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### "I Couldn't Sleep": Tension in Preservice Teacher Writing Instruction

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**Abstract:** This narrative inquiry explores the tension two preservice teachers experienced when designing writing curricula that underscored their writer identity. For the purposes of this article, I define writer identity as one's personal writing experiences, habits, and beliefs. I intentionally elicited stories from participants about their experiences as writing instructors, primarily during the semester they conducted their student teaching experiences. Consistent with narrative inquiry, stories in the article were the primary form of data collection via four semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed participants encountered unexpected tensions as writing instructors and were unprepared to navigate such situations. These tensions were present from the design of the writing curricula to the execution of their writing pedagogy. I anchor my discussion in the strategies teacher educators can provide to prepare preservice teachers to navigate unexpected tension, creating a more sophisticated teacher identity. Specifically, I identify the intentional work of writer identity development. I also draw from the literature to offer additional strategies preservice teachers can utilize to navigate these and similar unexpected tension. It is necessary to help preservice teachers navigate the tension they will likely encounter as teachers so they can flourish as writing instructors and effectively prepare today's English language arts students.

**Keywords:** tension, writer identity, writing teacher education



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## Introduction

**M**y intention to explore how preservice teachers' (PSTs) writer identity influenced their writing pedagogy led to unexpected findings. Despite their ability to find opportunities to merge their personal writing experiences, habits, and beliefs (i.e., their writer identity) with the required secondary curriculum as student teachers (Premont, 2021), they, too, shared rich and abundant narratives of tension as writing instructors that demanded my attention. My return to the literature informed me that tensions are a powerful component in professional teacher identity discourses (e.g., Alsup, 2006; 2019). More specifically, when the writing teachers project their writer identity as writing pedagogy (Woodard, 2013). In short, their narratives of tension were worthy of additional investigation to learn more about the challenges PSTs encounter in their writing curricula. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore tensions that arise when PSTs project their writer identity as writing pedagogy. Ultimately, I recommend PSTs engage in thorough writer identity development to navigate these and similar tensions.

For instance, Darren (all names are assigned pseudonyms) shared a narrative of tension that piqued my interest: "I care enough about my students that I want them to have the type of emotional reward that comes with using writing for their personal lives, but I have to work within an academic framework." His statement at the midpoint of his student teaching experience resonates for many PSTs in that he was bound by state standards. Darren had a strong desire to design classroom writing opportunities to reflect the way he experiences writing—moments saturated with intention, personal insight, and discovery. He relished writing experiences that afforded him an "emotional reward," or writing opportunities that enabled him to feel "good." Darren envisioned a secondary classroom where he could teach students

to compose for similar purposes, especially opportunities to write for reasons beyond grades. However, he quickly learned the "academic framework," among other challenges, limited this opportunity.

Gwen can relate to similar struggles. She envisioned designing classroom writing activities she found valuable in her personal life, such as navigating relationships through composing unsent letters. However, she, too, found the compulsory "academic framework" limited these opportunities: "I will have these lesson plans that I want to do and I will have these really neat things like writing letters . . . [but] they have these certain standards that they need to meet."

Their experiences reflect the tensions that often accompany new teachers (e.g., Alsup 2006; 2019; Smagorinsky et al., 2004; Warner, 2016). Gwen and Darren experienced their respective tensions in writing instruction because of a desire to project their writer identity as writing pedagogy. Their personal writing practices were multifaceted, and they found writing to be an important personal activity for growth. In this sense, they hoped that they could help secondary students experience writing the same way they do. For the purposes of this article, I define tension as the struggle to create and execute writing activities that reflect participants' writer identity. Though much research has explored tensions in the context of PSTs, (e.g., Alsup, 2006; 2019; Covino, 2019; Dunn et al., 2018; Smagorinsky et al., 2013; Warner, 2016), I narrow these tensions and explore those that arise when PSTs project their writer identity as writing pedagogy.

Woodard (2013) asserted such tensions are "underexplored" (p. 378). She argued that only a handful of research studies explored how personal writing habits influence writing pedagogy (Gleeson & Prain, 1996; Robbins, 1992; Woodard, 2013; 2015), and

fewer documented the tensions such instruction engenders (Robbins, 1996; Woodard, 2013). To that end, I illustrate similar tensions from two PSTs from a large Midwestern university during their student teaching experiences. I draw from Woodard's (2013) argument that "tensions must be considered in order to develop understandings about how to help teachers intentionally capitalize on their out-of-school practices to enrich and transform their writing instruction" (p. 388).

This work is especially important given that teacher educators traditionally do not acknowledge impending tensions (Olsen, 2010). I wonder whether Gwen and Darren may have experienced their tensions differently had they (a) been predisposed to encounter and respond to tensions through an interrogation of their professional writer identity and (b) if they could have explored their tensions within a community. Importantly, teacher educators must legitimize teaching tensions, exploring possibilities to navigate around them (Warner, 2016). This manuscript is designed to explore the tensions Darren and Gwen experienced as writing instructors and offer possibilities for future PSTs to navigate similar tensions.

The data collected in this article were part of a larger research project intended to focus on how identity influences pedagogy. However, the unexpected narratives of tension led me to reevaluate the possibilities for this research and led me to a new research question: How do two PSTs understand the connection between their writer identity and the tensions they experience as writing instructors? Drawing from Gwen and Darren's experiences, I explore the research question and offer possibilities to navigate such tensions, highlighting how their experiences "may promote the development of a more refined professional identity" for future PSTs (Friesen & Besley, 2013, p. 30). I first set the stage by reviewing writer teacher identity, tensions in

enacting writer identity as pedagogy, and tensions as learning experiences.

## Literature Review

### Writer Teacher Identity

Professional identity is a lifetime experience (Alsup, 2019;) as it is ever-changing, contextual, and consists of multiple classifications of identity. People are always in the process of "becoming," and that becoming is comprised of multiple identities (Gee, 2000; Wenger, 1998), sometimes even at odds with each other (Danielewicz, 2001; Morgan, 2004). Intentionally pursuing identity development is important because it directs our ambitions (Izadinia, 2013) and represents what teachers value (Taylor, 1989). Anchoring tensions that novice teachers encounter within identity "offers the possibility of interpreting [their] tensions in the light of what it means to be and to become a teacher" (Pillen et al., 2013a). In the context of this research, I focus on writer teacher identity.

Since writing is integral for English language arts (ELA) instruction, one of the common identities for ELA teachers is writer identity. This research is a well-rooted and growing body of literature. ELA teachers have strongly been encouraged to write since the inception of the Bay Area Writing Project in 1974 (e.g., Whitney, 2017) in part because the best writing instructors have a strong sense of self as writers (McKinney, 2017; Morgan, 2017; Woodard, 2017).

Specifically, the "teacher-writer" is one who saturates their life with meaningful writing experiences (Dawson, 2017), often capitalizing on them to guide their writing pedagogy (Whitney, 2017). A teacher-writer "lives the teaching life more fully because it is infused with writing" (Whitney, 2017, p. 70). They write freely and can empathize with secondary student writers because they are keenly familiar with the difficulties of writing (Dawson, 2017; Locke, 2017;

Morgan, 2017; Whitney, 2017). They write regularly and openly talk about their writing in powerful ways that guide students' writerly decisions (McKinney, 2017).

Researchers illustrate PSTs can develop their writer identity in a dedicated class focused on writing instruction. Morgan (2010) highlighted that this single course "can positively impact PSTs' sense of self as writers, their attitudes toward writing and sense of self-efficacy" (p. 363). This is understandable given that the PSTs in her study transformed their sense of self as writers by consistent writing and the making of writerly decisions throughout the semester. Hall (2016) similarly found that PSTs' attitudes about writing and writing instruction shifted after completing a dedicated course for writing instruction for early childhood teachers. Zimmerman et al. (2014) also emphasized how a dedicated course on writing enabled PSTs to change their beliefs about writing and to enhance their knowledge of composition pedagogy, among other benefits.

Teacher-writers are more inclined to "reflect on teaching practices" (Dawson, 2017, p. 11), establish authority (Dawson, 2017; Whitney et al., 2014), and modify their writing instruction when opportunities to share their personal writing experiences arise (Whitney, 2017). Indeed, "the field of education—and society as a whole—needs the contributions of teacher-writers now more than ever" (Hicks et al., 2017, p. 8).

### **Tensions in Enacting Writer Identity as Pedagogy**

This section will explore the tensions teachers experience as writing instructors. Brooks (2007)

documented four successful fourth-grade writing teachers whose disparate personal writing lives played little role in their writing pedagogy. Rather, each teacher was much more invested in their student's writing growth than in their own. For instance, teachers were more interested in talking about writing generally rather than sharing or talking about personal writing. Robbins (1996) illustrated three high school English teachers who did not, or were unwilling, to capitalize on their writing habits and beliefs in their writing classroom. One teacher, an award-winning poet, focused primarily on helping students submit "the finished product" by the required due date rather than teaching writing strategies or helping students experience writing as an act of "discovery" as was common for him (p. 124).

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Woodard (2013) further addressed the complexities of enacting identity as pedagogy, documenting how one eighth-grade teacher participated in creative writing workshops and hoped to compose a book to explore the truth. This same teacher even encouraged students to create "radical revisions" in their writing based on her own experience with creative writing. However, she was "pretty hesitant to call [herself] a writer" (p. 386), and was not convinced that her writing approach was appropriate for eighth-grade students given their state standards and end-of-year assessments.

McKinney and Giorgis (2009) documented a teacher with 39 years of experience: These experiences include teaching positions in the elementary through high school, as an elementary school principal, and later as a literacy specialist. She composed informally and formally when opportunities arose. There were moments when she drew upon her writing habits and practices when she taught junior high students in

Yemen. For instance, she intentionally invited students to organize and compose their writing as she did: she wrote in a stream of conscious format, organizing her writing once she could visually see it. Despite her pedagogical success, she “explicitly chose not to teach the way she writes” as a literacy specialist (p. 143). Rather, she encouraged instructors to teach with steps for implementing various writing strategies. Regardless of whether she was “unable or unwilling” (p. 134) to align her teaching practices with her writer identity, the prepackaged curricula she offered were contrary to her writing beliefs and practices.

### **Tensions as Learning Opportunities**

The research studies I addressed reveal that writing instructors are likely to encounter tensions and/or inconsistencies if they teach writing according to their own writer identity. Though tensions may be fraught with disappointment, confusion, and anxiety, such experiences need not always be negative: even the knowledge that future tensions await is helpful. Alsup (2006) draws from Britzman’s (1998) “myth of normalcy” to argue that teacher educators erroneously paint a tranquil picture of the teaching profession, suggesting that it is a career devoid of complication. She argued that the traditional message suggests that PSTs will have successful teaching experiences “if they learn and implement the preferred pedagogies appropriately” (p. 63, emphasis in original).

Hargreaves and Jacka (1995) problematize this practice, referring to them as “soft seduction” into the teaching profession (p. 58). This “seduction” unknowingly leads PSTs to a much more challenging, tensions-filled career than they anticipated. Thus, they are ineffectively prepared to develop the sophistication necessary to experience and later challenge, the tensions they will likely encounter in secondary schools. Significantly, it eliminates

valuable learning experiences, and these learning experiences are necessary for education courses because (a) early career teachers are likely to face tensions (Alsup, 2006; 2019; Pillen et al., 2013b), and (b) tensions influence identity construction (Alsup; 2006; Smagorinsky et al., 2004).

Tension, in general, can help teachers construct their professional identities (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Alsup, 2019; Covino, 2019; Friesen & Besley, 2013; Galman, 2009; Pillen et al., 2013a) and strengthen pedagogical practice (Horn et al., 2008). For instance, Tensions enables teacher educators to encourage PSTs to be comfortable with the uncomfortable and reflect on their tensions “rather than seek to eliminate them” (Galman, 2009, p. 479). Such critical examination can engender a more polished teacher identity (Alsup, 2006; Covino, 2019; Friesen & Besley, 2013), and such experiences may be conducive for helping peers build their own teacher identity (Covino, 2019). Beyond this, PSTs are more likely to feel prepared to tackle similar challenges in the future (Pillen et al., 2013a) and experience “new kinds of hope and new challenges” that may invigorate beginning teachers (Olsen, 2010, p. 80).

## **Method**

### **Context**

This narrative inquiry focuses on the subset of data that highlights participants’ tensions in writing instruction. I orient the present study with the following research question: How do two PSTs understand the connection between their writer identity and the tensions they experience as writing instructors?

My original methodological approach to this research, like all qualitative inquiry, was not linear. I initially planned to design a multiple-case study to explore PSTs’ writing instruction because my limited experience with narrative inquiry led me to believe



that I may unintentionally create distance between myself and “mainstream” research (Schaafsma et al., 2007, p. 284). It is not uncommon for narrative inquirers to create “fictions” (Hendry, 2007, p. 493) or “fictional possibilities” (Schaafsma et al., 2007) within the narrative inquiry. Thus, I worried about the perception that many narrative inquirers paint the picture of events as they could have happened (Burdick, personal communication) rather than the “literal representation” in which events are presented precisely as experienced (Coulter et al., 2007, p. 108). In short, I worried scholars might devalue my research and wonder whether the stories I included in my data were only “partial truths” (Hendry, 2007, p. 493).

However, critical conversations with mentors led me to reexamine my decision with a new lens. Significantly, stories paint a portrait of the “human experience,” leading to the success or failure of realizing goals (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 8), and underscore one’s “beliefs and experiences” (Bell, 2002, p. 209). Beyond this, Clandinin and Connelly (1998) amplify the power of stories by contending they can transform educational experiences for teachers and students) and enhance the quality of education for all. To that end, I utilized the power of story as the main form of data (Polkinghorne, 1995) in this narrative inquiry. Participant stories were fraught with challenging experiences as writing teachers, and the examination of these stories illuminated the challenges preservice and novice teachers may experience. Ultimately, their stories enabled me to examine their tensions with a new lens to offer possibilities to navigate such tensions.

**“Participant stories were fraught with challenging experiences as writing teachers, and the examination of these stories illuminated the challenges preservice and novice teachers may experience.”**

## Theoretical Framework

Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) help situate narrative inquiry within the broader umbrella of qualitative research by underscoring one of the goals of qualitative research as “understanding” (p. 4). This aligns with one of the primary goals of narrative inquirers in that they aim to understand (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquirers rely on eliciting storied data as their primary method of data collection (Polkinghorne, 1995) and accept that stories are the “fundamental unit that accounts for human experience” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4). Such exploration via narrative enables the inquirer(s) to understand their phenomenon.

Pinnegar and Hamilton (2011) explain that a central tenet of narrative inquiry is the constant utilization of narrative during the entire research process. This includes the inquiry, data collection and analysis, and evaluation of narratives as research. In fact, narratives are so foundational that they act as both the method and the phenomenon (e.g., Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Clandinin & Huber, 2007; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) explain this concept, noting that “narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study” (p. 2). In other words, narrative inquirers collect their data (method) via stories and then examine those same stories (phenomenon) for meaning.

Thus, narrative inquiry seeks to amplify the voices of the participants (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Huber et al., 2013) in ways that naturally co-construct the story among participant and researcher (Connolly &

Clandinin, 1990; Huber et al., 2013; Schaafsma et al., 2007). Ultimately, “when researchers conceive of interviewees as narrators, they not only attend to the stories that people happen to tell during interviews but also work at inviting stories” (Chase, 2005, p. 661, emphasis in original). True to narrative inquiry, I designed my interviews in the present research to elicit stories about the teaching of writing.

Beyond this, narrative inquiry is relevant for unpacking identity (i.e., experience) because narratives and identity are inherently connected (Alsup; 2006; Clandinin & Huber, 2007; Goodall, 2005), and such methodology “enables teachers to make sense of their professional worlds and to inform their teaching practices” (McKinney & Giorgis, 2009, p. 145). In fact, narratives have the capacity to underscore “complex explanations of student and teacher identities” (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011, p. 1) since “personal identities are complicated narrative constructions” (Nelson, 2001, p. 106). In other words, the narratives we share about ourselves construct our identities (Cortazzi, 2001; Hendry, 2007; Huber et al., 2013).

Ultimately, the connections between narrative and identity and how narratives construct and reflect identity align with my goals of exploring the tensions of writer teacher identity. Participants shared their writer identities via narratives across each interview. Specifically, the narratives are foundational to my understanding of participant experiences as writing instructors and foundational to the narrative methodology (Polkinghorne, 1995). Simply said, I would not have had the rich experience to explore PSTs’ narratives of tension if I had used another methodology.

I utilized a constructivist lens to ground my theoretical understanding throughout my research. Constructivists provide the framework for “how individuals learn and make meaning linking new

knowledge to existing understanding” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 17). Guba and Lincoln (1994) contend “the aim of inquiry is understanding and reconstruction of the constructions that people (including the inquirer) initially hold” (p. 113, emphasis in original). In other words, a hallmark of a constructivist approach is the iterative reassessments of the data to refine understanding (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ultimately, a constructivist lens enables researchers to construct knowledge based on the way new knowledge uniquely informs previous understanding or experience (see Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Guba and Lincoln’s concept that constructivism does not offer a singular correct answer is a significant component of my research. In other words, I recognize I may have a more sophisticated response to navigate their tensions based on evolving research and experience.

Further, constructivism uniquely aligns with the work of narrative inquiry in that “narrative inquiry seems consonant with constructivist and interpretive perspectives” (Jones, et al., 2014, p. 86). This further aligns with a primary goal of narrative inquirers in that they aim to understand (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Crotty (1998) highlights a significant component of the constructivist framework in that it “points up the unique experience of each of us” (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). The present research uniquely underscores the experience of tension in writing instruction, so highlighting such experiences with a lens towards “identifying new possibilities within that experience” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 55) is paramount. In other words, my intention is to consider new possibilities to navigate tensions in writing instruction by examining the present tensions.

### **Participants**

I highlight two participants in this subset of data: Gwen and Darren because they best articulated their tensions in writing instruction. They shared most

narratives of tension as writing instructors, which often included layers of complication. I had strong relationships with both throughout the entirety of our interview process. I originally met them as their course instructor for one of the required literacy courses in the English Education program in the fall of 2018. I was impressed with their engagement in course material and their willingness to grow professionally. For instance, both accepted my invitation to prepare roundtable presentations at a local site of the National Council of Teachers of English in spring 2019. I mentored both as part of this experience, strengthening my rapport with them.

Prior to their student teaching, Gwen and Darren previously completed a course designed to become better writers and writing instructors (i.e., writing methods). The course instructor asked me to assist intermittently, primarily during opportunities to introduce and provide feedback for digital and multimodal writing instruction. Thus, I saw first-hand the context of a portion of the course. In short, students enrolled in this course engaged in traditional and multimodal writing opportunities and designed writing curricula after these principles. There was not required reading, activity, or discussion of encountering tensions as writing instructors. I provide more context for each participant.

### ***Gwen***

Gwen, a white female, is intelligent, responsible, and regularly impressed me with her insights. She completed her student teaching responsibilities at the same middle school she attended as a student, exclusively teaching 8th grade English in a suburb of a large Midwestern city. Gwen composed during moments of anxiety and uncertainty. Specifically, Gwen narrated experiences where she wrote late in the night when she felt anxious about being away from home during college. She described her writing

as stream of conscious. That is, she composed freely and vulnerably unencumbered by conventional grammar and style. By composing this way, Gwen spilled emotions and thoughts on paper until she calmed down.

Relatedly, Gwen wrestled with the relationships in her life by writing unsent letters. She composed letters to clarify and organize her thoughts in a “safe space” before she engaged in verbal conversation. Gwen viewed writing as a “work of art” in that there is no correct way to approach it. This philosophy guided her own writing, and she hoped to influence secondary students to think similarly. However, she expressed repeated tensions in her inability to design a writing curriculum according to her writing experiences and beliefs.

### ***Darren***

A white male, Darren is loquacious, hard-working, and often demonstrated a keen thinking ability. Darren conducted his student teaching experience at a local high school near a large Midwestern university, teaching freshman and junior English classes. As a writer, I was impressed with his writing purposes and his reflective nature. Darren often spoke about his desire to write for what he referred to as an “emotional reward,” or writing that made him “feel good.” Darren shared stories of how he received positive feelings from his experiences writing an unpublished young adult dystopian novel as a high school student and, most recently, through reflective poetry.

For example, Darren narrated a recent time he hiked alone in the woods and felt impressed to compose poetry about nature. Relatedly, he narrated his intention to compose poetry to process unsettling events at the site of his student teaching experience. Darren values writing as a vehicle to reflect and “process.” My interviews with him made clear that he,



too, experienced regular tensions within his writing curriculum.

### Data Collection

I collected storied data for this research project as is consistent with narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Jones et al., 2014; Polkinghorne, 1995). I interviewed participants once in the spring of 2019 and three times in the spring of 2020: Once each in January, March, and May. I intentionally organized the latter three semi-structured interviews to occur toward the beginning, middle, and end of their student teaching experiences. In total, I interviewed each participant four times for a total of 368 minutes of data that I transcribed. I originally intended that all interviews be held in person, but the global pandemic necessitated that I conduct one online interview with Darren (May 2020) and two online interviews with Gwen (March and May 2020). Despite this change, the depth of each interview was consistent with their in-person interviews.

Though I oriented my attention on their perceived connection between writer identity and writing pedagogy, I could not ignore the rich narratives and statements of tension. In fact, their narratives of tension often arose from questions not designed to elicit such. For instance, I asked Darren how his personal writing habits influenced his writing pedagogy, and I followed up from a previous interview to ask Gwen how she prepared secondary students to focus on themselves as writers. These and similar questions about their writing pedagogy elicited unexpected narratives of tension. Such unexpected data are not uncommon in narrative inquiry as this methodology “seeks to examine experience with an eye to identifying new possibilities within that experience” (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007, p. 55). To that end, their tensions arose as a possibility to study that I did not anticipate.

The data collection methods were anchored in reliable methods specific to narrative inquiry. For instance, participants shared their narratives of tension in a safe space that allowed them to talk freely about their challenges in the classroom. The narratives they shared were consistent with narrative inquiry, and, as the researcher, I was intentional about eliciting stories (e.g., Chase, 2005). I provided “time and space to tell [their] story so that it too gains the authority and validity that the research story has long had,” giving the traditionally “silenced” participant a platform to share their story (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, p. 4). Significantly, the onus was on me as the researcher to not only provide a stage for the participant to share their narratives but also to construct a mutual relationship that enabled the storytelling to flourish. In other words, I did not act as the “mighty” researcher standing over them, critiquing their language and pedagogy.

### Data Analysis

I analyzed the data according to In Vivo coding, which utilizes the precise language of participants (Saldaña, 2013). After transcribing each interview, I read and reread the data, highlighting statements and narratives of tension in writing instruction that “[stood] out” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 93). I identified seven total subthemes of tension between Gwen and Darren from the larger study. Four subthemes were specific to Darren: Tensions in (a) playing the game of school, (b) planning and execution, (c) perceived expectations, and (d) remote instruction. Three subthemes were specific to Gwen: Tensions in (a) teaching to the standards, (b) writing activities, and (c) remote instruction. For the purposes of this article, I identified three themes: Tensions in (a) “playing the game of school”, (b) curricular expectations, and (c) student engagement. For instance, the themes for this article fall under the following scenarios:

- when participants were unable to help secondary students experience writing the same way they do (e.g., Darren said, “I enjoy writing for the emotional reward that it brings me because I can process, I feel good afterward, and in my mind when I’m preparing lessons I expect my students to have that same reward and it’s just not the case for the majority even of my students.”)
- when participants felt undue pressure to misalign their writing philosophies with their writing instruction due to, for instance, curricular expectations (e.g., Gwen said, “I have had to throw lesson plans out the window to spend weeks just reviewing figurative language. I mean, I had no idea that was going to be something I was going to have to do.”)

I copied narratives and statements of tension (i.e., codes) from the transcripts into a new Word document, organizing them thematically. I organized codes under the primary theme “Tension,” and further established subthemes when necessary. I reviewed codes and themes to confirm they were relevant and significant. Afterward, I manually transferred the themes and codes from the Word documents into NVivo, a software program that aids qualitative researchers.

Transferring the data to one centralized software program enabled me to examine the data more efficiently within and across participants. The Nvivo software also enabled me to create visuals that enabled me to examine my research in a new light. I ultimately drew from the richest narratives and statements of tension.

## Findings

I oriented my findings to match the tensions Gwen and Darren experienced as secondary writing instructors. First, I document tensions Darren experienced when he perceived students in his courses were “playing the game of school.” Following, I illustrate shared tensions in (a) curricular expectations and (b) planning and executing plans.

### Tensions in “Playing the Game of School”: Darren

One component of Darren’s tension as a writing instructor was connected to his unrealized goal to transform students into thoughtful, intentional writers. Specifically, he wanted them to experience writing the same way he does—as deliberate and reflective activities. To his dismay, Darren found that students were unwilling to write for much more than a grade.

I run into these students [who] are so used to just playing the game of school and that there is an end result: A product that their teachers want them to get to, and they can get to that by the ways that aren’t the thread that we want to run through their learning.

The “thread” that he hoped would “run through their learning” was intentionality and critical reflection. However, Darren perceived that such student writing approaches were rare. Instead, he perceived to encounter students who “play the game of school” or those who identify writing activities as little more than an assignment to be checked off. Since Darren primarily engaged in personal writing to earn an emotional reward through reflective thinking, the predominant student writing approaches were concerning to him given his perception that

**“One component of Darren’s tension as a writing instructor was connected to his unrealized goal to transform students to thoughtful, intentional writers.”**

“everything in [the student] mind is so focused on playing the game of school.”

Despite these feelings, he narrated an experience when he advised one student to “play the game of school”:

I required students to propose a topic so I could approve it to make sure that they were on the right track. [One student’s] topic was about feminist representation in *Gatsby*, which I was all for. And then this student went forward and tried to make the second half of their essay criticizing school . . . And as much as I agree with some of those aspects of what she was saying—it wasn’t going to fulfill the requirements for the essay in a way that I could give her a good score according to the rubric that was already made. . . And so I encouraged this student sometimes we have to play the game of school in order to move forward through things to be able to make change.

Darren’s decision to protect this student’s grade rather than help her earn an emotional reward—a reward he fought for students to have—is striking. Though Darren believed that writing for intrinsic motivation is more valuable than extrinsic motivation, he still encouraged this student to compose in a way that merits a high score. The entire scenario was unsettling:

I couldn’t sleep because . . . I want to have a much more meaningful and in-depth conversation and I want to hear this essay that this student wants to write, but I also need to do what’s best for this student in the immediate future and get them a good grade.

Darren’s advice distanced this student from earning an emotional reward, emphasizing the grade rather than the learning experience. Significantly, Darren

perceived these end goals to be mutually exclusive. Therefore, Darren felt his only choice was to help the student write in a way aligned with the rubric, eliminating any possibility for this student to earn an emotional reward with appropriate guidance. Significantly, choosing to help this student score highly or compose a personally meaningful composition represented a challenge that Darren was unprepared to tackle alone. Indeed, he envisioned only the two choices rather than additional possibilities (Dunn et al., 2018). Ultimately, Darren’s experience echoes Woodard’s (2013) research. He felt his writing approach was not conducive for students to succeed in this writing activity based on his understanding of success in the rubric he designed to assess their writing.

### **Tensions in Curricular Expectations**

Gwen and Darren experienced tensions in the curricular expectations thrust upon them. For instance, Gwen hoped to implement similar genres that were personally meaningful to her as a writer, including letter writing and personal journals. These genres helped her navigate challenging moments in her personal life, and she hoped she could implement similar writing in her curriculum. However, she lamented how the state standards suppressed her writing pedagogy.

They’re [parents, community, stakeholders] very aware of their standards and their grades and if I do something that’s not directly aligned with a standard . . . they reject it. And so where I might have a cool lesson plan about writing letters, or writing personally, if they can’t directly apply it or see the direct [connection] to something they’re going to be tested on, they fight me on it.

Certainly, the standards are approved to guide teachers in their writing pedagogy, but Gwen found

them limiting. She ultimately designed a letter-writing activity, but she did so despite the standards. In other words, the letter-writing activity was part of a larger project she justified because its purpose was to demonstrate comprehension, “and less on writing mechanics.” She further suggested the letter-writing activity not being “the main focus” of the project also helped. Even so, the lengths to create what should have been a simple yet meaningful writing activity were more difficult than needed be.

Darren also experienced tensions due to the curricular expectations he was unprepared to tackle. Specifically, he felt an obligation to prepare students for end-of-level tests:

I have a final exam that’s been given to me that [students are] going to take at the end of the year, and [I] have to make sure that [I] teach them everything that is on this final exam so they can get a good grade. So, to me, I’m like well, like I gotta teach them. I gotta make sure they understand and comprehend Gatsby. I gotta make sure they know how to write a literary analysis essay because there are questions about that on the exam.

**“Preparing students to compose literary analyses and similar objectives directly aligned with standardized testing limited the writing pedagogy he perceived to be most valuable.”**

Darren acknowledged he feels “pressure,” even though he does not recognize its source. He believed that preparing students to take end-of-level exams impeded his ability to create meaningful assignments, such as “reflective poetry” or “creative stories,” because it “is not going to fit into those [unspoken] requirements.” For Darren, though, foregoing such activities was also foregoing an opportunity to help students grow as writers. In other

words, teaching directly to the test precluded Darren from considering writing opportunities beyond the standardized, perfunctory writing students have come to associate with school. Darren believed writing opportunities that honored students’ writer identities and emphasized emotional rewards rather than external scores were most valuable. However, he felt limited by required curricula such as standardized testing and literary analyses. And, for better or for worse, he perceived these to be mutually exclusive opportunities.

Darren conceded that teaching to the test is “easier on me, but it’s not what I want for my students.” Darren’s goals for students are more sophisticated in

that he hopes they identify a change within themselves rather than a change through an external score. Darren hoped students might turn to writing to navigate and explore life’s challenges and opportunities, but he felt he did not meet that goal.

### **Tensions in Student Engagement**

Another common tension Gwen and Darren experienced were tensions in the ways students engaged with their writing pedagogy. These tensions were independent of the tensions they experienced in curricular expectations because both Gwen and Darren voiced their concern directly with the ways students engaged with their pedagogy regardless of the standards. And in Darren’s case, he recognized these tensions in the planning stages prior to classroom instruction.

For instance, Gwen experienced these tensions as she tried to create writing assessments. However, her inclination to have students compose rather than

take multiple-choice tests clashed with the secondary students' traditional school experience. She claimed it was especially difficult to engage secondary students beyond the "mindset of just comprehension," especially for "assessments" because so much of their experience was through multiple-choice tests. Their mindset centered on comprehension made it challenging to explore student thinking through writing, which is common in her personal writing. Even so, Gwen did her best to implement this pedagogy in her curriculum, but to little avail. "A lot of my hang up with them is that I expected them to be more able to go in depth than they were." These tensions were compounded because Gwen noted she "would have loved to talk about the in-depth things" as an 8th grade student herself. However, her mentor teacher reminded her that she was not the "typical" 8<sup>th</sup>-grade student, so Gwen acknowledged that perhaps her expectations were too high.

However, it was still challenging when Gwen perceived student resentment towards her composition assessment practices even though she designed them without a right or wrong answer. Gwen perceived students to challenge her by saying, "why? Why would I want to [write]? This is stupid. I don't need to write." Gwen offered a possibility for this tension: "I think that a lot of [students] are reluctant to see themselves as [writers]. They write in classes, they have to, but I think they see themselves as more of students than anything else."

Gwen's perception that students do not identify as writers is intriguing. Gwen shared this tension through narrative:

We have a student who will exclusively write a journal. Everything she writes is like a journal. And as much as I appreciate that, there are certain things you have to do in order to pass school . . . And as much I wish I

could tell her that you can journal your way through life that's not the case. . . . it's that school kind of [writing] where you think of right vs wrong writing. I help her learn the "right way" of writing, which is awful.

For Gwen, this moment was troublesome because she strongly believed writing is a "work of art"—one without a "right or wrong way to do it." Dictating to a student the "correct" way to write not only undermined her teaching philosophy but likely distanced the student from exploring her thoughts through writing.

Moreover, the way Darren perceived students to respond to his writing pedagogy ultimately began to affect the way he planned writing activities: "It's really in the planning stages that I think as a writer and then plan as if I'm planning to teach writers, and then I have to adjust because I'm not: I'm not teaching writers necessarily." Planning became a source of tension for Darren because he envisioned his writing classroom saturated with exploration and discovery. Such moments, however, were infrequent.

I enjoy writing for the emotional reward because I can process. I feel good afterwards. And in my mind when I'm preparing lessons, I expect my students to have that same reward, and it's just not the case for the majority even of my students.

Darren hoped his writing instruction might "engage [students] in a way that makes them want to write outside of the classroom," but he acknowledged most students may not be inspired to write as he does: "It's difficult because if I'm not instructing people who are intrinsically motivated to write, I have to have a focus on requirements and extrinsic motivation." Ultimately, the tensions Darren experienced can be summarized in one poignant thought:



In my mind all my students are me and they're not. And that's hard for me to come to grips with. And I know it shouldn't be. And it's obvious. I know that intellectually and I always have known that intellectually. My students aren't me. And it's still hard to—I don't know—it's still hard to adjust.

Darren's tensions are palpable. He hoped to create a writing classroom for students to compose freely and intentionally. However, he was unprepared to navigate these tensions and was faced with daily challenges. For Gwen and Darren, the way students engaged in their writing pedagogy caused tension. Considering that such tensions were part of their daily experiences, it stands to reason that such overwhelming tensions may create unwanted effects (e.g., Alsup, 2006; Volkman & Anderson, 1998).

### Discussion

A hallmark of narrative inquiry is coming to understand something that could only be obtained using this methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To that end, my interviews with Gwen and Darren enabled me to learn about the depths of their narratives of tension in ways not possible through other methodologies. Darren and Gwen began their student teaching experiences with visions of designing writing curricula that modeled their personal writing experiences. They found creating such writing opportunities were possible in the secondary writing curricula (Premont, 2021), but they often discovered unexpected challenges in their writing pedagogy. Designing a narrative inquiry with the opportunity to listen to these narratives of tension enabled me to learn more about the phenomenon than any other methodology could have provided. Such a rich

examination and analysis of the data led me to consider future possibilities for teacher educators to prepare PSTs to encounter and successfully navigate future tensions in writing instruction.

Foremost, teacher educators and PSTs must be cognizant of possible tensions PSTs may encounter (Pillen et al., 2013b), and the present research underscores that such tensions include writing instruction. Whitney (2011) emphasized an important concept relevant for Gwen and Darren and many other PSTs: "There's reading and writing as I've known them in my private life, and then there's reading and writing as they often look in schools, and while these sometimes complement one another,

they also often conflict" (p. 51). Gwen and Darren both experienced tensions in their writing classrooms primarily because of the way they experienced and negotiated personal writing outside of the classroom. These tensions were palpable, in some instances, from the way they planned their writing activities to the way they executed them. Gwen and Darren's experiences reveal that

teacher educators cannot "make assumptions about the ways teachers' everyday literacy practices inform their writing instruction" (Woodard, 2013, p. 388).

For Gwen, directing a student to compose the "right way" was "awful." This instruction contradicted her belief that writing is a "work of art." For Darren, explaining to a student that her writing, though interesting and worth including, did not fit the expectations as described in the rubric misaligned with his personal and pedagogical writing beliefs. They further expressed tensions in the expectations heaved upon them to meet state standards. Though Darren found such instruction "easier," it did not

**"Such a rich examination and analysis of the data led me to consider future possibilities for teacher educators to prepare PSTs to encounter and successfully navigate future tensions in writing instruction."**

fulfill the goals he had for student learning experiences. Overall, they were unprepared to tackle these challenges alone. Indeed, they were “caught between visions of what kind of teacher they can and should become” (Kohnen, 2019, p. 372).

Darren wanted to become a teacher who helped students focus on the emotional rewards for writing. His goal was not solely to help students score highly: He truly wanted them to grow through writing. As a novice teacher, however, he defaulted to helping a student secure a favorable score without considering possibilities to negotiate how the student may have earned a high score and an emotional reward. Gwen, too, recognized her instruction to help her student write the “right way” misaligned with her writing philosophy, but she continued regardless, perhaps not knowing which options were available.

Gwen and Darren’s decisions to choose the “all or nothing” routes further demonstrate that teacher educators should “help PSTs see possibilities for nuanced action in response to tensions in teaching decisions” (Dunn et al., 2018, p. 54). Gwen demonstrated evidence of such considerations when she included the letter-writing activity as part of a final project, but there is still more to negotiate. I give pause to consider additional strategies she and Darren could have considered within a community of peers and mentors.

For instance, Gwen may have encouraged her student to seek mentor texts to consider how purpose and occasion influence writerly decisions. This instruction may have helped the student explore possibilities rather than default to the “journal” genre for each writing opportunity. Darren may have helped his student explore the opinion editorial genre rather than the traditional argument essay to consider how feminine representation in *The Great Gatsby* is a relevant lens for students today. Such strategies may have helped find an in-between action

that Dunn et al. (2018) recommend. Even so, these tensions underscore that teacher educators must “transform them into learning experiences” (Pillen et al., 2013a, p. 675), preparing PSTs to tackle and navigate tensions (Dunn et al., 2018). Importantly, such instruction should happen within a community (Pillen et al., 2013a; Pillen et al., 2013).

Teacher educators can help PSTs navigate tensions through multiple approaches. One approach is through being vulnerable about the tensions they experienced as former ELA teachers. Since so many novice teachers experience tensions, it is likely that they, too, wrestled with tensions early in their careers (e.g., Alsup 2006; 2019; Smagorinsky et al., 2004). Freely sharing these vulnerable experiences can normalize tensions for PSTs. It further provides valuable opportunities to share how they navigated these tensions and what they may do differently now that they have more experience as teachers and teacher educators.

Another approach teacher educators can take is to intentionally focus on identity development in methods courses. Such pedagogical practices can lead to substantial clarity in direction and goals (Izadinia, 2013). For instance, previous research recommended that PSTs “interrogate” their writing beliefs and evaluate whether they align with the research on writing instruction (Premont et al., 2019). Significantly, such identity instruction enables PSTs to engage in borderland discourse (Alsup, 2006), where they can negotiate their personal and professional identities, ultimately merging the two. Neither the PST’s writer identity nor their professional identity is lost; instead, they work in tandem to create a stronger, more capable writing instructor.

Alsup (2006) shared an example of borderland discourse from professional identity writ large. One PST created a visual teaching metaphor of a pair of

shoes to demonstrate that she walks in “[students’] footsteps.” This metaphor merged her professional and personal subjectivities. Specifically, the PST explained that working late nights to prepare for class would cause her to be tired in class the following day. She thus envisioned herself being forthright with students, acknowledging her exhaustion and explaining its cause. Alsup explained this “discourse reflected a recognition that teacher identity is not simply a professional identity, but also a personal identity that must negotiate and incorporate various subjectivities placing multiple demands on her time and energy” (p. 155).

Alsup’s (2006) theory of borderland discourse demonstrates that PSTs can retain their values while also merging professional subjectivities into the classroom. This concept is applicable to writer identity as well, where PSTs can leverage personal writer identities with a professional teacher identity to create meaningful writing activities for students that align with state standards. PSTs can retain their personal writing beliefs and further maintain a strong professional identity in knowing that their pedagogy can help secondary students grow as writers. I argue that such action leads to a more sophisticated professional identity.

Intentionally interrogating and negotiating their writing beliefs can further strengthen the pedagogical

possibilities they offer secondary students and navigate future tensions. These practices may help PSTs prepare to tackle tensions and consider possibilities “that do not manifest as ‘all or nothing’” (Dunn et al., 2018, p. 54). Beyond this, PSTs can further negotiate their writer identity by considering how they align to the state writing standards, sharing and refining their writer identity through their university classroom community. Those whose writing beliefs do not align with the research on writing teacher education and/or the state standards then have opportunities to consider new teaching perspectives.

The fact that Gwen and Darren experienced tensions because of their writer identity need not mean they abandon their teaching philosophies. Previous scholarship reveals this approach is powerful (e.g., Woodard, 2015). For instance, Whitney (2017) credited the transformation of her writing pedagogy in part to her ability to draw from her writing experiences. She described how this model transformed her writing instruction, replacing “anxiety” with “wonderings, experiments, [and] shared ventures” (p. 72). Gwen, Darren, and others who draw from their writer identity can have similar teaching experiences, too, but they must learn to negotiate their writer identity with curricular, and even student, expectations.

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