations area, Esther guided her past the customer reps' desks, around to the back of the tellers' cage. There were five people on duty. Hector Bonilla smiled in his usual polite manner as soon as he saw the two women approaching him. "Hector, I'd like you to meet LaKeesha Jones. Hector, LaKeesha and I have been chatting about the possibility of her becoming a teller here. I'd like for you two to work together for an hour or so, and then I'll come back for you, LaKeesha. Hector, may I see you for a second?"

Esther walked the young man a few feet away from his station. "Listen, I want you to really pay attention to how LaKeesha works. Look at the way she deals with customers, how she handles money, and how well she knows TIPS. I'll talk with you later, all right?"

"Yes, Esther," Hector said, nodding his head so vigorously that his straight black hair rippled over his forehead. In the eighteen months that he had been with the bank, Hector had proved himself to be a good worker, stable and serious. He always came early and stayed late. Esther knew she could depend upon him for a fair assessment. She might not hire LaKeesha this time, but if the girl had decent skills, she might consider her when there was another opening.

One hour later, Esther stepped outside her office, caught Hector's eye, and motioned him over. In a few moments, he appeared at her door, and she ushered him to a seat inside. "How did she do?" Esther asked.

"She is very good worker," Hector said solemnly, his dark, serious eyes looking straight into hers. "She is polite to customers. She is accurate with money. She knows the computer system too. I didn't have to tell her very much at all." His smile was as earnest and diffident as he was.

HANDOUT: *Brothers and Sisters*

"Thank you, Hector. Would you tell LaKeesha to come to my office, please."

"Well, Hector told me you did very well," Esther said after LaKeesha settled herself into her chair. The young woman beamed. Esther asked her a few questions about the transactions she'd just made. Finally, she stood up and extended her hand. "I've enjoyed chatting with you, and I'll be in touch."

LaKeesha stood up. "My grandmother, she lives with me and she keeps my baby, even if he's sick, so you don't have to worry about that."

Esther nodded her head. "Well," she said, opening the door just a little wider, "that's just fine."

She felt the girl's eyes on her. "Just fine," Esther repeated, waiting for LaKeesha to leave.

The young woman stepped toward her. "I know I can do a good job for you. I'll come on time. I know how to be a good worker. I can smile at the customers and be polite and hand them their money. I want to work." She knew she was talking too much, that she should just leave, but the words seemed to be bubbling up from some spring. "My whole family's been on the county for as long as I can remember. I didn't tell none of them where I was going, because I didn't want to get their hopes up. I want to be a good example for my younger sisters. They need to see somebody working." She paused and stood up straighter. "If I don't get this job, would you just please call me and, like, tell me what I did wrong, so I won't make the same mistake on the next interview? Because if I don't get this job, I'm gonna get me a job from somebody."

Esther hesitated a moment, then closed the door. "Sit down," she told LaKeesha.

"First of all, get rid of those fingernails. This is a place of business, not a nightclub. Second, your dress is too tight and too short, and your heels are too high. Third, you're wearing too much makeup. Fourth, your grammar is poor. It's 'I didn't tell any of them,' not 'none of them.' And don't say 'like' so much. And another thing: get rid of the braids. I think they're beautiful, but when you're working for white folks you want to fit in, not stand out." Seeing the distraught look on LaKeesha's face, Esther spoke a little more gently. "Now, everything I'm telling you can be corrected. It's up to you."

"If I change all those things, will you give me a job?" LaKeesha's expression was eager, hungry.

"I can't promise you that," Esther said quickly, "but I believe that if you make those adjustments, somebody will hire you. And don't think in terms of a job. You have to think about a career."

LaKeesha's eyes, which seemed to grow larger and more hopeful every minute, didn't leave Esther's face.

"You need to think: I'll start as a teller, then I'll become an operations assistant, then I'll get in the operations training program, and then I'll become an operations manager. That's the kind of mind-set employers want to see in an employee."

LaKeesha's face brightened, and she stood up. Before she realized what she was doing, she was hugging Esther and mumbling in her ear: "Thank you, sister."

Esther felt the word even more than she heard it. There was obligation in that word. And she didn't want any part of that.

She pulled away. "Don't ever call me that here," she said quickly. Esther watched as LaKeesha passed through the bank and out the door. Even after she left, the musky odor of TLC oil sheen spray clung to the air in the room. Esther knew the odor well; it was her scent too.

Esther closed her eyes. She could see herself making those fast deals. Lending millions just on her say-so. If she played her cards right, maybe she could be the one who'd transcend the glass ceiling. Every once in a while, they let somebody black slip through. Why shouldn't she be the one?

Esther walked around her desk with her hands clasped together in front of her and then behind her. She pictured LaKeesha's face, the yearning in her eyes. No, no, no! She wouldn't sacrifice her career in the name of racial solidarity. Forget it. She was going to pick up the phone and hire an acceptable white boy, with acceptable grammar and short fingernails, because that was the right move to make. The smart move.

Sister.

That and a dollar won't even get you a ride on the bus.

Esther picked up the telephone.

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## Appendix M—Perceptions vs. Realities Comparison Letter Assignment

**Perceptions vs. Personal Reality: A Comparison Writing Assignment**

**Directions:** Write a letter to your e-pal comparing what people perceive you to be like and what you are actually like. In other words, you might address first impressions that others have of you that are different from who you really are and are the same as who you really are.

**Role:**

**Audience:**

**Format:**

**Topic:**

**MODE:**

**Your Task- what you need to include in the letter:**

1. You will discuss at least two differences between people's impressions/perceptions of you and your personal reality.
2. You will discuss at most two similarities between people's impressions/perceptions of you and your personal reality.
3. You will establish an introduction, with a basic "thesis" and/or explanation of the letter, as well as a brief conclusion.
4. You will write in the format of a friendly letter.

**Guidelines:**

- **Brainstorm qualities/key points you might discuss**
- **Create an outline based on one of the models you receive**
- **Write a rough draft of the letter to be self and peer edited**
- **Compose a final draft of the letter to be published**

Appendix N—Field Log Table of Contents

TYPED COPY OF FIELD LOG TABLE OF CONTENTS  
(Numbers represent divider tabs in the field log)

1. Coding Index, Codes and Bins Document, and Theme Statements
2. Field Log Entries: Participant and Non-Participant Observation Journals
3. Surveys
4. Benchmark Writing
5. Personal Identity Unit Artifacts
6. Perceptions vs. Realities Comparison Unit Artifacts
7. E-Pal Correspondences
8. Final Student Reflections