USING SOCIAL WRITING INSTRUCTION AS A MEANS OF BUILDING COMMUNITY AMONG DIVERSE GIFTED STUDENTS IN A TRANSIENT,

PULL-OUT LITERACY PROGRAM

By

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DEDICATION

To my dear husband of 20 years, John C. Lester,

Thank you for always supporting my dreams and helping to make them happen.

Together, we are now the Drs. Lester. We make a great team.

To my amazing girls, Julia and Danielle,

You are my inspiration for wanting to improve education for all children.

I only hope I can become half the mom you two incredible young ladies deserve.

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VITA

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ABSTRACT

In this era of high-stakes testing and teacher accountability, teachers complain of a lack of time for authentic writing experiences that lead to deeper community development. Yet numerous researchers, including Vygotsky, argue the value of community development as a means of creating safe places where students feel valued, allowing them to make more relevant connections for life-long learning.

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to explore how writing builds community among diverse students in a short term, transient gifted program. The study incorporated ethnographic research techniques combined with basic descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. The study focused on three research questions: How does writing in a social setting build community among students in a transient, pull-out gifted program? How do the diverse backgrounds and school cultures of participants impact the development of the learning community? How sustainable is the sense of community developed in the researcher's classroom, as students move to another classroom?

Over the course of two nine-week periods, the researcher taught 98 students the craft of social writing as a means of building community. Students shared personal stories in open discussions and wrote journal entries based on their peers' stories. A Classroom Community Survey was administered three times throughout the study and responses were compared using inferential statistical analysis. Student journals, teacher interviews and researcher observations were coded for patterns of community development.

Researchers have found that children develop a sense of community in a short amount of time through the process of social writing. Students' positive feelings toward

community, especially in the area of learning, decreased when they left the community focused classroom environment. Students would benefit from participation in some form of community development throughout the school year. There was little evidence of an impact from socioeconomic levels on community development   due to the use of social writing and the focus on acceptance as part of the community in this classroom. Future research may be needed to establish a link between teacher characteristics and student perceptions of community. Further study is needed on the impact learning communities have on academic success.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The sharing of real-life experiences in a safe environment of trusted classmates plays an important role in overcoming the anxieties about writing, inspiring subject ideas that naturally encourage interesting details, observations and descriptions (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 2003; Taylor, Branscombe, Burcham & Land, 2011). Encouraging children to write about themselves allows them to see that their own lives have value, and are worth sharing, as well as helping children come to know each other personally (Calkins, 1986; Moore-Hart, 2005; Graves, 2003; Taylor et al., 2011). As students share life stories, they become a community of learners, rather than rows of strangers struggling to compose thoughts (Graves, 2003). A classroom community rich in educational experiences bound within collaborative and cooperative activities creates trust among the students and encourages children to take risks (Edwards, Perry, Janzen & Menzies, 2012). Children learn most effectively in an active, social environment where opinions are valued, cultural differences are accepted, and new thinking is encouraged (Cooper, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978; Grisham & Wolsey, 2006). When a group of students becomes a community, those students help each other learn more deeply and model new learning for others (Graves, 2003).

Creating authentic experiences complete with opportunities for interaction and communication among classmates results in meaningful learning where students understand their work has purpose (Edwards et al., 2012; Vygotsky, 1978). When children are encouraged to interact in such a way as to foster trust, respect, optimism,

care and intentionality within an educational environment, this serves to nurture, support and invite learners to accomplish goals and successful outcomes (Edwards et al. 2012).

Statement of the Problem

Students learn the value of accepting those who are different from themselves when they are given an opportunity to become members of a community of learners who are trusting, thoughtful and considerate of others' perspectives and stories (Taylor et al. 2011). But in this educational era of high-stakes testing and teacher accountability for student success on standardized assessments, teachers often complain of not having enough instructional time to give to authentic writing experiences or community development. Due to the pressures of standardized writing tests, teachers tend to teach more formulaic essays such as the five-paragraph variety focused on individual writing prompts that represents a limited view of writing (Brimi, 2012; Scherff & Piazza, 2005). Writing is a constructive process allowing writers to create meaning from experiences (Hillocks, 2002; Brimi, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is deepened as children take risks without penalty of ridicule within a community of learners (Cooper, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978; Grisham & Wolsey, 2006). Formulaic writing misses the opportunity to build those meaningful learning environments that encourage the development of community.

Over the years, the researcher and her students have created this kind of community through shared writing experiences that spanned the school year. The class structure allowed 24 students to spend 90 minutes a day, four days a week for an entire nine-month school year in the creation of meaningful pieces of writing within the context

of the classroom community. The researcher moved to another school assignment as a writing instructor of students in a pull-out, gifted program. Once a week, children were transported from their community elementary schools across the county to another location, where gifted-certified teachers provided differentiated lessons focused on group oriented higher-ordered thinking skills and state identified goals for gifted children. Students rotated among four teachers, moving to a new teacher each nine-week grading period. The researcher saw each student one day a week for approximately nine weeks. Since Shared Journal (Taylor et al., 2011) and cooperative writing projects support the development of social relationships and thus fostered rich environments for community learning in the researcher's previous classroom, this study explored the effectiveness of such social writing with students who do not have the benefit of long periods of time within the same group. The research was aimed at answering the question: Will writing together be enough to support the development of deep meaningful relationships, as seen in the writing development and social interactions within a writing community? Can the experience of writing about others for only a brief amount of time foster the same close relationships shared among students who spend a significant amount of time together inside and outside of the classroom setting?

Purpose of the Study & Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore how writing builds community among students in a short term, transient program. Could students develop that same feeling of safety and trust that allows them to take risks and develop as writers among a group of

students they only see once a week for nine weeks? The general research questions that provided the focus for this study were:

1. How does writing in a social setting build community among students in a transient, pull-out gifted program?

2. How do the diverse backgrounds and school cultures of participants impact the development of the learning community?

3. How sustainable is the sense of community developed in the researcher's classroom, as students move to another classroom?

Significance of the Study

In this age of high-stakes testing and teacher accountability for student success on standardized writing assessments, teachers across grade levels often complain of a lack of instructional time to devote to authentic writing experiences (Kelley, Hart, & King, 2007). Yet in 2003, the National Commission on Writing suggested a newly revised focus on writing across the curriculum (Kissel, 2008). This current study was intended to shed light on the possibilities of student success in writing development with short term, concentrated instruction using social writing as a means to create a learning community. This community created from immersing gifted student authors in social writing gives way to deeper learning and opportunities to connect personally to new understandings. Exploring the writing processes of young learners provides insights for understanding how to best improve curriculum and writing instruction with the valuable lessons students provide as they share their own voices within the creation of written language of a common community (Kissel, 2008). The goal of teaching writing is not a matter of

meeting only the curriculum needs of ever-changing assessment demands within a school system, but to give children an opportunity to share their voices and feel valued, as a means to create writers for life in a community of learners, avoiding negative experiences that only encourage a hatred of writing (Calkins, 1986; Kissel, 2008).

Definition of Terms

The following definitions and terminology are part of the understanding of this research.

Gifted Child: According to the Georgia Department of Education (2013) a child qualifies as gifted if they demonstrate a high degree of creativity, intellectual ability, and motivation.

Sense of Community: Created when individuals feel a bond with others in a group of learners based on common understandings of shared experiences, and backgrounds. This bond may lead to an increase in supportive attitudes, acceptance of differences, commitment to goals and learning in a collaborative environment (Bettez, 2011; Blenkinsop, 2012; Bloome, 2001; Cross, 1998; McKinney, 2003; Nicholas, 1997; Noddings, 1996; Rovai, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978).

Shared Journal: A learning process using interactive talk to promote the sharing of life experiences which are then used as foundations for original writings with common themes. Participation in the process teaches children to reflect on their own experiences and relate to the experiences of others, thus building a sense of empathy for others (Taylor et al., 2011).

Social writing: a process that allows the craft of writing to move beyond a motor skill used to complete a task to a more complex cultural activity involving the exchanging of ideas which take a unique form as a result of the student interaction and the sharing of ideas. (Moll, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978)

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning communities have become a focus of educational research because the concept is synonymous with the changing pedagogical theories about the nature of learning and supporting the goal of educating students with an eye toward lifelong learning and service toward others (Cross, 1998; McKinney, 2003; Williams, Brien, & LeBlanc, 2012). It is understood that social interaction plays an integral part in cognitive development (Bettez, 2011; Cooper, 2003; Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Piaget, 1969; Vygotsky, 1986). The constructivist theories of Piaget (1974) and Vygotsky (1986) point to a need for children to work and discuss new information openly as a means of deepening cognitive development. Much has also been written on social justice teaching focusing on the community of teachers and students growing closer together through shared exchanges but there is still little regarding what impacts the process of building learning communities between students (Bettez, 2011). Classrooms tend to focus on the teacher building relationships with students through conversation in large groups but rarely are ideas exchanged openly and developed between students as a learning community themselves. Building a true community among students allows the development of interdependence and greater appreciation for diversity (Bettez, 2011). The focus of this study involved the development of community among diverse students as they shared their views and life events through the process of writing development in a social setting. This review of literature explores the cognitive benefits of community learning within a classroom. The needs of a diverse population are discussed with attention to school culture, characteristics of poverty, and inclusion in regards to social communication skills. An explanation of the demands for writing instruction in modern

classes includes descriptive research of both process writing and the strategies of Shared Journal (Taylor et al., 2011), the two instructional methods utilized throughout this research study. The social aspects of writing give way to an understanding of the value of peer interactions and sharing cultural differences. Due to the characteristics of the specific population of this study, a definition of the gifted student is provided with an overview of the concept of gifted education and the pull-out model of differentiated instruction for gifted learners.

Learning Communities

A community may be defined as a collection of individuals who make up a group, and who rely on others' talents to accomplish a common goal, make decisions together, identify themselves as part of something larger than themselves, and work through collaborative decision making (Blenkinsop, 2012; Cooper, 2003; Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Shaffer & Anundsen, 2005). Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory explains how human consciousness comes clear by the internalization of shared social action determined by the environmental, historical, and cultural factors within the community where the interaction takes place. This educational need for learning communities comes from the view that learning is a social process involving diverse means of looking at and solving problems making it possible for individuals to function together in a pluralistic society (Blenkinsop, 2012; Cooper, 2003; Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1986) explored how children construct knowledge as a process of context-specific social interactions resulting in the creation of new knowledge that is directly related to pre-existing knowledge and norms. Members of the community take part in the

process of growing competence in the shared learning (McKinney, 2003). The level of engagement of the members with the learning taking place in the shared space determines the richness of that community (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006).

Some of the essential elements of a learning community are trust, mutual interdependence among members, common spirit, interactivity, shared respect for values and beliefs, and common expectations (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 2007; Shaffer & Anundsen, 2005). The constructivist elements of collaborative learning, a fundamental focus of learning communities, supports the belief that knowledge is constructed socially, not by passive interaction with text, but by developing new understandings within a social group (Cross, 1998; Piaget, 1969, 1983). Noddings (2005) states that caring for one another is the basic characteristic of a true community. Schools are one of the few places where children are provided enough stability and continuity that provide the experience of true community, possibly allowing children to feel a sense of belonging (Nicholas, 1997). Building community within the classroom is vital because a sense of community establishes many positive social behaviors through peer social interaction (Siegler, Deloache & Eisenberg, 2006; Wright, Diener & Kempt, 2013). A true community encourages democratic values with communication and discussion leading to consensus and decision-making (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Nicholas, 1997).

Teachers who develop true community in the classroom must allow themselves to let go of the control that tends to monopolize conversations and promotes only teacher-centered concerns (Blenkinsop, 2012; Cooper 2003; Nicholas, 1997). Learners must be engaged in the process of education, making it necessary for teachers to walk a fine line when considering how much to organize and control the study since such control limits

student-centered creativity thus lessening the creation of community among the group (Blenkinsop, 2012; Cooper 2003). The ability to work together through a process as a team, listen actively, and talk effectively with others in the group adds to the depth and richness of relationships within a community (Blenkinsop, 2012; Cooper 2003; Nicholas, 1997). When students work through their own conceptual frameworks with peers, they fit those new frameworks into their own knowledge and develop a network for learning called schema, which serves as a cognitive map permitting new learning to make connections to what the students already know based on background knowledge (Cross, 1998). Small interactive groups of peers are more likely to make connections with new learning than textbook and teacher-centered lectures (Cross, 1998). Children learn that they have the power to make real-world differences when they learn to work within a community (Caine, Caine, McClintic & Klimex, 2009). Doise and Mugny (1984) suggest that it is the process of resolving conflicts within children's social groups that gives way to new cognitive development and allows children to construct deeper understanding. Conversations between peers that may result in verbal conflict, cooperation and conflict resolution allow children to exchange differing perspectives and build new knowledge (Doise & Mugny, 1984; Gordon & Bridglall, 2005). Working in groups as a learning community serves a greater purpose than just helping students master content. Encouraging conversation in the classroom forces members of a group to articulate personal ideas and learn to listen to the ideas of others and appreciate the skills of peers (Gordon & Bridglall, 2005). Students are given an opportunity to feel as though they belong to a high-performing learning community (Gordon & Bridglall, 2005). They learn

that the ability to excel does not come from simply solving problems quickly, rather from the ability to work diligently with the help of others (Gordon & Bridglall, 2005).

Building Community within a Diverse Population

The current research study explored how diverse backgrounds and school cultures impacted the formulation of classroom community when students from many different neighborhood schools came together in one classroom and learned to share intimate life stories and traditions in a learning community. The children of this study were transported from neighborhood school environments to a central location in order to have their gifted needs met by gifted-certified educators. These different school environments formed yet another category of diversity for the population of study in this research. Every school may be said to have a sense of community or an ambience or feeling about it that is reflected in how things are accomplished with regards to the balance of ever-changing power between the members of that community (Meier, 2012; Peterson & Deal, 2002). The goals and decisions made within the school community are also considered the culture of that school, which is guided by the values, beliefs, symbols, routines and collective histories of all people who contribute to the school community, including teachers, administrators, and, especially, students and their families (Meier, 2012). The written and unwritten expectations that form over time influence the behavior of those who share in the educational experience of that environment (Meier, 2012; Peterson & Deal, 2002). Stakeholders are usually unaware of the influence the values of the school culture place on their actions and decision-making including what teachers find as priority for their focused lessons, work ethic, and success achieved in relation to goals

(Meier, 2012; Peterson & Deal, 2002). School culture also influences classroom environments and the students in terms of how they relate to each other. This diversity may impact the development of community due to language and social barriers brought on by different home and school environments (Blenkinsop, 2012; Cooper, 2003; Kozulin, 1986; Slocumb and Payne, 2000; Turner and Youb, 2008).

Researchers suggest that placing advanced learners in accelerated homogeneous classroom settings such as pull-out gifted classes benefits high achieving students because of the quicker pace, conversation, extended material, and higher teacher expectations (Tomlinson, 1999, 2005). Tomlinson (1999) warns that these children still are products of differing readiness, interests, intelligences, languages, genders, and cultures. The traditions, cultures, and educational levels of today's students impact the way they relate to each other, thus impacting the overall school culture and the goals set as they attempt to develop as a learning community (Williams, et al., 2012; Meier, 2012; Sparapani, Seo & Smith, 2011). Teachers must recognize that children bring different attitudes and experiences into a classroom that may result in a communication disconnect between teachers and students (Sparapani, Seo, and Smith, 2011). Since communication is the center of every learning community, teachers must be aware of possible disconnects and differentiate accordingly (Sparapani, Seo, and Smith, 2011; Tomlinson, 1999, 2005). Students today may have great potential, but some still come from homes that lack support, encouragement, role models, or the life experiences that add new knowledge to preexisting backgrounds, which impacts classroom community development (Tomlinson, 1999; Meier, 2012). Within the same classroom community, many students may be months or years ahead of expected standards-based curriculum

(Tomlinson, 1999). Equity is certainly an issue that teachers must address by taking the time to know their students' individual needs and provide curriculum accordingly (Tomlinson, 1999).

Some critics warn it is this cultural diversity that may slow the formation of positive relationships within the classroom community, citing some students' inability to adjust to diverse students (Bettez, 2011; Turner &Youb, 2008). During the 1990s, community began to be viewed as an environment for interdependence between individuals, creating an appreciation for diversity (Bettez, 2011). Bettez (2011) considers the sense of belonging as central to community building. Belonging means to be a part of a larger group that is in the process of the creation of something new. Bettez (2011) takes this definition a step further when she concludes that being a part of a community allows members to become part of something greater than themselves that changes as the group changes. The educator's role in a learning community is to create an environment where students are encouraged to re-examine or reconsider ideas, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge previously held by the student or the group. Children are asked to think deeper, consider the big picture, or explore further questions and perceptions brought from personal cultural norms or pretenses (Blenkinsop, 2012; Cooper, 2003). Teachers must create environments where multiple perspectives are accepted (Turner & Youb, 2008). In time, these perspectives give way to a sense of understanding of others through cooperative and collaborative engagement in a safe, inclusive environment promoting an appreciation for multiculturalism (Blenkinsop, 2012; Cooper, 2003; Noddings, 1996; Turner & Youb, 2008). Working with others in a group of people who are not previously known and discovering strengths in others can potentially cause a student to shed

tendencies to judge peers in the classroom (Blenkinsop, 2012; Cooper, 2003; Noddings, 1996; Turner & Youb, 2008). This gives the teacher an opportunity to develop curriculum that allows students to be seen publicly and be appreciated for their talents (Blenkinsop, 2012).

Academic diversity influences community development. Today's classrooms reflect a technology- rich environment filled with interactive white boards, computer access, and internet-based learning tools, allowing teachers to broaden curriculum to include a wide range of social and culturally diverse subjects (Cash, 2011). The caveat is that along with new educational options and increased social awareness comes a dramatic increase in student needs ranging from early exposure to a variety of literacy skills to very limited access to reading materials and computers adding the increased need to consider the diversity within a student population (Bloome, 2001; Cash, 2011). Learning differences are identified at earlier ages and may range from sensory processing disorders, emotional and behavior issues, autism, degrees of English language proficiencies, and varying types of giftedness (Cash, 2011).   It is important to consider how teachers respond to these differences and design curriculum to serve the needs of all students while maintaining the essential standards-based curriculum (Cash, 2011).

Researchers have found that the unequal access to learning through schools is a barrier to community-building in multicultural and multilingual classrooms along the demographic lines of race, gender, and socioeconomic class (Bloome, 2001; Moller, 2005; Turner & Youb, 2008). An understanding of student socioeconomic influences plays an important role in modifying curriculum so it aligns closely with the way different groups of children learn and process information (Slocumb & Payne, 2000). It is

not a separate curriculum from that used with all children but is differentiated to meet specific needs (Slocumb & Payne, 2000). Language tools such as vocabulary acquisition and comprehension skills may differ greatly causing a rift in the learning community (Moller, 2005). Verbal skills may differ, hindering the sharing of ideas thus limiting the connection to the community of learners (Moller, 2005; Turner & Youb, 2008). The differences in how children interact socially in different settings play a role in understanding individual communication. Social morays influence how children develop communication skills, which impacts how children of differing social groups speak to each other, changing word meaning as the individual's psychological context changes at the time of usage (Kozulin, 1986). Understanding how different social groups use language is advantageous to the formation of a learning community (Kozulin, 1986; Slocumb and Payne, 2000). Students from a lower socioeconomic level will use what is referred to as casual-register (Slocumb & Payne, 2000), which leads to story structures told with the end of the story first or the moment of greatest emotional impact playing the lead. Students of more affluent socioeconomic level will use a formal-register of language, telling stories from beginning to end. Slocumb and Payne (2000) suggest that entertainment plays a higher priority than education in lower socioeconomic groups, a characteristic vital to curriculum planning. These students tend to miss out on educational opportunities because they do not have an understanding of how to interpret and organize information given in a more formal format. Equity issues may involve a middle-class bias that results in misevaluated minority students, who thus are not given access to resources and programs that offer greater challenges and opportunities (Bloome, 2001). Emotion plays a large role in comprehension for lower socioeconomic social

groups, thus making personal connections to new learning vital for curriculum planning, according to Slocumb and Payne (2000).

Working toward the development of classroom community helps prepare students for a future in a society that has become a blend of many cultural backgrounds, religions and ideologies (Cooper, 2003). Howard (2001) suggests that building community involves students' abilities to reflect on common interests, backgrounds, histories, and experiences in a way that allows students to relate through their similarities and foster social relationships. Using more cooperative learning situations and the elimination of homogeneous ability groups is another means to encourage relationships among diverse students (Howard, 2001). Teaching children to build and maintain a community within the classroom will allow them to feel a sense of belonging in the pluralistic society of adulthood (Cooper, 2003). Children need to be liked and to feel included in supportive classrooms (Gregory & Chapman, 2002). The classroom teacher must create a sense of inclusion allowing children to bond with one another and the teacher in order to form a productive learning community (Gregory & Chapman, 2002). It is imperative that students feel successful, enjoy social acceptability, and celebrate their learning in an environment that encourages independent thinking and creativity (Gregory & Chapman, 2002). In a healthy classroom environment, acceptance is the norm and discipline issues are rare because there are clear guidelines and mutual respect between students and teachers within the community (Tomlinson, 1999, 2005).

Students who see themselves as part of the creation of something new become part of the community of learners who are more thoughtful and inclusive (Blenkinsop, 2012; Cooper, 2003). In this way, students are allowed the opportunity to discover their

talents within the context of the classroom community educational experience to provide

alternatives and opportunities to free their imaginations (Blenkinsop, 2012). The subject

of the learning becomes a connective core to develop the relationships within the

community, facilitating engagement with content by talking and interacting with one

another (Cooper, 2003). Teachers and students must work together to build acceptance

and respectful, supportive communication within the community. This comes from

developing listening skills, celebrating positive achievements and never using negative or

degrading tones when responding to others within the group (Cooper, 2003).

Constructivist Learning Through Writing Development

The researcher explored how community development occurred within the

context of a social environment focused on instructional models for elementary writing

immersion. Constructivist learning theory states that children construct their own

understandings through social interactions with their peers and the surroundings (Piaget

& Inhelder, 1969; Piaget, 1974, 1983; Vygotsky, 1986). When students are given the

opportunity to work together in an open and collaborative environment to improve their

own storytelling and writing abilities, they learn about each other in the process (Piaget &

Inhelder, 1969; Piaget, 1974, 1983; Vygotsky, 1986). Vygotsky (1978) considered the

ability to think or talk inside the mind as a learned response after having the opportunity

to share communication orally with peers. This oral communication requires social

interaction and leads to writing development (Prior, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch,

1991). Vygotsky suggested that writing must be given a sense of purpose for children

through social interaction and be incorporated into real life skills (Prior, 2006; Vygotsky,

1978). In this way, writing becomes not simply a mechanical operation but a form of valuable communication within a social context (Prior, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's (1978) reported how children become part of society through daily interactions in the cultural practices within communities and institutions. Vygotsky (1978) argued that human development happens through daily encounters in social cultural settings within communities and institutions. Wertsch (1991) refers to social processes as interpsychological and considers the process to involve frequent communication in small groups engaged in social interactions that lead to higher mental processes.

Learning to write effectively remains a focus throughout the elementary years and is best accomplished when children become socially engaged in the process of organizing and conveying their thoughts throughout a reflective process (Chohan, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). Teaching writing has become an even higher priority in today's classrooms due to The Common Core State Standards Initiative (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) that has become a reality in a majority of states. Through this initiative, writing standards are described in four instructional areas: text types and purposes, production and distribution of writing, research to build and present knowledge, and range of writing (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Teachers are advised to include writing as part of routine instructional practices across curriculum and task-specific areas, focusing on different purposes and audiences with an infusion of keyboarding skills and Internet usage (Hawkins & Razali, 2012; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers,

2010). Collaboration between peers and adults through the development of publishable writing is also a priority since writing is a fundamental part of a child's cultural development (Hawkins & Razali, 2012; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). Often when educators talk about teaching writing, they become fixated on the role of skills in writing instruction including grammar, mechanics, and spelling (Cunningham & Allington, 1999; Graves, 2003). Such concerns are legitimate because children need to learn not only how to express their ideas and feelings but also how to tell their stories clearly and in ways which others can read (Cunningham & Allington, 1999; Graves, 2003). Simply filling in the blanks of a worksheet and having the ability to capitalize proper nouns is not an accurate assessment of knowing how to use writing skills (Cunningham & Allington, 1999; Gallagher, 2006; Graves, 2003; Taylor et al., 2011). Learning punctuation in the context of writing is much more effective than studying punctuation marks and rules for punctuation in isolation (Calkins, 1986; Gallagher, 2006; Graves, 2003; Wright et al., 2013). Many educators are critical of curriculum used in school writing classes that often takes place under artificial conditions. Writing tasks such as abstracting chapters and books, completing essay tests, and writing term papers are largely of the teacher's making (Bunning & Horn, 2000; Gallagher, 2006; Graves, 2003; Wright et al., 2013). Such writing activities are not set in a larger social or communication framework to which students may relate to students and bring interest or create a sense of writing's relevance (Bunning & Horn, 2000; Gallagher, 2006; Graves, 2003; Wright et al., 2013). They are only assignments that are graded by the teacher; thus, they do not have authentic purpose

and there is no lack of motivation for writing (Bunning & Horn, 2000; Wright et al., 2013).

According to Vygotsky (1978), the natural development of writing is a culmination of gestures, sketching, improvising, imaginary play, and, finally, the written word. Since Vygotsky (1978) concludes that writing must be authentic and serve the child's needs, teaching writing is a method involving skills embedded in play situations. Teaching children the art of writing requires a great deal of attention and effort from the teacher and student. Writing instruction should be based on the needs of the students as they develop naturally within their own active writing process (Vygotsky, 1978). As political priorities and cultural expectations continue to influence the demands set upon the education profession, the need to raise the standards of education has become a priority for all governments. Quality has become the keyword worldwide (Flores, 2006).

Reading and writing are active processes. Students construct their own meaning in an inherently social environment, making literacy dependent on the learning community for structure and meaning (Bloome, 2001). In this context, constructing meaning goes beyond making connections with background knowledge but also refers to the social interaction required to process new learning (Bloome, 2001). This requires a shift from the more cognitive focused writing instruction, which often takes place under artificial conditions where teachers require students to individually complete essays, term papers, or to answer writing prompts that do not provide connection to the child's life and do not serve an authentic purpose (Blenkinsop, 2012; Cooper 2003; Turner & Youb, 2008). Many researhers focus more on the social constructivist perspective that stresses the importance of the social element in classrooms rich in language experiences tied to

authentic writing that builds community as well as increases writing achievement (Cooper, 2003; Taylor et al., 2011; Turner & Youb, 2008). The social well-being of students must be considered simultaneously within the construction of challenging curriculum (Nicholas, 1997). How readers and authors interpret the written word and then discuss their thoughts, reevaluating their own thoughts as others offer their own opinions, depends on the group or community in which the action takes place (Bloome, 2001). Community members read, interpret, and interact in similar ways using common societal rules. As community members learn to work together, they form a shared communication style, allowing everyone within the community a means to understand a common context (Bloome, 2001). This learning community provides a supportive audience, an essential element for a successful authentic writing experience. Academic success is directly related to writing ability (Lam & Law, 2007). Writing should be used as a tool to "scaffold more thinking and awaken students to the power of questioning, summarizing, noticing, and categorizing," (Calkins, 1986, p. 486). Research shows that students who were subjected to the increase in writing and writing instruction in their language arts class scored higher on standardized tests than those students from the previous year who did not receive the treatment (LaBonty & Danielson, 2005). Through their research, LaBonty and Danielson (2005) found that students take ownership of their learning as they write and are forced to explain their thinking (LaBonty & Danielson, 2005).

Shared Journal

A focus of this study was the question of how writing in a social setting impacted the development of community among diverse student authors who became engaged in

the sharing of real-life events, discussed issues, questioned and wrote personal narratives through the research-based literacy strategy Shared Journal (Taylor et al., 2011). This instructional practice is embedded in the constructivist view that individuals construct their own meaning through social interaction with others (Blenkinsop, 2012; Bloome, 2001; Cooper, 2003; Kamii & Randazzo, 1985; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Taylor et al., 2011; Tunks, 2012). The process of Shared Journal combines oral storytelling and writing real-life experiences as a means of building community in the classroom (Taylor et al., 2011). During each class, three children orally shared personal stories, as other student authors listened and took notes. Shared Journal storytellers shared their stories in the author's chair, a focal point of the room where only authors - students and teachers - share their work (Gallagher, 2006). Listeners learned to pay attention to details and reconstructed a story while clarifying events (Taylor et al., 2011). After a discussion session about each of the stories shared, student authors negotiated to select the story that became the focus of the day's journal entry. The one chosen storyteller answered more insightful questions for the purpose of gleaning more details. Students generated their own questions concerning authenticity and relevance, and began to think critically as authors themselves (Taylor et al., 2011). Once members of the group were satisfied, they moved to their writing tables and began crafting an original version of the storyteller's tale. They could choose to tell the story closest to the oral version or expand their higher level thinking skills by relating a personal story of their own to that of the storyteller. In this way, the children were given a sense of choice and the freedom to write using a mix of authentic styles (Taylor et al., 2011; Tunks, 2012).

A fundamental element of the Shared Journal process (Taylor et al., 2011) is the children's opportunity to freely discuss the stories and question the relevance of the details openly. Britton (1993) suggests that people have to learn how to mediate a group discussion and develop the ability to organize ideas into conversations with peers. Through the process of asking questions and giving answers, learners begin to build a library of a variety of information that continually grows with time, allowing the learning to become part of the social interaction among peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Listening to storytellers, responding with helpful critique, asking questions, and using feedback to make revisions to works in progress allow students an opportunity to develop literacy skills as well as the skills needed to positively support each member of the community of authors (Fisher, 2007; Taylor et al., 2011; Tunks, 2012). Encouraging children to ask questions about missing details, gaps in information, and incorrect information is important for developing creative problem solving and allowing children to take ownership of new discoveries (Taylor et al., 2011; Torrance & Sisk, 1999; Tunks, 2012). Hollins and Spencer (1990) found in their study of the perceptions of elementary and secondary students that the willingness of the teachers to listen and take interest in the personal lives of the students created positive feelings that led to increased student effort in school. When children have authentic reasons to write, such as sharing life stories with an audience of peers or recording family histories, they are able to understand the real-world reasons authors compose, giving relevance to their writing, which in turn allows the craft of writing to improve (Gallagher, 2006; Taylor et al., 2011; Torrance & Sisk, 1999; Tunks, 2012). Students favored teachers who allowed them to express their own

opinions and share ideas when completing assignments and engaging in class discussions (Hollins & Spencer, 1990).

Working with peers is considered crucial for cognitive development in the area of language learning (Kamii & Randazzo, 1985; Tunks, 2012). The Shared Journal process offers students the necessary authentic writing experiences, those that allow children to mix genres as they write and give them multiple opportunities to interact as a means of developing communication skills and deepening cognitive thinking skills (Gallagher, 2006; Taylor et al., 2011; Tunks, 2012). Strategies including oral storytelling, topic selection through selection procedures, and recording real-life reflections of other children's experiences encourage children to construct deeper meanings and an understanding of story, audience, empathy, and community (Taylor et al, 2011; Tunks, 2012). The social interaction of Shared Journal allows children to create a shared meaning of an event, a process which allows students to move from thinking only of their own views to considering the more sociocentric concerns of a group (Tunks, 2012). Piaget and Inhelder (1969) considered the egocentric thought process as one where the child thinks everyone else sees events and the world around them just as they do. Sharing real-life events and then following through with discussion and questioning allows children an opportunity to see the world through different perspectives and to understand diverse needs (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Tunks, 2012). This movement toward a more socio-centric thought process begins to build a sense of community within a classroom that becomes evident through the language used as children ask questions, make comments, and help others draft writings (Taylor et al, 2011; Tunks, 2012).

The first goal of a successful writing strategy must be to create a sense of purpose that motivates students to want to write (Gallagher, 2006; Graves, 2003). If students are to develop as lifelong readers and writers there must be an intrinsic importance for writing beyond the simple completion of another writing assignment for a grade (Gallagher, 2006; Graves, 2003). Students must understand what they need to write, the purpose of their writing and the relevance of their work in regards to their own lives (Bloome, 2001; Gallagher, 2006). As children share stories during Shared Journal, young authors begin to recognize their audience. Stories are retold and shared with other authors and journals are ultimately published in the class library or on a class internet-based website. Publication gives student authors a sense of purpose for their writing because they know they will have an audience (Graves, 2003; Taylor et al, 2011; Tunks, 2012). For students to create authentic writing, they must have an intended reader, even if that reader is not known at the time of composition (Taylor et al. 2011). When teachers connect the writing activity to personal interests, future goals, or past experiences, students are able to value the purpose of the writing and see it as a part of their learning process that increases motivation (Lam and Law, 2007). Shared Journal focuses on the children's lives. These stories are of value because they come from their own worlds. Calkins (1986) insists writing begins with a decision to create new meaning from chosen topics and end with something of significance.

Within the context of Shared Journal, students learn to listen to the stories of others and relate to children unlike themselves (Taylor et al, 2011; Tunks, 2012). Calkins (1986) states that authors need listeners who will respond with empathy, laughter, and questions. Through sharing stories, the children begin to understand one another as they

talk about personal experiences (Calkins, 1986). Sharing and listening to the stories of

others helps build empathy that builds tolerance for other perspectives and cultures

(Gregory & Chapman, 2002). Writing is both emotional and cognitive (Lam & Law,

2007). Teaching children to value writing as a craft is a matter of showing them the world

and inviting them to use their writing abilities to explore their knowledge across the

curriculum (Calkins, 1986). Chapman (2002) explains that learning to write, a part of

emergent literacy, involves both the cognitive and social construction of literacy

knowledge.

Pewewardy (2005) used the Shared Journal strategy in a predominantly white

undergraduate multicultural education course as a means to study cultural understandings

in higher education. The college level approach differed from the traditional primary

strategy in terms of presentation. College students did not tell stories to a whole group,

but were paired with one other student. They shared daily as a means to use Shared

Journal to complement diversity initiatives in a higher education institution by providing

students with opportunities for sustained and meaningful engagement across race and

other social group boundaries (Pewewardy, 2005). Journal writing can serve as a

sounding board for students who may be reluctant to express themselves in open

classroom discussions (Pewewardy, 2005). Whether needs are social or academic, Shared

Journal is a strategy that provides writers with an opportunity to develop and act upon an

intrinsic need to participate in a safe environment, allowing writers have the opportunity

to take risks by making mistakes without fear of punishment, (Taylor et al, 2011; Tunks,

2012). Pewewardy (2005) observed that students mutually benefited from consensus or

disagreement with their journaling partners. Students were encouraged to discuss their

beliefs, observations, and perceptions with at least one other student and the course

instructor thus becoming more conscious about their beliefs and identities through journal

sharing (Pewewardy, 2005). Children relate to the storytellers because they have similar

experiences and tap into motivational resources within the instructional environment

(Lam & Law, 2007).

Process Writing

One of the two writing instructional models used in this study is the Process

Writing model, a function of planning, drafting, conferencing, editing, revising, and

publishing. Students write regularly on topics that span all curricular areas in engaging

creative formats (Hawkins & Razali, 2012). Students may begin planning a piece using

outlines or mapping strategies as a means of organizing their thoughts. Drafting coincides

with conferencing, editing and revising over a period of reflective rewriting. Students

may conference with student partners, teachers or groups about sentence-to-sentence

edits or seek advice on more wide ranging topics including the context, voice or

perspective of the writing (Hawkins & Razali, 2012). Teachers become facilitators of the

process, offering suggestions for growth and not evaluators looking for a score (Hawkins

& Rezali, 2012). It is important to note that the stages or steps in the process are written

in a specific order but they happen interchangeably and without plan since an author's

thought process can be unpredictable (Graves, 2003; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Hawkins &

Razali, 2012). Process writing has evolved since the early 1970s out of a less directional

model with very little teacher support, focusing on process rather than product (Graves,

2003; Flower & Hayes, 1981). One of the earliest writing process models was Rohman's

(1965) model of prewrite, write, and rewrite. More recent work concludes that the

writing process changes with the influences of purpose, audience, genre, and the author's style (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). Due to the influence of state standards on teaching the process model within artificial conditions, Schuster (2004) argues that the focus shifted more to drafting but new research has brought about a change in teaching writing. Teaching the process model today requires scaffolding lessons that include engaging prior knowledge, editing, and setting goals (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 2003; Hawkins & Razali, 2012; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). Multiple factors influence the writing process, such as the social benefits in peer groups when composing and editing with partners. Best practices in teaching include improving writing while developing positive attitudes, social behaviors, and problems solving skills (Hawkins & Razali, 2012; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). Cognitive researchers Flower and Hayes (1981) question the linear context of process writing and encourage a more complex method that is individualized. The writing process should not follow a fixed order of operation but instructional strategies including explicit instruction, engaging prior knowledge, and setting goals (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Hawkins & Razali, 2012; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). Process writing often focuses on the stages that lead to a final written product, but should orient instruction more toward the experience of producing the writing.

Graves (2003) suggests that the writing process may begin with what he considers the entry point of the process, involving choices that occur without planning that serve to initiate the focus of the written piece. Writing begins with a plan that could be in the form of lists, outlines, or drawings (Graves, 2003). The writer initiates the composition of the piece from the time the first sentence is formed to the final draft (Graves, 2003). The overlap between composing and rehearsal is the natural writing process (Graves, 2003).

Graves (2003) refers to the creative force that moves the writing through the process as "voice" (p. 227). The voice is the author's personality, interests, word choice, and purpose for the writing itself (Graves, 2003). Voice changes as the author matures but continues to influence the content and context of the writing (Graves, 2003). Teachers of writing must understand the process of the craft as well as the development of the author (Graves, 2003). Process writing encourages a focus on the craft of writing, including taking time to plan a piece, compose multiple drafts while editing, and revising for publication for an authentic audience (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 2003; Hawkins & Razali, 2012). Emphasis moves away from a finished product and focuses on the steps for developing the writer's skills during writing (Hawkins & Razali, 2012).

Hillocks' (2002) review of research on the writing process from 1963 to 1982 concluded that the teacher's role was to facilitate the process and not provide direct instruction in grammar, syntax, or design. The process approach model focused on narrative stories as linear representations involving proofreading and editing as the same procedure (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). Teachers did not use direct instruction, because the process was valued more than the final written product (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). Hillocks (2002) found minimal impact on the quality of writing products as a result of this early writing process instructional model. Students conference with teachers and peers as a means of internalizing feedback from the social environment to improve their understandings of what is needed for authentic writing for a real audience (Dix & Cawkwell, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). Reflection, revision, and interaction with other student writers and teachers become tools of instruction for improving voice, word choice, sentence structure, and organization. In this process the teacher serves more

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as a facilitator than an evaluator who gives grades (Calkins, 1986; Dix & Cawkwell, 2011; Graves, 2003; Hawkins & Razali, 2012). Today, the writing process model involves both procedural knowledge and other strategies that may be nurtured through exploration and direct instruction including prewriting activities that activate schemata, genre studies, editing grammatical errors, revising drafts, audience awareness, and feedback from peers and the teacher (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). Positive impacts on students' achievement and writing development were found in studies that view the process model as teacher directed in terms of guiding students to plan, draft, revise, and edit with a focus on allowing students to view themselves as authors (Calkins, 1986; Dix & Cawkwell, 2011; Graves, 2003; Hawkins & Razali, 2012).

A Gifted Population

Due to the location of the current study, the population of student authors were all state-identified gifted students brought together one day a week from various community elementary schools. The first usage of the educational category of "gifted student" came into existence during the 1920s as the standardized testing movement opened doors for identifying students' diverse educational needs (Borland, 2005; Reis & Renzulli, 2010). Terman (1925), often referred to as the father of American gifted education, developed the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, which is widely used as an intelligence assessment to help group students for differentiation (Borland, 2005; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005). Terman's definition of giftedness included "the top 1% in general intellectual ability as measured by the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale or a comparable instrument" (Terman, 1925, p.43).

Today, researchers consider a more inclusive definition for the highly intelligent gifted child that includes the influence of culture and values on the talents and intellectual gifts (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Sternberg& Davidson, 2005). Frasier and Passow (1994) conducted research on the characteristics of diverse gifted students and concluded that the traits and aptitudes of gifted children are common across cultures. Characteristics may present themselves in different terms for different students but every socioeconomic population and ethnic group of all cultures has members who are identified gifted as children or adults (Frasier & Passow, 1994; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005).

Renzulli (1978) was one of the first theorists to consider a research-based definition for giftedness that brought together several components of education. Renzulli (1978) categorized two separate types of giftedness, "schoolhouse giftedness" or the type of intelligence that responds well to test taking skills and "creative-productive giftedness" which relates to those who use their abilities to solve problems that have personal relevance in a real-world application (Renzulli, 2005, pp. 253-255). Above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment are all included in an overall definition of the behaviors that result from distinct intrapersonal characteristics leading to gifted ability (Gordon & Bridglall, 2005; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Renzulli, 1978). Measuring intelligences presents the problem of defining giftedness that will always be conceived in different ways culturally and socially (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Renzulli, 1978; Renzulli & Reis, 2008). Several cultures historically value gifted abilities in ways that are inconsistent with American educational theories about the moral components of giftedness (Foreman & Renzulli, 2012). Consider the contemporary fundamentalist

Islamic cultures that fail to recognize girls as having the ability to develop gifted behaviors under their cultural belief system, although a more universal definition of giftedness does not exclude people based on ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation (Foreman & Renzulli, 2012).

The concept of giftedness has evolved beyond the results of intelligence tests to include rapid learning, attention, memory, problem solving skills, humor, and commitment to tasks (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005). Slocumb and Payne (2000) identified three main differences that set gifted students apart from non-gifted. These were the ability to learn at a quicker rater, the ability to solve problems and manipulate abstract ideas, and the ability to make personal connections. When addressing these differences, teachers must be sure to address student interest levels and make new information relevant to students (Slocumb & Payne, 2000). Student products must reflect a higher level of understanding beyond what is directly taught in the classroom (Slocumb & Payne, 2000).

Reis & Renzulli (2010) warn that educators must be cautious when identifying such broad characteristics of giftedness when working with diverse students who may exhibit behaviors differently depending on the context or environment. Frasier and Passow (1994) also warn of the ineffectiveness of selection procedures that do not take into account teachers' tendency toward cultural or socioeconomic bias which may create preconceived ideas of what constitutes giftedness; thus some potentially gifted students are overlooked when it comes to testing. The characterization of what it is to be gifted is the subject of countless volumes of research-based literature that spans decades of pedagogical reform. However, it is difficult to find one all-inclusive definition due to the

diversity of the gifted population (Borland, 2005; Reis& Renzulli, 2010; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005). More students would be identified and served appropriately if the recognized definition of giftedness was expanded to a more flexible form that translated across cultural and socioeconomic lines (Fraiser & Passow, 1994; Reis & Renzulli, 2010).

The first goal of gifted education is to provide children with the best opportunities for self-fulfillment through a combination of performance skills that lead to the greatest personal and academic development (Renzulli, 2005; Reis & Renzulli, 2010). Teachers of gifted children must be reflective about the goals of their instruction as they work with individuals who have enormous creative energy and powerful intellect because these are the children who could potentially advance society in numerous ways (Torrance & Sisk, 1999). Gifted students require a classroom environment rich with many curriculum strategies that are designed to address all children and celebrate their differences rather than one single strategy that may bore most and overwhelm others (Torrance and Sisk, 1999). Such gifted students will benefit from working in groups with students who are somewhat older (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Torrance & Sisk, 1999). Impatience and perfectionism are common with many gifted and talented students, making them feel that they do not fit in with their common aged peers (Torrance & Sisk, 1999). Working in groups on projects allows gifted students to relate with like students through common interests and offers a variety of instructional methods to satisfy individual learning needs (Torrance & Sisk, 1999).

A second goal of gifted education is to encourage the development of citizens willing to solve contemporary problems through the creation of new knowledge and art

rather than encouraging people to simply consume preexisting information (Renzulli, 2005; Reis & Renzulli, 2010). All students deserve equal access to quality education that is presented with consideration for the different needs of individual children (Borland, 2005; Renzulli, 1978; Renzulli, 2005; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Tomlinson, 1999, 2005). All populations across cultural lines contain gifted children with exceptional abilities in one or more areas (Baldwin, 1991; Reis & Renzulli, 2010). The majority of children who are identified as having gifted intelligence continue to come from the majority culture, while economically challenged and other diverse populations are underrepresented (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005; Slocumb & Payne, 2000). Teachers have a responsibility to create instructional strategies for the gifted that take into account social and cultural values of all students in order to encourage positive self-concepts and acceptance of personal gifts (Baldwin, 1991; Reis & Renzulli, 2010). Renzulli (1987) makes a distinction between those who do well on standardized achievement and cognitive ability tests and those who have the ability to create new products from acquired skills and knowledge while applying information processes in a real-world manner (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Gordon and Bridglall, 2005). There is a need for more consideration for those students who have the ability to achieve at high academic levels who would be included in the gifted populations but may have a tendency to not score well on academic achievement tests (Borland, 2005; Renzulli, 1978; Renzulli, 2005; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Tomlinson, 1999, 2005; Gordon and Bridglall, 2005). Low-income and minority students, including African American, American Indian, and Hispanic individuals, are often chronically underserved by the public school (Romanoff, Algozzine, and Nielson, 2009). The percentage of African American and Hispanic

students in gifted education is often much less than that in the larger school population, an issue that may be the result of the identification process (Renzulli, 1978; Romanoff et al., 2009). Throughout history, gifted education and the processes used for the identification of gifted traits has been criticized for unequal representation along racial lines (Borland, 2005; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005). As the American population continued to change during the 1920s, immigrants from Austria, Italy, Russia, and Hungary brought numerous children into the public schools, creating greater diversity in the classrooms (Borland, 2005; Mayer, 2005). New laws required children who may have previously been forced to work in the factories to help support families to attend public schools bringing socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural differences into classrooms designed for homogeneous populations (Borland, 2005). The more diverse the population became the more assessments were required to quantify student achievement. Thus, more socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural differences were evident in the variances of the individual assessments (Borland, 2005). Many researchers question the validity of the identification since minority students remain underrepresented in gifted programs (Borland, 2005; Mayer, 2005; Renzulli, 1978; Renzulli, 2005; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Tomlinson, 1999, 2005). Borland (2005) agrees that there are individual differences in students of both elementary and secondary academic levels that may derive from ability and motivational influences from social, cultural, and other environment factors. Researchers expanded the concept of giftedness to include many different characteristics and skills combining non-intellectual qualities such as potential, self-concept, and creativity (Reis & Renzulli, 2010).

The struggles for acceptance in the gifted community often involve the biases of teachers who are subject to their own cultural understandings (Bianco, Harris, and Garrison-Wade, 2011). Although gifted students are identified through state-mandated testing, teachers often have the responsibility to make the initial identification that is later followed up with testing and evaluations. Relying on teachers to make judgments about giftedness often leads to recommendations of those students who conform to expectations of how gifted students act in class and perform on achievement tests (Bianco et al., 2011; Davis & Rimm, 1985). Bianco et al. (2011) researched the effect of gender bias on teachers' eagerness to refer children for gifted assessment. In a mixed-methods study of 89 students in elementary through high school in two states, teachers were given hypothetical vignettes where gender was the variable (Bianco et al., 2011). Teachers referred boys for gifted assessment more often than girls, which indicates more training is required to further the understanding of a definition of giftedness. Existing ideals based on cultural assumptions are used to judge giftedness, which causes teachers to focus on what a child cannot accomplish rather than highlighting potential talents and abilities (Bianco et al., 2011). This leads to underrepresentation of several populations including learning disabled students and those of lower socioeconomic levels (Bianco et al., 2011).

Gifted Pull-Out Programs

The current study took place in a county-wide transient pull-out program, designed to meet the needs of gifted primary students through differentiation and group activities. Children were transported from their home schools to another location, where

gifted-certified teachers provided differentiated lessons focused on higher-ordered thinking, group work, and state identified goals for gifted children. VanTassel-Baska (2012) and Tomlinson (1999) suggest that all schools need to focus on differentiation for all children to include instruction, ongoing assessment, and opportunities for group work. Differentiation of current curriculum and ability grouping in regular classrooms are priorities for today's classroom teachers in meeting the needs of and challenging all students (Renzulli and Reis, 2008; VanTassel-Baska and Wood, 2010). Classrooms are designed as homogeneous environments based on chronological age, yet most teachers realize the need for differentiated instruction based on readiness levels, interests, and learning styles to maximize growth and success rates for all students (Tomlinson, 1999). Considering the diverse range of abilities in a heterogeneous classroom, there is often a lack of instructional depth of content and time for planning multiple strategies to engage individual gifted children (Belcastro, 1987). Gifted programs are intended as a means of advocating differentiation for all students and a way to meet the legitimate needs of a widely considered underserved population (Renzulli and Reis, 2008; Tomlinson, 2005; VanTassel-Baska and Wood, 2010).

An alternative means of serving the gifted population involves using part-time pull-out classes, where a gifted child is removed from the regular education class for a short period of time and receives instruction from a gifted-certified teacher in the company of similar students (Belcastro, 1987; Borland, 2005). Pulling gifted students together provides an opportunity for them to interact with others like themselves and work with trained instructors who use materials designed for the gifted (Belcastro, 1987; VanTassel-Baska and Wood, 2010).

The advantages of a pull-out program for gifted students include the opportunity for gifted children to socialize with intellectually equal peers (Belcastro 1987; Dimitriadis, 2012; Renzulli, 1987; Vaughn, Feldhusen, and Asher, 1991). Basic skills are not the focus for gifted instructors. More time is allotted for activities that lend themselves to higher ordered thinking skills and research (Belcastro, 1987). Another benefit of removing gifted children from the heterogeneous class is that it allows other students who may be overshadowed by the highly successful gifted student to become the center of attention and the teacher may have more time for individual needs.

One disadvantage of pull-out programs may be the resentment from regular education teachers toward those who teach classes that the students proclaim are more exciting (Belcastro, 1987). The simple fact that schedules are interrupted creates tension between regular education teachers and gifted teachers. Time for projects and in-depth unit lesson planning is a problem when children spend one session a week with the gifted instructor. Belcastro (1987) admits that due to time restrictions and isolation, the pull-out program may lack continuity and coordination with other equally beneficial school departments.

Dimitriadis (2012) explored four different methods of providing differentiation to mathematically-gifted, primary-aged students. Of the differentiation methods utilized, pull-out programs for gifted students showed the most positive results based on student outcomes and teacher and student interviews in the London-based study, (Dimitriadis, 2012). Data collection involved classroom observation, documentation, and interviews with teachers and students. Each of four primary schools used different models including in-class instruction, ability grouping, pull-out grouping, and mentoring to provide

differentiation for the needs of gifted students. Although none of the models involved specific frameworks for mathematically gifted students, all four utilized higher-ordered thinking, involving questioning, which gives children exposure to skills requiring analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information. Gifted students working through the pull-out program showed more positive gains than the other three models (Dimitriadis, 2012). Success was accredited to the challenging tasks given within peer groups and the teachers' ability to give additional instruction whenever problems occurred (Dimitriadis, 2012). This continual scaffolding within a common peer group allows children to work and challenge themselves with adult assistance, which follows Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development. The ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) allows teachers to work with students within their actual developmental ability and help students progress towards their potential growth through adult support. The positive outcomes of pull-out programs for gifted children give added support for the theory that gifted students have different needs that may be met through the social grouping of like gifted students (Belcastro 1987; Dimitriadis, 2012; Renzulli, 1987; Vaughn et al., 1991).

In a meta-analysis of 30 years of research focused on pull-out programs for gifted students, Vaughn et al., (1991) concluded that these programs do have positive impacts on gifted students in the areas of academic achievement, creativity, and critical thinking. They do not appear to have a negative influence on self-concept (Vaughn et al., 1991). When programs strive to integrate regular curriculum, allow students to work with peer groups, pace material to meet gifted needs, and provide a higher level of instruction, the model can produce positive outcomes for gifted students (Belcastro, 1987; Vaughn et al.,

1991). The model could be most effective for gifted students in small school districts with limited resources (Vaughn et al., 1991).

Renzulli (1987) argued that pull-out programs provide a departure from regular education classrooms and basic curricula where the interests of the gifted population are often not taken into consideration. When teachers are asked to balance the regular class along with the needs of gifted students, they are forced to label activities specifically gifted (Vaughn et al., 1991). When pull-out models are put into place, the teacher may label the course or curriculum as gifted and not the child, allowing the students of above average ability an opportunity to use their talents and strength adds to create significant projects without being singled out (Vaughn et al., 1991).

Several researchers (Davis and Rimm, 1985) argue that pull-out gifted programs have weaknesses, including the suggestion that such programs are more entertainment based and the children worry about making up missed work, which makes them feel punished. Also, since pull-out programs are not full-time, they cannot meet the needs of students due to fragmentation of the curriculum (Davis and Rimm, 1985). Van Tassel-Baska (1987) suggested that more communication between the gifted educator and the regular classroom teacher is necessary if the total needs of the gifted child are to be met in full. Van Tassel-Baska (1987) concluded that pull-out models do not offer focused instruction for a specific period of daily time, set different expectations for students, do not give grades, and do not arrange curriculum experiences over the span of time students spend in the program. Although Belcastro (1987) pointed out some of the same issues with gifted pull-out models, he offered seven basic criteria of gifted pull-out programs, including: integrating the regular classroom curriculum with gifted education, students

experiencing daily gifted programming, being placed with intellectual peers, the pacing of gifted education matching individual student needs, the curriculum must be complex, and teachers must be well trained.

Sustained Learning through Community Development

The third research question driving this study involved the impact of learning communities on future classroom environments and student learning. As previously stated, allowing children to experience writing development through the social interactions of a learning community helps them not only to develop cognition but also creates a sense of belonging as children share ideas, speak with empathy, and see themselves in the experiences of others (Bettez, 2011; Noddings, 1996; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Piaget, 1974; Vygotsky, 1986). The question becomes whether the same group of children continued to feel empathy, accepted diversity, and maintained a sense of belonging as they transferred to a different instructional environment that was not necessarily structured as a learning community.

Learning communities consist of a variety of educational approaches focused on making social connections between students and their teachers in an effort to deepen cognitive development (Butler & Dawkins, 2007). Research has shown that students who participate in learning communities receive better grades and show significantly higher levels of faculty and peer involvement compared to other students who do not participate (Butler & Dawkins, 2007). For example, a learning community focused on math and

science outcomes for improving high school minority outcomes over the course of three years was overwhelmingly successful,bringing a 75% failure rate in pre-calculus courses to a 75% to 80% pass rate (Butler & Dawkins, 2007). When surveyed, students credited their friendships and study groups for the development of increased confidence and success rates.

There is substantial research available detailing the benefits of community learning and writing in social settings. The current research may add to the support for teaching young children within a social setting as a means of improving cognitive development and providing opportunities for cultural understandings. This research may also shed light on the lesser developed issue of short-term exposure to writing in a learning community among diverse students as a positive foundation that may or may not carry on throughout other less social classroom experiences.

Conclusion

This review of literature combines the ideas of cognitive development, social learning, and writing among diverse students as a means of improving overall community development and learning for children engaged in authentic writing experiences. It is well documented that peer interactions deepen personal understandings among learners and strengthen cognitive development (Bettez, 2011; Cooper, 2003; Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Vygotsky, 1986). The learning challenges of gifted students, brought together from differing neighborhood schools in a short-term, transient pull-out program, add a complexity of diverse cultures and learning styles that may be addressed through group activities requiring more higher ordered thinking skills through questioning and

conversation (Dimitriadis, 2012; Meier, 2012; Blenkinsop, 2012). Understanding the needs of gifted children as well as the cognitive benefits of social interaction fosters a better understanding of the benefits of developing relationships between students through writing within a learning community (Blenkinsop, 2012; Reis & Renzulli, 2010). When teachers give children a voice through shared writing experiences, allow the free exchange of ideas and cultural differences through conversations, and provide authenticity for the work and audience, student writers begin to value writing and the relationships created during the process of community building. The question becomes not the value of writing in a social setting but the ability to build this community when time is short and differences are many. Building a learning community takes time for understanding, sharing, and trust. The definitive goal of a learning community is to deepen cognitive development, in this case through writing, and to broaden diverse understanding through social relationships. Teachers must release control and allow students time to share openly and express their own personal voices as they learn to reflect on their life experiences and relate to the experiences of others as they develop through authentic writing experiences.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This mixed-methods study incorporating ethnographic research techniques combined with basic descriptive and inferential statistical analyses focused on how gifted elementary students participating in a short term, social writing instruction evolved into a community of learners. The goals of this research were to explore (1) how writing in a social setting builds community among gifted students in a transient, pull-out program; (2) how the diverse backgrounds and schools' cultures of individual children impacted the development of the learning community; and (3) how the sense of community developed in the researcher's classroom is sustained as students move to another classroom. This methodology chapter describes the participants, including the identification of gifted students and the organization of the gifted program; the social writing methods that were used, including Process Writing and Shared Journal; the data collection methods; and the data analysis methods. Finally, samples of the instruments and surveys used can be found in the appendix.

Participants

The students participating in this research study attended a center for the gifted in an urban county school system. All gifted students left their community schools and attended the center for gifted students one day each week. Therefore, this class was made up of students from several different schools throughout the system. The gifted student is defined according to the Georgia Department of Education (2013) as a child who demonstrates a high degree of creativity, intellectual ability, and motivation.

Eligibility for gifted services required students meet the criteria set by the state department of education in at least three of the four categories of mental ability, achievement, creativity and motivation (Georgia Department of Education, 2015). Mental ability was reflected by a score at or above the 99th percentile on a normed-referenced test of mental ability for children in grades kindergarten through second. A score in the 96th percentile or higher was required for children attending grades third through twelfth. Achievement was measured through total math or reading sections of a norm-referenced achievement test. Student scores must have fallen in the 90th percentile or higher for qualification. If this score was not available, students could have produced a product portfolio that reflected achievement. The work represented must have been of a type that could be quantified into a numerical score of 90 or better on a 100 point scale, as evaluated by a panel of gifted-certified educators. Creativity was measured using a standardized creativity characteristics rating scale. The county where this research took place used the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking. Scores must have fallen at or above the 90th percentile for eligibility. Motivation was measured using a standardized motivational characteristics rating scale. Scores needed to fall at or above the 90th percentile. Once children were identified as gifted, they entered the county's gifted program. This meant leaving their community school classroom once a week, riding on a bus and spending one day with a gifted certified teacher at a central location. The gifted services were intended as an enrichment program, extending the same grade-level appropriate curriculum standards as those presented in students' community school environments.

Organization of the Gifted Program

Four teachers shared two grade levels at the proposed school, with each teacher teaching a different content area. Different school populations were served on each day of the week. Therefore, the researcher taught five different classes (one per day each week) for a nine-week period. After spending one semester with the researcher, the students rotated to another teacher and subject area for the following nine-week grading period. For the purpose of this research, the researcher's first and second nine-week classes participated in the study. The gifted class sessions began approximately at 8:30 a.m. and concluded at about 1:30 p.m. There were breaks in the instructional time for lunch and outdoor recreation.

Eight separate heterogeneous classes of gifted students (four in the first nine-week period and four in the second nine week period) participated in this study at the public gifted school. No more than 24 students attended each class at one time. Classes were made up of a composite of students traveling from 33 different elementary schools to attend the gifted program one day each week. Because students came from various socio-economic levels and school environments, the classes were diverse. The common characteristic is that all students were state-identified as gifted. Informed consent was gathered indicating parental/guardian permission for students to participate in the study (see Appendix A). The results represent a 100 percent participation rate, since the students were part of the researcher's classroom. Students' identities remained confidential and no names were attached to any data collected. Pseudonyms were used for reporting any qualitative or identifiable data.

Shared Journal Writing Instruction Methods

The majority of writing development took place during Shared Journal, a

research-driven process that involved students sharing stories from their own lives and, in

turn, asking questions about the stories of others, and finally developing original

nonfiction works while learning authors' techniques of good writing (Taylor et al. ,2011).

Shared Journal strategies offer students an opportunity to learn in school in the same

natural way they learned during the early stages of language development (Taylor et al.,

2011). Individual student authors constructed their own knowledge through social

interaction with others (Kamii & Randazzo, 1985; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Taylor et al.,

2011). Talk was encouraged as students built meaning from shared experiences (Taylor et

al., 2011). Throughout Shared Journal, the researcher acted as facilitator, moving

students through the steps in the process, eventually relinquishing control to the group as

familiarity with expectations developed (Taylor et al., 2011).

Students started Shared Journal by gathering on the carpeted area and choosing

three story tellers who shared events from their own lives. Listening students recorded

notes in their writing journals. The class discussed themes and created an appropriate title

for each of the three stories as a means to assist in remembering the main ideas of each

story. Together, the class negotiated and then voted for one storyteller's tale that became

the focus of the day's journal entry. This negotiation process developed over time as

students learned to present their own opinions and to better understand the opinions of

other students (Taylor et al., 2011).

The chosen storyteller continued to answer questions from the remaining students,

allowing a discourse to develop about the important details. Students accessed their

personal experiences related to the story told as a means to make connections with the

storyteller (Taylor, et al., 2011). A time limit was imposed for the questioning session, when necessary. Students took their notes to the group writing tables and drafted their own versions of the storyteller's story of the day. Questions of the storyteller often continued as students wrote original pieces. Conversations were allowed throughout the process. Informal teacher and student conferences occurred as students worked to improve technique. Once student authors were satisfied with their own stories, everyone reconvened on the carpet for sharing and reflection of stories. Students were given the option to publish their work in the classroom library with or without illustrations.

Process Writing Instruction Method

Student authors participating in this research strengthened their writing skills through the study of process writing (Graves, 2003), an approach to teaching writing that emphasizes the stages of writing development rather than the completion of a grammatically flawless final product. It is a child-centered approach designed to help children explore their own thought processes and construct meaning through personal reflection (Graves, 2003). In the approach, students are taught planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing strategies within a safe environment, where the exchange of ideas between students and the teacher during formal and informal conferencing is encouraged. Voice, or the reflection of the writer's personality within the written word, becomes the driving force behind the process approach (Graves, 2003). The choice of information, organization of that information, and word choice are all determined by the writer's use of voice (Graves, 2003). The author paid close attention to

the content and meaning of the work and then to the grammatical form (Badger & White, 2000; Ho, 2006).

During writing instruction, the researcher introduced the class of student authors to original works by published authors and built curriculum-based lessons involving collaborative group writing projects. Students worked in collaborative pairs or teams, depending on the assignment and choice of the students. The intention was to allow children time to engage in this type of process writing during each of the nine classroom sessions. Boyle and Charles (2011) suggest four possible learning models for the collaborative writing relationships, which were given as options during the researcher's class. They included giving a child a chance to choose to work alone to start and then join another child to help with editing and revising. A child may have chosen to also work alone and confer with the teacher only. Another choice was to work with another student author with very limited teacher conferencing. The fourth option included working in partners with a great deal of teacher intervention. Children were also allowed to sit together at one table and talk openly as individuals as they composed stories and asked questions simultaneously. Researchers have found that student writers, given the opportunity to meet together in co-authoring groups, partnerships, feedback groups, or conferences, develop confidence and skill in their writing as well as build relationships and connections within the community (Godbee, 2012). An example of such an exercise involved small group author teams coming together to write original versions of well-known works of classic fairy tales. As the teacher, the researcher moderated conferences with the groups to help facilitate the process of planning, drafting, composing, editing, revising, and finally publishing completed stories. Since there are dangers in using a

model that requires conferencing when time is limited because many students are at risk of being left out from author-teacher conferences or student-to-student editing (Blythe & Sweet, 2008), the researcher often used student conferencing and informal group sharing to make up for lost conferencing time.

Data Collection

One of three questions that drove this research focused on how writing in a social setting builds community among students in a transient, pull-out program. Data collection addressing this question included anecdotal notes and audio tapes of sharing sessions and collaborative writing groups. A Likert-style survey adapted from the twenty-question Classroom Community Scale designed and piloted by Rovai (2002) was used as a means to quantify community development over time. Answering research question 1 required a pretest to be administered on the first day of class, which was compared to a posttest on the ninth class session. The survey design was based on the concept of community as a group of individuals who rely on each other to achieve a common goal and work collaboratively (Cooper, 2003; Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Rovai, 2002; Shaffer & Anundsen, 2005). Essential elements of community specifically addressed by the Classroom Community Scale (see Appendix B) are trust, mutual interdependence, interactivity, shared respect for common values and beliefs, and expectations (Bellah et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002; Shaffer & Anundsen, 2005). Using several data sources helped support triangulation of data, a qualitative research strategy that involved the use of several sources as a means to increase the validity and reliability of the study findings (Cooper, 2003; Shaffer & Anundsen, 2005).

A second research question and focus of the data collection was the impact of the diverse backgrounds and school cultures of individual children on the development of community. The same anecdotal notes, audio tapes of sharing and discussion sessions, and the Classroom Community Scale (see Appendix B) results for the pretest and posttest were organized in groups to reflect the different socioeconomic levels of student participants.

The third research question focused on the sustainability of community as students moved to another classroom that did not focus on building relationships. Triangulation of data for this question included a third administration of the Classroom Community Scale (see Appendix B), observations of student work, and interviews with the teachers in the school rotation. A comparison of the results from the survey posttest and the third administration or post-posttest were used as a measure of student perceptions of community development as they continued to work together in another teacher's classroom. The two teachers who worked with students after they participated in the study were interviewed using two main guiding questions: How would you describe the relationships between students in Group 1 after they spent a nine-week semester studying with the researcher? In regards to Group 2, how would you compare this group's interactions and behaviors from the first semester of the school year to the third, after focusing on building community with the researcher? Video recordings of student interactions, interviews with teachers, and anecdotal notes were transcribed and coded for emerging patterns.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data for this study included both qualitative and quantitative

methods. The Classroom Community Scale (see Appendix B) was administered at the

beginning and the end of the nine-week semester focusing on community development.

Student responses to individual questions included 1 point = strongly disagree, 2 points =

disagree, 3 points = no feelings or neutral, 4 points = agree and 5 points = strongly agree.

The pretest and posttest results for both Group 1 and Group 2 were analyzed using

descriptive statics (the mean and standard deviation) as well as inferential statistics

including a two-tailed t-test. These methods were used to determine if there were any

statistically significant changes in student perceptions of community development over a

nine-week period.

Video recordings of student writing sessions and collaborative projects were

analyzed for patterns of development. Student writing journals were also analyzed for

emerging trends and coded based on categories that surfaced. This analysis and coding

allowed for reduction of the data so that conclusions could be made and the specific

research questions answered. The complete transcripts of audio recordings were

reviewed a second time with regard to the second research question about the impact of

the diverse backgrounds and school cultures of individual children on the development of

community. The same data analysis and reduction processes were used to reveal patterns

of language usage with attention toward the students' individual community schools.

Additionally, to examine this second research question, the pretest and posttest results of

the Classroom Community Scale (see Appendix B) were classified based on the free and

reduced lunch rates reported by the schools which the students attended. Using data from

the county's free and reduced lunch - fiscal year data report, Georgia Department of

Education (2015), student surveys were divided into four groups. Higher Socioeconomic Group 1 and Higher Socioeconomic Group 2 referred to students who came from schools that reported less than a 60% average free and reduced lunch rate. Student responses were placed in Lower Socioeconomic Group 1 or Lower Socioeconomic Group 2 if their home schools reported a free and reduced lunch rate of 69% or higher. Both Low Socioeconomic Group 1 and High Socioeconomic Group 1 attended the researcher's classroom from the first day of school. Both Low Socioeconomic Group 2 and High Socioeconomic Group 2 joined the study during the second semester of school. The survey results were analyzed (see Table 4), using a two-tailed t test, to determine if there were significant differences across the different school populations for the purpose of identifying any impact of socioeconomic levels on community development.

For the third research question, teacher interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a constant comparative method. This included coding related to how the sense of community developed in the researcher's classroom impacted the students as they moved to another classroom. Data reduction were based on the categories that emerged during analysis of friendship, trust safety, and learning. These categories were used to examine trends and draw conclusions. Finally, The Classroom Community Scale (see Appendix B) posttest results were compared with the post-posttest results from the third administration of the survey given when students were with the next teacher to examine if the students' perceptions changed. An item analysis using another two-tailed t-test was completed to examine the results for statistical significance.

Summary

This methodology chapter outlined the descriptive and inferential statistical analysis methods as well as the ethnographic techniques used to explore how social writing in a pull-out gifted population relates to the development of community over a very short period of time. The three research questions guiding this study involved (1) how writing socially builds connections over a nine-day period, (2) how diversity impacts that community development and (3) how the sense of community continues when students leave the community-focused classroom environment. Participants were described in terms of their qualifications for the state gifted program. This made a difference as to how students were randomly placed in the researcher's gifted classroom during the first and second semesters of the school year. The community development techniques utilized in the study were also explained including Shared Journal writing (Taylor et al., 2011) and group-oriented process writing. Data collection and analysis was described as involving Likert-style survey results, as well as anecdotal notes from researcher observations, samples of student journals, and daily video recordings. All qualitative data were transcribed for analysis. Stories from the videos and journals are used as evidence to support analysis through throughout the study.

Chapter 4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

This mixed-methods study incorporating ethnographic research techniques combined with basic statistical analyses focused on how gifted elementary students participating in a short term, social writing instruction evolved into a community of learners. Students wrote together as a means to support the growth of deep meaningful relationships, as seen in the writing development and social interactions within a writing community. The central focus of the study was to explore how the experience of collaborative, social writing for an average of nine school days fostered community within a classroom setting.

This analysis of data chapter will present the processes of analysis and findings of both quantitative data from surveys and qualitative observations and interviews. The survey instrument is discussed in detail. Descriptive characteristics of all participants are presented. The three research questions driving this study are discussed. Data analysis is organized by specific research question, including tables of quantitative results with narrative explanations and related qualitative observations. Four specific themes for analysis are used to frame all data within the three research questions- safety, friendship, trust, and learning.

Students were given a 20-question, Likert-style Classroom Community Scale (Rovai, 2002) which focused on their own feelings of safety, friendship, trust, and learning within a group of students attending a writing class one day a week for nine weeks. The questionnaire consisted of 20 self-reported items exploring community within the classroom setting. Each item was followed by a five-point Likert scale of

possible responses: 5 = very positive feeling, 4 = positive feeling, 3 = no feeling, 2 = negative feeling, 1 = very negative feeling. Cartoon-style expressive faces with hand gestures of "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" were added to assist young children with understanding the meanings of the responses. Negatively worded survey questions were reverse scored. Higher scores reflected a more positive sense of community.

Descriptive Characteristics of Respondents

This study focused on students attending one particular instructional center designed to support state-identified gifted students from elementary schools in a large southern school district that serves more than 30,000 students. Participants were selected based on random placement in the researcher's gifted fourth and fifth grade writing class during two different nine-week grading periods. Children were transported one day a week from their community elementary schools across the county to the educational center, where gifted-certified teachers provided differentiated lessons focused on group oriented higher-ordered thinking skills and state identified goals for gifted children. The researcher taught two groups of students over the course of two nine-week grading periods, using social writing techniques as a means to build community. Eight separate heterogeneous classes of gifted students participated in this study at the public educational center. Classes were made up of a composite of students, traveling from 33 different elementary schools (see Table 1). The community schools serving the students in this study report a range of 100 percent free and reduced lunch to 22.24 percent, creating diverse classroom populations. The common characteristic of the population is that all students were identified by the state as gifted. During the course of two different

nine-week semesters, these eight groups spent approximately five hours a day for nine

days, or for a total of 45 hours, participating in social writing.

Table 1

Demographics of student participants

	Group 1 (n=47)	Group 2 (n=47)
Gender		
Male	20 (42%)	26 (55%)
Female	27 (58%)	21 (45%)
Age		
11 years old	11 (23%)	9 (40%)
10 years old	20 (43%)	25 (53%)
9 years old	16 (34%)	13 (28%)
Grade		
Fifth grade	23 (49%)	19 (40%)
Fourth grade	24 (51%)	28 (60%)
Race		
Caucasian	36 (77%)	38 (81%)
African American	7 (15%)	7 (15%)
Asian	3 (6%)	1 (2%)
Hispanic	1 (2%)	0
Mixed race	0	1 (2%)
Free/reduced lunch		
69% or higher	11 (24%)	13 (28%)
60% or lower	36 (76%)	34 (72%)

The first set of study participants (N=47) entered the researcher's public gifted

fourth and fifth grade classroom during the first nine-week semester of the school year.

This group consisted of 20 (42%) males and 27(58%) females. Within this group, 23

57

(49%) were fifth graders and 24 (51%) were fourth graders. Only 11 (23%) students

were 11 years old, while 20 (43%) students were 10 years old and 16 (34%) students

were 9 years old. Within this group, 36 (77%) students were Caucasian; 7 (15%) were

African American; 3 (6%) Asian/Pacific Islander; and 1 (2%) was Hispanic. Eleven

(24%) students came from a community school that reported a free and reduced lunch

population of 65% or higher. The remaining 36 (76%) students reported a free and

reduced lunch rate higher than 22.24 % and lower than 60%.

The second set of study participants (N=47) studied writing in the researcher's

classroom during the second nine-week semester of the school year, having already

completed nine weeks together with another gifted-certified instructor who focused solely

on math as a subject concentration. This group consisted of 26 (55%) males and 21

(45%) females; 19 (40%) students were fifth graders and 28 (60%) students were fourth

graders. Nine (19%) participants were 11 years old; 25 (53%) were 10 years old; and 13

(28%) were 9 years old. Of these students, 38 (81%) were Caucasian; 7 (15%) were

black, 1 (2%) was Asian/ Pacific Islander and 1 (2%) was classified as of mixed race.

The community schools of 13 (28%) students reported a 60% free and reduced lunch

population or higher. The remaining 34 (72%) students reported a free and reduced lunch

rate between 22.24 % and 60%.

Research Questions

The questions guiding this research were (1) How does writing in a social setting

build community among students in a transient, pull-out program?, (2) How do the

diverse backgrounds and school cultures of individual children impact the development

of the learning community?, and (3) How sustainable was the sense of community developed in the researcher's classroom as students moved to another classroom? The current research focuses on the hypothesis that students participating in a transient, short-term pull-out program will show signs of community development over time after working through social writing experiences. Thus the null-hypothesis reflects a lack of community development, after experiences in social writing over time.

Data Collection

Community development comes from sharing commonalities and differences in a safe, trusting environment that builds friendships throughout the learning process. The purpose of this study was to explore the sense of community in a transient classroom as it was developed through writing in a social setting using a mixed-methods study including both qualitative and quantitative data collection. Observations and video recordings were made as children were given the opportunity to share stories about their lives orally and then in written form during daily writing sessions. The researcher used a social writing technique called Shared Journal (Taylor et al., 2011) as a means of encouraging the development of relationships within the learning community. The method provided an opportunity for students to tell short stories from their own lives and relate to the life stories of others in a safe, nonjudgmental classroom environment. The writing process involved listening to oral retellings, discussing and questioning storytellers, recording notes, and finally writing an original version of a storyteller's verse. Completed drafts were then shared and discussed in small group settings. The goal was to allow children an

opportunity to discover personal connections between their own lives and the stories of the other students around them, thus developing community within the classroom. These drafts and journal entries were copied and analyzed for language and theme patterns as a means of helping to answer the research questions. Researcher observations were recorded as notes and video recordings, which were useful when documenting students coming together in support of each other and learning to connect their own lives to the stories of others. Transcripts of daily video recordings provided written records of shared journal exchanges and the personal stories that developed as a result of community development routines.

Quantitative data were collected over the course of two nine-week semesters. Students completed a Likert-style survey (Rovai, 2002) three different times, as a pretest at the beginning of the nine-week term in the researcher's class, at the end of the nine-week term in the researcher's class, and then at the end of the next nine-week term in their next teacher's class. Responses included 1 point = very negative feeling, 2 points = negative feeling, 3 points = no feelings or neutral, 4 points = positive feeling and 5 points = very positive feeling. This equated to 282 survey responses. Student responses to individual questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, etc.) as well as inferential statistics (t-tests to compare pretest scores to post-test scores over a nine-week semester). The data collection reflects a 100% response rate. All 94 participants were members of the researcher's classroom. Students were asked to respond anonymously with no prompting or personal gain. The 20-question Likert-style survey (Rovai, 2002) questions were analyzed in groups reflecting four common themes related to community development - safety, friendship, trust, and learning (see Table 2).

The four themes emerged from both the qualitative and quantitative findings as the

researcher continued to analyze the data. Microsoft Excel and QuickCalcs GraphPad

Software were used to calculate the quantitative data.

Table 2

Classroom Community Question Categories

Categories	#	Classroom Community Scale Survey Questions
Safety	2	I feel that I am encouraged to ask questions.
	4	I feel that it is hard to get help when I have a question to ask.
	6	I feel that I get answers from the teacher about my work quickly.
	8	I do not like to let students know that I do not know the answers.
	10	I don't like to answer questions in class or give my opinion.
Friendship	1	I feel that students in this class care about each other.
	3	I feel that I am friends with other students in this class.
	5	I do not feel like this class is like a family.
	7	I feel like this class is a family.
	9	I feel lonely in this class.
Trust	11	I trust the kids in this class.
	13	I feel I can count on other students to help me when I need them.
	17	I feel nervous about some kids in this class.
	19	I feel confident that others will be kind to me in this class.
Learning	12	I feel like I did not learn very much in this class.
	14	I feel that other students in this class do not help me learn.
	15	I feel that students in the class need me to help them learn.
	16	I feel that I am given lots of chances to learn in this class.
	18	I feel like I am not learning in this class.
	20	I feel that this class does not inspire me to learn.

Adapted from Rovai, A. (2002).

Throughout the study, student participants were divided into two main groups, Group 1 and Group 2. For the purpose of answering Research Questions 1 and 3, Group 1 consisted of students from 16 different area community schools who participated in the study starting on the very first day of school. After spending one day a week for nine weeks of community development study with the researcher, these students moved on to another classroom that did not directly address community development. Group 2 was made up of students from 17 community schools. These students spent the first nine-week semester with another teacher who did not focus on community development directly. Group 2 joined the researcher's study during the second semester and then moved back to the classroom environment that did not focus on community from the beginning of the school year.

Research Question 2 addressed the impact socioeconomic levels have on the development of community in the researcher's classroom environment. Student participants were divided into four groups based on the percentages of free and reduced lunch reported by their community schools. Higher Socioeconomic Group 1 refers to students who attended the researcher's classroom from the first day of school and came from schools reporting a free and reduced lunch average rate of 60% or lower. Higher Socioeconomic Group 2 also came from schools with less than a 60% average free and reduced lunch rate. These students joined the researcher's study during the second semester of school. Participants were included in the Lower Socioeconomic Group 1 and Group 2 if their home schools reported a free and reduced lunch rate of 69% or higher. Lower Socioeconomic Group 2 joined the study during the second semester of school. Qualitative data included daily video recordings of student interactions during social

writing sessions, researcher observations of student interactions and analysis of student

work samples. These recordings were analyzed for patterns of language usage with

attention toward the students' individual community schools.

The two teachers who were directly involved with the participants before and

after the social writing class, were interviewed and responses were videotaped and

transcribed for analysis. The two teachers taught a specific subject during the morning

session of class- math or science. Then these teachers team-taught project-based lessons

in the afternoon. For the purpose of exploring answers to research question three, the

researcher interviewed both teachers separately and then the conversation continued

together as a means of gathering qualitative data. One of the two teachers was a 60-year-

old male with 17years of experience in the public school system. For the purpose of the

study, he will be referred to as Mr. Jones. The second teacher was a 39-year-old male,

with 15 years of public school experience who will be referred to as Mr. Smith. Teachers

were asked to explain their observations of student behavior before and after the

researcher's treatment focusing on community development. Two basic interview

questions were used to open the conversation about students involved in the community

development research project.

- How would you describe the relationships between students in Group 1
  after they spent a nine-week semester studying with the researcher?
- In regards to Group 2, how would you compare this group's interactions
  and behaviors from the first semester of the school year, to the third
  semester, after they spent time in the researcher's classroom?

The interviews were useful when exploring research question three, which involves the sustainability of community as students move to another classroom environment.

Research Question 1- How does writing in a social setting build community among students in a transient, pull-out program?

This question focuses on the use of social writing over a very short period of time for the purpose of creating community between students who came together from different school environments. As a means of answering question one, the survey (Rovai, 2002) was presented to 47 students on the first day of class as a pretest or baseline analysis. The same instrument was then distributed on the ninth and final day of class as a posttest. Survey questions were grouped into four categories - safety, friendship, trust, and learning - to reflect general topics for community development (see Table 3). These categories became evident during analysis of data, as common themes emerged through survey results and observations of student interaction.

Table 3 Results of Classroom Community Survey over one nine-week semester

	N	Pretest M	SD	Posttest M	SD	t	df	p-value
Group 1	47							
Safety		3.83	1.03	4.289	.198	2.9388	92	.0042*
Friendship		4.07	.893	4.42	.7499	2.0764	92	.0406*
Trust		3.289	.96	4.32	.8117	5.6437	92	.0001**
Learning		3.9	.99	4.47	.78	3.00	92	.0034*
Group 2	47							
Safety		4.04	.9048	4.14	.876	.5789	92	.564
Friendship		4.22	.8101	4.34	.777	.7275	92	.4687
Trust		4.069	.8468	4.21	.8145	.869	92	.3871
Learning		4.234	.85	4.40	.86	.93	92	.3511

* $p \le .05$ **$p \le .0001$ Note. Rating scale: Strong positive feeling = 5, positive feeling = 4, no feeling = 3, negative feeling = 2, strong negative feeling = 1

Safety

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the questions related to feelings of safety in the classroom setting over time. The 47 responses from Group 1 reflected a statistically significant relationship toward the positive range for safety based on the pretest and posttest questions. There was a significant difference in the scores from group one pretest (M= 3.8383, SD=1.03332) and group one posttest (M=4.28936, SD=.198532) conditions; t (92) = 2.9388, p=.0042. These results suggest that students in the first group had a neutral or no feeling toward safety at the beginning of the class session. The group 1 responses show an increase in positive feelings toward safety when answering questions after spending a semester working together through a variety of social writing activities.

The results from Group 2 tell another story. The independent-samples t-test conducted to compare students' feelings of safety within community development over time reflect no significant difference in scores for the pretest (M=4.0425, SD=.9048) and posttest (M=4.1489, SD = .87654); t (92) =.5789, p=.564. The pretest and posttest means show only a .10 increase. Both are within the positive range for feelings toward safety. This suggests students already had a basis for community and felt secure answering questions before the social writing treatment and did not experience a significant change in the level of safety throughout the semester. While there were slight positive gains in the feelings of safety, the students had already established relationships leading them to feel safe with their classmates in the previous nine weeks with another teacher.

Qualitative data indicate that students developed some feeling of safety as they participated in the sharing of personal details from their own lives through social writing. Over time, these stories, which were videotaped during sharing, were used to inspire

other students to write related pieces. After seeing themselves in the stories of others, children felt safe enough to share their life experiences with the group. After two sessions, it was evident in student writing samples that students were finding connections between stories as they often started their original related stories by saying "Just like (child's name) story, I (like experience) too..." This pattern was evident, through the transcripts of video recordings, on the second day of Shared Journal in the class of eight students. After the first storyteller regaled the group with a zoo adventure, one student chimed in during the storytelling session, "I can relate to the part where you scraped your knee!" As the semester continued, students parroted the phrase "I can relate to ...” followed by examples of personal life stories that were similar to the storyteller. The initial commonality created a safe gateway for the author to share a personal story with the group without fear of ridicule. Storytellers' themes often sparked conversations that allowed other students to feel connected to the writings of the day, which helped build atmosphere for safe community writing. An example of one student's story inspiring another story was a session that resulted in shared ‘baby sister’ stories. Earlier, when class started, one particular student expressed hesitation saying, "I don't have anything to write about." After listening to the storyteller, however, she knew she had a story to tell as the storyteller shared her experience of going to the hospital to see her new sister.

The storyteller began her story explaining how excited she was when her aunt picked her up from school to take her to see her new baby sister in the hospital. "She asked me if I wanted to see a picture of my new baby sister but I said, “No”. I wanted it to be a surprise. It felt like an hour driving to the hospital. When I saw her, she was so tiny except for her head. She was swaddled and it looked so cute! Her feet and hands

looked so tiny. Her head looked so big! I said, "Maybe she has a big brain like her big sister."

At this point, the initially hesitant member of the note-taking audience suddenly straightened up and smiled. "I know how she felt about the picture. I wanted to see my baby sister for the first time for myself," she said as she nodded her head in agreement.

The storyteller continued, "I started to worry about not being as close to my baby sister as I am with my 5 year old sister. The new baby is 10 years younger than me. But then my mom told me that if I choose to be close to her, I will. It will just be a different kind of close." Again, the second child spoke out, letting the storyteller know just how important a big sister is to a baby sister. She knew because her baby sister was only five months old.

The two girls continued to share notes on being a new big sister. The child who was reluctant to speak out at first became the director of the conversation once she found a common bond with the storyteller, and felt secure enough to speak out. The reluctant writer started her story, "Just like (storyteller's name), I got a new sister last year... I did not even know about her until she was five months old." Both girls published their own stories on the class website, the first for the reluctant student.

By the fourth session of most of the participating classes, video transcripts show students as they became more comfortable within the group and more forthright with personal details. In one particular class of eight students, the shyest, most reserved child in the classroom began to feel safer amongst her peers and took a chance, after refusing to take her turn in the author's chair during every previous class. Video recordings of very early interactions show this student bowing her head as if to hide when storytellers

were called to speak. By the fourth class, she volunteered to be a storyteller. In the loudest voice she could find, she told of her trip to North Carolina to see her aunt and visit a water park. The slide was too big for her, since she "didn't swim that good." But her aunt insisted she try it anyway. She talked about being scared when she hit the water and her head not finding the surface very quickly. Then she explained how excited she was when she found a pirate ship that kids were actually supposed to jump off. There were other games offering an Xbox as the prize. She and her brother were very eager to win the prize. After her story, the listening audience applauded. It was obvious by their enthusiasm that they understood what it meant for her to speak out and share.

Her story was followed by numerous writings of a fear of swimming and how it took someone else's encouragement to get them into the water. Students once again empathized with the storyteller and explained how difficult it was for them to find the courage to swim. Water parks became a common theme for the remaining sessions. The shy storyteller later became a very vocal editor of other stories. She was the first to raise her hand during discussion sessions. She seemed to want acceptance from the group.

Friendship

Group 1 results from the independent-samples t-test conducted to compare those questions related to development of friendship resulted in statistically significant differences for the pretest (M= 4.07, SD=.89304) and the posttests (M=4.429, SD=.7499) conditions; t (92) = 2.0764, p = .0406. Both means reflect a positive attitude toward friendship within the classroom community, with a slight increase after the social writing

treatment. This may imply that the students, although they started the school year together in the researcher's class, may have been acquainted before the school year began. The increase may be a result of getting to know each other more deeply through social writing.

Once again, Group 2 presents a different case. While there was a slight gain in the mean, there were no statistically significant differences between the mean of the pretest (M=4.22979, SD =.8101) and the posttest (M=4.34894, SD=.77732) conditions t (92) =.7275, p=.4687. Since both means reflect a positive feeling toward friendship, this may imply that students came to class as friends and only slightly deepened their friendships through social writing experiences.

Trust

The questions concerning trust within the community reflect extremely statistically significant differences between Group 1 pretest (M=3.289, SD.96) and the posttest (M=4.3244, SD=.8117); t (92) = 5.6437, p =.0001. These results suggest that students started the semester with neutral or no feeling toward trusting others in the classroom. After learning more about each other through social writing experiences, students developed a greater sense of trust, thus developing a sense of community.

Again, Group 2 had only slight gains when comparing results for the development of trust within the community. There is no statistically significant difference between the mean of the pretest (M=4.069, SD =.84683) and the posttest (M=4.21, SD=.8145); t (92) =.869, p=.3871.These results suggest students came into the researcher's classroom after spending the first semester of school developing trust to a level reflected by a mean

greater than 4, which reflects a positive view of trust from the beginning. The semester of community development treatment had minimal impact on trust for group 2 according to student perception data.

Observations of student interactions reflected visible displays of trust among students as they shared personal details from their own lives in very public displays. Many storytellers feared being rejected by their peers if they shared personal experiences that might not be received well by the group. These feelings became evident when children sat away from the group during sharing as if to avoid having to share. During group conference sessions, the researcher observed students simply agreeing to publish someone else's work without ever reading their own. This led to discussions about why we share our work and what traits make someone's work interesting. Others sat in the group sharing circle, but stared at the floor and often refused to share their story when called upon. Building a trusting relationship with peers takes time and experience. For many of the students of this study, it took at least two or three weeks before they felt confident enough to share openly. One particular story brought such hesitation to the storyteller during the fourth class session that she almost sat back down in the audience without saying a word. There was a long pause as she positioned herself to speak. She took a moment to gain her composure. She picked up the microphone and stopped to scratch her nose and take a deep breath. She covered her mouth with the microphone as she stared at the floor. She opened her mouth but put the microphone in her lap again, nervously twirling the cord with the other hand. "I had a story in mind. I'm just nervous to tell it. It's not coming out of my mouth," she whispered. Other members of the group supported her, without knowing the subject matter, by chiming in one after the other.

"Just say it," pleaded one of the children in the listening audience.

"Come on, come on, come on," another child chimed in.

The storyteller covered her mouth with the microphone, as if to hide.

"We won't tell anyone," said a small female voice in the front.

"There's no embarrassment here, I hope," said another female voice.

"You can turn around and tell it to the board," suggested a boy from the audience.

"We won't laugh either," said another female loudly from the back of the crowd.

"Okay," she began shyly. "When I went to the vet with my mom to see my dog over the summer," she stuttered a bit here. "...and um, I passed out underneath the chair in the office."

The storyteller explained waking up in the hospital to see the view of her family standing around her.

"All the doctors would tell me is that I have epilepsy," she said as her audience looked up from their notebooks.

"What's epilepsy," several asked in chorus.

"It's a disorder of the brain," she answered. She continued to talk about her family history of epilepsy. She answered a few questions clarifying that her hospital stay happened over the summer. She explained that her seizures were rare. Then she slipped off the Author's Chair as if to sink out of view. Hands shot up from the listening audience. The class wanted to know more immediately.

"What was your reaction when you found out you had ep-e-leps-ey," asked a girl who wasn't too sure how to pronounce the word.

"What-cha-ma-call-it!" responded another voice in the crowd.

"Actually it's very important," said the storyteller indignantly as she began to answer the question. "I asked my mom, 'What is epilepsy?' I have the rarest type of seizure. I will pass out and not hear anything."

Children asked about her medications and if they made her sick. They wondered how often she had seizures.

"The type of epilepsy I have is very dangerous and some people have died from it," the storyteller explained. "Then they created the type of medicine I'm taking. It runs in my family. I'm not allowed in the deep end of pools because I could have a seizure and drown."

This was followed by a discussion of what the class should do if this young lady were to have a seizure in the classroom. The teacher explained that the storyteller's mother spoke with all the teachers during the first week of school about this type of epilepsy. Specific procedures such as using a towel under her head to protect her during an incident and not restraining her in any way were discussed openly with the class. "This kind of stuff is serious," said one boy listening intently.

Then the storyteller jumped up. "I want you all to know something," she said calmly. "I just want you all to know that epilepsy is not contagious. You don't have to be afraid of me. I'm just like everyone else." Another child from the crowd yelled out, "Group hug!!" The students spontaneously gathered around her. Tears flowed. Students supported her throughout her sharing, giving her the strength to share her very personal true-life event.

The next step in the day's writing process was to give children 20 minutes to write in their journals. Students could choose to write their own personal stories related to the

storyteller's sharing or write a version of the storyteller's tale using notes taken during the sharing. After writing, all students shared their stories in small groups. Each small group voted for one story to be read to the class. The class listened and then voted for the one story that would be published on the class website. The stories that followed the epilepsy story ranged from retellings of her story to very personal stories. One, in particular, resulted in more tears and hugs. It was a related story entitled "Mom's Seizure." The first person account told of how one of the students lost her mother unexpectedly after she had a seizure in the upstairs bedroom. The class decided it should be published on the class website. When the child's father read her story online, he said she had confused the details of two different episodes, but he realized he needed to talk with her more about what happened to her mother.

> *"I was seven. We were having dinner and were waiting for our mom to join us. I remember she had made chili the night before. We were waiting and we heard her yell, 'Help!' and then a 'CRASH!' It was about five minutes before he came out. But when he did, he held mom in his arms. My instinct was to call 911. Soon I heard sirens blaring...I started crying when I saw people wheeling mom into the ambulance.*
>
> *Dad, my brother and I ate in silence. We went to bed. When I woke up, dad was standing next to me. He told me that mom had died. (My brother) came into my room and started crying when dad told him that mom had died. We cried for nearly an hour. If you go to Athens and go into a graveyard, there is a plaque with roses and ballerina shoes."*
>
> *- fourth grade girl*

Learning

The Rovai (2002) survey focused on feelings of perceived learning though six main questions. There was a statistically significant difference when a t-test was used to compare Group 1's pretest (M=3.9, SD = .99) and posttest (M=4.47, SD=.78), t (92) =3.00, p. = .0034. The mean score moved from the area of neutral or "no feeling" to one reflecting a more positive feeling toward learning in the classroom after spending a semester working through social writing and community development activities. This is the group that started the school year in the researcher's classroom with a focus toward community development. The same questions generated responses that showed no statistically significant difference in the scores for the Group 2 pretest (M=4.234, SD=.85) and Group 2 posttest (M=4.4, SD=.86); t (92) =.93, p=.3511. Similar to the results from the previous sections, these results suggest once again that, although there is some increase in positive feelings toward community development in the group that started the year with social writing opportunities, the treatment did not have a significant impact on the group that came to the class after spending a nine-week semester together building relationships before being a part of the research study.

Research Question 2: How do the diverse backgrounds and school cultures of participants impact the development of the learning community?

This researcher explored community development by introducing social writing to several groups of children over time. The population that participated in the study consisted of eight different groups of students that attended the researcher's class once a week for nine weeks. The individual classes consisted of gifted elementary students from different schools across a large community-wide school system. Since different schools

were grouped together on different days, the populations of each day varied, most remarkably by socioeconomic level. For the purpose of this study, the socioeconomic level of each school represented was determined by the specific schools' free and reduced lunch fiscal year data report. The population used in this research has thus far been referred to as Group 1, which is the group that started with the researcher on the first day of school and Group 2, which became part of the study during the second semester of school.

In order to explore the question of the impact diversity may have on community development the two basic groups - Group 1 and Group 2-were each broken into two separate sub groups based on the reported percentage of free and reduced lunch for individual schools. The first group was referred to as Higher Socioeconomic Group 1 and consisted of the responses from students who attended on the two days that served a population of students from schools that reported an average free and reduced lunch rate of 60% or lower. This was the same for Higher Socioeconomic Group 2. Participants counted in Lower Socioeconomic Group 1 and Group 2 attended the researcher's class on the two days a week that served students from schools with a reported average free and reduced lunch rate of 69% or higher. Maintaining separate populations for study was deemed necessary as a means to compare overall responses over time with regards to Group 1 starting the year in the researcher's classroom and Group 2 beginning the year in another teacher's classroom before beginning any type of formal community development activities.

Researcher observations, video recordings of daily participation in social writing activities and journal entries were analyzed for signs of language patterns related to

community development and socioeconomic diversity. After transcribing and coding the

material the researcher found no evidence found to support the idea that socioeconomic

levels made an impact on the development of community during the nine sessions. When

Group 1 and Group 2 were compared, it was evident that language between students from

home school environments reporting different free and reduced lunch percentages did not

differ significantly during the limited amount of time in the researcher's classroom.

Table 4 Impact of socioeconomic levels on student perception of community development

	Pretest	Posttest

	N	M	SD	M	SD	t	df	p-value
Higher SE								
Group 1	36							
Safety		3.76	1.02	4.23	.8593	2.0945	70	.0398*
Friendship		4.07	.9094	4.46	.735	1.99	70	.0504
Trust		4.04	1.005	4.32	.807	1.3028	70	.1969
Learning		3.89	.997	4.46	.7946	2.6447	70	.0101*
Higher SE								
Group 2	34							
Safety		4.105	.8499	4.05	.9017	.2588	66	.7966
Friendship		4.25	.7638	4.32	.744	.4320	66	.6672
Trust		4.05	.87195	4.1029	.8369	.2483	66	.8047
Learning		4.22	.8336	4.377	.836	.7776	66	.4396
Lower SE								
Group 1	11							
Safety		4.07	1.06	4.47	.79	.9981	20	.3302
Friendship		4.02	.8448	4.32	.7947	.6576	20	.5183
Trust		4.04	.8056	4.34	.83369	.8608	20	.3995
Learning		3.96	1.00	4.515	.7492	1.4664	20	.1581
Lower SE								
Group 2	13							
Safety		3.87	1.02	4.38	.764	1.42	24	.1684
Friendship		4.15	.9224	4.40	.862	.7138	24	.7138
Trust		4.115	.7835	4.51	.6712	1.3804	24	.1802
Learning		4.26	.907	4.46	.9354	.5279	24	.6024

* $p \leq .05$ **$p \leq .0001$ Note.
Rating scale: Strong positive feeling = 5, positive feeling = 4, no feeling = 3, negative feeling = 2, strong negative feeling = 1

Safety

Student's feelings of safety within a classroom setting are often reflected by their willingness to answer questions and request assistance from the teacher. Students participating in this research were asked direct questions about their feelings toward safety as part of the Rovai (2002) survey. An independent-samples t-test compared the Higher Socioeconomic Group 1 (N=36) pretest (M=3.76, SD=1.02) and the posttest (M=4.23, SD=.8593); t (70) = 2.0945, p=.0398. There were statistically significant differences between the responses for questions related to the students' feelings of safety within the classroom community when considering Higher Socioeconomic status. The first group of students served in Higher Socioeconomic populations started the year with neutral or no feeling toward speaking out in class and increased slightly to a positive feeling after working through social writing. A second t-test found no statistically significant differences when comparing the same responses for the Higher Socioeconomic Group 2 (N=34) pretest (M=4.105, SD .8499) and posttest (M=4.05, SD =.9017); t (66) =.2588, p= .7966. The second group came to the researcher's classroom with a positive feeling toward safety that decreased slightly but remained positive during the course of the research study. Again, no statistically significant differences were found between the Lower Socioeconomic Group 1 (N=11) pretest (M=4.07, SD=1.06) and posttest (M=4.47, SD=.79); t (20) =.9981, p=.3302 or the Lower Socioeconomic Group 2(N=13) pretest (M=3.87, SD=1.02) and posttest (M=4.38, SD=.764); t (24) =1.42, p=.1684. Only the responses from the first group of students from schools reporting a lower percentage of free and reduced lunch were found to be statistically significant. Their feelings toward safety increased from the first day of school to the end of the first semester, after focusing on community development through social writing.

Friendship

When analyzing survey responses relative to impressions of friendship within the classroom community, a t-test revealed no statistically significant differences when comparing the Higher Socioeconomic Group 1(N=36) pretest (M=4.07, SD=.9094) and posttest (M=4.46, SD = .735); t (70)=1.99, p=.0504. When a t-test was used to compare the Higher Socioeconomic Group 2 (N=34) pretest (M=4.25, SD=.7638) and posttest (M=4.32, SD=.744); t (66) = .4320, p= .6672, again, no statistically significant differences were evident. These students came into the researcher's class with a positive response to friendship. The responses increased slightly during the course of the research. Differences were not statistically significant between the Lower Socioeconomic Group 1 (N=11) pretest (M=4.02, SD=.8448) and the posttest (M=4.32, SD=.7947); t (20) =.6576, p=.5183. The same is true for the Lower Socioeconomic Group 2 (N=13) pretest (M=4.15, SD=.9224) and posttest (M=4.40, SD=.862); t (24) =.7138, p=.4822. Although none of the surveys revealed statistically significant differences, the means show that students in both Higher and Lower Socioeconomic Groups 1 and Group 2 all entered the researcher's classroom with well-established positive feelings toward friendship and maintained these feelings throughout the semester.

Trust

The Higher Socioeconomic Group 1 (N=36) and Group 2 (N=34) were asked questions relating to trust, such as "I feel like I can count on other students in this class to help me when I need them" and "I feel nervous about some kids in this class." There were no statistically significant differences found between the Higher Socioeconomic Group 1 pretest (M=4.04, SD=1.005) and posttest (M=4.32, SD=.807); t (70) = 1.3028, p=.1969 or the Higher Socioeconomic Group 2 pretest (M=4.05, SD=.87195) and posttest (M=4.1029, SD=.8369); t (66) =.2483, p=.8047. The same is true for the Lower Socioeconomic Group 1 (N=11) pretest (M=4.04, SD=.8056) and posttest (M=4.34, SD=.83369); t (20) =.8608, p=.3995 and the Lower Socioeconomic Group 2 (N=13) pretest (M=4.115, SD=.7835) and posttest (M=4.51, SD=.6712); t (24) =1.3804. All four groups, two lower socioeconomic and two higher socioeconomic, came into the researcher's classroom with positive feelings toward trust. These feelings increased slightly during the semester of community development.

Learning

Survey questions such as "I feel like I did not learn very much in this class" or "I feel that I am given lots of chances to learn in this class" add to an understanding of how students perceived their own learning within the classroom environment. When responses from the Higher Socioeconomic Group 1(N=36) students were compared, a statistically significant difference was found in scores from the pretest (M=3.89, SD=.997) to the posttest (M=4.46, SD=.7946); t (70) =2.6447, p=.0101. The means increased over the course of the semester from neutral or "no feeling" to a positive feeling

toward the learning in the classroom environment. Much like the other data sets for Research Question 2, the unpaired t-test revealed no statistically significant difference between the Higher Socioeconomic Group 2 (N=34) pretest (M=4.22, SD=.8336) and posttest (M=4.377, SD=.836); t (66)=.7776, p=.4396. This is also the case for the Lower Socioeconomic Group 1 (N=11) pretest (M=3.96, SD=1.00) and the posttest (M=4.515, SD=.7492); t (20) =1.4664, p=.1581 and the Lower Socioeconomic Group 2 (N=13) pretest (M=4.26, SD=.907) and posttest (M=4.46, SD=.9354); t (24) =.5279, p=.6024. Student response means in both groups slightly increased over the course of the semester, showing a rise in the level of positive feelings when considering their own attitudes toward learning.

Only two statistically significant findings came from socioeconomic levels of student participants based on their home school's report of free and reduced lunch percentages. Higher Socioeconomic Group 1, which started the school year with the researcher, reported a statistically significant increase in feelings toward community in the two categories of safety and learning during the 9 sessions. None of the other three groups gave statically significant responses when socioeconomic levels were considered and analyzed through the data.

Research Question 3 - How does the sense of community developed in the researcher's classroom impact the students as they move to another classroom?

Research question 3 is based on the assumption that some sense of community was developed during the first semester with the researcher. The focus of this third inquiry is the sustainability of this newly developed sense of community. Is community

evident once the students spend another semester or again, one day a week for nine weeks, with another teacher? Both student and teacher perceptions were considered when exploring this question through quantitative and qualitative means. As mentioned, students spent one day a week during one nine-week grading period with the researcher. At the end of the semester with the researcher, the students moved to one of two other teachers. These teachers were interviewed after spending a semester with the student participants.

Quantitative data were collected through the use of the same Rovai (2002) Likert-style survey. The survey was administered a third time as a post-posttest, when the semester with the subsequent teacher ended. Survey questions from the post-posttest of the second semester were compared to the posttest from the end of the first semester and analyzed using an unpaired t-test, the same method as the previous data reported. The twenty survey questions were divided into the same four main categories that emerged from analysis- safety, friendship, trust, and learning (see Table 5).

Table 5

Student perception of community after time in another classroom

| | N | Posttest | | Post-Posttest | | | | |
		M	SD	M	SD	t	df	p-value
Group 1	47							
Safety		4.289	.8481	3.88	1.20	1.9043	92	.06
Friendship		4.429	.7499	4.11	.8942	1.8739	92	.0641
Trust		4.32	.8117	3.85	1.1324	2.23	92	.022*
Learning		4.47	.7832	4.053	1.1227	2.1311	92	.0357*
Group 2	47							
Safety		4.14	.87654	3.017	1.37	4.7337	92	<.0001**
Friendship		4.34	.7773	3.17	1.47	4.8605	92	<.0001**
Trust		4.21	.8145	3.51	1.217	3.2770	92	.0015*
Learning		4.40	.8639	2.38	1.40	8.3586	92	<.0001**

$* p \leq .05$ $**p \leq .0001$ Note. Rating scale: Strong positive feeling = 5, positive feeling = 4, no feeling = 3, negative feeling = 2, strong negative feeling =1

Safety

Student survey items, such as "I feel that I am encouraged to ask questions" and "I get answers from the teacher about my work quickly" reflect a characteristic of feeling

safety within an environment, which assists students in developing a sense of community. When Group 1 (N=47) answered such questions, the responses did not reveal statistically significant differences for the posttest (M=4.289, SD=.8481) and the post-posttest (M=3.88, SD=1.20); t (92) =1.9043, p=.0600. The means decreased from a positive feeling toward safety to a response of neutral or "no feeling". Conversely, Group 2 (N=47) responses reflected statistically significant differences when comparing the posttest (M=4.14, SD=.87654) and the post-posttest (M=3.017, SD=1.37); t (92) = 4.7337, p< .0001. Again, the means decreased significantly (-1.12) from a positive feeling toward safety to neutral or "no Feeling." This is the class that spent the first nine weeks in another classroom, joining the researcher's class in the second nine weeks of the year and then moving on to another teacher in the following nine weeks. Students' feelings toward safety lessened as they moved to another teacher's classroom. These results reflect that the feeling of safety in the community declined when the classroom environment was no longer focused on community development.

Friendship

Friendship comes from sharing like stories and developing a sense of empathy toward fellow students, thus becoming a community. Students' feelings of friendship were reflected in survey items such as "I feel that students in this class care about each other" and "I feel lonely in this class." The responses to such questions were compared using the unpaired t-test, which revealed no statistically significant differences for the Group 1 (N=47) posttest (M=4.429, SD=.7499) and the post-posttest (M=4.11, SD=.8942); t (92) = 1.8739, p=.0641. Similar to the responses for safety, a statistically

significant difference was found when questions referring to friendship in the Group 2 (N=47) posttest (M=4.34, SD=.7773) were compared to the post-posttest (M=3.17, SD=1.47); t (92) =4.8605, p< .0001. These results indicate a significant decrease in the mean score from a positive feeling toward friendship during the time spent sharing in the researcher's classroom to neutral or "no feeling" in the next teacher's classroom. Students' perceptions of community decreased as students moved to another classroom that did not focus on community development, according to survey results.

Although data show students' perceptions decreasing toward friendship over time, teacher perceptions tell a different story. Mr. Smith mentioned the difference between the researcher's first group and the following groups. He noticed how the first group came into his class with a sense of community right away. They learned to appreciate each other and worked together from the start, since the researcher worked with them from the beginning of the school year. Mr. Smith noticed that the researcher's next group was more difficult to bring together because he said they spent the first semester not focusing on community development. *"It's hard to break a habit,"* according to Mr. Smith. *"If they don't start out with a helping vibe or a community atmosphere, they're focused on the 'me atmosphere' vs. the community."*

Mr. Jones looked at the participants as a whole and compared them to the two groups that were not a part of the researcher's study. According to his observations, those students who participated in the community development activities in the researcher's classroom did not segregate themselves as much as previous groups. Boys and girls worked together, partnering up as a means to work toward the strengths of the partner, he said. Grade levels mixed causing older, more mature students to work well with younger

students. Students also mingled, moving into different groups rather than staying with the same friendship groups from the same schools. Although the students worked well together, those students who came into the group later in the year often had a more difficult time becoming part of the group.

> *I noticed that the kids who have been through [the community development project] are very much together. Newer kids that come through that group struggled to fit in. The new ones didn't seem to be generally pulled into the group. The ones who have been together, it's 'we've been together'. I don't know if that's the personalities in the room or if it's that they experienced this process together. They have a common shared experience that they've built a team or a group of friendship together. That's the biggest thing I've seen.*

Mr. Smith noticed another child did not have a dynamic personality. She kept to herself. She also cried the first three weeks in his class because she was the only child from her school attending the program and she sincerely did not want to be in the class, away from her home school. The researcher's second group took her in, Smith said. They made her sit with them and pulled her into class projects. Mr. Smith mentioned that this particular student was very shy and never really made herself known but that did not seem to stop the other students from including her.

He also noticed students showing kindness to one visually impaired student who was often left out during group projects at the beginning of the year. After spending time focusing on community development and returning to his class, he noticed other students were quick to help her when she had a difficult time cutting or working with equipment rather than ridicule her, as other class groups had done. *"That class is really good with*

her," he said. *"Where a person who is very self-minded would be upset with her for slowing down the group's progress. This group changed. They want her to be with them."*

These interviews served as supportive qualitative data for community growth between participants in the researcher's study. Both teachers witnessed examples of students learning to empathize with students who were normally left out of classroom projects. Mr. Jones in particular noticed that the students were very close emotionally, almost to the point of excluding students who joined the class after the research concluded. This is contrary to student perceptions reflected in the statistical data. Statistics revealed that the students left the researcher's class with positive feelings toward friendship, but those feelings declined after a semester with the two other teachers.

Trust

Trust must be present if relationships are to form into a community in the classroom. The Rovai (2002) survey addressed characteristics of trust directly by having students respond to such statements as "I trust the kids in this class" and "I feel nervous about some kids in this class". The unpaired t-test revealed a statistically significant difference for answers related to trust in the Group 1(N=47) posttest (M=4.32, SD=.8117) and the post-posttest (M=3.85, SD=1.1324); t (92) = 2.32, p =.0220. Statistically significant differences were also found between the Group 2 (N=47) posttest (M=4.21, SD=.8145) and post-posttest (M=3.51, SD=1.217); t (92) =3.2770, p= .0015. Again, the feelings of trust declined from a positive feeling after the social writing instruction in the researcher's class to neutral or "no feeling" after time in another teacher's classroom.

Quantitative data showed the students' feelings of trust created within a community declined after moving to another classroom structure that didn't include a focus on community development.

Learning

Students' perceptions of their own learning were part of the Classroom Community survey (See Appendix B) in items such as "I feel like I did not learn very much in this class" and "I feel that I am given lots of chances to learn in this class." An unpaired t-test revealed statistically significant differences in the Group 1(N=47) posttest (M=4.47, SD=.7832) and post-posttest (M=4.053, SD=1.1227); t (92) =2.1311, p=.0357. Statistically significant differences were also evident in the Group 2 (47) posttest (M=4.40, SD=.8639) and the post-posttest (M=2.3853, SD=1.40); t (92) =8.3586, p<.0001. These results show declining mean scores for students' feelings toward learning after they spent a semester with another teacher. The gains in students' perceptions made during community development focused lessons with the researcher did not hold after spending time in a less community-driven classroom setting according to statistical data.

Teacher observations, again, tell a different story. During the interview with Mr. Smith, he mentioned noticing that students in the researcher's class discovered with whom they were most likely to work most successfully. Mr. Smith expected one particular group to bicker and be difficult to organize because he had watched their behavior at lunch during pervious semesters. Much to his surprise, he said, they did not request to work by themselves. They worked together with much greater success. *"It's*

not a mixture you would think would happen and they get together and it just goes now,"

Mr. Smith said. "It's like night and day."

Mr. Jones mentioned two students specifically who seemed to learn that they

simply could not work together. *"Last year, all they were in there for was to cut up and*

play." After spending time with the community focused group in the researcher's

classroom, the two boys' behavior changed dramatically and they seemed to learn with

whom they worked most successfully.

> *After being [with the researcher], those two boys both worked with girls and they*
>
> *worked without incident. It was weird but [one of the boys] was on task and quick*
>
> *witted [after being a part of the community project]. That was the strangest*
>
> *thing, to see who they were with the first nine weeks. You see a transition in their*
>
> *partners after they were [a part of the research project].*

Again, the teachers' perspectives differed from student perceptions recorded from survey

results. Although students reflected attitudes conducive to learning in the teacher's eyes,

students in Group 2 rated learning the lowest with a 2 point ranking or "disagree," when

asked about positive feelings toward learning.

Summary

This analysis of data chapter outlined the results of ethnographic research

techniques that were combined with descriptive and inferential statistical analysis for the

purpose of exploring how social writing allowed students to evolve into a community of

learners over a very short period of time What was considered was the idea that

socioeconomic levels might make a difference on how students perceived their own

feelings toward community development in regards to the four emergent themes of safety, trust, friendship, and learning. Although the qualitative data, namely interviews with the two teachers in the following class environments, showed an increase in community especially in the areas of learning and friendship, quantitative survey results showed statically significant declines in students' perceptions of learning and trust.

For the purpose of exploring the impact of diverse backgrounds on community development, survey results related to socioeconomic levels of the participants' schools were divided into Lower Socioeconomic and Higher Socioeconomic populations. Only the Higher Socioeconomic Group 1, that started the year with the researcher from the first day of school, made statistically significant growth in positive feelings of safety and learning. None of the other three socioeconomic groups made statistically significant results within any of the four categories for community development.

The greatest number of statistically significant differences - all toward a negative response - are reflected in the data for research question three, which explores the sustainability of community as students move on to another classroom environment that does not focus on community development. The students who started the year with the researcher responded with statistically significant differences toward a negative feeling when considering trust and learning in the classroom that followed the researcher's study. The students' perceptions of the sense of community declined according to survey results. Data analyses revealed that the perceptions of safety, friendship, and trust fell from a "positive feeling" toward neutral or "no feeling" when considering the results from Group 2, the group of students who started in the researcher's classroom in the second semester, after a semester together without community development. This same group's

feelings toward learning decreased from a "positive feeling" to a "negative feeling," reflecting a -2.02 decline. The Group 2 participants' perceptions of community declined once leaving the researcher's classroom and spending a nine-week semester with another teacher who did not focus on community development.

Interviews with the two teachers who worked with the participating students after they left the researcher's classroom revealed positive perceptions of community among the students. Both teachers reported specific incidences reflecting increased community, especially among Group 2. The two teachers discovered three main differences between students who were part of the researcher's study and those who were not.

- The group became very close, often making it difficult for newer students to fit in.

- Students became aware of which students made more successful project partners.

- Students were more accepting of differences within their groups and worked to include students.

Although students' perceptions of community declined in another teacher's classroom, those teachers responsible for their learning observed a closer connection between students after focusing with the researcher on building community. Statistically, the students' perceptions of community were not sustained when moving to other classrooms without a concentrated focus on development.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the development and sustainability of community derived from immersing gifted, socioeconomically diverse students in social writing over a relatively short amount of time. As standardized testing and teacher accountability for student success on standardized writing assessments take priority in classrooms, teachers often neglect what they perceived to be time-consuming authentic writing experiences (Kelley, Hart, & King, 2007). This study was inspired by the need to shed light on the value of social writing as a means of creating learning communities that may increase student success. This chapter summarizes the purpose of studying community development through social writing. A presentation of the conclusions derived from the research is followed by implications of those findings. Limitations for the study and considerations for future research are also discussed.

Summary of the Study

Measuring the influence of social writing on community development required quantitative analysis of student responses to a Classroom Community Survey (see Appendix B) about student perceptions of their own experiences in a classroom geared toward enhancing community development through shared oral and written stories.

Qualitative data included teacher interviews, researcher observations, video recordings of social writing experiences, and the student journals. These data were coded for language patterns and common themes reflective of community development.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How does writing in a social setting build community among students in a transient, pull-out gifted program?

2. How do the diverse backgrounds and school cultures of participants impact the development of the learning community?

3. How sustainable is the sense of community developed in the researcher's classroom, as students move to another classroom?

The 94 student participants involved in this study were all members of the researcher's gifted classroom setting. Students were transported from their community schools to the researcher's pull-out gifted school one day a week for nine weeks. After the session with the researcher, students moved on to a second teacher's classroom environment which was not focused on developing community.

A pretest, a Likert-style survey, was given as students entered the researcher's classroom. A posttest consisting of the same survey was completed at the end of the nine week semester. A third administration of this test, called a post-posttest, was given after students left the researcher's classroom and spent nine sessions with another teacher. The results of these three applications were divided into Group 1 and Group 2 depending on whether students attended the researcher's class during the first semester or second semester. Data were analyzed using descriptive statics as well as inferential statistics including a two-tailed t-test. These methods were used to determine if there were any

statistically significant changes in the student perceptions of community development

over different periods of time. Video recordings, student journals and teachers interviews

were coded and analyzed for language patterns and common story threads. The

researcher addressed each of the three research questions individually with regards to

four common categories that emerged from the data throughout the process. The

categories of safety, trust, friendship, and learning emerged from analysis and were used

to organize and group like data.

Findings

The findings of this exploration of community development through social

writing suggest several generalizations involving the ability to create community in a

short time, the value of writing as a tool to enhance learning, and the impact of

socioeconomic levels on community development.

1. Data analysis indicates that some level of community can be developed over a

short period of time. This supports Vygotsky's (1978) argument that learning will happen

socially and continues to be a part of the social context of the environment. Although

students spent a relatively short amount of time together, specifically one day a week for

nine weeks with the researcher, survey results show that students did form a sense of

community. Data from both Group 1 and Group 2 showed increases in the means of

students' perceptions of community from pretest to posttest, which indicates that there

was an increase in the level of community in the researcher's classroom from the time

students entered until the time they left and moved to another teacher's classroom. This

could be due to the fact that students' perceptions increase naturally as they spend time

with classmates, with or without the social writing experiences. The amount of time spent participating in social writing activities was not directly addressed in this study, but it is interesting to note that when looking at the means of the posttest for Group 1 compared to the means of the pretest for Group 2 (taken at approximately the same point in time), all indicate high levels of positive feelings for all four categories. However, Group 1, the group that had been with the researcher for the first nine weeks, had higher means on all four categories than those of Group 2 who had been with another teacher the first nine weeks. Since these two tests were given when both groups had been with each other the same amount of time, it stands to reason that some gains were the result of the community development that naturally occurs as children spend time together. The data show, however, higher gains when students spend time together experiencing social writing (see Table 3). This gives value to the use of social writing as a tool for community development since it involves student collaboration on real world problems that build on language and experience shaped by students' culture (Vygotsky, 1978).

2. Student perspectives of community reflect a need for teachers to maintain a focus on community development throughout the school year and across all curriculum areas. Teachers need to focus on community from the start and carry the sense of community throughout a school year, as stated in Vygotsky's (1978) argument for the use of strategies that promote literacy across the curriculum and are a combination of whole class and independent learning. Teachers must provide students an opportunity to manage discussions about new learning and allow these discussions to evolve over time and throughout all subject areas. Research data reflected a greater sense of community across all four categories of safety, friendship, trust and learning when students were exposed to

social writing strategies at the beginning of the year. Group 1 survey results from pretest to posttest show statistically significant positive gains, while Group 2 - the group that joined the researcher after nine weeks with another teacher – showed gains but none were statistically significant (see Table 3). This concept was also supported by the teachers' comments when interviewed about their observations after students spent time studying community development and then rejoined their class. One teacher specifically mentioned that the bond between Group 1 was much closer than Group 2, which seemed to have a more difficult time coming together during group projects. *"It's hard to break a habit,"* according to Mr. Smith. *"If they don't start out with a helping vibe or a community atmosphere, they're focused on the 'me atmosphere' vs. the community."* This observation reflects the idea that community is a mindset that should be started from the beginning if the goal is to create stronger learning communities. In order to develop community that deepens learning, teachers must allow students to talk with each other in class, while supporting them as they articulate personal ideas and learn to listen and appreciate the skills of other classmates (Gordon & Bridglall, 2005).

Although the two teachers who worked with students after the researcher were both gifted-certified and highly qualified educators, their instruction was not focused on building strong community between students. Mr. Jones mentioned that he, too, noticed students who experienced the researcher's project seemed to be "very much together." It was also mentioned that it was often difficult for outside students to join the group if they were not part of the group that participated in the research. Mr. Jones made a point to say he was not sure if the exclusion was due to the bond of those who participated or simply their personalities.

3. There was very little evidence to support the idea that students' socioeconomic levels had a direct impact on the development of community, based on student perspectives reflected in survey results, student journals or researcher and teacher observations. This contradicts other research which has shown that cultural diversity may inhibit the development of classroom community because some students have difficulty forming positive relationships with diverse students (Bettez, 2011; Turner &Youb, 2008). Vygotsky (1986) argues that culture is the central factor for community development. Students learn by sharing and interacting with others and following the social rules colored by individual cultural foundations. Researchers also suggest that community development may be hindered when students feel their differences are not appreciated within the classroom community or the teacher ignores different attitudes, traditions, cultures, and experiences brought to the community by diverse students (Williams, et al., 2012; Meier, 2012; Sparapani, Seo, and Smith, 2011). Research question 2 addressed the impact socioeconomic levels may have on the development of community. Qualitative data included coding journal entries for common language patterns, transcribing videotaped social writing sessions and analyzing researcher observations. There were no obvious patterns that emerged reflecting any impact of socioeconomic levels on the development of community during the nine sessions for either Group 1 or Group 2. Quantitative data from the Classroom Community survey (see Appendix B) supports the concept that socioeconomic differences did not have a significant impact on the student perceptions of community (see Table 4). The only statistically significant increases in student perception were reflected by the Higher Socioeconomic Group 1 in the areas of safety with a pretest (M=3.76, SD=1.02) and

posttest (M=4.23, SD=.8593); t (70) =2.09, p=.3098 and learning with a pretest (M=3.89, SD=.997) and posttest (M=4.46, SD=.7946); t (70) =2.6447, p=.0101. These were the students who started the school year with a focus on community development, but none of the other three groups showed any statistically significant increases or decreases in student perception of community when considering socioeconomic differences. The lack of effect from socioeconomic differences could be due to participation in social writing which allowed students to be heard and seen publicly while being appreciated for their opinions and talents (Blenkinsop, 2012). Students may have felt accepted in the classroom setting, regardless of cultural differences, which allowed them to be a part of the learning community.

The lack of increases or decreases could be attributed to the very short amount of time students spent in class with the researcher. Nine days may have been enough time to navigate the group and begin to become a community of learners but not enough to share deeper cultural differences. Another possibility for the lack of effect may be the researcher's own understanding of the importance of accepting all cultural differences as seen in the research design. The hurdles that some diverse children may find when trying to fit into a classroom community may not be present in a classroom focused on bringing everyone together into one community of learners.   Also, and perhaps more to the point, the socioeconomic levels of individual students may not be reflected by a school's reported percentages of free and reduced lunch. A child may be from a middle class home and still attend a school with a high poverty rate. There may need to be another form of ethnographic categorizing for such a small population.

4. According to the responses on the Classroom Community Survey (see Table 5) students valued a strong sense of community. When students moved to classroom environments where teachers did not focus on community development, the students' perceptions of safety, friendship, trust and learning declined across all levels in both Group 1 and Group 2. Both teachers who taught the courses that followed the researcher's classroom study were highly qualified, gifted-certified teachers but they did not focus on community development within the structure of their classroom environment. Both Group 1 and Group 2 reflected statistically significant decreases in students' perceptions of community once students spent a nine-week semester with another teacher (see Table 5). This indicates a stronger relationship between social writing strategies and the development of community, because when students quit using these strategies there was a dramatic drop in student perception of community. The drop in positive student perceptions could also reflect the type of environment in the second teacher's classroom and the lack of focus placed on building community. Even though these teachers saw gains in the students' participation and cooperation during group projects, the students did not feel the same about the learning community as they did when they were actively part of developing community through social writing.

Implications

There is evidence in this study to support the idea that giving students an opportunity to experience writing in a social manner improves personal connections and builds safe environments where learning communities prosper. The pressures of high-stakes testing and teacher accountability lead teachers to believe they do not have time

for community building or authentic writing during the daily standards-based curriculum. The students who participated in this research met only nine days over a course of nine weeks. Yet, their responses to survey questions about their perceptions of safety, trust, friendship, and learning in the researcher's classroom showed marked increases throughout the active social learning process. According to survey results, once students left the researcher's classroom, the students' perceptions of a sense of community decreased dramatically. The results of using social writing strategies in this study support other research findings which state communication is the foundation of community (Sparapani, Seo, and Smith, 2011; Tomlinson, 1999, 2005). Students were willing to participate openly, building bonds that enhanced learning. Thus follows the constructivist view that children construct their own meaning as they participate in social interaction with others (Blenkinsop, 2012; Bloome, 2001; Cooper 2003; Kamii & Randazzo,1985; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Taylor, et al., 2011; Tunks, 2012; Vygotsky, 1986). Support is indicated by the results of this research for increase inclusion of authentic writing experiences in the process of creating learning communities and using writing as a means of improving student success. Students participating in learning communities come to their own consensus and decisions while developing democratic values with communication and thoughtful conversation, adding to the value of the use of such strategies across grade levels and curriculum (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Nicholas, 1997).

More professional development needs to be offered to teachers who often find writing instruction intimidating, making them less likely to immerse children in quality authentic writing experiences. There is a great deal of research available that supports the importance of building relationships between teachers and their students. Understanding

the background stories of students helps build meaningful relationships that open doorways for student learning. Connecting writing activities to personal interests, goals, or past experiences gives students the opportunity to value writing, making it part of their learning process and increasing motivation (Lam and Law, 2007).

The teachers interviewed for this project noticed marked differences in student work ethic and behavior after students spent time participating in social writing in the researcher's classroom. Students, on the other hand, responded with decreased enthusiasm for community, especially in terms of learning (see Table 5) when they moved on to other teachers' classrooms with no community building focus. One teacher specifically mentioned the need to start with a sense of community within the group or the habit is established and difficult to change. This evidence reflects a need for teachers to use community development strategies from the first day of school, and continue supporting community across the curriculum and throughout the school year.

Limitations

The limitations of this study directly relate to the fact that this was the researcher's classroom setting and students. All students were from the same school district. Participants were all state-identified gifted and transported to the researcher's classroom once a week. Although the researcher's role of teacher was necessary, objectivity was also an issue due to the relationships developed between students and researcher. The use of video recordings during social writing sessions may have been an intrusive element in the students' conversations, causing them to become more guarded in their comments and storytelling elements.

The wording on the Community Development Survey (see Appendix B) included double negatives, which may have confused young participants who misunderstood the intent of the response. This may have skewed the responses unintentionally. Students may have answered questions in a manner they did not understand simply because they were not accustomed to reading sentences including double negatives.

Research question 2 focuses on socioeconomic differences. The researcher used the free and reduced lunch percentages reported to the county by students' community schools. It is difficult to quantify individual students' socioeconomic level based on a general school qualification. Students from a middle class family may attend a school that qualifies for 100% free and reduced lunch, especially if all children do not attempt to register for the county lunch services. This means that using the reported free and reduced lunch percentages may be too generalized to offer correct correlation for each student.

Future research

The results of this study have raised many questions and issues for possible future research. For example, there is evidence that a sense of community developed among the students of this study on some level during the nine sessions of social writing. This was a small population that met very few times. One possible subject for future research could involve a larger population using social writing over a longer period of time to explore a deeper sense of community. Comparing student perceptions of community to academic success may yield evidence of social writing as a valuable course of study. Specifically,

future researchers may explore the correlation between higher student perceptions of community and academic gains over time.

A second possibility for future research involves looking at the socioeconomic influences on community using social writing in more heterogeneous classes. The student participants in the current study were all state-identified gifted students attending the researcher's fourth and fifth grade classroom. Future research conducted using a greater number of students from more varied cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds may yield valuable information about the impact different backgrounds have on social writing and the depth of community that may result in higher student success.

Writing can be a very personal experience but when it is put in a social context, how secure do teachers and students feel about their own abilities to share through written expression? What impact does their own self-efficacy have on the bond of developing learning community? A study of the role of teacher characteristics or student and teacher perceptions of such characteristics may clarify the methods used by some teachers to encourage development of learning communities. Researchers may delve into whether some teachers are more effective moderators of community building than others due to some before unseen quality in teaching style or methodology.

With professional development in mind, future researchers could serve to measure the value of instilling community development across the curriculum throughout the school year. Research focused on the connection between the depth of community development and student academic success could further academic interest in professional development that encourages teachers who often shy away from writing to use social writing as a means to build learning communities.

Finally, more investigation could be conducted on the differences between student perceptions of the classroom environment and teacher viewpoints. This study resulted in two very different perspectives toward the community that developed as it moved into another classroom environment. Students' perceptions decreased across all four categories in feelings toward community, while the teachers saw very positive influences toward community developed in the researcher's classroom. Future researchers could use such results to help provide profiles of successful environments that yield academic success. Looking at how students see educational environments as compared to teacher intent may help bring about changes in the way educators prepare the environment and maximize academic achievement.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Columbus State University Institutional Review Board

Informed Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research project conducted by Kim Lester, a doctoral candidate n the College of Education at Columbus State University. Dr. Jan Burcham will supervise this study.

I. Purpose:

The purpose of this project is to explore how writing builds community among students in a short term, transient gifted program. The general research questions that provide the focus for this study are:

1. How does writing in a social setting build community among students in a transient, pull-out program?

2. How do the diverse backgrounds and schools cultures of individual children impact the development of the learning community?

3. How does the sense of community developed in the researcher's classroom impact the students as they move to another classroom?

II. Procedures:

The purpose of this study to is to explore the impact of writing together on the development of social relationships with children who come together from different schools for only one day a week. In order to study this, second and third grade students will participate in writing instruction that requires social interaction. Using Shared Journal, students will tell stories orally and record other students' stories as a means of developing writing, listening and speaking skills, while building relationships within our classroom community. Other collaborative writing projects will require social interaction as well.

Data collection will include anecdotal notes, audio tapes of sharing sessions, and collaborative writing groups during Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday class sessions of the first and second nine-week grading periods. Student writing journals will also be analyzed to determine evidence of community development.

A Likert-style survey adapted from the twenty-question Classroom Community Scale designed and piloted by Rovai (2002) will be used to quantify community development over time. Pre-tests and post-tests will be analyzed for connections between how children felt about the community in their classroom at the beginning of the semester and how they felt at the end. Students will take the test a third time in the final semester to see if their responses change over time after spending weeks with another teacher.

Since these children come from different schools, the impact of diverse backgrounds and school cultures of individual children on the development of community will be explored through the analysis of the same audio tapes and anecdotal notes taken with attention toward how children from different schools interact with each other. These recording will be made on

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Monday, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. The students will be participating in these experiences (both the writing and the surveys) as part of the normal routines in their classroom. They will not be doing any different experiences for this study.

III. Possible Risks or Discomforts:

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts associated with this study. All of the data collection comes from the normal routine experiences in the classroom, so students will not be doing anything differently. Additionally, students' participation or lack of participation will not impact their grades in any way.

IV. Potential Benefits:

Children learn best when they learn socially. Therefore, participating in the social writing experiences in the classroom helps students learn. Additionally, the community building that may result from the social writing experiences may lead to greater development of support and friendship among the students.

V. Costs and Compensation:

There are no costs nor compensations associated with participation in this study.

VI. Confidentiality:

All data collected as part of this study will remain confidential. No participants will be identified and no names will be included in the study. Project material including surveys and audio recordings will be accessible by the researcher and stored safely in a locked location within the classroom. All data collected from or about students will be destroyed following the study.

VII. Withdrawal

Your child may withdraw or you may withdraw your child from this study at any time with no penalty or loss of benefits.

For additional information about this research project, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Kim Lester, at Lester.Kimberly@mcsd.ga.k12.us or lester_kimberly1@columbusstate.edu.

If you have questions about your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact Columbus State University Institutional Review Board at irb@columbusstate.edu.

I have read this informed consent form. If I had any questions, they have been answered. By signing this form, I agree to participate in this research project.

_____   _____

Signature of Participant's Parent/Guardian   **Date**

Appendix B

Classroom Community Scale

Directions:
Read every sentence carefully. Circle the face that matches how you feel about the statement. You may use a pencil or pen. There are no wrong answers or correct answers. Mark your best answer.

		Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**No feeling**	**disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
1	I feel that students in this class care about each other.					
2	I feel that I am encouraged to ask questions.					
3	I feel that I am friends with other students in this class.					
4	I feel that it is hard to get help when I have a question to ask.					
5	I **do not** feel like this class is like a family.					
6	I feel that I get answers from the teacher about my work quickly.					
7	I feel like this class is a family.					
8	I do not like to let other students in the class know that I **do not** know the answers.					

		Strongly Agree	Agree	No feeling	disagree	Strongly disagree
9	I feel lonely in this class.					
10	I **don't** like to answer questions in class or give my opinion.					
11	I trust the kids in this class.					
12	I feel like I did not learn very much in this class.					
13	I feel like I can count on other students in this class to help me when I need them.					
14	I feel that other students in this class **do not** help me learn.					
15	I feel that students in the class need me to help them learn.					
16	I feel that I am given lots of chances to learn in this class.					
17	I feel nervous about some kids in this class.					
18	I feel like I am not learning in this class.					
19	I feel confident that others **will** be kind to me in this class.					

		Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**No feeling**	**disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
20	I feel that this class **does not** inspire me to learn.					

Adapted from Rovai, A.(2002). Development of an instrument to measure classroom community. *Internet and Higher Education*. 197-211.