Authentic for Whom?: An Interview Study of Desired Writing Practices for African American Adolescent Learners

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Abstract

Across theory, research, and learning standards, there is a clear call for authentic writing experiences to increase achievement and engagement. According to theories of authenticity that stress its subjective nature, a writing task is authentic when a student perceives it as relevant to the real world—as they define the real world. Moreover, there is a need for authentic writing in classrooms that connects to increased student engagement, but the reality of writing instruction across schools in the United States remains rote and teacher-centered. These narrowed views and perspectives are further exacerbated when it comes to teaching African American youth in classrooms. Using qualitative interview data involving 12 African American students in the middle grades, the researchers examined the following questions: 1) *How do African American adolescents describe their classroom writing experiences?* 2) *What factors do African American adolescents desire related to authenticity for writing instruction?* Researchers found 24 present, desired and undesired practices expressed by participants when describing their classroom writing experiences. In this article, eight of the most prevalent factors (i.e., expression, personal connections, sharing with peers, sharing with teachers, structured writing, student and teacher choice of topics, and writing for impact) are illustrated to understand how these variables contributed to authentic writing experiences. Findings from this study suggest that more research is needed within classrooms that attempt to increase the perceived authenticity of writing tasks among African American youth.

> *Writing is a way to express yourself. I mean, people don't listen to you when you just speak. People are like, "No, I hear with my eyes," you know stuff like that. It's like ok well if you won't listen to me when I speak, how about I write something down and make it beautiful and fluent and just powerful. And then you will pay attention to me and what I actually have to say.*

The above quote comes from the interview transcript of Jasmine, a 13-year-old African American girl who was asked, *Why is writing important to you?* In her response, she illuminated the purpose and power of language through writing. In her conceptualization of writing she deems it as the means for self-expression and a tool to engage others to listen to one's thoughts. Her words especially resonated with us as former middle school teachers and current writing researchers, and her words charged us to inquire about the writing experiences of African American youth in middle school classrooms and if classroom instruction supports writing in ways that Jasmine described as *beautiful*, *fluent* and *powerful*. We also questioned the construct of authenticity in writing instruction and the degree to which authentic writing is experienced by Black youth in school spaces. We draw upon a conception of authenticity as a subjective judgment about the real world relevance of a task (Splitter, 2009). In other words, to be authentic, the writing task must connect to the lives of the youth. Moreover, an authentic writing task needs to be perceived by students as relevant to the real world—as they define the real world (Behizadeh, 2014).

By asking Jasmine why is writing important, we were beginning to listen to her voice and why she feels writing matters. Her words suggest that an authentic writing task requires the purpose of engaging others in writing. Thus, for Jasmine, a

topic and an audience that matters to her may be required for authenticity. For example, based on our knowledge of Jasmine and the topics that matter to her, we could ask her to write to an audience on the current state of media representations of Black girls (a topic in which she has expressed interest). In contrast to this, a less authentic writing assignment for Jasmine might be to write a persuasive essay on a prompt that will only be read by the teacher on a topic that she perceives as irrelevant. Because of our framing of educational authenticity as residing within a student's perceptions rather than a task, the only way we can know what is authentic for Jasmine or other students is to ask, which is what we engaged in for the purposes of the current study.

Purpose of the Study

Our desire to support Jasmine and other African American students who "have something to say," led us to develop a study that draws upon qualitative interview data from two separate studies (Seidman, 2013) with adolescent African American students in the middle grades to respond to the following research questions:

1. How do African American adolescents describe their classroom writing experiences?
2. What factors do African American adolescents desire related to authenticity for writing instruction?

We chose to draw upon interview data because this source of data affords opportunities to provide thick descriptions of the voices of participants. This study was planned to project the voices of African American adolescents in their own words, as their voices have been historically marginalized in classrooms across a wide span of years (Howard, 2001). However, if we understand the classroom writing experiences of African American youth, we can push toward improved practices in middle level classrooms and increase the experiences that youth find real, meaningful, and connected to their lives.

Review of Literature

We examined the actual and desired practices of African American adolescents drawing on three major bodies of work: authenticity in writing; historical purposes of African American writing; and assessment reports on U.S. writing instruction. These three bodies of work informed our data collection and analysis and contribute to establishing the significance of this work. Collectively, researchers suggest that student conceptions of authenticity in writing classrooms are overlooked when it comes to informing curriculum and policy decisions and are not widely reported in large-scale assessments. Moreover, the purposes for writing that African Americans held historically are largely absent from the ways writing is privileged in language arts classrooms and within assessments.

Authenticity in writing practices. In previous research that uses the term authenticity related to educational settings, a narrow conception of authenticity is often employed and a lack of student perspectives is offered (Ashton, 2010; Behizadeh, 2014; Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996; Splitter, 2009). Authenticity in education is often thought of as residing within a particular task, rather than being a judgment of a task by a student (Behizadeh). In this study, we operationalize a definition of authenticity in writing drawing on Behizadeh's previous review of educational authenticity. In this past work, Behizadeh defines authenticity as "a student's perception that a school task connects to his/her life" (p. 28). She draws on the work of Ashton (2010) and Splitter (2009) who counter the common assumption that authenticity is a characteristic of a task and position authenticity as person-dependent. This is a critical orientation for researchers exploring authentic literacy experiences with youth; researchers and teachers cannot assume that writing tasks that align with their conceptions of the "real world" are actually perceived as authentic by the students with whom they work. In the current study, we sought African American youth perspectives on desired writing, and although we cannot designate these desired practices as more or less authentic based on mere

desire, we can take these desired practices and compare them to the tenets of authentic writing described in our conceptual framework to begin the conversation about authenticity for African American youth in U.S. schools.

Notwithstanding the lack of a clear consensus on defining authenticity, calls for authenticity in literacy education prevail. In a review of a century of literacy research, Hillocks (2011) posited, "We know from a very wide variety of studies in English and out of it, that students who are authentically engaged with the tasks of their learning are likely to learn much more than those who are not" (p. 189). However, it is not clear in Hillocks' review what contributes to this authentic engagement. Also speaking to the need for authenticity, Applebee & Langer (2011) in their review of writing practices across the US made the following points:

> … The actual writing that goes on in typical classrooms across the United States remains dominated by tasks in which the teacher does all the composing, and students are left only to fill in missing information, whether copying directly from a teacher's presentation, completing worksheets and chapter summaries, replicating highly formulaic essay structures keyed to the high-stakes tests they will be taking, or writing the particular information the teacher is seeking. (p. 26)

Thus, there is a call for authentic writing in classrooms that connects to increased student engagement, but the reality of writing instruction across schools in the US remains rote and teacher-centered. Furthermore, these narrowed views and perspectives are exacerbated when it comes to honoring the voices of African American youth in classrooms (Ball & Ellis, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Honoring the voices and needs of African American youth is especially important for this population of students, as they have been historically underserved in schools. Ball and Ellis argued that writing instruction for students of color is often relegated to drill exercises rather than instructional practices that are "interactive, meaningful approaches that require extended writing, reflection, and critical thinking" (p. 507). Darling-Hammond also found that students of color were more likely to receive less rigorous instruction than other peers. Because of the correlation between unengaging, culturally disconnected school experiences and students of color dropping out or being pushed out of school, providing authentic writing instruction to students of color is a civil rights issue (Greene, 2008; Lunsford, Moglen, & Slevin, 1990; Behizadeh & Engelhard, 2011).

All students—and Black students especially—will greatly benefit from authentic writing instructional practices. Moreover, these literatures point to the deficit resting within teaching and instruction, rather than within the capacity of actual students. This is noteworthy because African American youth are often blamed for academic underachievement when in fact, the instruction in classroom is not serving students well nor is it responsive to their lives (Ladson-Billings, 1994). To truly understand how to implement authentic writing, we need to talk with students about their own experiences and their desires for writing. Their responses become a useful starting point for moving forward in crafting more authentic curricula and assessments.

Historical purposes of African American writing. In addition to students of color receiving less rigorous curricula, current instruction in English language arts classrooms is also disconnected from students' histories, particularly the ways African American people have written throughout time. This disconnect relates to purposes and uses of writing. According to sociohistorical literacy researcher, Alfred Tatum, African American people have historically written across four sociocultural platforms (Tatum, 2013; Tatum & Gue, 2012). He uses the term, "platforms" to capture the historical writing conceptualizations of African Americans and

reasons why they have written overtime. He found they have written across four central purposes. These include writing to 1) *self-define* their lives as opposed to others writing about their lives; 2) *nurture resilience* in ways to remain steadfast against society's oppressive conditions; 3) *engage others* or contemporaries into the fold to strive for a better humanity for all; and 4) *build capacity* for future generations. In other words, their writings created a foundation for others to build and advance their agendas which deemed meaningful for their lives. These platforms bear resemblance to the historic purposes of writing of African American women (Royster, 2000). Royster posits that Black women have written to 1) assert their multiple identities, 2) refute false views of their lives 3) and advocate for social change.

Across a wide history for Black people, writing became a socio-political tool and mode for social action while helping authors to develop knowledge, ask stimulating questions, offer different perspectives, and get others involved in acting on issues affecting families, communities, countries, and the surrounding world. Language was more than just words in print but a tool for advocating for the rights of others and themselves. In multiple studies with African American boys and girls (Henry, 1998; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996; Muhammad, 2015a; Winn, 2013; Wissman, 2009), researchers have found that youth write across the same purposes of writers who have come before them yet these purposes are disconnected to the types of writing African American students engage in school classrooms today.

Policy reports on writing instruction. In addition to a lack of authenticity in writing experiences for American youth that highlights the missing historical writing platforms, many researchers and policymakers perceive a crisis in American education relative to writing instruction as the national landscape of writing achievement has remained dismal (Behizadeh & Engelhard, 2011). For example, over a decade ago, the *National Commission on Writing* (2003) emphasized,

> American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts language and communication in their proper place in the classroom… Although many models of effective ways to teach writing exist, both the teaching and practice of writing are increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years. (p. 3)

The need for a revolution to improve writing achievement through better instruction is also echoed in more recent policy statements from the National Center for Education Statistics (2012). In the most recent report, adolescents across the nation are still struggling to reach proficient levels of writing. Twenty-four percent of eighth graders scored at the proficient level (defined as demonstrating competence) and only 3% at the advanced level (defined as superior performance). These data mirror low proficient levels in years before (ACT, 2007a, 2007b). These long standing data give further evidence of the need to make instructional practices more authentic for our youth so that their engagement in writing increases along with their achievement in writing.

Significance of the study. Collectively, the research reviewed has contributed to establishing a line of literacy research that has defined authenticity in writing, as well as advanced purposes for writing among African Americans and the current landscape of writing policy and instruction. Adolescent writers need spaces in classroom spaces where they can write to make sense of their lives and identities in ways that are authentic and meaningful for them, rather than solely being decided by adults. Currently there are scarce in-school opportunities where students can write to express their voices without being constrained by writing prompts or practice for large-scale writing assessments. Additionally, African American students in particular are often subjected to rote, less

demanding writing instruction. Although a problem for all students, literatures suggest that African American adolescents have unique experiences in literacy learning—namely learning a curriculum that is not responsive to their complex identities (Muhammad, 2012). In order to address critical issues in U.S. education, the current study seeks to identify desired practices of African American youth that can potentially increase meaningfulness and effectiveness of school experiences.

Conceptual Framework

We draw from and build upon previous research (Behizadeh, 2014) in authentic writing instruction as a conceptual framework for our study. Behizadeh interviewed a diverse body of eighth grade students over two years (22 students total) and observed their classroom instruction related to writing in order to understand adolescent perspectives on authentic writing instruction. Findings showed that students articulated three primary requirements for authentic writing: 1) structured choice of valued topic, 2) freedom over structure, and 3) writing for impact. These three themes also included references to the importance of sharing final products and in-process work with others. Structured choice of a valued topic means that students want to be able to choose a topic that connects to them and allows them to express their feelings and thoughts, although they may need help making a meaningful choice. Writing for impact indicates that students want their work to effect change in the community and world, and dominance of freedom over structure means that students value expression and meaning making over adhering to conventions of writing. Sharing with others means that students want to share their in-process writing and final products with other people, including peers, teachers, family members, and friends. The final factors of authenticity in simplified form are choice, expression, impact, and sharing.

Although these four themes may prove to be generalizable to adolescent writers as a group, authenticity will vary by individual, task, and particular subgroups (Behizadeh, 2014/2015). Additionally, Behizadeh and Engelhard (2014) found in their validation of a scale to measure authenticity in writing that students from different ethnic backgrounds had statistically significant differences in perceived authenticity of various tasks. In this previous study, the authors were not able to explore in depth what was contributing to these differences, although it was hypothesized that because different ethnic groups may share similar cultural funds of knowledge, there may be some shared reaction to a particular writing task within a subgroup of the student population.

In this study, we compare the four major themes from this framework to the themes derived from a set of 12 interviews of Black/African American students, aged 12 to 14, in order to determine if participants are experiencing authentic writing as we have defined it here, and if there were possibly shared experiences or concerns with how Black students experience writing in school that were important to consider when attempting to implement writing experiences designed for high authenticity. It is important to note that we are not making authenticity claims for all the students; just because students desired something, it did not mean that the factor would increase authenticity. However, we were able to connect student desires to the four major themes of choice, expression, impact, and sharing, which suggests that the desired writing practices of these African American youth may increase the perceived authenticity of writing instruction.

Methodology

We draw from two qualitative studies with African American youth and writing. Before explicating the details of the current study, we offer a brief description of each of the two studies. In the first study, Muhammad brought eight African American girls together for a four-week summer writing group to analyze how they write about their identities across multiple forms of text (i.e., personal narratives, poetry, essays, letters, and short stories) (Muhammad, 2015a; 2015b). The eight girls in this study came from different

socioeconomic backgrounds and schools (i.e., private, public and charter). In addition, they came into the writing group with varied experiences and interests in writing in and out of school. Before and after the writing group, Muhammad interviewed the group of girls, asking them about their in- and out-of-school writing experiences. Data included the girls' writing artifacts, pre- and post- interview data, observational field notes of the writing sessions, and researcher analytic memos. The interviews were opportunities where the girls were asked to talk more broadly about writing and the purpose it served for them in and out of school spaces. Data from the girls between the ages of 12-14 are included in the current study.

In the second study, Behizadeh (2014) conducted a qualitative study of authentic writing instruction at an urban middle school. The school was as a Title I-Targeted Assistance School, and also authorized as an International Baccalaureate (IB) world school. According to the school's website, the breakdown by ethnicity of the entire school in 2010-2011 was Asian (12%), Black (46%), Hispanic (13%), Native American/Alaskan Native (1%), White (24%), and Multiracial (4%). Many of the students were recent immigrants to the US, and 14% were classified as Limited English Proficient. In order to represent the full spectrum of experiences at this school site, Behizadeh purposely selected and interviewed 22 eighth grade students representing a diversity of class level (General, Accelerated, Gifted), gender, ethnicity, and writing interest over the course of two years (2010-2012). Data sources included 43 student interviews (22 pre- and 21 post-interviews) and also approximately 100 hours of observation in two participating teachers' classrooms. There were nine classes involved in the study, six in the first year and three in the second year. Out of the 22 focal students who participated in interviews, interview data from 8 participants who identified as Black and African American are analyzed in the current study.

Methods of analysis. We draw from transcribed pre- and post-interviews in both studies where participants who identified as Black or African American talked about school and their in-class English language arts experiences with writing and writing instruction. In the combined study, there were a total of 12 participants, and most of the students attended schools in urban contexts. We had eight adolescent girls and four adolescent boys with grade levels ranging from 7-8 (see Appendix A).

Each student participated in two audiotaped individual semi-structured interviews that involved each student discussing writing experiences in and out of school. On average, the interviews lasted 35 minutes each. The interviews served as the central data sources as we approached the research questions. In addition, we recorded memos of our notes during the interviews. We engaged in two rounds of coding. In the first round, we engaged in Strauss and Corbin's (1998) methods of open, axial, and selective coding. This process of coding allowed us to first approach the data without any prescribed codes and see what themes emerged in response to each research question. In the first round of coding, we had 48 combined selective codes. It is important to note that we did not have prompts that asked students directly about the tenets of authentic writing. Rather, we were asking students to describe in-class and desired writing experiences and then we derived the codes through coding analysis. Although we did have factors derived from Behizadeh's (2014) study in mind, we did not apply these as a priori codes.

After individually coding all 12 interviews through the stages of coding, we met and compared our list of open codes, condensing repetitive codes and eliminating ones that could be represented by other codes. This resulted in a coding scheme of 24 final codes where each code was labeled, defined, and aligned with an example from the data. These codes were generated from the voices of our participants and they were not asked to respond to these directly in the interview questions. Also, these codes are not mutually exclusive. In many ways they connect and relate to each other.

In phase two of the coding we reengaged in selective coding but engaged in this collaboratively. Using our coding scheme, we went through each of the interviews again and assigned codes to any statement in which a participant was voicing a present, desired, or undesired writing practice. Our goal was to generate counts for each of these three categories. To be clear, a student sometimes was coded as both experiencing a factor and desiring it. Alternately, sometimes students expressed a practice as desired, but did not indicate that it was present in their writing instruction. We did not find any instances where students indicated *un*desired writing practices that they had *not* experienced (see Appendix B).

Findings

In this article, we discuss codes that six or more participants expressed as either present, desired or undesired. We chose six out of 12 as our criterion for inclusion because this count represents at least half of the participants in the study. There were a total of eight prominent themes:

1. Expression
2. Personal Connection to Writing (to students' lives and identities)
3. Structured Writing (graphic organizers, template writing)
4. Student Choice of Writing Topics
5. Teacher Choice of Writing Topics
6. Writing for Impact on Self or Others (including writing for significant purposes)
7. Sharing, Feedback, and Critique of Writing with Peers
8. Sharing Feedback, and Critique of Writing with Teachers

Importantly, we want to highlight that the three themes of writing openly, including multimodal writing, and writing for fun/joy were all very close to meeting our inclusion criterion, with all three of these themes having five counts in the "desired" category. Although we do not discuss these in detail in the findings, we return to these themes in the discussion. Figure 1 represents the major findings from the current study. In Figure 1, the degree to which factors were present in their ELA classrooms is represented by dark bar on the bottom, the middle bar (lightest) represents the degree to which students desired these practices and the top bar represents the practices undesired. In the following sections, we take each of these major findings and define the code further and use transcript data from participants to illustrate each finding.

Expression. Expression was a general term for students wanting to share thoughts, feelings, and emotions through writing. Six out of 12 students desired opportunities for expression while five students indicated this factor was present. The following exchange represents the theme of desired expression when asked about classroom writing experiences:

> Xavier: I don't think they [teachers] allow you to write what you want to write, write the way you feel on…
> Behizadeh: What do you think then - what is the purpose of school writing?
> Xavier: To get you ready, like to get you ready for big writing tests and to help you out if you want to become a writer and help your skills.

Although student responses indicate that they are experiencing some degree of expression, they have a desire for more expression. Xavier's comment indicates one of the possible explanations for lack of expression in school writing: teachers are getting students ready for major writing tests. A growing body of research documents the negative responses high-stakes, large-scale writing assessments are having on writing instruction (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Xavier's interview also shows a desire to have classroom spaces to self-express in the ways he chooses.

Personal connection to writing. A second major theme in this study was having a personal connection to writing. This theme is defined as writing that connects to students' lives and identities. There were six students who said

they were able to make personal connections to their writing and six students who desired personal connections. Returning to Jasmine who opened this article, when Muhammad asked her, "Do you get opportunities in school to write and read about who you are?" Jasmine replied, "Yes, not necessarily about who I am but to write and read, yes we have lots of opportunities to do that." Jasmine expresses that reading and writing happens in her classroom but not in ways where she has a personal connection to the writing tasks. To gauge if this is something she actually desired, Muhammad followed her initial response and asked how important it was for her to write in ways to make sense of her identities. She responded:

> Jasmine: It's important because it's like writing is really about self-identity. It's like you're your own self, it should help you know who you are.
> Muhammad: To help African American girls to know who they are?
> Jasmine: Umm humm
> Muhammad: How does that help other people when we write about ourselves?
> Jasmine: It helps some people to see who we are you know. That we are all our own people and all different people.

These data suggest that increasing personal connections to student writing helps students to have personal benefits (of writing about their lives) but it also helps others to learn who they are.

Structured writing. Structured writing was the type of writing that is prescriptive and includes using graphic organizers and templates to create compositions. This theme had a more complicated set of responses than many others. While six students noted the presence of structured writing in their language arts classrooms, two indicated this was desired and two indicated it was undesired. The complex response set here suggests that structured writing may be perceived differently based on how it is enacted. Jacob explained that he typically has to write on a given topic and the number of paragraphs is usually predetermined. The participants who indicated a desire, expressed that structure helped them to organize their thoughts for writing. This is one reason Ivy said she enjoys writing five-paragraph essays. Akira noted that she enjoys some structure while writing by stating: "The teacher gave us a start to a story and then we had to finish it. I found it so hilariously fun. My friend was like 'I bet I can make a funnier story, Akira.' I was like 'whatever'". In contrast, Lynette felt as though structured writing was inhibiting her writing process. In the transcript below she explains this in detail:

> Lynette: Well I like brainstorming but I don't like doing outlines. There's really no point of the outline. If I do an outline then I should do a first draft because that's my… The first draft— my outline is my first draft. That's me putting everything in order.
> Behizadeh: Oh OK. So do you feel like when you write first draft you would naturally do what you would in an outline?
> Lynette: Yeah, yeah.
> Behizadeh: So for you it's almost an extra step and it's not necessary.

The difference in students' dispositions towards structure may be due to the very different types of structures teachers are using. For Lynette, being forced to create an outline when it does not work for her writing process is negative, but for Akira, being given the beginning of story is a helpful starting point for creativity. It could also be that some structured writing combined with other factors of authenticity (choice, impact) might still result in an overall highly authentic activity.

Teacher choice. Teacher choice indicates that the teacher is choosing the topic of writing for the student. Eleven of the 12 students discussed teachers choosing topics for them, and similar to structured writing, there were varied feelings about this with three students indicating this practice was desired and five students indicating this was undesired. One of the

examples of the youth expressing this finding comes from the interview of Ivy, who talks about shifts in choice from 6th to 7th grade experiences:

> Last year when I was in sixth grade, we would write about anything we wanted because our teacher was all about writing and reading so last year we would always write and read a lot. But when I was in 7th grade, she would always tell us what to write about.

From further discussion with Ivy, we learned that the teacher in 6th grade created a stronger literary culture where they read and wrote different forms of text every day. When asked about the shift in 7th grade, Ivy expressed that she did not always like being told what to write about. As with structured writing, these data suggest that teacher choice is not inherently unproductive, but depending on degree and method of teacher choice, it is often perceived as negative.

Student choice. Student choice in writing topics means that the youth have some say and choice in what they write as opposed to being told what to write from the teacher or curricular mandates. From the collective data, eight participants commented that some aspect of student choice is present in their classrooms and a total of nine spoke about desiring this. In this excerpt, Muhammad asked the student how she feels about school writing assignments and Jasmine replied:

> If it's not something I like, I don't want to do it. I know I have to, but I mean if it's – it's like I'll put the same amount of effort, but it's like if I don't really want to learn about this topic, I don't really want to do it.

Jasmine is speaking to writing in the context of someone else's voice or someone telling her what to write about, which is something she does not always want to do. She explained that when she is not afforded the space to decide what to write about, her effort and interest are affected.

Writing for impact on self or others. Writing for impact means the writing has a meaningful influence on self and others. Three noted writing for impact was present and seven desired this practice. When Muhammad works with teachers and students, she often asks, "Of all the things in the world, which topics/issues require the utmost importance of your pens?" This question typically calls for writers to think about who they are as well as others in communities. Essentially, this question gets at how can my pen serve to advance the conditions of others and myself. Writing in this way also means that students are going beyond writing to get a grade or writing to *inform*, *describe* or *explain*—which are common purposes for writing in schools. Instead, writing for impact is connected to students finding meaning and purpose to the writing event and connecting writing to their lives. Charity articulated thoughts related to this definition:

> Sometimes they [writing assignments] don't make any sense on why we should do this. Some topics the teacher gives you, you can't relate to. It's like some of the scenarios are out of place and would never happen at all. Sometimes I think it's just required by the Board of Education to give the students a writing project to *say* that we're doing hands-on activities.

Charity suggested that purpose is important in the writing task and the importance of relating the writing to one's life in a meaningful way. Alluding to same point, Lily stated:

> In school, especially for eighth graders, we tried to write persuasive essays and I was never really good at that. It was like 'so how am I supposed to persuade somebody to like do this or that?'

> But this was different [describing the summer institute] because it wasn't just to persuade someone it was to make a statement to really change something because the things we wrote about in school were like that's not really going to help society in a really big way but this was like really important and it could really do something and I think that made me a better writer. Like when we write papers in school but this will be doing something with the writing. And that's a different experience.

Writing for an impact to others means writing to improve and advance society as Lily put it or writing around scenarios that are or could actually happen. The other key point that Lily makes is related to "doing something with the writing." In other words, she suggests that writing must serve some greater purpose that extends beyond the confines of the classroom.

Sharing, feedback, and critique of writing with peers and teachers. In this last findings section, we explore the themes of sharing writing with peers and sharing writing with teachers. Regarding sharing with peers, four participants noted this was present, six desired this, and one indicated this practice was undesired. Akira discussed at length how her teacher frequently allows her to share her work with the whole class, and also expressed how much she enjoys this practice. She talked about a classmate who gave her meaningful feedback, stating:

> And I still remember the face of the person who said, '[Akira] you should make a sequel to that.' His name is [name removed]. He goes here. I still remember him. And just presenting like you get feedback maybe it's a laugh or it's like 'Yeah, I totally get that.'

Throughout Akira's interview, she recounted multiple examples of sharing work with her peers and how enjoyable this experience was for her. Alternately, she never mentioned sharing her work with her teacher. However, other students did discuss the importance of sharing their work with a teacher. In the current study, two participants discussed sharing work with a teacher as present and six expressed desire for this practice. Jason desired sharing work with teachers, and was also the one participant who expressed that sharing work with peers was undesired. His explanation for this was that when he engaged in peer reviews, his peers did not find his errors, but then his teacher would catch them and take off points. Jason said about having teachers review student work, "Umm, they could say—they could look over it and like 'Oh, I see little mistakes, go look for them,' or something like that." Jason's rationale for wanting to share his work with his teachers raises a concern about whether or not this practice would increase authenticity; he wants this practice so he will not lose points on his final paper, not because he believes teacher feedback will increase the power of his writing.

Discussion

Our findings are complicated due to the complex and sociocultural nature of writing and the writer. Both students and teachers vary greatly, making it difficult to characterize African American students' united experiences and desires related to writing. Additionally, as Jason's words in the last theme illustrates, the desired practices of the participants may not always have been related to authenticity but rather may have been more connected to getting higher grades on writing. However, in spite of these limitations, these eight themes offer some considerations for authentic writing instruction for African American or Black students in the nation. In particular, our participants are experiencing some degree of expression and personal connections to writing, but may want more of these factors. Additionally, African American and Black students in this study are experiencing teacher choice and structured writing yet are expressing desire for student

choice and writing for impact. Thus, desires and reality are potentially misaligned. Although we did not illustrate the factors of writing openly, multimodal writing, and writing for fun/joy, these were indeed factors that most of the participants strongly desired and are worthwhile instructional approaches. These factors contrast with traditional school sanctioned writing that is connected to assessments.

Returning to the tenets of authenticity, student desire for expression, personal connection, and student choice connects directly to the tenets of freedom over structure and structured choice of a valued topic. Data indicate that students are experiencing some degree of expression and personal connection in their school writing experiences, yet the voices of our participants often indicated a desire for more of these two factors. Similarly, regarding writing for impact—which is both a theme in this study and a tenet of authentic writing, three participants experienced writing for impact and eight desired this in their writing instruction, suggesting a potential area of focus for increasing authentic writing experiences. The final tenet of authenticity from our conceptual framework, sharing work with others, was also a prominent theme in this study, with half of the participants desiring either sharing work with teachers or students. Connecting sharing to impact, if students are able to share their work with their intended audiences, they will be more likely to have a stronger impact. Sharing work with others also relates to student desire for expression; expressing an idea or opinion may be more meaningful when expressed *to* someone. Comparing the factors of authentic writing listed in our conceptual framework with African American student desires for writing, all of the desired practices connect to the theoretical underpinnings.

Importantly, teacher-directed elements such as teacher choice and structured writing had mixed reactions; some students had positive dispositions, some had negative dispositions, and very few students expressed desire for an increase in these two factors. We think these data indicate that although these factors are not increasing the authenticity of writing to a great degree, students can appreciate the help and guidance of these two factors when they are potentially combined with other factors that do increase authenticity. For example, if students are writing persuasive essays for impact to a real audience and feel they can express themselves and write openly, it may be that a teacher generated topic or a template for organizing the essay is perceived as helpful rather than a hindrance.

Furthermore, the factors these adolescents desired related to writing instruction were connected to the historical purposes of writing for African Americans. Particularly, adolescents sought to put their voice in print openly and in ways that would allow them to express their identities and write in ways that would impact or change self, others, and society. This suggests the need for socio-historical approaches to writing instruction with African American students, which supports the intersection of culture, identity and history to help shape practice. A socio-historical approach connects history to student learning while also engaging them socially and culturally. This is especially important in the current realities of African American youth, as their voices are not fully honored in classroom spaces. Writing for similar historical purposes has potential emancipatory power for youth to develop agency for making sense and determining their own pathways. As expressed by the participants in this study, they desire to use writing as a tool to make sense of their lives, to write openly and to self-express. Developing writing exercises around the historical purposes of writing could support students in their desired writing practices while also connecting them to their rich literary history.

Instructional Implications

Our work suggests a continued push for culturally responsive instruction in writing instruction in English language arts classrooms. Drawing from the work of Geneva Gay (2010), our findings support the importance of using students' cultural resources and perspectives as a conduit for improving and advancing teaching practices. In

addition, when students' voices are honored and validated and our instruction is shaped around their lives, then personal interest and engagement for learning increases for the community of learners in the class (which includes the teacher). Culturally responsive writing pedagogy also calls for teachers to find the intersections of students' histories, identities, and literacies (Muhammad, 2015b; Winn & Johnson, 2011). Although participants in this study did articulate the presence of expression, connections, and sharing work, they also voiced desire for these practices and writing for impact. Increasing the cultural relevance of writing tasks will most likely increase the authenticity of writing tasks for African American youth.

Another implication suggests the need to utilize Tatum's (2013) four purposes for writing across a more diverse group of youth. In the study we learned that African American adolescents have an immense desire to write freely without censorship or being constrained by other parameters such as teacher chosen topics, templates, or prompts. To develop useful writing platforms, we suggest teachers study the cultures of students, their communities and their homes. This includes listening to their voices directly. This also calls for researchers and teachers to push back traditional writing curriculum and instruction that is linear, unchanging, and prescriptive, or one that focuses solely on knowledge and skills and neglects students' identities, voices, or potential impact they may have on the world.

In an example from Muhammad's study, many writing exercises were developed to help the girls make sense of their lives. The lessons each week were culturally responsive in the sense that they were crafted around their identities as Black girls and around the rich literary traditions of Black women. During the week of writing personal narratives for example, Muhammad spent time teaching the girls about the genre by reading and discussing multiple mentor texts of personal narratives written by other Black women who wrote for the purpose of defining self. When the girls were preparing to write their own narratives, they had several model examples to draw from to teach them about content and structure. They also had choice in deciding which event they wanted to discuss as a part of their own personal story. They were encouraged to think of their identities as complex and multilayered so they would not be fixated or just writing about their race or gender. Muhammad found that the girls did not just write to express their identities but they also wrote about powerful stories to nurture their personal resilience. Following their first drafts, each girl was encouraged to share their writing with the group for feedback and critique that was then used to polish their individual pieces. They began to develop their individual writing processes by the end of the class, and most importantly they connected writing to authentic purposes in which they had agency in determining.

Conclusion

We opened this article by sharing the words of a young adolescent girl to express the necessity of honoring the voices of students in classrooms as educators seek to understand how their students take up the classroom instruction they experience daily. Youth voices should consequently inform the ways in which writing is taught. Collectively, the voices of participants provide educators with direction on what they need and what could potentially advance their writing abilities. Findings from this study also showed that African American youth writers have a desire to be great and prevail in writing. They desire to write authentically within environments that help to cultivate their self-expression, environments where the writing is authentic for them and not just for others. Our analyses suggest that our participants may be experiencing authentic writing practices in their classrooms but that these experiences could be more authentic if there was increased choice, more focus on writing for impact, and if expression and personal connections to writing (which were noted as present to some degree) were heightened. When writing instruction is approached with these factors in mind, it creates space for students to reach their potential and write in ways where they are successful beyond proficiency scales. ❖

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Appendix A

Table 1

Participants

Participant	Grade	School Context
Akira	8	Public/Urban School
Charity	8	Public/Urban School
Dahlia	8	Public/Urban School
Dinora	8	Public/Urban School
Ivy	7	Charter/Urban School
Jacob	8	Public/Urban School
Jasmine	7	Public/Urban School
Jason	8	Public/Urban School
Lily	8	Private/Suburban School
Lynette	8	Public/Urban School
Tony	8	Public/Urban School
Xavier	8	Public/Urban School

Appendix B

Table 2

Final Codes of Writing Practices

Final Code	Frequency Count Present	Frequency Count Desired	Frequency Count Undesired
"Realness" of Writing Topics (global and community relevance)	1	2	0
Collaborative Writing	1	2	0
Expression	5	6	0
Variety of Genre (different types of writing written)	3	1	0
Individual Writing	5	0	4
Mechanics (grammar, punctuation, and conventions)	5	1	2
Multimodal Writing	3	5	0
Personal Connection to Writing (to students' lives and identities)	6	6	0
Presenting Writing	4	3	0
Process writing (drafting, editing, and revising)	4	3	1
Publication of Writing	0	4	0
Sharing, Feedback and Critique of Writing with Peers	4	6	1
Sharing, Feedback and Critique of Writing with the Teacher	2	6	0
Structured Writing (graphic organizers, template writing)	6	2	2
Student Choice of Writing Topics	8	9	0
Teacher Choice of Writing Topics	11	3	5
Teacher Connecting With Student	0	1	0
Valued Topic or Prompt	3	3	0

Writing for Impact on Self or Others (including writing for significant purposes)	3	7	0
Writing Openly (without censorship)	1	5	0
Writing Time (uninterrupted)	0	3	0
Writing to Build Knowledge (research)	1	3	0
Writing to Experience Fun/Joy	2	5	0
Writing with Mentor Text	2	3	0

Appendix C

Figure 1. *Frequency of Major Codes*